

He was a *rosh yeshivah*, a father figure, a confidant, a friend, and an endless wellspring of inspiration. He grew up on Long Island, but became a disciple of the luminaries of the Israeli yeshivah world. Rav Asher Zelig Rubinstein was a man of truth, but he was also the epitome of warmth, joy, and inspiration, transforming the lives of countless young men who became *bnei Torah*

fearless in TRUTH & LOVE

BY **Dovid Sussman**
PHOTOS *Family and Yeshivah Archives*



The snow that blanketed Jerusalem last month was thrilling for some, treacherous for others — and left the Torah world with a catastrophic loss. Rav Asher Zelig Rubinstein, *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshivas Toras Simcha, had slipped in the snow that covered the streets of his Mattersdorf neighborhood, and was recuperating in Shaare Zedek Medical Center following surgery. On Shabbos morning, *Parshas Va'eira*, he preferred to rise early and daven *vasikin*, before the hospital's Shacharis minyan that begins at 7 a.m. Wrapped in his tallis, Rav Rubinstein, 71,

davened at his usual deliberate pace, with all of his characteristic enthusiasm and intensity. Then, as he sat and waited to be taken to the shul for Krias HaTorah and Mussaf, Rav Asher Zelig suddenly passed away. At that moment, a most unusual spiritual leader was taken from Klal Yisrael.

No Distractions On the surface, the worlds of the Modern Orthodox American day school and the cloistered powerhouse Israeli yeshivos seem unbridgeable. People are often surprised when great Torah scholars make the leap from one to the other, but for Rav Asher Zelig Rubinstein *ztz"l*, his background is part of what made him beloved by the entire spectrum of the Torah world — from venerated *talmidei chachamim* to American *bochurim* deliberating about staying in yeshivah another year before starting college.

Tall and distinguished-looking, with his dignified *rosh yeshivah's* frock, Rav Asher Zelig looked exactly like what he was: A renowned *talmid chacham*, *rosh yeshivah*, and disciple of the *gedolim* of the previous generation. In the years he spent learning under Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, Rav Shach, the Ponevezher Rav and other luminaries of his day, Rav Asher Zelig had made it his mission to continue to spread the light of their Torah. But he had no qualms about invoking his own beginnings in a different place.

Rav Asher Zelig Rubinstein grew up in Far Rockaway, New York, where he received his elementary school education at the Hebrew Institute of Long Island (HILI), which later became known as HAFTR, the Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway. In later years, Rav Asher Zelig would bemoan the absence of passion for Torah that prevailed among his peers, lamenting that of the kids who were in school with him, there may have been a handful who were inspired enough to go on to raise families of *bnei Torah*.

But that didn't stop him from maximizing the spiritual opportunities that were available.

In his family's shul, the Friday night davening was often led by the *chazzan* Reb Dovid Berry (the father of Suki Berry), who infused his davening with feeling and passion. Rav Asher Zelig would also mention his tremendous debt of gratitude to his first-grade *rebbe*, whom he perceived as a model of *avodas Hashem*. As a child, he would see the *rebbe* sitting in shul learning in his tallis and tefillin, and this gave him a picture of what *avodas Hashem* could really look like. Years later, Rav Asher Zelig even named a *mussar kollel* after him.

Another value that would go on to define Rav Asher Zelig's life was his resolute commitment to truth, a trait he learned from his own father, Reb Yirmiyahu, who worked as a butcher and was known for his uncompromising honesty.



As a teenager, Rav Asher Zelig chose to take his learning to a higher level by enrolling in the Telshe Yeshivah in Cleveland, Ohio. He once told a friend who opted to stay in New York that he preferred a quiet place with a dormitory where he could learn day and night with no distractions. He wanted to reach a certain level of accomplishment in Torah learning before he moved on to college. Little did he know that even more dramatic changes were in store for him.

It began with a suggestion from Rav Moshe Weinberg (the brother of Rav Noach Weinberg *ztz"l*) that he could benefit from spending a year in yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael before beginning his college education. "You should grow in Yiddishkeit as much as you can," Rav Moshe suggested.

Shortly thereafter, Rav Asher Zelig was present when the Ponevezher Rav, Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman *ztz"l*, visited Far Rockaway. The ambitious youth approached the visiting *gadol* and told him, "I heard that you have a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael, and I'd like to come."

The Ponevezher Rav was dubious at first. "It's not a yeshivah for Americans," he told Rav Asher Zelig. "I don't think it's for you."

"I heard that it's one of the best yeshivos, and that is what I want," Rav Asher Zelig persisted.

The Ponevezher Rav reluctantly agreed.

Prickly Start Rav Asher Zelig Rubinstein was 16 when he arrived at Ponevezh, finding himself suddenly thrust into the unfamiliar world of an Israeli yeshivah with accommodations that were far from any standards he was used to. His students recall how Rav Asher Zelig used to describe his first night sleeping on one of the "mattresses" in the dormitory, which was actually no more than a bag of straw. As he felt the sharp tips of the needles poking into his back, young Asher Zelig questioned his decision to attend the yeshivah — and after a few days, he even made plans to leave. But another American *bochur* who had come to the yeshivah a year earlier encouraged him to remain there a little longer. Rav Asher Zelig took his advice — and it soon became clear that his decision to stay would be life-altering. Rav Asher Zelig maintained a lifelong debt of gratitude to that *bochur*, who is today a respected *maggid shiur*.

For a year, Rav Asher Zelig drank in the *shiurim* of the celebrated Torah luminaries who were on staff: Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach, Rav Shmuel Rozovsky, and Rav Dovid Povarsky. But then his parents asked him to return home for the bar mitzvah of his only brother. Rav Asher Zelig approached the Ponevezher Rav to tell him about the occasion, but the Rav advised him not to attend. "If you

go to America," he pointed out, "you might not come back. Tell your mother that you will be remaining here, and I will go in your stead."

The Ponevezher Rav indeed attended that bar mitzvah, even delivering a *drashah* for the occasion, and then he met with Rav Asher Zelig's parents. "You have a truly special son," he told them. "You should be very proud of him; he has become quite a *talmid chacham*."

But Rav Asher Zelig's parents had other concerns. "He must come home soon," the budding *talmid chacham*'s mother insisted. "He needs to learn a profession, such as medicine or law, so that he will be able to earn a living."

The Ponevezher Rav was undeterred. "Your son is really a genuine *talmid chacham*," he



EVERYONE WAS HIS FAVORITE Whether dancing with *talmidim*, sharing a *bochur*'s holiday joy, rallying against compromise, or *bentshing* a *chassan*, Rav Asher Zelig's fire ignited cold hearts

"EVEN THOUGH HE USED TO SCREAM AT US THE MOST, WE ALSO KNEW THAT HE LOVED US THE MOST"

explained to the worried parents. "If he stays in yeshivah, he will become a very big *rav*."

"A *rav* like you?" Mrs. Rubinstein asked.

The Ponevezher Rav smiled. "Even greater," he replied.

Satisfied, she gave her blessing for her son to stay on.

Undiluted Rav Asher Zelig remained in Ponevezh for another two and a half years before returning to America. During that time, he became very close with the legendary *mashgiach* of Ponevezh, Rav Chatzkel Levenstein, never missing a single one of Rav Chatzkel's *shmuessen* or *vaadim*. When he did return home for half a year, he found that even the experience of learning in a top yeshivah in America didn't compare to his time in Ponevezh. He wrote to Rav Chatzkel, asking whether he could return to Eretz Yisrael despite his parents' distress, and the *mashgiach* responded with a letter (now printed in *Ohr Yechezkel*) encouraging him to do so. In a prescient prediction, Rav Chatzkel expressed his confidence that by returning to Ponevezh, Rav Asher Zelig would one day have a profound impact even on accomplished Torah scholars.

It was only a few years before Rav Chatzkel's prediction would begin to be fulfilled. When he was 23, Rav Asher Zelig returned to America briefly where he was married, and then with his bride made the journey back to Eretz Yisrael. He first learned in the kollel of Novardok, which was under the auspices of Rav Avraham Yoffen, the son-in-law of the Alter of Novardok. Then he met Rav Mordechai Elefant, the *rosh yeshivah* of Itri. Rav Asher Zelig's first position in *chinuch bochurim* was that of *mashgiach* of Itri's yeshivah *ketanah*, but he quickly demonstrated his prowess for

teaching older boys and moved on to occupy the same position in the American portion of Itri's yeshivah *gedolah*. After a while, the American group in Itri left to form their own yeshivah, Mishkan HaTorah, taking Rav Asher Zelig with them.

In that capacity, Rav Asher Zelig transformed the lives of numerous young men, most of whom intended to stay for one year and then go back to America for college. Rabbi Menachem Nissel, today a premier *mechanech* in Eretz Yisrael, was one of Rav Asher Zelig's students during that period. He vividly recalls the scope of Rav Asher Zelig's impact on those *talmidim*: "The boys all came in with secular names — Andy, Robbie, and so on — and without any intention of staying in learning long-term at all. But Rav Asher Zelig had a tremendous effect on the entire group. Today, they are all big *rabbanim*."

What was his secret? "He had the incredible ability to speak to everyone in an undiluted, very strong, and very truthful way," Rabbi Nissel recalls. "He spoke fearlessly. He was never afraid to say what was on his mind, what he felt was the truth, no matter what it was. He wouldn't water down *daas Torah*, but we knew it came from his tremendous love for Torah and for us. We were terrified by what he said, but at the same time, we could feel that it was saturated with boundless love."

Road Show After a number of years in Mishkan HaTorah, Rav Asher Zelig became a *rosh kollel* in Ashdod, where he traveled daily from Jerusalem. Those trips offered him a providential opportunity to touch Jews who were far removed from the Torah. He had a policy of picking up hitchhikers when he drove; even though he was a distinguished *rosh yeshivah*, he never considered it beneath his dignity.

He often picked up soldiers who were



ALL SMILES Rav Asher Zelig loved to communicate with Hashem, delight radiating every time he prayed. Reciting the brachos at a bris, he couldn't hide his mirth



trying to hitch a ride in that direction, and he used those opportunities to expose them to new concepts of Judaism. His car was stocked with tapes featuring prominent lecturers such as Rav Amnon Yitzchak — and those soldiers, who were too polite to ask him to turn off the tapes in his own car, were captive audiences, listening to a Torah-inspiration talk all the way to Ashdod. Often, by the time they reached their destination, the traveler was so enthralled by these new ideas that he wanted to stay and hear the rest. At that point, Rav Asher Zelig would pop out the cassette and hand it to him.

“Keep it,” he would say. “It’s yours.”

His Closest Talmid In 1995, Rav Shmuel Auerbach *shlita* instructed Rav Asher Zelig to open a new yeshivah for American boys — Yeshivas Toras Simcha, in the Mattersdorf neighborhood of Jerusalem. With a student body of about 50 boys, Toras Simcha takes in *bochurim* from other American yeshivos in order to prepare them for prominent mainstream institutions. But in the meantime, they become part of a unique “family,” one that was dominated by a formidable *rosh yeshivah* whose hallmarks were love and kindness for his *talmidim*.

Many students described Rav Asher Zelig as a literal father figure. “It was clear that he loved everyone. He was like a modern-day Aharon HaKohein,” asserts Rabbi Yaakov

Brandwein, a close *talmid* of Rav Asher Zelig from Toras Simcha. “In fact, he was a Kohein himself, and when he *duched* and said the *brachah* of *I'vereich es amo Yisrael b'ahavah*, we could hear him smiling under his tallis. He was overflowing with love for his *talmidim*, and it was so real and so genuine that everyone felt it. I’m sure that every student you speak to is going to tell you that he was Rav Asher Zelig’s closest *talmid*.”

“He must have had hundreds, if not thousands, of students,” adds another close *talmid*, Rabbi Yitzchak Abeles. “But whenever former *talmidim* came back to visit him in the yeshivah, whether they were old or young, regardless of how they looked or dressed, Rav Asher Zelig greeted them with extraordinary warmth and affection — and his trademark bear hug.”

Many of his *talmidim* longingly recall the outpouring of affection with which their *rebbe* constantly greeted them, his ready smile and crushing embrace. In the yeshivah, he was always accessible; he made time for anyone who wanted to confer with him, spending hours offering advice or encouragement to a student.

“His daily *shiurim* were masterpieces of Torah and filled with his trademark passion,” Rabbi Abeles adds. “The entire room would shake as he banged his fist on the table. At the same time, he was intimately aware of our needs and cognizant of our capacities. He encouraged us to learn and grow. If a married student said a *chiddush* that he liked, he would tell the young man his wife should bake a cake

to celebrate that *chiddush*.”

Rav Asher Zelig made Yiddishkeit come alive for his *talmidim*, with the same vividness and intensity that it held for him. He sought the best possible *baalei tefillah* to inspire his students with Yom Tov and Rosh Chodesh davening, and he was never afraid to defy convention in order to do what he felt was truly in the spirit of the day: In a lecture before Purim, he made the significance of learning Torah on that day so vivid that *talmidim* spent the day reviewing pages of Gemara. On Chanukah he would talk about the holiday as a time to strengthen Torah learning, and, unlike other yeshivos, Toras Simcha would remain in session on Shabbos Chanukah. Only the following week would the boys be given an “off Shabbos.”

Perhaps Rav Asher Zelig’s relationship with his students was best encapsulated by a comment made by one student at the shivah: “Even though he used to scream at us the most, we also knew that he loved us the most.”

“I Love Talking to G-d” Rav Asher Zelig truly loved his students, but that was only one piece of the puzzle. Another part of what made him so captivating, so incredibly effective and powerful, was his boundless love for Hashem and His Torah. His students describe the passion he invested in davening and *bentshing*, how his face was wreathed in delight as he pronounced each word. “He loved *bentshing* and he loved davening,” Rabbi Abeles

remembers. “It’s been years since the last time I heard him *bentsh*, but I can still hear him enunciating each word with passion and intensity.”

“Watching him daven was an experience,” Rabbi Nissel recalls. “He always said Shemoneh Esreh with a huge smile. And people used to go to his home just to hear him *bentsh*.”

Rav Asher Zelig’s students recall an incident that took place on one of his trips to the United States. He was davening Maariv in a particular shul, but by the time the rest of the minyan finished, he was still engrossed in his own Shemoneh Esreh. The minutes ticked by, and the men stared at him as he continued to daven. After he finally finished, one of the men remarked, “You seemed to actually be enjoying yourself.”

“Of course I was enjoying myself!” Rav Asher Zelig responded. “I *enjoy* talking to the Ribbono shel Olam!”

This was a phenomenon that permeated all of his prayers, whether it was Kiddush, Bircas Hamazon, or *birchos haTorah*. As a Kohein, Rav Asher Zelig always received the first *aliyah* on Shavuot morning, which meant that he recited Akdamus.

“As tired as everyone was after staying awake all night, no one could fall asleep while he was saying Akdamus,” remembers Rabbi Abeles. “His joy over *kabbalas haTorah* made everyone cry.”

Who Wouldn’t Change? Rav Asher Zelig’s circle of influence didn’t end with his students in yeshivah. He also delivered a *shiur* on *hashkafah* every Thursday night in his home, which was attended by a group of married Torah scholars. According to Rav Elchanan Levenstein, a devoted attendee who had not missed a single *shiur* in decades, “Originally, the *shiur* was open to *bochurim*, but eventually, Rav Asher Zelig felt that it wasn’t appropriate for them, and he opened it only to *avreichim*. The *shiur*, which focused on lofty *hashkafic* concepts, was also grounded on the principle of absolute truth, which Rav Asher Zelig personified. He was never afraid to say what he felt needed to be said.”

For Rabbi Levenstein, those weekly *shiurim* formed the basis for a lifelong relationship. “When I got married,” Rabbi Levenstein recalls, “I asked the Rosh Yeshivah to be an *eid* at my *chuppah*. At first, Rav Asher Zelig agreed, but then he called me with some unpleasant news: He had to make a trip to the States, and he wouldn’t be in Eretz Yisrael for my wedding.

“I took the news very hard, and I pleaded with him and even sent messages through his family to ask if he could change his flight. It really meant a lot to me for him to be at my *simchah*. Finally, he decided to stay, but he told me he would have to fly out immediately after the wedding. Unfortunately, all the flights out of the country were booked solid at the time, and it was impossible for him to get a seat. Finally, he took the only ticket available, which was a first-class ticket. He left immediately after the *chuppah*. That was how far he was willing to go not to cause distress to a *talmid*.”

If Rabbi Levenstein considered Rav Asher Zelig a father figure before, that cemented it. “I had him on speed dial. I never made a move without consulting him. He was the one who told me to go into *chinuch*, and I have been there ever since. And he came to all our *simchahs* just as a father would.”

An incredibly versatile speaker, Rav Asher Zelig was able to touch the hearts of everyone who heard him, regardless of their background or level of learning. And, say his *talmidim*, anyone who heard one of his fiery *shmuessen* was bound to change. “It was impossible *not* to change,” Rabbi Brandwein asserts.

“The way he spoke about Hashem and about Yiddishkeit, you simply had to become a different person. In fact, in certain institutions — where they are not really interested in fostering spiritual growth for their students — Rav Asher Zelig’s tapes were banned, because they were afraid he would change *bochurim* too much.”

Sorry, Wrong Number Rav Asher Zelig’s presentation looked like a complex mix of fierceness and humility, but it was all based on the same principles of truth and love, say his disciples. He’s famed for his refusal to speak on the phone with anyone who called him from a nonkosher phone number. (In Israel, rabbinically approved “kosher cell phones,” which



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have no access to the Internet or texting, can be identified by the first digits in the phone number.) "I'm sorry," he would tell the caller, "but you shouldn't be using this kind of phone. Hang up, call me from a kosher number, and then I'll speak to you."

Rav Asher Zelig once received a telephone call from a prominent educator in the Beis Yaakov system, who was calling on a nonkosher number. The woman was highly influential, but that didn't deter Rav Asher Zelig from speaking his mind. "I can't understand how a woman who is responsible for the *chinuch* of so many Jewish girls could be calling from a nonkosher phone," he told her, adding his standard refusal to speak until she called him back from a kosher phone number.

Rav Asher Zelig didn't hesitate to make his feelings known in public either. Just a few weeks before his passing, at the *sheva brachos* of the son of a close *talmid*, Rav Asher Zelig rose to speak and openly chastised the *baal simchah*. "It's not appropriate for someone like you to be in possession of a nonkosher phone!" he declared in front of the guests. The *chassan's* father, in fact, had asked a *sh'eilah* and had been given permission to use a nonkosher phone for business, but after that incident, his son presented him with a gift: a kosher phone to replace the one he would be discarding.

"As embarrassing as this may seem to have been," one of Rav Asher Zelig's students emphasizes, "the *baal simchah* didn't take it as an insult at all. He understood it was all about Rav Asher Zelig's love for him."

But while Rav Asher Zelig could be bold and fearless when he felt the situation called for it, he was also a man of extraordinary humility. He sought out *chizuk* wherever he could find it, regularly attending the *shmuessen* of Rav Tzvi Meir Silberberg. Rav Tzvi Meir might have been a generation younger, but Rav Asher Zelig once described him as "a fireball of *yiras Shamayim*, and I sit by his feet to hear his beautiful and powerful *divrei chizuk*."

Truthfully, Rav Tzvi Meir Silberberg is great in his own right, but Rav Asher Zelig could push the limits of self-effacement even in situations of public embarrassment. Rav Asher Zelig was

once at a *shiur* given by a prominent *talmid chacham*, when a cell phone rang somewhere in the audience. The speaker was perturbed, and Rav Asher Zelig hastily put his hand in his pocket, as if to silence the device. Several minutes later, the cell phone rang again, and the speaker grew even more vexed as Rav Asher Zelig once again placed his hand in his pocket. When the phone rang a third time, the speaker began to storm out of the room. Rav Asher Zelig followed him, apologizing profusely and promising that the incident would not repeat itself.

At the shivah, a visitor reported solemnly that the offending cell phone, in fact, had belonged to him, not to Rav Asher Zelig. The Rosh Yeshivah had simply pretended to be the owner of the phone, in order to spare the true owner from embarrassment.

The Road Ahead As news of Rav Asher Zelig's *petirah* spread, shock and mourning set in among his students. Their sense of loss was palpable and keen; they grieved for him as they would grieve for a parent. "People who knew how close I was with him called me to express their condolences," Rabbi Elchanan Levenstein recalls. "I even received a call from a student I had taught in *cheder*, who knew how important my connection with Rav Asher Zelig was to me."

"He was irreplaceable," Rabbi Abeles comments. "I have never seen anyone else like him. We are grateful for the time we had with him, and our only desire is to continue giving him *nachas* and traveling along the road on which he led us."

The morning after the *levayah*, as the yeshiva students filed in for Shacharis, they couldn't take their eyes off the painful emptiness of the chair at the front of the *beis medrash*. But as the morning *seder* began, they knew what they had to do, what Rav Asher Zelig always wanted them to do. He had shown them the path they must take, and now the time had come for them to travel it without him. They had lost their commander, but he was still in their hearts, leading them on the long journey ahead. ●

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