

LIVING A LIFE OF EMES: HARAV MEIR HALEVI SOLOVEITCHIK, ZT”L

CLOSING DOWN THE YESHIVOS DURING COVID

Before I start the shiur, I want to pose a question. Maybe someone out there will have a good answer. I have noticed that they closed down all the *yeshivos*, talmud Torahs, the *yeshivah ketanos*, the *batei midrashim* and the *kollelim*.¹ Baruch Hashem, an “amazing” accomplishment. Whose *hachra’ah* was that? Did it come from the *rabbanim* sitting together and thinking and planning? No. Most *rabbanim* understand that you don’t do this. But today, the Satan is very strong, so they brought police and medical people to R’ Chaim who know absolutely zero about this illness. Any expert will tell you that. They convinced him to close the *yeshivos*. I have one question. Today, Thursday, in the middle of the month of March, 70% of people went to work. How come the police and the doctors don’t stand at the doors of the businesses? Why don’t they go to the heads of the businesses and explain to them that they can’t keep their businesses open for a couple of dollars! The reason is that they understand that *parnassah* is *chaim*. It is *chiyuni* (essential). And if *parnassah* is *chiyuni*, then *chinyuni* is *docheh* (pushes over) health. Going to the grocery store is also *chiyuni*, you need to have food. Going to the pharmacy is also *chiyuni*. They could very well insist that no one should go to the grocery and you have to order everything over the phone. But they didn’t think of that There was even a *chasunah* in a grocery store recently because in a grocery store, people are allowed to congregate. They showed the *chassan* and *kallah* standing there in the middle of the fruit and vegetables section! Now, 50 people could gather outside, so they allowed up to 50 people. But they should allow a minyan in somebody’s backyard with just 10 people?! What if they would have insisted that every minyan has to be 10 people and the *asarah rishonim*, the first ten, are part of the minyan. You know, Hashem loves the *asarah rishonim*. For anybody who thinks it’s not important to come in the first 10, then goodbye. You could still daven but you’ve got to stand outside the room.

The gemara (Berachos 10a and Shabbos 10a) says tefillah is *rachami*, it is *chayei sha’ah*, which is what we need right now. But no! The doctors convinced *rabbanim* and these *askanim* that Torah חיינו ואורך ימינו - that’s *bedieved*. But a grocery store? Ay ay ay ay ay ay. Business? Ay ay ay ay ay ay. Now, of course, they make “suggestions,” that it would be better if you could work remotely from home. But I want to know: did they tell anybody in Lakewood, “You know, it would be better if you learned remotely from home”? Those who want, should go home. Then there would be room in all the *batei midrashim* in Lakewood for everybody to sit six ft. apart because one thing is for certain, if they would have offered people the opportunity to go home, there would have been a lot of takers. But they closed them down lock, stock and barrel for who knows how long! I just don’t understand it. *Tzorich iyun*. It won’t be the first *kasha* I have. If they said: “Nobody is allowed to go out of his house,” then I would have had no qualms with any of these rules! But if I see *goyim* driving in the street, I see them going to work. I see *yidden* going to work. So why are they cloing the *yeshivos*? I agree, maybe they are driving to work. Okay, so let’s make rules: to *yeshivos*, everybody could drive in his own car. We could come up with ideas. But there were no ideas. The idea was to be *mevatel* the *batei midrashos*. That I don’t understand. I am sure that the *roshei yeshivos* tried to stick up but the doctors said, “But Rosh Yeshivah, you don’t understand the matzav! You are not a medical man. *Pikuach nefashos* is *docheh* everything.” All I know is that there are plenty of *gemaros* about *gezeiros* that were made against learning Torah and it was *pikuach nefashos* They wanted to make a rule that anybody who was caught learning Torah is going to get killed. And the greatest of the great gathered *bemakheilos* in public (Brochos 61b).² And of course the medical people asked, “What are you doing? What kind of *hanhagah* is this? It is *pikuach nefesh* to learn with all these people.” What did those *gedolim* say? “Can a fish live out of the water? This is *chiyuni*. We should stop learning?!” Regarding COVID they could have said, “Let’s find an *eitzah*. Learn in your house, each one privately, maybe get Skype and why don’t you learn remotely.” I was always wondering why Rabbi Akiva had to be *makhil keheilos berabim*?! Why did it have to be “in their face,” in the public parks? Go find a forest somewhere, travel in the woods, go find some *midbaros*, go into some caves, and give shiurim in the caves! No, that the *tena’im* and the *amora’im* didn’t understand so much like the *heintiger* (today’s) people. Today, people understand better. *Nebach!*

It’s called *פני הדור כפני הכלב* - “the face of the generation will be like the face of a dog” (Mishnah Sotah 9:15). Chazal say *פני הדור כפני הכלב* means the following. If you ever walk a dog in the street, the dog always runs in front of you. Why does a dog do that? I worked on a farm for a couple of summers. I never once saw a cow go in front of the guy leading the cows. Even if there are no strings. The farmer walks in front, and all the cows follow him. But dogs are always running in front of their owners. You know why? Because the dog wants to feel that he is pulling the man! Not that the man is guiding him. So it says *פני הדור כפני הכלב* - that’s today’s *matzav*. The people are pulling the leaders. Instead of the *ketanim* taking guidance from the *gedolim*, laying the facts on the table and saying,

¹ Ed. note: this shiur took place on March 19, 2020, soon after the new COVID restrictions went into effect.

² תנו רבנן: פעם אחת גזרה מלכות הרשעה שלא יעסקו ישראל בתורה. בא פפוס בן יהודה ומצאו לרבי עקיבא שהיה מקהיל קהלות ברבים ועוסק בתורה. אמר לו: עקיבא אי אתה מתירא מפני מלכות? אמר לו: אמשול לך משל, למה הדבר דומה - לשועל שהיה מהלך על גב הנהר, וראה דינים שהיו מתקבצים ממקום למקום. אמר להם: מפני מה אתם בורחים? אמרו לו: מפני רשתות שמביאין עלינו בני אדם. אמר להם: רצונכם שתעלו ליבשה, ונדור אני ואתם, כשם שדרו אבותי עם אבותיכם? אמרו לו: אתה הוא שאומרים עליך פקח שבחיות?! לא פקח אתה, אלא טפש אתה! ומה במקום חיותנו, אנו מתיראין, במקום מיתתנו - על אחת כמה וכמה. אף אנהנו עכשיו שאנו יושבים ועוסקים בתורה, שכתוב בה: “כי הוא חיך וארך ימיו”, כך, אם אנו הולכים ומבטלים ממנה - על אחת כמה וכמה!

“Now you make a decision,” they say, “No, you don’t understand. R’ Chaim Kanievsky, how could you understand? You sit in your room all day long! What do you know about the world?! You understand medicine?! You understand infectious diseases?! You know Wuhan, you know China?! And everything else?” *Nebach*, that is the world we live in today and everybody means well, I know.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu should help us. It turned into a *gezeirah* of *gashmiyos* and then the Satan figured: “If the horse is galloping, so let me jump on the horse and then I will become a *shutuf* with Hashem and give some *eitzos* to undermine this whole thing.” It’s simply mind-boggling!

To be *misbatel* from Torah and think that it’s going to bring the *yeshuah*?! That’s the kookiest thing to say! Somebody asked me if this is *Mashiach tzayten*. I said, “Definitely. To me, this is the proof that it’s *Mashiach tzayten*.” It says about *ikvasa demeshicha* that the *ne’arim* will tell the *zekeinim* what to do, נערים פני זקנים ילבינו זקנים יעמדו מפני קטנים (Sotah, *ibid*). That’s what it says in the Mishnah. The youth will look down upon them: “You don’t know anything, you understand nothing.” This rav, that rav. I didn’t say there can’t be two *dei’os*, but everybody changed their mind. Hakadosh Baruch Hu should save all of us, He is the only One that is going to be *matzil* us. Every person who is supposed to get it, will get it and he should have a *refuah shleimah bimeheirah*, and whoever is not supposed to get it, will not get it. Of course you have to make some kind of *hishtadlus*. I don’t say this is a time to hug anybody or to shake anybody’s hands. I would keep a distance from most people. If you are able, that is the way you should do it. If you lock yourself in your house, you could catch it from your family. All the boys coming home from outside now, do you know what they’re bringing home? *Mishloach manos*? So they go home and they are “*mezakeh*” all of their families with “*mishloach manos*.” They should make one house for all the people that have it and put them together. Some big gym.

WHAT SHABBOS MEANT FOR MY REBBI

Tonight (24 Adar) is the *yahrtzeit* of my great Rebbe, HaRav Meir HaLevi ben Reb Yitzchok Zev HaLevi Soloveitchik (1929-2016). First I am going to share with you something he said on this parshah.

In the beginning of parshas Vayakhel, it says: - “and on the seventh day, it should be a holy day for you” (Shemos 35:2) - “ששת ימים - שבת ימים - “you should do work for six days,” קודש - “and on the seventh day, it should be a holy day for you” (Shemos 35:2).

When my Rebbe spoke about this parshah, he said that there is nothing like Shabbos. The mitzvah of Shabbos is amazing. Shabbos was a day my Rebbe yearned for. He looked forward to it. He prepared for it. Erev Shabbos, when his time came to prepare for Shabbos, the world did not exist. It was like a seder of avodah in the Beis Hamikdash. Every week was the same, it wasn’t this week this way, next week that way. He prepared for Shabbos with great awe and with great respect. He loved Shabbos.

The Briskers have an interesting *minhag*. Most people are interested in finishing Shabbos, 35 minutes *mehadrin min hamehadrin*. Some are *groyse tzaddikim*, they wait 40 minutes. The real *chassidei umos ha’olam* do 45 minutes. Some yeshivos do 50 minutes. And a few *nebachs* keep 72. That is how it is in the world generally. In Brisk they have an interesting *minhag*, they wait an eighth of a day, it makes the 72 minutes sometimes look like 40 minutes. It sometimes could be very long. And the last thing they are doing is to be in a rush to go make Havdalah, go daven Maariv. When the time came, they said, “Okay, now, we are going to go daven Maariv.” I said, “We have to sit here a whole motzei Shabbos in your house? There are things to do.” He said, “What do you have to do?” When my rebbe would make Havdalah he would say, “Oy vey. I have to wait another whole week for Shabbos to come!” As soon as Shabbos is over most people want to run into the shower, they can’t wait to put their jeans on, or their weekday pants. Some people put their *vochendiker* (weekday’dik) slippers on. Some people put different shirts on. They *pashut* can’t wait to get into their weekday. They want to be *mavdil bein kodesh lechol*, and put the music on or check their phones.

By my rebbe, Shabbos was *heilig*. By Hashem Shabbos is *heilig*. Rashi (Shemos 35:2) says before Hashem gave us the mitzvah to build the *mishkan*, the Torah proceeded to teach us the mitzva of Shabbos. Why? To teach that the building of the *mishkan* is not *docheh* Shabbos.³

EVEN GEULAH DOESN’T “PUSH OFF” SHABBOS

The rebbe further explained that the *mishkan* was the *tachlis* of the world - it was the fulfillment of Hashem’s greatest desire. There was nothing like having the *mishkan* where Hashem was able to reside together with Klal Yisrael. So you would think that for such a holy purpose, nu, a little Shabbos could be pushed aside. But the Torah says you cannot be *oiver* any single *aveirah* even for the biggest purpose. My rebbe would say over from his father, the Brisker Rov, the gemara in *Eiruvim* (43a-b), which has a *shaileh* about the *issur techumin* (the *issur* limiting a person how far he could go on Shabbos). The gemara asks whether the *issur techumim* applies above the height of ten *tefachim* off the ground, such as to one who travels by leaping (or flying) above this height. The gemara says that if it does apply, then Mashiach ben Dovid cannot come to redeem the Jewish people on Shabbos because even if he would travel above ten *tefachim*, he would not be allowed to travel more than two thousand *amos*.⁴

Now, the *issur techumim* is a relatively minor *issur*, it is not one of the 39 *melachos*, it is not one of the major things. The Brisker Rov said that we have to understand this gemara. Klal Yisrael has been suffering for thousands of years in their *galus* and they are waiting *bekilyon einayim* for the *geulah* and every second that the *geulah* could come earlier is *chashuv le’ein shiur*, it is extremely *chashuv*! If Mashiach comes even one minute before the *keitz*, you have to know it is a tremendous *zechus*!

³ ששת ימים. הקדים להם אזהרת שבת לציווי מלאכת המשכן, לומר שאינו דוחה את השבת (מכילתא)
⁴ תא שמע: הריני נוזר ביום שכן דוד בא - מותר לשתות יין בשבתות ובקמים טובים רש"י: בשבתות ו"ט - דודאי לא אתי משיח האידנא ואסור לשתות יין כל ימות החול רש"י: ואסור כל ימות החול - דילמא אתי. אי אמרת בשלמא יש תחומין - היינו דבשבתות ובקמים טובים מותר אלא אי אמרת אין תחומין, בשבתות ובקמים טובים אפמי מותר? שאני הקם, דאמר קרא: "הנה אנכי שלח לכם את אליה הנביא ונגו" רש"י: לפני בא יום ה' - לפני ביאת בן דוד יבא אליהו לבשת וְהָא לֹא אֶתָּא אֵלֵיהּ מֵאֲתָמוּל, וכו'.

He said that they related this story to the Tshebiner Rov (R' Dov Berish Weidenfeld, 1881–1965) and he said, "Yes, but by us, it is our minhag." So everybody has to go after his minhag. They wouldn't bend even though it looked funny.

PURSUING TRUTH, NO MATTER WHAT

Now, one thing my rebbi learned from his father was the *middah* of *emes*, I can't imagine there was somebody like him! I will give you a simple *maaseh*. My rebbi was once in the middle of shiur and one of the guys in the shiur made a joke. The joke was *mashpi'ah* on other people and it became a *matzav* of *simchah* a *shtikel*. R' Meir smiled also. After the *shiur*, he said, "I want to clarify something. There was once a *talmid chacham* named R' Yudel Holtzman from Yerushalayim and there were *bachurim* that were close to him. One time, in the middle of *havdalah*, the *bachurim* began to laugh but R' Yudel himself did not laugh. Afterwards, R' Yudel said, "When everybody is laughing, *be'emes* you have to laugh with them. That is the proper conduct, you laugh together. But what can I do when I am mentioning the name of the *Eibishter*? I couldn't laugh. So excuse me for not joining your laughter, I couldn't." My rebbi said this story. Then he added, "I want you to know that I was aware of that story when everybody started laughing. But the reason why I laughed was not because I was doing *darkei nimus*, to laugh together with everybody. That was not the reason why I laughed. The reason why I laughed is because I thought it was funny!" So one could have asked, "Why did he laugh? Maybe just to be polite, maybe *alzt feinkeit*." No. He was so *makpid* about the *emes*, he didn't want anyone to think that he did it because of that. "Don't think I'm this *feiner mentch* and I'm laughing because everybody else is laughing." He had no problem at all to be *modeh al ha'emes* in the shiur and say, "I made a mistake." And he would say it *berabim*!

I remember one time he said a *shtikel* Torah during the shiur. I was excited when he said a *shtikel* Torah; we were yearning to hear a *shtikel* from him and this was a *geshmake shtikel*. We *chazered* it over that night, pumping *chazoroh*. He comes the next day to the yeshivah and says to me, "Yisroel, did you write that *shtikel* from yesterday? I want you to erase it. Did others write it?" I said, "I think so." He came into the *beis hamidrash* and he said, "What I said yesterday was a mistake and whoever wrote it down in his notebook should erase it." I said, "Why? I like it." He said, "It is not *emes*." I said, "Maybe you think it is not *emes*, but I think it is *emes*. I like the way it sounds. A *geshmake shtikel*." "Nein, not like that." That was the kind of person that he was. It was amazing that he had a special *ahavah* for *emes*. By him, the *emes* was something that you cannot imagine!

A LIFE BUILT ON THE FOUNDATION OF EMES

My rebbi once went to Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz (1918-2009) when his wife died. He went to be *menachem avel* Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz. When he came in, Shlomo Lorincz looked up *geshokeled* (shook his head) and said to R' Meir, "I thought the Brisker Rov came to my house. Your face reminded me exactly of your father." So R' Meir said, "You are not the first person to say that. The *emes* is, you have to know, the *tzurah* is not the *ikkar*, it's the *pnimiyus* that's the *ikkar*. If the *pnimiyus* fits with the *tzurah* then it's good, and that, I can't tell you."

He was once given *sandeka'us* at a bris and they brought him a nice chair with some cloth on it. They said put your feet on this chair. He said he won't do it. They asked him what's the problem? He said, I don't want to put my feet on this chair. "You know why? How do I know that the one who is in charge of this chair is *maskim* that a person should put his feet on this chair that has upholstery on it? If it was plastic, that's one thing, but on an upholstered cloth chair, maybe it could get dirty." He was not *maskim* to put his feet on that chair no matter what! They *pashut* had to go to one of the neighbors of the shul to get another cloth to cover the chair and then he put his feet on it. His life was so *meyusad* (was founded) on *emes*. His father baked it into him.

I remember I once said something to him that I heard from him in the beginning, when I came to learn by him. He said, "I never said that." I said, "Rebbi, I don't have *ruach hakodesh*, I wrote it down in my notebook, it's there." He repeated, "I never said it. Bring me your notebook." I went to my room, got the notebook, went back to his house, showed him the notebook. He said, "I never said it." I said, "Rebbi are you trying to tell me that it was a dream? I wrote it over in the shiur." He told me, "You weren't dreaming, you were fantasizing. I never said that." I asked, "Rebbi, what is the *pshat*?" He said, "You didn't repeat the words in the sequence that I said them, so what you said was your *zog* (statement), you didn't say my *zog*. Maybe it was similar, maybe it was related, maybe it was on the same subject, but that's not what I said." After that, if I ever reminded him of something, I made sure I had it down pat!

He told me the following story from his father. There was a *yid* that once came to the Brisker Rov and said to the Brisker Rov, "I want to tell you something, I heard from your father, R' Chaim in Brisk when I visited him. It was relevant to appointing a rov in Yerushalayim. R' Chaim told me a description of Yerushalmi people, and why it is hard for them to have a rov." The *yid* told the Brisker Rov what he had heard from R' Chaim. The Brisker Rov listened to him and said, "Thank you." He *chazered* it over. "Thank you." Ten years later, the *yid* came to the Brisker Rov again. "Did I ever tell you what your father said?" And he tells him the whole story. The Brisker Rov said, "*Sheker*." The guy said, I heard it from your father! "*Sheker*." "What do you mean it is *sheker*!?" The Brisker Rov said, "Ten years ago you told me the descriptions my father gave of the Yerushalmi *yidden*, and he said that description first. Right now, you told me that he said that description second. So one of them is definitely a *sheker*."

Could you imagine how exact these people are?! The *zehirus*! He was *medakdek* in *halachah* like you cannot imagine! I used to tell him, "Rebbi, is it not worth it?" He would say, "It is never worth it if you have to be *oiver* an *issur kal*, it is not worth it." His memory should be a *zechus* for us to be able to be *machzik* a little bit in his *derachim*. His life should be a guide for me and a light to Klal Yisrael. It was a loss. This man was a walking Brisker Rov!

REBBI'S AMAZING "DIKDUK"

R' Moshe Shmuel Shapiro (1917-2006), a very big talmid of the Brisker Rov said, "Let me tell you the *chiluk* (difference) between R' Meir and all the other brothers. All the brothers are *ma'atikei shmuah* - they are saying over what they heard. R' Meir is the *Rov alein* (the Brisker Rav himself), not saying over what he heard. He was an embodiment of the Brisker Rov." You cannot imagine the nuances.

One time he was giving a *shiur*, when one of his son's babies was in the house and the wife was there too. In the middle of the *shiur*, the baby started crying. R' Meir turned to the father and said, "Chaim, go take care of your child." And R' Meir explained himself, "*Nu, mecheichi teisa* (how do I know this to be true), maybe it's the mother's job? The father is in the middle of learning, the father can't take care of the baby now!" So he said, "I heard from my father, *mein tatte hot gezugt*, that Moshe Rabbeinu said, 'האנכי הרייתי את כל העם הזה אם אנכי ילדתיהו כי תאמר אלי שאהו בחיקך כאשר ישא האמן את הינק, וגו' - 'Did I produce all these people, did I engender them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a caregiver carries an infant?' Did I give birth to this nation that I should be worried about them?' It is *mevuar* (clear) in this *passuk* that if you give birth to somebody, even if you are the father (i.e. even if you are busy), you have to take care of them. So now your job is to go take care of your child."

Do you know what kind of *dikduk* that is?! There's a *cheshbon al pi* Torah! He embodied the Torah, he embodied the Brisker Rov. I used to look at him and look at him. Just being in his presence, you felt the awe, you felt the *yirah*. Every move I made in front of him, I was petrified. If it wasn't *ois gehalten al pi halachah*. If I poured him a drink, I had to think to myself, "What mistake could I possibly make when I make this drink?" Then he would take the drink and a second later he would make a *borei nefashos*. He was so *machmir* you can't be *masig*. How hot his tea was, was *ois gecheshbont*. On Shabbos he wouldn't drink tea. He would just take water and honey. He was *choishesh* that maybe it's going to be cooking. I said, "Rebbi, it's tea essence." His father was *choishesh*, so he was *choishesh*. It was unbelievable what he was *choishesh* for! It was never a matter of his will. His will was completely *bateil* to the will of the Shulchan Aruch and the Ribbono Shel Olam. There was never a *zich*, there was never a self.

EVERYTHING WAS GECHESHBONT

A guy once came to him when he was in a car. He rolled down the window and asked, "What do you want?" The guy said, "I want a *brachah*." He said, "Oh no." But he gave him a *brachah*. The driver asked him, "What was that all about?" He said, "*Le'olam*, I would never give a *brachah*, because my father didn't believe in that. The only time my father gave *brachos* was by my *chasunah* in Bnei Brak. He came to Bnei Brak, and since there everybody was used to getting *brachos* from the Chazon Ish, so my father held that the *minhag hamakom* there was to give *brachos*, so he gave people *brachos*." Suddenly R' Meir notices that one of his relatives is there with his two kids. He turns to him and says, "You also fell to these *shtussim*?! What did you come for?" This relative was thinking, "I have to *chap arein* now that I have a chance!" So R' Meir said to the driver, "I'll tell you why I gave him the *brachah*. Because if I would tell him, 'Sorry, I'm not *ra'uy* to give you a *brachah*, the guy would think that I'm a big *anav*. And I'm not! It would be a *sheker*! So therefore I decided it would be better to give him a *brachah*." That was the *cheshbon* he made. He said over then, "For everything I had a *kabbalah*. Where did I get that from? From the Chozeh of Lublin. The Chozeh of Lublin moved into Lublin and he became a rebbe. So the rov of Lublin called him in and said, 'What are you doing? You are making yourself into an *adam gadol me'od*?' He said, 'What do you want me to do?' He said, 'I want you to get up in shul and say: '*Ich bin nisht ken adam gadol, ich bin a ish katan* and no one should make a fuss about me.'" So he did it. What happened? He got up in shul and said that, but it had the reverse effect because everybody said, "Wow, what an *anav*, what a *tzaddik*. He gets up in shul and he publicly announces that he is a *gornisht*!" Bang, more people came to him! So finally, the Lubliner Rov went to him and said, "I have an *eitzah*. Get up and say you are a *gadol hador*, you are *mamish* unbelievable. You are a *tzaddik vekadosh*." He said, "*Dos, ken ich nisht zogen*. That I can't say, it would be a lie."

Zechuso yagen aleinu.

THE BOTTOM LINE

From adamantly refusing to violate even a minor *issur* of Shabbos, in putting up election signs in the city of Brisk - a lesson he learned from the his illustrious father, to not making any *cheshbonos* outside of the prism of Torah, Halacha and Hashkafa, to pursuing the *emes* at every step of the way (even in making sure that his laughter was properly understood) - every word and action of HaGaon HaRav Meir HaLevi Soloveichik, zt"l, was calculated and guided by his deep desire to serve Hashem and follow the dictates of Shulchan Aruch. Although it's an impossible task to emulate even a few of these areas of R' Meir's Avodas Hashem, we can nevertheless take a small but tangible area in his *dikduk hamitzvos* and an uncompromising drive for *emes*, and try to incorporate it into our daily living. Perhaps, one area where we could start - and where people often stumble - is when relating something in the name of another person, whether it's a *Dvar Torah* or otherwise. This coming week - whether I am learning in a yeshiva, kollel, or work in the office - unless the information that I will relate (in the name of someone else) is correct and verified, I won't say it. This will not only teach me the importance of pursuing *emes*, but it will also be a *zechus* for the *neshama* of HaRav Meir HaLevi ben HaRav Yitzchok Zev, *zechuso yagen aleinu*.