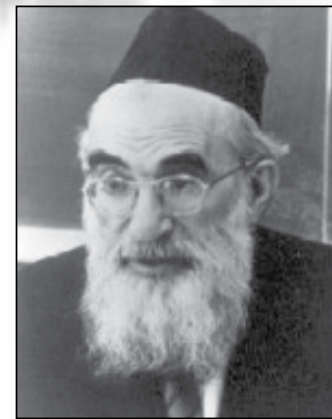


# Rav Dovid Lifshitz zt"l

The Suvalker Rov and Rosh Yeshiva  
at Yeshiva Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon

On His 20<sup>th</sup> Yahrtzeit, 9 Tammuz



In the summer of 1993, Klal Yisroel mourned the passing of Rav Dovid Lifshitz, a distinguished, Rosh Yeshiva, Rov and *mashpia* who had served for years one of the Roshei Yeshiva of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon and had a profound impact on the lives of countless *talmidim*. In his *hesped* for Rav Dovid, Rav Chaim Stein, the Rosh Yeshiva of the Telzer Yeshiva of Cleveland, related that while he had known Rav Dovid for many years as a brilliant *talmid chochom* and outstanding *mashpia*, he had learned something new during Rav Dovid's final illness. During that time, he had seen how attached and devoted Rav Dovid's students were to him. The bond between *rebbe* and *talmidim* was so profound that it was clear that their very souls were linked. One *talmid*, who had been at Rav Dovid's side virtually throughout his final illness, even accompanied the *aron* to Eretz Yisroel, along with Rav Dovid's daughter and son-in-law. This, Rav Chaim asserted, was a testimony to Rav Dovid's own intense devotion to his *talmidim*. Just as Rav Dovid poured his own heart and soul into each and every one of his students, the students responded in kind; their own devotion mirrored his.

Rav Dovid Lifshitz was a brilliant Torah scholar and an incredibly successful Rebbi and *mashpia*. An authentic European *rov* who spent most of his life on American soil, Rav Dovid brought the passion for Torah, the exemplary *middos* and endless *chessed* of his illustrious mentors in Europe - Rav Shimon Shkop, Rosh Yeshiva of Grodno, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel, and Rav Yerucham Levovitz, Rosh Yeshiva and Mashgiach of the Mirrer Yeshiva - into his life in the United States. He radiated love of the Torah and love of Klal Yisroel to his students wherever he taught, and he was beloved and respected by his students, who saw him as the living embodiment of all the ideals of the Torah.

## An Author of Seforimas a Child

Rav Dovid Lifshitz was born in Minsk on the seventh of Tishrei, 5667 (1906), to Rav Yaakov Aryeh and Ittel Lifshitz. His paternal grandfather, Rav Shlomo Zalman Lifshitz, was a businessman in Grodno as well as a distinguished *talmid chochom*, who authored the *sefer Olas Shlomo* on *Seder Kodshim*.

Even at a young age, Reb Dovid's brilliance and passion for Torah were evident. While he learned in a standard *cheder* in Minsk, the young Dovid, along with a friend, authored a *peirush* on *Sefer Mishlei* entitled *Tal Yaldus*, along with a translation of *Sefer Daniel* and *Sefer Ezra*. Just a couple of years later, Reb Dovid went to Grodno with his father, Reb Yaakov Aryeh, to visit his ailing grandfather. When they arrived, they found Reb Shlomo Zalman on his deathbed, and it was not long before he departed from this world. At that point, Reb Yaakov Aryeh elected to remain in Grodno, which was un-

der Polish sovereignty, rather than return to Minsk, where the family would be threatened by the Bolsheviks. Before long, the entire Lifshitz family resettled in Grodno, and it was there that Reb Dovid became *bar mitzvah*.

## In Grodno and Mir

One of Reb Dovid's most significant mentors was Rav Shimon Shkop zt"l, the legendary *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivas Shaar HaTorah in Grodno. Rav Shimon arrived in Grodno around this time, following an assembly of *gedolei Torah* in the year 5680 (1920), at which he was asked to leave the *rabbonus* of the town of Breinsk, where he had been serving for over a decade, and take the helm of the yeshiva in Grodno. Shortly after Rav Shimon's arrival, the upheaval caused by the Russo-Polish War of 1919 and 1920 had a devastating effect on the yeshiva, almost closing it altogether. By Sukkos of the year 5681 (late 1920), only Reb Dovid and a few other *bochurim* were left in the yeshiva. But before long, Rav Shimon was able to revive the yeshiva, and it served once again as a vibrant center of Torah learning.

Reb Dovid spent five years learning in Shaar HaTorah, years that had a profound effect on him that lasted for the rest of his life. Throughout his life, whenever Reb Dovid quoted Rav Shimon Shkop, he would refer to him as "*mori verabi* - my master and teacher." Reb Dovid imbibed his *rebbe's* Torah, and along with it he absorbed Rav Shimon's example of the relationship a *rebbe* should have with his *talmidim*: his patience, his dedication, and the formation of a life-long bond with every *talmid*.

When Reb Dovid was eighteen years old, Rav Shimon urged him to follow in the footsteps of many of the older *talmidim* in the yeshiva, who had left to learn in the great Yeshiva of Mir. In Mir, as in Grodno, Rav Dovid was known as a gifted *iluy* and a gifted member of the yeshiva's student body. His memory was phenomenal, and it was known that he was extraordinarily well-versed in all of the classic *seforim* studied in *yeshivos*, such as the *Ketzos Hachoshen*, the *Nesivos Hamishpat*, and *Chiddushei Rabi Akiva Eiger*. His peers noted that he was always serious, and that he conducted himself in a manner befitting a much older *talmid chochom*. Reb Dovid developed close relationships with both the Rosh Yeshiva of Mir, Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel zt"l, and the yeshiva's renowned *mashgiach*, Rav Yerucham Levovitz. He maintained his connection with Rav Shimon Shkop and made sure to greet his *rebbe* and absorb his words of Torah every time he returned to his parents home in Grodno.

## The Suvalker Rov

When Reb Dovid was 24 years old, the *rov* of the town of Suvalk, Rav Yosef Yoselowitz, asked Rav Eliezer Yehuda Finkel to

help him find a *shidduch* for his only daughter, Tzipporah Chava. In those days, it was almost rare for a young man at the age of 24 to get married, especially in the Mirrer Yeshiva, but the Rosh Yeshiva felt that Reb Dovid would be a fitting match for the Suvalker Rov's daughter, and he did not hesitate to suggest the *shidduch*. The two were married in Cheshvan of the year 5693 (1933), at a wedding attended by many of the most illustrious *rabbanim* of Poland at the time.

Reb Dovid and his new wife settled in her hometown of Suvalk, where he assisted his father-in-law in managing his rabbinic responsibilities. Suvalk was actually a large city, home to a *kehillah* of over 10,000 Jews and 27 *shuls* and *batei medrash*. It was not long before the full responsibility of the *rabbonus* fell on Reb Dovid alone; just two years after Reb Dovid's marriage, his father-in-law passed away, and Reb Dovid succeeded him as the *rov* of Suvalk. Due to Reb Dovid's young age, some members of the community were initially opposed to offering him the position, but an elderly man named Reb Menachem Friedman stood up at a community meeting and declared, "Jews of Suvalk, one day a large city like Bialystok will simply come and grab Reb Dovid!" The others were convinced, and Reb Dovid's official appointment to the position was approved by none other than the undisputed leader of Lithuanian Jewry at the time, Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzensky zt"l.

Reb Dovid was indeed a very young *rov*, but he was also an extraordinarily dedicated and active one. His many efforts on behalf of the Jews of Suvalk, which addressed many areas of need, were deeply appreciated by the community and earned him their abiding love and respect.

The education of the youth and *bnei Torah* of Suvalk was a cause that was very dear to Reb Dovid. Following his father-in-law's example, Reb Dovid spoke in the main *beis medrash* of Suvalk every Shabbos, delivering *chiddushei Torah* to a scholarly audience. Yeshiva *bochurim* would visit him on Shabbos afternoons to be tested on their learning. He worked hard on behalf of the local *Talmud Torah*, and he also founded a *yeshiva* for older students, many of whom went on to learn in some of the great *yeshivos* of Europe. Reb Dovid also made efforts on behalf of the "Tiferes Bochurim" organization that his father-in-law had founded. This organization aimed to satisfy the spiritual hunger of young men who, due to the terrible economic climate at the time in Europe were forced to work in order to supplement the family income. Tiferes Bochurim providing these *bochurim* with nightly *shiurim* and other forms of learning and the spiritual structure that ensured that their spiritual growth would continue despite the fact that they were unable to learn full time in *yeshiva* anymore.

Reb Dovid was also active on behalf of

many of the Jews of Suvalk who were in need of *chessed*. He was a gifted orator and made frequent appeals on Shabbos on behalf of a wide range of causes - *hachnosas orchim*, the *Talmud Torah*, firewood to heat the homes of the poor, a Jewish hospital, and many other needs. One cause for which Reb Dovid worked constantly and with particular fervor was assisting the Jewish soldiers who had been conscripted into the Polish army and were serving on a base near Suvalk. Reb Dovid worked tirelessly to see to it that they were provided with kosher food on a constant basis, and he intervened with their superiors to arrange for them to be released once a week so that they could daven with a *minyan* and attend a *shiur*. The weeks between Purim and Pesach were a time of particularly intense activity on behalf of the soldiers; the entire *kehillah* was called upon to see to it that they were supplied with food that was kosher for Pesach, and the Seder itself was held for a group of several hundred soldiers in a large hall, led by Reb Dovid himself and attended by a number of important communal figures.

Despite his young age, Reb Dovid was also called upon to adjudicate numerous complicated *dinei Torah* that were brought from outside Suvalk, a task that he handled with success.

## Dedication Under Fire

When World War Two broke out in September, 1939, the Jews of Suvalk were among the first to suffer - and Reb Dovid's acts of dedication to his *kehillah* rose to an entirely new level. As war broke out, German planes appeared in the skies overhead and began raining bombs on the city of Suvalk. Reb Dovid's immediate response was to hurry through the rain of destruction in order to free any Jews who had been imprisoned in the local jail, lest they be harmed by the shelling.

Suvalk briefly fell into Russian hands, but in accordance with the terms of the treaty between Germany and Russia (the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact), it was quickly handed over to Germany. The Nazis entered Suvalk on Simchas Torah of that year, and Reb Dovid was immediately summoned to appear before the Gestapo. A delegation of important members of the community went with him to meet the German officials, who treated the Jews with derision and contempt. It was not long before the Germans issued an edict prohibiting *shechitah* in the city. Then, on a surprise visit to Reb Dovid's home, a group of Nazi soldiers found a knife on his table and took it to be a *shechitah* knife. Their response was vicious: Pressing the knife against Reb Dovid's throat, a soldier demanded that all the *shechitah* knives in the city be handed over immediately. Then the Nazis demanded a list of all the wealthy Jews in town, as well as any Jew who owned a radio. Reb Dovid managed to keep his wits about him and claimed that all the affluent

Jews had already escaped, and he had no way of knowing who owned a radio.

## Escape from the Nazis

The situation quickly went from bad to worse, as the next Nazi decree called for all the *shuls* and *batei medrash* in the town to be closed immediately. Before long, a decree of expulsion was issued against all the Jews of Suvalk. The community leaders begged for mercy, explaining to the Nazis that they had nowhere to go; the borders of Russia and Lithuania were sealed to them. But their pleas were met with cruel indifference. Ultimately, the community was granted a two-week reprieve in order to devise a plan for resettlement.

Reb Dovid leapt into action. Traveling to the Russian border, he obtained permission to cross the border and meet with local officials. He pleaded for his fellow Jews to be granted sanctuary and was told that his request would be passed on to Moscow. No response was ever received. A similar attempt to meet with Lithuanian officials was rebuffed, when Reb Dovid and his delegation were not even allowed to cross the border. Nevertheless, the Jews on the other side of the border managed to communicate to their brethren in distress that they should try to cross over into Lithuania illegally, and there was hope that they would be allowed to remain once they were there.

Reb Dovid refused to leave his community, but he did send his wife, his widowed mother-in-law, and his two children, a five-year-old girl and a baby, across the border along with a group of other Jewish refugees. Unfortunately, at this point tragedy struck the family. During the clandestine border crossing, the baby began to cry and the border guards opened fire. Reb Dovid's five-month-old daughter was tragically killed by the gunfire, and his wife and mother-in-law were captured by the Lithuanian police and returned to the Germans. Reb Dovid's older daughter was separated from her mother and grandmother and somehow ended up in Kalvarija, a Lithuanian city that was home to 1000 Jews.

After this incident, Reb Dovid was finally persuaded to leave Suvalk and find his missing daughter, whose whereabouts were then unknown to him. Along with his wife and mother-in-law, Reb Dovid crossed the border and was reunited with his daughter. He continued to work tirelessly for the sake of the Jews of Suvalk. About 3000 Jews were saved before the rest of the community was rounded up by the Germans in the month of Kislev and met their bitter end at the hands of the murderous Nazis. (Unfortunately, the Jews who remained in Lithuania were also killed when the Nazis overran that country just a year and a half later. Among them was Reb Dovid's mother-in-law, Rebbetzin Yosefowitz.)

Reb Dovid, his wife, and his surviving daughter managed to obtain passes allowing them to travel through Russia and Japan to the United States. It was a long, arduous journey that ultimately brought them to Honolulu, and from there to San Francisco, where they arrived on Erev Shavuos, 1941. In America, Reb Dovid was greeted warmly by the expatriates of Suvalk. Even though the vast majority of them had emigrated prior to his arrival in Suvalk, they were well aware of all that he had done on behalf of their families and friends back home, and they were glad to repay his kindness. The community rented an apartment for Reb Dovid in the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn. Reb Dovid remained in Brooklyn for a year, where the Jews of Suvalk provided him with all his needs and yeshiva *bochurim* flocked to him to speak in learning.

He was also highly respected by American *rabbanim*, who recognized him as a distinguished European *rov*, and he was accorded the same respect as the veteran members of the Agudas Harabbonim. In 1942, Reb Dovid Lifshitz was invited to serve as the *rosh yeshiva* of Beis Medrash LeTorah in Chicago, an offer that he accepted.

## A Sought-After Mashpia

In Chicago, Reb Dovid was highly respected by the various *rabbanim* of the city, and he became a beloved and admired *mashpia* and *marbitz Torah* in the yeshiva. Reb Dovid's reputation traveled across the country, and he soon received two offers of other positions, each of them in New York. One was extended by Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz *zt"l*, who invited Reb Dovid to serve as a *maggid shiur* in Mesivta Torah Vodaas, while the other came from Dr. Samuel Belkin of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon, who offered Reb Dovid a prominent position in that institution. Reb Dovid chose to accept the position at RIETS. He especially felt that he could contribute to RIETS's stated goal of producing *rabbanim* that would serve in communities throughout the country. Indeed, his experience as both a practicing *rov* and his years learning in the great yeshivos of Grodno and Mir made him eminently suited for the task.

Thus, in 1944 Reb Dovid returned to New York and settled in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. But

Kotler *zt"l* remarked at the time that Reb Dovid did not have the right to resign from his position, since the Jewish world needed him. After the other members of the presidium passed away, Reb Dovid also gave up his position so that Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l* could serve as the sole president of the organization. Reb Dovid held the title of honorary president for the rest of his life.

Reb Dovid had a deep, abiding love for Eretz Yisroel, and he played a fundamental role in the political scene of the nascent State of Israel. Shortly after the State was founded, Reb Dovid traveled to Eretz Yisroel and was instrumental in assembling the "religious front" that was included in the first Knesset.

For many years, Reb Dovid served as the vice president of Ezras Torah, the *tzedokah* organization founded in 1915. In 1976, Reb Dovid was appointed the president of the organization; it was a position he held until his passing 17 years later. During this time, he collected thousands of dollars on behalf of impoverished Jews everywhere, particularly the Torah scholars of Eretz Yisroel.

## A Devoted Rebbe

Two years before his passing, Reb Dovid was the guest of honor at the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary banquet of Ezras Torah. The banquet was attended by a large number of his *talmidim*, and Reb Dovid took a personal interest in each one, inquiring about his learning and greeting each with visible warmth and affection. It was clear to everyone present that

searching for a way to influence the *talmid*, and he had no rest until he had managed to do so.

Upon joining the faculty of RIETS, Reb Dovid insisted on living in the yeshiva's neighborhood. He was committed not only to teaching his students during the time they spent with him in his *shiur*, but also teaching by example throughout the day. His home was open to students at all hours, every day of the week. Especially joyous were special days such as Purim when the *talmidim* would come to his house to rejoice and hear beautiful words of Torah that exuded joy and set the tone for the day. The love that he radiated to his *talmidim* was one that was tangible and amazingly bridged the gap between the European born and educated Yiddish speaking *gaon* with wholly American English speaking *talmidim*.

Reb Dovid also davened every day in the yeshiva and his devotion to *tefillah*, served as a source of inspiration to all that observed him. Especially moving was the way he looked on Yom Kippur, dressed completely in white, the holiness of the day etched on his face. Those that merited hearing Rav Dovid emotionally intone the Avinu Malkeinu *tefillah* on Yom Kippur will never forget it. Indeed his very presence in the RIETS *bais Medrash* lent it an aura of greatness.

Reb Dovid sought to encourage his students who had the ability, to enter the fields of Torah education and *rabbonus*, but he remained close even with those who chose other professions, and he continued to derive pride and pleasure from their accomplishments.

## Promoter of Peace

Reb Dovid was known for his commitment to the ideal of *shalom*, peace. He was beloved by many people and had many close friends. On every possible occasion, Reb Dovid warned others to refrain from using hurtful or demeaning words. His approach was always to avoid confrontation and to maintain peaceful coexistence with others; he eschewed *machlokes* of any sort. Even in his capacity as a member of the Agudas Harabbonim, an organization whose goal was to defend Yiddishkeit from all breaches or distortions of tradition, Reb Dovid somehow always found a way to achieve that goal without rancor or discord.

Once, Reb Dovid organized a march of yeshiva students in Chicago, in an effort to promote Shabbos observance and convince Jewish storeowners to close their establishments on Shabbos. At first, some objected to the plan, claiming that no benefit could come from it, but Reb Dovid was determined to see it through. "Even if one store closes its doors, it will be worth it," he declared. Ultimately, Reb Dovid was successful in influencing many business owners. But in all of Reb Dovid's struggles against *chillul Shabbos*, he remained constantly pleasant and avoided confrontation or hostility. As a result, his pleas for *shemiras Shabbos* were much more readily received.

Reb Dovid passed away on the ninth of Tammuz, 5753 (1993) and was deeply mourned by his *talmidim* and by Jews worldwide. His *shiurim* were published under the title *Shiurei Rav Dovid Lifshitz*, and a number of his *mussar shmuesen* were also published under the title *Tehillah LeDovid*.

Sources: *Introduction to Tehillah LeDovid*, *Keshes Giborim*, *Rav Chaim Stein's hesped on Rav Dovid*, (published in *Beis Yitzchok of that year*), and an article in *HaPardes* (No. 67 vol. 9)



1. Rav Avraham Joffen | 2. Rav Meir Cohen | 3. Rav Mordechai Pinchas Teitz | 4. Rav Dovid Lifshitz | 5. Rav Eliezer Silver | 6. Rav Aharon Kotler | 7. Rav Simcha Elberg | 8. Rav Shimon Morduchovitz | 9. Rav Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman | 10. Rav Chaim Tzvi Kruger.

while Reb Dovid left Beis Medrash LeTorah, his students could not bear to see him go. Eleven of his *talmidim* from the yeshiva approached Reb Dovid before his departure and insisted that they could not remain in the yeshiva without him; if he was leaving, then they would follow him. And so they did; Reb Dovid arrived in the yeshiva in New York accompanied by those eleven students, who continued learning under his tutelage.

## Serving the Jewish World at Large

Outside the confines of the yeshiva, Reb Dovid was also involved in many communal causes. He served for many years in the presidium of the Agudas Harabbonim of America and Canada, an organization that sought to promote Shabbos observance, yeshiva education, and many other important Jewish causes. Reb Dovid was a skilled orator, and his public addresses made a profound impact on his audiences. He once resigned from his position in the organization, but he was then asked to retract his resignation. Rav Aharon

Reb Dovid had heeded *Chazal's* injunction to "establish many students." Indeed, Reb Dovid could be credited with "establishing" thousands of students, and taking a personal interest in each of them.

Reb Dovid's seemingly endless dedication to his students was something that he absorbed from the *rebbe* of his youth, Reb Shimon Shkop. Following Rav Shimon's example, Reb Dovid was always willing to take the time to explain any concept repeatedly in his *shiurim* until his students had grasped it. And his concern for his students and their well-being extended far beyond their years under his direct tutelage; he continued taking an interest in their lives long after they had left the yeshiva. Even years after a student had learned under him, Reb Dovid would remember the student and his family by name.

Reb Dovid was once told that one of his *talmidim* was not conducting himself in a proper way. Even though this *talmid* had not completely left the fold, Reb Dovid was moved to tears. He immediately began