



REFLECTIONS ON MY REBBE, RAV MOSHE DOVID TENDLER ZT"l



Shimshon HaKohen Nadel

The Talmud (*Mo'ed Katan* 25b) relates that following the death of Rabba and

Rav Yosef, the bridges over the Euphrates collapsed into one another, and following the death of Abaye and Rava, the bridges over the Tigris collapsed into one another. These great sages were 'bridges' - *ba'alei mesorah* - connecting one generation to the next. And their deaths marked the end of an era.

Moreinu HaRav Moshe Dovid Tendler zt"l was a living link in the chain of tradition. He connected us to the *gedolim* of the previous generations, all the way back to Sinai. And his death too marks the end of an era.

Rav Tendler was many things: A posek and a professor. A rosh yeshiva and a scientist. A world-class talmid chacham with a Phd in microbiology. A communal leader and synagogue rabbi. But to me, he was a Rebbe.

His *shiur* was unlike any other in the yeshiva. Rav Tendler wouldn't get lost in abstractions, *pilpulim*, or *lomdus*. Instead, his *shiur* focused on *halacha l'ma'aseh*, the practical application of halacha. The *sugya* would come to life - pirouetting off the page of the Gemara - as Rav Tendler would share real questions and cases he was involved in, drawing on years of experience as a *posek*. We would often look

together at the *teshuvot* of his beloved *shver*, HaGa'on Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, with Rav Tendler providing fascinating footnotes and important background information to the *teshuvah*.

Rav Tendler defined '*Torah L'shmah*' - the study of Torah for its own sake - as '*L'shem Hora'ah*,' for the sake of being able to rule; to render *p'sak halacha*. He would invoke *Kiddushin* 30a: "The words of Torah should be sharp in your mouth, so should someone ask you a question you will not stammer - instead - answer him immediately." And he was critical of those who study in yeshiva or kollel for many years, but when asked how to make a cup of tea on Shabbos, 'don't want to *pasken*.'

It was not uncommon for me to be sitting with him in his office at Yeshiva University, or at his home in Monsey, NY, and he would receive a phone call - usually from across the great expanses of the globe - on some serious matter. And it was also not uncommon for him to quickly gesture to me to pick up the phone and listen in on the conversation, so I could hear how he navigated the complex question.

He wanted his talmidim to be competent and confident in answering a *shayla*.

He was also the address when the answer was unclear, or the question too great for a newly-minted rabbi. We knew we could turn to him and he would guide us. One of the *poskei ha-dor* was just a phone call

away, always magnanimous, always generous with his time.

It's no surprise he was so generous with his talmidim, he loved us. Chazal compare the talmid-rebbe relationship to the parent-child relationship (*Sifrei, Va'etchanan*). This was tangible to anyone who merited to be a talmid of Rav Tendler. He treated us like his own children, and our children like his grandchildren. Our s'machot were his s'machot, and our successes were his successes. He was deeply invested in his talmidim, and was so proud of their accomplishments. Together with his late Rebbetzin Sifra a"h, he would open up his home to us for Shabbat, Yom Tov, and Chanukah. And we *talmidim* didn't call him Rav. We called him Rebbe.

For decades, Rav Tendler served with distinction as a Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and Professor of Biology and Jewish Medical Ethics at Yeshiva College. He entered the yeshiva at the age of thirteen in 1939, and in his own words, "never left." YU's motto of Torah U'Madda was his own personal mantra. But he would often quip that there should "be more Madda in the Torah classes, and more Torah in the Madda classes!" He brought science into the Beit Midrash and Torah into the laboratory. Sophisticated *sugyot* were illuminated by scientific material, and his biology classes were peppered with statements of Chazal.

As a preeminent posek and pioneer in the field of Medical Halacha, Rav Tendler ruled on the most difficult and delicate areas of halacha: Complicated questions of *pikuach nefesh*, end-of-life issues, organ donation, *agunot*, abortion, and reproductive



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medicine. He answered them all with a surgical precision, a great finesse, and with a great sense of responsibility. He had broad shoulders and garnered the confidence of the broad community, recognized as a leading authority.

In addition to his many accomplishments, he also developed a cancer drug he named Refuin. A Time Magazine article dated May 31, 1963 described how “the discovery made by Dr. Moses D. Tendler... took on an aura of romance because he spends only part of his time in the laboratory, the rest in his study as a Talmudic scholar.” Even Time magazine couldn’t ignore this Kiddush Hashem. As the Mishnah he was fond of quoting states, “Lovely is the study of Torah together with worldly pursuits!” (*Avot* 2:2). *How many can boast that their rosh yeshiva discovered a cure for cancer?*

Rav Tendler was an invaluable resource to his saintly father-in-law, HaGa’on Rav Moshe Feinstein. When Rav Moshe was posed with questions of medical procedures, or innovations in science and technology, he turned to his beloved son-in-law. Rav Tendler is quoted in tens and tens of *teshuvot* in the *Igrot Moshe*, providing the necessary medical or scientific information needed to pasken the *shayla*.

His Torah was a ‘*Torat Chayim*,’ a living, breathing Judaism that engages the modern world and confronts its challenges. He believed that an understanding of science, technology, and the *metzi’ut* is indispensable. He would point to how Rav spent eighteen months among the shepherds studying what types of blemishes on animals heal and which are permanent (*Sanhedrin* 5b), or how Rabbi Zeira was

hesitant to rule on issues of family purity without requisite knowledge of the physiology involved (*Niddah* 20b), or the Talmud’s critique of one who knows how to calculate the calendar based on astronomy and the constellations but does not, as such calculations are considered a “mitzvah” (*Shabbat* 75a). “There is wisdom found among the gentiles” (*Eicha Rabbah* 2:13), and for Rav Tendler, an understanding of that wisdom is *sine qua non* for deciding halacha.

A rare scholar, he was an expert in both Torah and science. And he saw no conflict between the two. For him, they lived together in perfect harmony. They complemented one another. He was equally at home quoting Galen as he was quoting the Rambam. Equally at home in the dalet amot of the Beit Midrash and the four ells of the science lab.

Returning from the funeral of Rav, the Talmud (*Berachot* 42b-43a) records how his students sat by the river and ate. When they finished and wanted to *bentsch*, a question arose to which they had no answer. Rav Adda bar Ahavah stood up, rent his garment a second time and said, “Rav has died and we have not learned from him the laws of *Birkat Ha-Mazon*!” *Now that Rav Tendler is gone, who will answer our questions? Who will provide us with direction and guidance in the most difficult questions of Medical Halacha, innovations in science, and advancements in technology?*

Born in 1926, he would often say that he was born in a “small shtetl in Europe, known as the Lower East Side of Manhattan.” “Hitler killed more than six million Jews, he destroyed a culture that you kids don’t even know about,” he would remark. And in his *shiur* we were transported to a long-lost

world where a man dressed in tatters knew every Tosafot by heart and could be asked any question on any page of the Talmud. Rav Tendler would share stories of how as a child he would accompany his maternal grandfather, Rav Shalom Baumrind, known as the Boyaner Mohel to the fish market for *kapporos*, where he would buy a live carp and place a piece of bread soaked in schnapps in its mouth. He shared how the same grandfather would take him to the Boyaner Rebbe's tisch, which he remembered as being regal and majestic, but to his grandfather's chagrin, still refused to take the Rebbe's *shi'rayim*. He recalled how his grandmother used to cut the bottoms of carrots first, as it's not nice to chop off the head.

He connected us to the *gedolim* of previous generations. As a *bachur*, he would read the Gemara for an elderly, blind Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin zt"l who sat on wooden orange crates so as not to take money from the yeshiva for furniture. He shared stories of his father, Rav Yitzchak Isaac Tendler zt"l, who served as a Rosh Yeshiva at RJJ and the Rav of the Kaminetzer Shul for decades, and his father's rebbe Rav Baruch Boruch Ber Leibowitz zt"l. Unpublished, little known anecdotes and *chiddushim* from the Rav, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik zt"l along with

other former RIETS roshei yeshiva from long ago. Stories of his interactions with Torah luminaries like Rav Kahaneman zt"l, Rav Hutner zt"l, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe zt"l. Often, while relating a story about his beloved *shver*, Rav Moshe, Rav Tendler would have to hold back the tears.

For Rav Tendler, sharing these stories and anecdotes was not '*bittul Torah*.' "Even the mundane conversations of Talmidei Chachamim requires study" (*Avoda Zara* 19b). He was connecting us with the *mesorah*. He taught his students more than just a '*blatt Gemara*,' he gave us a glimpse into greatness.

Rav Tendler was a towering intellectual giant, but at the same time very down to earth, and easily approachable. He was famous for his wry sense of humor. He possessed a sharp wit and biting sarcasm. Always quick with a comment or a comeback. Once when asked by a student if a certain decadent dessert made with dairy equipment can be eaten after meat, he scratched his beard and wondered aloud if it should be eaten at all, given just how unhealthy it is.

As a posek he could be unyielding, uncompromising, and unapologetic. He lived the Torah's charge to the *dayyan*: "You shall not tremble before any man" (Devraim 1:17). Whether it was brain death, *metzitzta b'peh*, or ascending the Temple Mount, he was unafraid to take a controversial position, even at great personal cost. He strove for truth, often quoting the Maharshal's

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comment that any distortion of the Torah is *yehareg ve'al ya'avur* (See *Yam Shel Shlomo*, *Bava Kamma* 4:9) or Rav Soloveitchik's comparison of a *posek* who errs to a false prophet.

He had an illustrious career, spanning decades dedicated to Jewish communal life. As a rosh yeshiva and the rabbi of Community Synagogue of Monsey, he helped shape Orthodoxy in America in the 20th Century. His books and dozens of scholarly articles on the intersection of halacha, science and medicine guided generations, and will continue to guide generations to come. He was blessed with *arichut yamim*, and continued giving *shiurim* until his most recent illness made it too difficult. He drew strength from his great love for the Torah and his great love for his talmidim.

"From Moshe to Moshe, no one arose like

Moshe." Like Moshe Rabbeinu, Moshe ben Maimon, and Rav Moshe Feinstein, Rav Tendler taught Torah to generations, connecting them to our *mesorah*.

Upon learning of the death of his teacher and master, Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Akiva rent his garments and cried out, "Woe is me, my teacher! Woe is me, my teacher! My master, who has left the entire generation orphaned!" (*Avot D'Rebbi Natan*, 25).

With the passing of Moreinu HaRav Moshe Dovid Tendler zt"l, our generation is orphaned. But he leaves a lasting legacy in the myriads of talmidim he taught and inspired. *Yehi zichro baruch*. ■

Shimshon HaKohen Nadel lives and teaches in Jerusalem, where he serves as mara d'atra of Har Nof's Kehilat Zichron Yosef and Rosh Kollel of the Sinai Kollel.

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