

Rav Yehudah Davis ZT"l

PIONEER AMERICAN ROSH YESHIVA

(1907-1997)

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

INTRODUCTION

Today the name Rav Yehudah Davis, zt"l, does not ring a bell with many people. Some may recall that he was the founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva Zichron Mayir of Mountandale, NY. However, few people are aware that Rav Davis was a bold thinker and innovator whose groundbreaking efforts in the late Thirties, Forties and Fifties set the stage for things that are considered commonplace in today's Orthodox world.

Some of his accomplishments include being a driving force that led to such people as Rabbis Avigdor Miller, Nosson Wachtfogel, and Mordechai Gifter, zt"l, studying in European yeshivas, starting what probably was the first Orthodox summer learning camp for boys, revitalizing Yiddishkeit in Baltimore shortly before and during World War II, successful Kiruv work, and an innovative approach to Chinuch. Rabbi Avraham (Albert) Schwartz, whose family was strongly influenced by Rav Davis beginning in 1938, told me that his mother called Rav Davis "*der Heliger Rebbe*" despite the fact that there were no Chasidische rebbes in Baltimore at this time. "My family did whatever Rav Davis

told us to do." Rabbi Schwartz's younger brother, David, told me "Rav Davis was fifty years ahead of his time. He turned Baltimore upside down!"

Who was this man who influenced so many? What lessons can we learn from knowing about his life? In order to at least present a biographical sketch of the life of Rav Davis. This is followed by some recollections of Rav Davis by some people who personally knew him. In this way it is hoped that the reader will gain a real appreciation for this extraordinary man.

EARLY YEARS

Rav Davis was born in Baltimore, MD on October 25, 1907 (17 Cheshvan, 5668). When he was young, his grandmother inspired him with stories about European *Gedolim*. There were no yeshivas in Baltimore at this time, so he attended public school and received his Jewish education in an afternoon Talmud Torah. Even as a youngster he displayed an unusual interest in his religious studies. After graduating high school Rav Davis enrolled in Johns Hopkins University and completed the requirements for his degree in a little more than three years. In 1927, at the age of twenty, he went to New York

to study at the Rabbi Yitzchok (Isaac) Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS).



He also continued his secular studies at Columbia University, but left after a year. He often explained that this was out of disappointment in finding no evidence to support the institution's claim that it honestly pursued knowledge.

Rav Davis felt that it was important to form groups dedicated to Torah study. The study group he organized in New York included the future Torah luminaries Avigdor Miller, Mordechai Gifter, Ber Elya Gordon, and Nosson Wachtfogel. In 1931 Rav Davis and Rav Wachtfogel went to Poland to study in the Mirrer Yeshiva.

BACK TO AMERICA AND THEN EUROPE AGAIN

In 1932 Rav Davis returned to RIETS. He resumed the study group he had formed before going to Europe and also arranged lectures by European Torah giants who were visiting America. Within a year Rav Davis had influenced some of the group members to study in Europe in the great yeshivas located there. The result was that Reb Mordechai Gifter went to Telshe, Reb Ber Elya Gordon to the Mir, Reb Mordechai Yoffe to Lomza, and Reb Avigdor Miller followed Rav Davis shortly after he went to Slabodka.

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In 1934 Rav Davis' mother became deathly ill, and he returned to Baltimore to be with her. Realizing that she was near death, Rav Davis' mother expressed her concern to him about the future of his younger brother, Chuni (Herbert). She was afraid that were he to stay in Baltimore after her passing, he might not remain observant. She made Rav Davis promise to take Chuni with him when he returned to Slabodka.

Shortly before his mother's passing Rav Davis married Frieda Basha Zions. After his

mother's *petira*, he, his new wife, and his younger brother left for Slabodka. Chuni was too young to actually study in the yeshiva; so Rav Davis arranged a special learning schedule for him. He also fashioned games for his brother to play after he finished his studies.

This period turned out to be one of great accomplishment for Rav Davis. He joined a *chabura* (study group) that completed the entire *Shas* in one year. (This was not the first time he had completed *Shas*. In fact, he had already done so before he went to Europe in 1931!) Rabbi Yisroel Bergstein,

z"l, one of the *chabura's* members, described Rav Davis as a "tremendous force, the *ari she'b'chabura*" (the lion of the group).

AMERICA AGAIN

Rav Davis left Slabodka in 1937, because Mrs. Davis could not stand the cold there. Life in Slabodka lacked many of the amenities of life in America. Indeed, at the time that her first child was to be born there was a flood in Kovno, and Mrs. Davis had to be transported by boat to the hospital!

Rav Davis was granted semicha before leaving Europe. Three great Lithuanian *rabbanim* tested him. They were: Rabbi Reuvein Zelig Bengis (the *Kalverier* Rav, later to become the *Av Beis Din* of the *Eida Hachareidis* in Jerusalem), the *Kaidaner* Rav, and the *Kovner* Rav (the *D'var Avraham*).

Shortly after his return to Baltimore he became the Rov of Congregation Adas Bnei Yisroel. This shul was similar to the Young Israel synagogues of the time in that it attracted American born youth—interested in Yiddishkeit. Rav Davis also stimulated the interest of a number of unaffiliated young people who began to come to the shul,

and, as a result, became more observant. He was a pioneer in *Kiruv Rechokim*.

Within a short time Rav Davis took over Baltimore's network of Talmud Torahs from the Conservative rabbi who had been running it. He took a "hands-on" approach to *Chinuch*. For example, after studying the relevant halachos he had his students make their own *tzitzis* and build their own *succos*. He influenced some of his students to go to Brooklyn to study in the new Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim, whose Rosh Yeshiva was Rabbi Dovid Leibowitz, z"l. Some of these young men became *b'nei Torah* of the highest caliber.

With the assistance of others he and Mrs. Davis began Baltimore's Bais Yaakov for girls, by going door to door to recruit students. The first classes were given by Mrs. Davis while the girls sat around her kitchen table.

BRIGHTON BEACH

Exactly when Rav Davis left Baltimore is not clear. Some think it was in 1942, some say 1943, and others believe it was in 1944. In any event, in 1944 he became the General Studies Principal of the Brighton Beach Yeshiva in Brooklyn, NY. By 1948 he was no longer the principal of the school, but he remained as a *rebbe*.

Rav Davis founded "The Boys' *Chabura* of Brighton" and thereby influenced young men who were to become future Orthodox Jewish leaders. These included Rabbi

Shaya Jacobson, who was later to head Yeshiva Tiferes Yisroel; Rabbi Dovid Weiner, of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim; his brother Rabbi Binyamin Weiner, former Menahel of the Bais Yaakov Cohn High School of Queens; and Rabbi Aharon Zuckerman, Rav of Agudath Yisroel of Midwood and faculty member of the Mirror Mesivta.

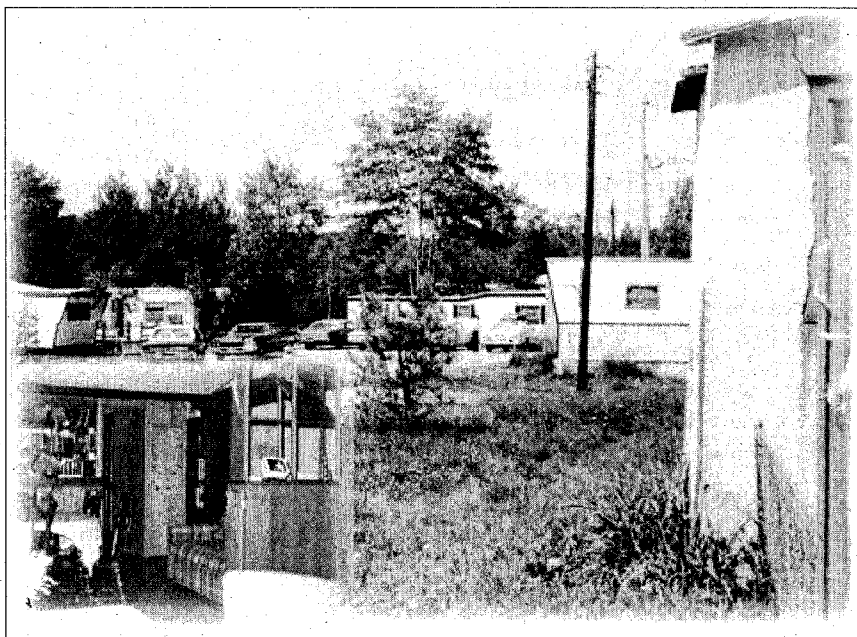
During this period Rav Davis created original methodologies for learning Talmud that were based upon rules of logic, syntax and language. His students found that these unique approaches facilitated their understanding of many difficult *Sugyas* in *Shas*.

BOSTON, PERSONAL TRAGEDY AND BROOKLYN AGAIN

In the mid-1950's Rav Aharon Kotler, z"l, sent Rav Davis to Boston to become the Rosh Yeshiva of a branch of the Lakewood Yeshiva that had been founded there.

Unfortunately, Rav Davis now experienced a period of great personal tragedy. He had a long bout with pneumonia that prevented him from teaching. Finally he was well enough to resume teaching. However, two days after he resumed giving shiurim, his oldest son, Mayir, a tireless *masmid* in the Philadelphia Yeshiva with exemplary *middos*, suddenly died at age 19. Rav

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The yeshiva's trailer park

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Davis was devastated by the tragic loss of this budding Torah scholar.

Rabbi Moshe Davis, a son of Rav Davis, told me, "While my mother was physically frail, she was a spiritual powerhouse, perhaps even stronger than my father in certain ways. It was she who helped my father through the trying time when my brother Mayir died. My father said more than once that if not for her, he would not have been able to continue his work."

Rav Davis and his family returned to Brooklyn. He continued devoting himself to disseminating his Torah ideals and became a *maggid shiur* in the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn. One evening, two boys attending nearby Lincoln High School knocked on his door and asked that he teach them. Rav Davis agreed, and this eventually led him to establish his own yeshiva.

The boys themselves raised the funds to buy a building for the yeshiva in Brighton Beach. The yeshiva was named Yeshiva Zichron Mayir, in memory of Rav Davis's son. Some of the boys who attended the yeshiva eventually emerged as Torah leaders.

During the summers Rav Davis took the boys to the Catskills. In the early years they went to Parksville. Rabbi Shlomo Rothenberg, the present Rosh

Yeshiva of the Mountaindale Yeshiva, recalled, "There was no heat, no running water. We were comfortable American boys. What made us go there? He was our *rebbe*; he was our father in everything in life – in marriage, in *chinuch*, in *ruchnius*, in *gashmius*."

MOUNTAINDALE

In 1965 the yeshiva purchased property in Mountaindale, New York, where it eventually relocated year-round. The decaying hotel building that originally had housed the married couples was soon replaced by an innovation – mobile homes that turned far from wealthy idealists into instant homeowners.

Unfortunately, Rav Davis also experienced tragedy in this location. In 1985 Mrs. Davis was hit by a car and killed while walking *Bein HaShmoshos* on Shabbos. Rabbi Moshe Davis related the following regarding the passing of his mother. "My mother, z"l, was *nifter* suddenly. After Shabbos, before I told my father what had happened to my mother, the entire family gathered, children and grandchildren, as well as my father's *Talmidim*. They were all present when I informed my father of the tragedy. Upon hearing the news, he went to bed and was heard crying and saying, 'She was everything to me! She was everything to me!'"

Mrs. Davis' *Levaya* took place the next day (Sunday). It was Erev Succos. Rabbi Y. S. Rothenberg told me, "We were shocked at how Rav Davis broke down at the *Levaya*! He was always so strong, yet he cried constantly and said over and over again, 'You have no idea what she was!'" Rabbi Moshe Davis related, "My father had a heart attack during her *k'vurah*. Hatzoloh was called, and he was taken to the hospital. He spent Succos in the hospital!"

PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS OF RAV DAVIS

As interesting as the reader may find the biographical sketch above, it still does not provide real insight into how Rav Davis was able to have such an effect on those who came within his sphere of influence. For this, one needs to "hear" from those he influenced.

With this in mind, we present below some recollections of the activities of Rav Davis by those who were close to him during three periods:

(1) **1938 - 1940** from Rabbi Avraham (Albert) Schwartz and his brother David. Rabbi Schwartz was the Rov of Congregation Shaarey Tefilah in Perth Amboy, NJ from 1956 until 1979. Mr. D. Schwartz was the Executive Director of the Yeshiva of Flatbush for thirty years.

(2) **Beginning in 1953** from Professor Eliezar (Leon) Ehrenpreis. Dr. Ehrenpreis is a

world-famous mathematician who received semicha from Rav Moshe Feinstein z"l.

(3) **1968 - 1997** from Rabbi Zvi Lampel. Rabbi Lampel spent 18 years studying with Rav Davis in Yeshiva Zichron Mayir. He is the author of **The Dynamics of Dispute and Maimonides' Introduction to the Talmud**, the winner of a National Jewish Book Award.

BALTIMORE IN THE 1930S

Baltimore, MD during the thirties was a city with a relatively large Jewish population. However, the vast majority of Jews there were not observant. Many of those who were affiliated with an Orthodox shul were not Shomer Shabbos.

Rabbi Schwartz and his brother, Boruch Mordechai a"h, entered Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim (then known as the Baltimore Hebrew Parochial School) at the same time. The school had only seven grades. After completing Eighth grade they entered the ninth grade of public high. During that first year of high school they studied with a Rebbe after school.

Their father regularly tested the boys, and he was not happy with the Jewish education they were receiving while attending public high school. Therefore, not long after Rav Davis and his family returned to Baltimore from Slabodka, Mr. Schwartz hired him to be a rebbe for his

sons. Mrs. Davis was engaged to teach the Schwartz girls. Reb Chaim probably had no idea what kind of a rebbe he had hired for his sons or what he was getting his family into!

Rabbi Schwartz related, "We were the Charedi family of Baltimore in the thirties, yet everything changed when we got involved with Rav Davis. My mother, Ida Rose, a"h, was constantly bringing this or that to the mikvah to be *toiveled*. We wore cotton Tzitzis during the summer. Rav Davis insisted that we wear woolen Tzitzis, and, of course, the ones we had were too small, so my mother had to make us new, bigger Tzitzis. Whatever he said, my mother, who referred to him as '*der Heliger Rebbe*,' would do."

In 1938 Rav Davis introduced an innovation that was to become part and parcel of the Orthodox scene within a couple of decades – a summer camp for boys where the *bachurim* would swim, play ball, and study Torah undistracted. There were a number of farms located not far from Baltimore, and one of them was inactive. Rav Davis rented this farm and made what was probably the first Orthodox learning camp for boys in America. He was both the learning rebbe and sports counselor. Rabbi Schwartz recalled, "We learned in the morning and played sports, swam and rowed in the afternoon. He not only taught us Torah, but he taught us how to swim and row

a boat. When we went bowling, he got a strike every time! There was nothing that the man couldn't do. He knew about everything – history, current events, you name it. How? I do not know. Whenever we raised an issue, he always asked us, 'What is the Torah view of this or that?'

Chaim Schwartz had planned that his sons would go to RIETS and Yeshiva College, graduate, and eventually take over his prosperous business. Rav Davis would not hear of it, insisting that the brothers attend Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim to study with Rav Dovid Leibowitz *zt"l*. In the end Rav Davis prevailed, so, in the summer of 1940, the boys became *talmidim* of Reb Dovid. Sadly, Boruch Mordechai suddenly passed away a few months after the brothers began learning in Chofetz Chaim.

While sitting Shivain Baltimore, Avraham Schwartz realized that his mother would never let him return to Chofetz Chaim. Still, Rav Davis was absolutely opposed to RIETS and Yeshiva College. A solution that everyone could live with was found when Rav Yaakov Ruderman *zt"l*, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel, came to be *Menachem Ovel*. He suggested that Avraham come to Ner Yisroel. Rav Davis agreed, and this was indeed what Reb Avraham did. Such was the extent of the influence that Rav Davis had on the Schwartz family! Reb David Schwartz told me. "He was a powerhouse; you could not but

follow his lead. He was fifty years ahead of his time!"

BRIGHTON BEACH AND BOSTON

Professor Eliezar (Leon) Ehrenpreis' family moved to Brighton Beach from the Bronx in

"So, in February or March of 1953 I went to *daven* with Rav Davis. We spoke after davening, and I told him that I was a mathematician." He asked me, 'How come a minus times a minus is a plus?' Here I was, a mathematician at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton

"We studied a piece of *Gemara* with a *Tosefos*. Afterwards, Rav Davis introduced me to someone and asked me to tell this person what we had learned. I was able to recall the *Tosefos* word for word by heart. Rav Davis said to me, 'Eliezar, I just heard that the price of tape recorders has dropped

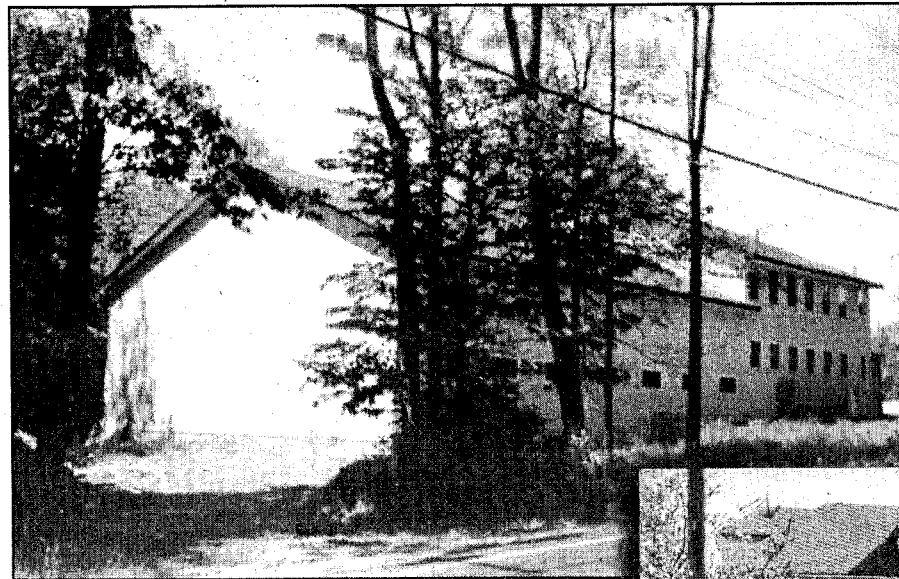
dramatically!' In this way he at once made it clear to me that it was *understanding* of the *Gemara* that counted, not the ability to regurgitate it *Baal Peh*.

"In truth Rav Davis rarely learned much *Gemara* with me. On Friday evenings we often went for long walks on the boardwalk. Sometimes we

hours and discuss various topics. He said more than once, 'If you were to see the *Ramchal* walking down the street, you would see a *Seichel* walking!' He always stressed developing one's *Seichel* so that one knew how to properly understand and deal with the world. Rote learning was useless to him.

"He was very interested in *Dikduk* and knew it well. He had developed certain approaches to learning *Gemara* that were linked to what he considered key words in the *Gemara*. He stressed the consistency of the *Gemara* and understanding the text deeply *before* studying *Rishonim* and *Achronim*. 'The *Tanna'im* included everything they wanted to say in the words of the *Gemara*,' he often told me. 'You have to read the words of the *Gemara* very carefully.'

"I took a position at Brandeis University (near Boston) in 1957. At this time Rav Davis was head of the Boston branch of the Lakewood Yeshiva. In fact, I lived in the yeshiva while I was at Brandeis. Rav Davis always dealt with the boys in a manner tailored to each individual. He did not use a 'cookie cutter' approach to *Chinuch*, and was not afraid to do innovative things.



The new yeshiva building.

1953. Although he was 23 at this time, he had never "really studied *Gemara* before." He expressed his desire to do so to his mother. She asked around and was told by her kosher butcher "If your son really wants to learn *Gemara*, then he should learn with Rav Davis." It was arranged that one Shabbos morning Dr. Ehrenpreis would meet Rav Davis at the *minyán* that he then had in Brighton.

[one of the top research institutes in the world], and I could not answer his question! I still do not know why conceptually minus times a minus is a plus! This was not the only question about mathematics he asked which I could not answer!"



The old yeshiva building.

would walk for three or four

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"Rav Davis was always interested in excellence. He recruited a fellow who was a champion wrestler to learn in the yeshiva. He wanted him because he was tops in wrestling, despite the fact that this fellow had very little background in learning. Rav Davis was always looking for people who were superlative in this or that; he felt that such people could become *Gedolim*.

"With this in mind he visited me at the Institute for Advanced Study during the 1962 - 63 academic year. I took him into the Faculty Tea Room and introduced him to some of the top mathematicians and scientists of the day. He spoke at some length with André Weil, who was considered by many to be the greatest mathematician alive. Rav Davis was interested in seeing how one achieved true excellence; no matter where it was to be found. He wanted to know how top people function.

"I suspect that one of the reasons why he moved the yeshiva to Mountaindale was because he was impressed with the atmosphere in and around the Institute. It is a place located in a lovely environment that is 'isolated' from the world at large, and whose members devote themselves exclusively to intellectual pursuits on the highest level.

"He always spoke to me in English. In fact, when I first met him, I assumed, because of his full beard, that I would have to communicate with him in Yiddish. However, he immediately greeted me in English, which 'startled' me. He did not fit the 'standard' picture of what I thought a rosh yeshiva should be. He was a very

strong personality. He always taught me to ask, 'Why?' when it came to anything. He would not compromise. If he felt he was right, that was it. He could not be budged.

"In the fifties he was given the most difficult high school class at the Mir. The first day he walked into class, the boys were noisy and essentially ignored him. He tried to begin learning with them, but it was very clear that they were not really interested. Finally, he told them to go outside and play ball. This they did for a couple of hours, until they realized that they were not going to learn anything that day. They came back into class, and he began teaching. It did not take very long before he had the entire class involved in learning. He had this unbelievable power to take people who were far from Torah and bring them close.

"During the years that I knew him in Brighton Beach, I never heard Rav Davis give a shiur. As I said, more often than not, we talked about all sorts of subjects for hours and hours. I learned much more Torah from Reb Moshe zt"l, from whom I got *semicha*. However, Rav Davis had a greater influence on me and my life. He gave me the wherewithal to learn with Reb Moshe."

YESHIVA ZICHRON MAYIR - NOT YOUR "AVERAGE" YESHIVA

What follows is a description of Rav Davis' yeshiva written by Rabbi Zvi Lampel.

"I came to Rav Davis' yeshiva at age 18 in 1968, located in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn during the winter, and Mountaindale, NY

in the summer. (Five years later the yeshiva relocated to Mountaindale year-round.) I was introduced to a world of Torah learning in which the Rosh Yeshiva was revered, there was a Seder of calisthenics in the morning, and it was insisted that we spend time swimming. There purposely was no kitchen or janitorial staff. We, the bochurim, in emulation of Yehoshua bin Nun, who 'swept' Moshe Rabbainu's tent, were to feel that the Beis Medrash upkeep was our responsibility and privilege. We learned to clean and cook and took turns managing the tasks. (My mother still remembers how shocked she was when she visited the yeshiva, and her pampered ben-yachid actually offered and made her a cup of coffee!)

"The *beis medrash* was quiet, with learning conducted in conversational tones, in high contrast to the loud pitch heard in most. [This changed in the late 1970's and that from then on the *Bais Medrash* 'hummed' with the sounds of learning.] There was no *bein hazemanim*--ever. "How does anyone take a vacation from learning?" Go home for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur?--How can you be away from yeshiva on Yom HaDin?! Succos, Pesach, Shavuot?--The days of Kabbolas HaTorah you want to leave the yeshiva?? Chanukah, when we commemorate the sacrifices made to learn Torah, you want to leave the yeshiva?? Elul Z'man? The time for *teshuvah*? Are you insane?

"Rav Davis practiced a strong love for his *talmidim* coupled with "strong mussar." Almost every Shacharis would be immediately followed by a drilling on the *sugya* being learned, inevitably leading to the conclusion that we are all '*am-haaratzim*,' or worse. Visitors who came to Shacharis would leave white-faced and

trembling after the experience, asking, 'Is it always like this?' I would joke: 'This? This was nothing compared to what we usually get!'

"Rav Davis focused on developing each *talmid's* individual strengths, disparaging the practice of trying to fit all into one mold. But he drilled into all of us the mandate of applying heart and *seichel* in the pursuit of *emes*. There was hardly a day he would not extol the value of "*seichel, seichel, seichel!*"

When asked why he made the permanent move to Mountaindale, where the *Yungerleit* would live in affordable mobile homes, Rav Davis would quote the *Sforno* in *Braishis* that explains why Hashem saw it necessary to place Adam in a beautiful garden: A pleasant environment is "*marchiv es haDaas*," it expands the mind's thinking abilities, and to Rav Davis, that is the meaning of life. As always, to keep closely connected to each *bochur*, the number of *bochurim* was kept low. I think the greatest number we ever had was 30."

CONCLUSION

Rav Yehudah Davis, zt"l, was *nifter* on 23 Adar I 5757 (March 2, 1997).

I once told Rav Avigdor Miller that I thought Reb Yisroel Salanter, zt"l, was a "revolutionary." (I was curious to see his reaction to this statement.) He replied excitedly, "Of course he was a revolutionary! You have to be a revolutionary! Anyone who 'walks' like everyone else cannot be an *Oveid* Hashem. You must be a revolutionary!" Without exaggeration I think we can say that both Rav Miller and his boyhood friend Rav Yehudah Davis were true Torah revolutionaries. There is much for each of us to learn from the lives of both of these great men.