Rav Yehudah Davis ZT"L
PIONEER AMERICAN ROH SH YEHIVA
(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 Mountaindale, 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 Wachtfolg, 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 Wachtfolg. In 1931 Rav Davis and Rav Wachtfolg 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 Zion. 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 Reuven Zelig Bengis (the Kalverier Rav, later to become the Av Beis Din of the Eida Hachareidis in Jerusalem), the Kaidoner Rav, and the Kovner Rav (the D’var Avraham).

Shortly after his return to Baltimore he became the Rav 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 it a “hands-on” approach to Chinuch. For example, after studying he 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 Mirrer 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 sugyos 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 emissary in the Philadelphia Yeshiva with exemplary middos, suddenly died at age 19. Rav

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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 Mayer 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 meggid shir in the Mis 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 Mountaintdale 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 ruchniut, in gashmiut.”

MOUNTAINDALE

In 1965 the yeshiva purchased property in Mountaintdale, New York, where it eventually relocated year-round. The decaying hotel building that originally 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 HaShoshmosos 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. Hatzolah was called, and he was taken to the hospital. He spent Succos in the hospital!!!”

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 Chabad.

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 school. 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 Chareidi 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 toveled. 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, swim and rowed in the afternoon.”

Beginning in 1953 from Professor Eliezer (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.

(2) Beginning in 1953 from Professor Eliezer (Leon) Ehrenpreis. Dr. Ehrenpreis is a world-famous mathematician who received semicha from Rav Moshe Feinstein z”l.”
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 zs”l. In the end Rav Davis prevailed, so, in the summer of 1940, the boys became talmidei 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 zs”l, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel, came to be Menachem Ovad. 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 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 could 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!

“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 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 Dikhuk 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 Tanaim 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.

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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 Mountaideal, NY in the summer. (Five years later the yeshiva relocated to Mountaideal 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 Rabbai’nus’ 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, Shavouot?—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?!! Eulz 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 Mountaideal, where the Menorah would live in affordable mobile homes, Rav Davis would quote the Sforno in Braitsh 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, z’tl, was niftar on 23 Adar I 5757 (March 2, 1997).

I once told Rav Avigor Miller that I thought Reb Yisroel Salanter, z’tl, 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.