

Rav Yehudah Davis (1907- 1997), ה"צד Avant-Garde Rosh Yeshiva

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Note: Those who spend their summers in the Catskill Mountains may not realize that Yeshiva Zichron Mayir is located not far from them in Mountandale, NY. This yeshiva first spent the summer of 1960 in Parksville, NY, in what can euphemistically be called “rustic” accommodations. Indeed, the first location of the yeshiva did not even have running water or heat. In 1965 Yeshiva Zichron Mayir relocated to Mountandale. The yeshiva’s pioneering and visionary rosh yeshiva felt that this was an ideal location for him to develop *Bnai Torah* using his innovative approaches in *Chinuch*. The yeshiva could only provide the most basic amenities for its talmidim and rebbeim in its first years in its new location. Nonetheless, the Mountandale Yeshiva, as it is commonly known, developed under its rosh yeshiva and produced many remarkable rabbonim and *baalei batim* who have made and continue to make unique contributions to Yiddishkeit. This article relates the story of the life of the founder of the Mountandale Yeshiva, HaRav Yehudah Davis, ה"צד.

Introduction

Today the name Rav Yehudah Davis 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 the driving force that led to such people as Rabbis Avigdor Miller, Nosson Wachtfogel, and Mordechai Gifter, ה"צד, studying in European yeshivas, starting 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*”¹ despite the fact that there were no Chasiddishe rebbes in Baltimore at this time. “My family did whatever Rav Davis told us to do.” Mr. David Schwartz², a younger brother of Rabbi Schwartz, told me “Rabbi 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 partially answer these questions, we first present a biographical sketch of the life of Rav Davis. This is followed by some recollections of Rav Davis by four people who personally knew him. In this way it is hoped that the reader will gain a real appreciation for this extraordinary man.

Biographical Sketch

Rabbi Davis was born in Baltimore on October 25, 1907 (17 Heshvan, 5668). When he was young, his grandmother inspired him with stories of European *Gedolim*. There were no yeshivas in Baltimore, 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 Rabbi 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 claims to honest pursuit of knowledge."³

"Wherever he was, Rabbi Yehudah Davis formed youth groups dedicated to Torah study. In New York, he formed a study group of ten, including Rabbi Avigdor Miller, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, Rabbi Ber Elya Gordon, and Rabbi Nosson Wachtfogel."⁴ In 1931 Rabbis Davis and Wachtfogel went to study in the Mirrer Yeshiva in Poland. In 1932 Rav Davis returned to RIETS. "Immediately upon returning to America in 1932, Reb Yehudah resumed his New York study group, continuing to arrange lectures by European Torah-giants who were visiting America. Within a year, he influenced each of the members of the group to make the move to Europe, and convinced any reluctant parents to agree. Thus, Reb Mordechai Gifter went to Telshe, Reb Elya Gordon attended the Mir in Poland, and Reb Avigdor Miller joined Rabbi Davis in his return to Slabodka.

"His learning in Slabodka was interrupted in 1936 [This date is incorrect. It was in 1934.⁵ (YL)], when his mother became deathly ill, and he decided to marry in America while near his mother.⁶ His mother expressed concern about her younger son, Chuni, for she felt that her husband would not be able to care for him.⁷ Rabbi Davis assured her that he would take his teenage brother under his wings. Indeed, Rabbi Davis took his new wife and brother back with him to Slabodka, and fashioned games for young Chuni to play after his scheduled learning.

"During this period, Rabbi Davis joined a *chabura* (study group) that completed the entire *Shas* in one year. (This was not his first time; he had already done so

even before arriving in Europe.) Rabbi Yisroel Bergstein ז"ר, one of the *chabura's* members, described Rabbi Davis as a "tremendous force, the *ari she'b'chabura* (the lion of the pack).

"The war clouds forming over Europe in 1938⁸ marked Rabbi Davis's final days on that continent. Before leaving, he sought a formal *semicha*, knowing how this would please his father. Presiding over the 'examination' were three great Lithuanian *rabbanim*: Rabbi Reuvein Zelig Bengus (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*)."⁹

Shortly after his return to Baltimore in 1937 Rabbi Davis 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 who were interested in Yiddishkeit. However, *Rav* Davis, not content with this, 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*.

"He took over Baltimore's network of Talmud Torahs from the Conservative rabbi who ran it. And he formed groups of young men, some of whom he sent to Brooklyn to learn in the new Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim under Rabbi Dovid Leibowitz, ז"ר, to become *b'nei Torah* of the highest caliber. He favored a "hands-on" approach to learning, having the boys make their own *tsitsis* after learning the relevant *halachos*, and helping them build their own *succos* after studying that subject."¹⁰ With the assistance of others "he began Baltimore's Bais Yaakov for girls, knocking on doors and recruiting students to absorb the teachings of Rebbetzin Davis around her kitchen table."¹¹

Exactly when Rabbi 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. "Within four years (1948), Rabbi Davis was no longer principal of the school, but remained as a *rebbe*. Yet it was now that he began to have his greatest influence in Brighton Beach, reaching the youth of another generation and fashioning them into Torah scholars and leaders. He began 'The Boys' *Chabura* of Brighton,' and took under his wings future leaders such as Rabbi Shaya Jacobson, who was to head Yeshiva Tiferes Torah [Yisroel (YL)]; Rabbi Dovid Weiner, now of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim; his brother Rabbi Binyamin Weiner [former Menahel of Bais Yaakov Cohn High School of Queens (YL)]; and Rabbi Aharon Zuckerman, now *Rav* of Agudath Yisroel of Midwood and faculty member of the Mirrer Mesivta in Brooklyn."¹²

"During this period, *Rav* Davis created original methodologies for learning Talmud based upon rules of logic, syntax and language. In the mid-1950's Reb Aharon (Kotler, ז"ר,) sent *Rav* Davis to be *Rosh Yeshiva* of a Boston branch of

the Lakewood Yeshiva for a year-and-a-half, and then returned to Brooklyn. Now followed a period of personal tragedy. After a long bout with pneumonia, he was finally able to resume teaching. But two days later, his 19-year-old son Mayir--a tireless masmid and exemplary baal middos--suddenly died from a brain tumor.

“Despite the tragic loss of this budding scholar, Rabbi Davis continued to devote himself to disseminating Torah learning and ideals. He assumed the position of *maggid shiur* in the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn. One evening, two boys attending nearby Lincoln High School knocked on Rabbi Davis’s door and asked him to teach them. Rabbi Davis assented, and thus began a new yeshiva, to be joined by members of the Mirrer Yeshiva class. The boys themselves raised the funds to buy a building in Brighton Beach, and the name Yeshiva Zichron Mayir was chosen, in memory of Rabbi Davis’s son. The boys who formed it eventually emerged as Torah leaders, teachers, *mechabrei sefarim* (authors of scholarly works), *maggidei shiur*, *roshei yeshivos* and *roshei kollelim*. Continuing with his way, Rabbi Davis took the boys to the Catskills in the summers. In Parksville, Rabbi Shlomo Rothenberg, the present Rosh Yeshiva of the Mountaindale Yeshiva, recalls, ‘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*.’

“In 1965, the yeshiva property was purchased 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.”¹³

Personal Recollections of Rav Davis

As interesting as the reader may find the biographical sketch above, it still does not give 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 Mr. David Schwartz. 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, ל"צ. He has held positions at Harvard, Yale, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, Johns Hopkins University, Brandeis University, the Courant Institute at New York University, the Belfer Graduate School (when it existed at

Yeshiva University), Temple University, and other prestigious universities and institutes. He has been and continues to be invited to lecture on his advanced mathematical research throughout the world. He recently returned from lecturing in Japan. Dr. Ehrenpreis is an avid runner, who has for many years completed the NY City Marathon.

Professor Ehrenpreis told me that Rav Moshe Feinstein, ל"צ, once asked him to explain something to him dealing with a secular subject. Reb Moshe then used this information in a *Teshuvah* he wrote. In this *Teshuvah* he said that he had received certain information from Dr. Ehrenpreis, whom Reb Moshe described as a "Talmid Chocham." Professor Ehrenpreis told me that of all of the accolades that he had received during his illustrious career in academia, being described as a Talmid Chocham by Reb Moshe was the most important to him!

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

Baltimore^{14,15}

Baltimore, MD during the Thirties was a city with a relatively large Jewish population. However, the vast majority of Jews residing there were not observant. Many of those who were affiliated with an Orthodox shul were not Shomer Shabbos. Much of the Jewish community was concentrated in East Baltimore. Between 1905 and 1963 Congregation Shomrei Mishmeres HaKadosh occupied what was known as the Lloyd Street Synagogue. It was "one of the leading Orthodox congregations of the East European immigrant community."¹⁶ Rabbi Schwartz told me that in the Twenties, Thirties and Forties "The shul was full of Seforim, and people learned there regularly. My father, Chaim Schwartz, ה"ע, was one of the mainstays of the shul. He kept it going long after the neighborhood changed, and even paid boys to come and help make the minyan."

Rabbi Schwartz was born in 1924. His brother, Boruch Mordechai, ה"ע, was a year older. However, since Rabbi Schwartz was very close with Boruch, he insisted on attending the first grade with his brother. As a result, they both entered Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim (then known as the Baltimore Hebrew Parochial School) at the same time. This school had only seven grades. After completing the seventh grade of *Limudei Kodesh* and *Limudei Chol* in 1937, the Schwartz boys attended summer classes and completed the Eighth grade of secular subjects, enabling them in September 1937 to enter the ninth grade of public high school (known as the Baltimore City College, because a student could earn college credit during the senior year). During that first year of high school they studied with a Rebbe after school.

Their father, Reb Chaim Schwartz, ה"ע, was a successful businessman, deeply committed to Yiddishkeit. His was one of the few businesses in Baltimore that were closed on Shabbos. Reb Chaim regularly tested his sons, and he was not happy with the Jewish education they were receiving while attending high school. Therefore, not long after Rav Davis and his family returned to Baltimore from Slabodka in 1937, Reb Chaim hired him to be a rebbe for his sons. Mrs. Davis was engaged to teach the Schwartz girls. Reb Chaim probably had no real idea what kind of a rebbe he had hired for his sons or what he was getting his family into!

Rabbi Schwartz told me, “We were **the** Charedi family of Baltimore in the Thirties, yet everything changed when we got involved with Rav Davis. My mother, Ida Rose, ה"ע, was constantly bringing this or that to the mikvah to be *toiveled*. We wore cotton Tzitzis during the summer. Rabbi 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.”¹⁷ 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 must have been the first Orthodox learning camp for boys. Rav Davis 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?’” (By the way, Rav Davis felt that it was important for him to know what was going on in the world. Even in his later years, when he was very ill, he had one of the *bochrim* in his yeshiva regularly bring him the **New York Times**.)

Chaim Schwartz had planned that his sons Boruch Mordechai and Avraham 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, זצ"ל. In the end Rav Davis prevailed, so, in the summer of 1940, the boys became *talmidim* of Reb Dovid. However, Boruch Mordechai became deathly ill a month or so after they were there and passed away in September.

Avraham Schwartz knew 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, זצ"ל, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel, came to be *Menachem Ovel*. He

suggested that Avraham come to Ner Yisroel. Rav Davis agreed, and this is 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 Boston¹⁸

Professor Eliezar (Leon) Ehrenpreis' family moved to Brighton Beach from the Bronx in 1953. He was 23 years old, but he had never “really studied Gemara before.” He expressed this desire 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 Rabbi Davis.” It was arranged that one Shabbos morning Dr. Ehrenpreis would meet Rav Davis at the minyan that he then had in Brighton.

“So, in February or March of 1953 I went to daven with Rabbi 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 [one of the top research institutes in the world], and I could not answer his question! I still do not know why conceptually a minus times a minus is a plus! This was not the only question about mathematics he asked which I could not answer!”

“We studied a piece of Gemara with a Tosephos. Afterwards, Rabbi Davis introduced me to someone and asked me to tell this person what we had learned. I was able to recall the Tosephos 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 would walk for three or four 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 *Tannaim* 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.’ More than once he told me the story of a *bochur* who got into trouble with his rosh yeshiva. His rosh yeshiva had explained a piece of Gemara in a certain way. This *bochur* pointed out that the text of the Gemara did not support the rosh yeshiva’s

explanation. There was some give and take, but the *bochur* would not back down, and his being adamant did not do him any good. Rav Davis supported the *bochur's* approach. 'He was correct. The words of the Gemara did not support the rosh yeshiva's *p'shat!*'

"I took a position at Brandeis University (near Boston) in 1957. At this time Rabbi 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.

"One of the boys in the yeshiva needed a means to earn a *parnasa*. I arranged a meeting with him and some administrators at Brandeis which would have assisted in this endeavor. Rav Davis asked me to take him there. At the time, the fellow was saying Kaddish for one of his parents. He pointed out to Rav Davis that if he went with me, he would miss Mincha and saying Kaddish. 'This is more important than saying Kaddish,' he told the *bochur*.¹⁹

"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.²⁰ 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. Rabbi 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. Not long afterward he permitted a number of boys from his yeshiva to visit the Institute. A highlight of their visit was when I showed them Einstein's desk.

"I suspect that one of the reasons why he moved the yeshiva to Mountindale 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 Rabbi 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, 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” Yeshiva²¹

What follows is a description of Rav Davis' yeshiva written by Rabbi Zvi Lampel. It is because of what is written below that the title of this article refers to Rav Davis as an “Avant-Garde Rosh Yeshiva.”

“I came to Rav Davis' yeshiva when 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 bochorim, 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!)

“Beards were out (to avoid *yehora*) and tsitsis were in ('because the begged with its tsitsis is meant to be worn as a garment, not partly in and partly out'). And if a new bochor with a beard would become a member of the yeshiva (on a contingency basis--it was forever on a contingency basis) he would have to go through the process of being mattir a *nedder* and remove it.

[Readers unfamiliar with the *Derech* of Lithuanian yeshivas before World War II may find it hard to comprehend this approach to beards and Tzitzis. However, the truth is that in yeshivas such as Slabodka, Telshe, and Mir, unmarried *bochorim* were not allowed to wear beards. In the Mir the *bochorim* not only did not

wear their Tzitzis out, but they did not take them out when saying *Krias Sh'ma*. It was considered unseemly for them to be “fishing around” for their Tzitzis during davening. This approach to beards and Tzitzis was continued in the United States in yeshivas founded by Roshei Yeshiva who had studied in Lithuania. Dr. Manfred Lehmann, who came to Ner Yisroel in 1941, wrote, “At that time there were no black hats, not even beards, nor any chasidim, among the students. The Lithuanian influence, especially by the mussar teachings of the Mir Yeshiva, dictated that any outer demonstrations of *frumkeit* (piety)—like black clothes, peyes, etc.—were signs of *gayve* (haughtiness) and had to be shunned. Hence the emphasis on light-colored suits and hats and clean-shaven faces - even among the oldest *talmidim*.”²² A friend of mine who studied in Bais Medrash Govoha in the Sixties and Seventies wrote me, “When I first came to BMG (in 1965), the rule was unless you are Chassidish, *bochrim* were strongly discouraged from having beards. There were always some bochurim who kept their beard after *sefira* for Shavuos or the like, and they were spoken to to make sure it came off.”²³

Rav Davis himself did not grow a beard until 1942 or 1943, when he was 35 or 36. It may well be that given the “complexion” of today’s yeshiva world, Rav Davis would not have the same policy towards beards and Tzitzis that he had then. On the other hand, he was a man who was concerned with substance, not form. Perhaps, given the emphasis on externalities that we see in some circles today, he would have continued his policy of not allowing unmarried *bochrim* to grow beards and wear their Tzitzis out. After all, he was an innovator who was not afraid to “buck the establishment” when he felt it was appropriate. (YL)]

“The beis medrash was quiet, with learning conducted in conversational tones, in high contrast to the loud pitch heard in most. [I have been told that this changed in the late 1970’s and that from then on the Bais Medrash ‘hummed’ with the sounds of learning. (YL)] There was no *bein ha Zemanim*--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, Shavuos?--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 teshuva? Are you insane?

“Rav Davis practiced a strong love for his talmidim coupled with “hard-core 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-ha'aratzim*,’ 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!’ (I could afford to joke. The Rosh Yeshiva was always soft on me, afraid I would fall apart under strong criticism.)

"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!*" practically salivating at forming that word. When asked why he made the permanent move to Mountandale, 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, ל"צז, was *nifter* on 23 Adar I 5757 (March 2, 1997).

I once told Rav Avigdor Miller that I thought Reb Yisroel Salanter, ל"צז, was a "revolutionary." (I was curious to see what his reaction would be 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 *Ovid* Hashem. You must be a revolutionary!" Without exaggeration I think that 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.

Epilogue

"Kollel Ohr Yehuda in Brooklyn, established in Brooklyn after the *petira* (passing) of Rabbi Davis, ל"צז, under the leadership of his son Rabbi Moshe Davis, שליט"א, serves as a continuation of Rabbi Davis's *derech* of perceiving *emmes* and internalizing it – as is written in the Torah: '*Veyadata hayom vehashevosa el levavecha* – And you shall know and take to heart....' The *kollel* also utilizes Rabbi Davis's approach that he saw written in *Sefer Michtavei Chofetz Chaim*. The Chofetz Chaim's son writes how he learned with his father, starting from the *pasuk* in the Torah, tracing the concept all the way to contemporary *halacha*. It is Reb Moshe Davis's hope that using his father's methodology will instill his *Yungeleit* with the tools they will need to continue spreading the true light of Torah to *Klal Yisroel*."²⁴

Postscript

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Yeshiva Zichron Mayir and talk with its present Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Y. Shlomo Rothenberg. He explained to me that the yeshiva still maintains Rav Davis' unique approach to *chinuch*. In particular, each *bochur* receives an abundance of individual attention. This can be accomplished, because the yeshiva remains small. Two years ago a new, modern *bais medrash* was built which includes a full size basketball court in the basement. Parents looking for a yeshiva where their son "will not get lost" should certainly consider Zichron Mayir.

¹ Interview with Rabbi Avraham Schwartz, June 1, 2005. Subsequently referred to as **AS Interview**.

² Telephone conversation with Reb David Schwartz, June 3, 2005. Subsequently referred to as **DS Interview**.

³ **Rabbi Yehudah Davis ztvk"l and the Mountindale Yeshiva** by Rabbi Zvi Lampel, posted Avodah Discussion Group (Monday, May 23 2005 Volume 15: Number 020) <http://www.aishdas.org/avodah/vol15/v15n020.shtml#11>. Subsequently referred to as **Avodah Post**.

⁴ **Rabbi Yehudah Davis, Builder of Torah and Kiruv in America** by Rabbi Zvi Lampel and Mrs. Faygala Safran, **The Jewish Observer**, November 2000, page 25. (Reprinted in **Torah Leaders**, Artscroll/Mesorah, 2002). Subsequently referred to as **JO**.

⁵ Based on a conversation (June 20, 2005) with Rabbi Moshe Davis, son of Rav Y. Davis.

⁶ He married Fraida Basha, daughter of Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Chions, , ל"צ .

⁷ Rabbi Herbert (Chuni) Davis told me during a telephone conversation on June 26, 2005 that, in truth, his mother was concerned about his frumkeit. She was afraid that if he stayed in Baltimore after her passing, he might not remain observant. Therefore she got Rav Davis to promise that he would take his younger brother with him when he returned to Slabodka.

⁸ Rabbi Herbert (Chuni) Davis told me (telephone conversation on June 26, 2005) that Rav Davis left Slabodka in 1937, because Mrs. Davis could not stand the cold there. Mrs. Davis was always frail, and life in Slabodka lacked many of the amenities of life in America. Indeed, there was a flood in Kovno at the time that her first child was to be born, and Mrs. Davis had to be transported by boat to the hospital!

Rabbi Moshe Davis, eldest 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."

Tragically, in 1985 Mrs. Davis was hit by a car and killed while walking *Bein HaShmoshos* on Shabbos in Mountindale. Rabbi Moshe Davis related the following regarding the passing of his mother. "My mother, ל"ט, 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!'"

Rebbetzin Davis' *Levaya* took place the next day (Sunday). It was Erev Succos. Rabbi Y. S. Rothenberg, the present Rosh Yeshiva of the Mountaindale Yeshiva, 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!"

⁹ **JO**, pages 26 - 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pages 27 -28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, page 27.

¹² *Ibid.*, page 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, page 30.

¹⁴ **AS Interview.**

¹⁵ **DS Interview.**

¹⁶ <http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/baltimore/b30.htm>.

¹⁷ **JO** page 27.

¹⁸ Based on a personal interview with Professor Eliezar (Leon) Ehrenpreis conducted on June 1, 2005.

¹⁹ This story should in no way be construed to imply that Rav Davis was in favor of the boys in his yeshiva attending college. Indeed, he was opposed to going to college. Rabbi Moshe Davis, the oldest son of Rav Davis, told me that his father often stressed that his children should not attend college. They all followed his advice. While it is true that some of the boys whom he influenced did graduate college, Rav Davis felt that this was appropriate only for certain individuals given their backgrounds and the orientation of their families.

²⁰ Rabbi Moshe Davis told me the following regarding this fellow who was a wrestler. "When my father, ל"צ, taught in the Yeshiva of Brighton Beach, he often spoke against such sports as boxing and wrestling, where the object of the sport is to hurt your opponent. He was also against professional sports, because a player can be sold to another team like a piece of meat. 'This can have a demoralizing affect on the players.' he explained.

"Mike, the wrestler, was a celebrated champion. His parents were Polish immigrants. My brother Mayir, ל"ר, excelled in all sports, and he met Mike at a camp for *baalei teshuva* run by the famous London brothers. Mayir used his talents and friendliness to bring Mike closer to Yiddishkeit.

"My father was thrilled when Mike agreed to go to the yeshiva in Boston. Mayir was there to help Mike stay on track. When Mayir left Boston to return to yeshiva in Philadelphia, my father said to me, 'Now Mike won't have his mainstay, and I am afraid for his future.'

"One day Mike came in and told my father that his mother was very sick and in the hospital. After Maariv my father himself went to the *Amud* to lead everyone in the saying of *T'hillim* for a woman he hardly knew. He said *T'hillim* with great emotion, his voice choking with tears.

"My father once told me. 'There is more to Mike than wrestling.' Another time he said, 'Behind the wrestling there is a soft heart.'"

²¹ **Avodah Post**

²² **Baltimore Half a Century Ago**, Manfred Lehmann,
http://www.manfredlehmann.com/news/news_detail.cgi/55/0.

²³ Personal email from R. Shmaryahu Miller, June 8, 2005.

²⁴ **JO** page 30.