Below is the “edited” version of the article that I submitted to the Hamodia. This version contains 1800 words less than what I submitted, and all of the footnotes have been excised. The original submission is at http://personal.stevens.edu/~llevine/rav_yehudah_davis_v12.pdf.

Please note that in an email from the Hamodia I was told that, “The editor that worked on your article was given instructions to edit very lightly, but to incorporate the comments of our mashgiach,” and “Another editor who reviewed both versions felt that the editing was done very subtly. Obviously, a writer is wedded to every word, and is passionate about its importance; so what seems subtle to us seems brutal to you.”

Rav Yehudah Davis (1907-1997), zt”l
A Rosh Yeshiva Ahead of His Time

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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 Mountaindale, N.Y. However, few people are aware that Rav Davis was a bold thinker and innovator whose groundbreaking efforts in the late ’30s, ’40s and ’50s set the stage for things that are considered commonplace in today’s Orthodox world. Some of his accomplishments include 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 of Baltimore, 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 the city at that 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 his life? Following is a biographical sketch of Rav Davis’s life, along with some
recollections of four people who personally knew him. Hopefully these will help
the reader gain a real appreciation for this extraordinary man.

Biographical Sketch

Rav Yehudah Davis was born in Baltimore on October 25, 1907 (17 Cheshvan 5668). When he was young, his grandmother inspired him with stories of
European Gedolim. There were no yeshivas in Baltimore, so he 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
earned 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.

Rav Davis formed youth groups to study Torah in several places. In New York,
his group of ten included Rav Avigdor Miller, Rav Mordechai Gifter, Rav Ber Elya
Gordon, and Rav Nosson Wachtfogel. In 1931 Rabbis Davis and Wachtfogel
went to study in the Mirrer Yeshiva in Poland. In 1932 Rav Davis returned to
RIETS and resumed his New York study group, continuing to arrange lectures for
the bachurim by European Gedolim who were visiting America. Within a year, he
influenced each of the members of the group to continue learning in Europe. Rav
Gifter went to Telshe, Rav Gordon attended the Mir in Poland, and Rav Miller
joined Rabbi Davis in his return to Slobodka.

Rav Davis had to interrupt his learning in 1934, when his mother became deathly
ill. He returned to America and decided to marry here, while he was with her. He
also assured his mother that he would take of his younger brother, Chuni, whom
she was afraid might not remain observant after she passed away in the
religiously arid environment of Baltimore. Rav Davis assured her that he would
take his teenage brother under his wings. Indeed, he took his new wife and
brother back with him to Slobodka and fashioned games for young Chuni to play
after his scheduled learning.

Back in Slobodka, Rav Davis joined a chabura that completed the entire Shas in
one year. (This was not his first time; he had already done so even before
arriving in Europe.) Rav Yisroel Bergstein z”l, one of the group’s members,
described Rabbi Davis as a “tremendous force, the ari she’b’chabura” -- the lion
of the pack.

In 1937, the war clouds forming over Europe prompted Rav Davis to return
home. Before leaving, he sought a formal semicha, knowing how much this
would please his father. Presiding over the “examination” were three great
Lithuanian rabbanim: Rav 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.

Shortly after his return to Baltimore, Rav 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.

Among the many inroads he made in Baltimore were taking over the leadership of the city’s network of Talmud Torahs and sending a number of young men to Brooklyn to learn in the new Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim, under Rabbi Dovid Leibowitz, zt’l. He favored a “hands-on” approach to learning, having the boys make their own tsitis after learning the relevant halachos, and helping them build their own sukkas. With the assistance of others, he also helped found Baltimore’s Bais Yaakov for girls, recruiting students to come learn with Rebbetzin Davis around her kitchen table.”

In the early 1940s, Rav Davis left Baltimore to become the general studies principal of the Brighton Beach Yeshiva in Brooklyn, N.Y., later staying on in the school as a rebbe. This was when he began to have his greatest influence in Brighton Beach, reaching the youth of the next generation and molding into Torah scholars and leaders. He began “The Boys’ Chabura of Brighton,” mentoring future leaders such as Rabbi Shaya Jacobson, who was to head Yeshiva Tiferes Torah; Rabbi Dovid Weiner, now of Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim; his brother Rabbi Binyamin Weiner, former menahel of Bais Yaakov Cohn High School of Queens; and Rabbi Aharon Zuckerman, now Rav of Agudath Yisrael of Midwood and faculty member of the Mirrer Mesivta in Brooklyn. During this period, Rav Davis originated special methods for learning Talmud based upon rules of logic, syntax and language.

In the mid-1950’s Reb Aharon Kotler, zt’l, sent Rav Davis to be Rosh Yeshiva of a Boston branch of the Lakewood Yeshiva for a year and a half, after which he 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, died suddenly from a brain tumor.

Despite the tragic loss of this budding scholar, Rav 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. Rav 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 Rav Davis’s son. The boys who formed it eventually emerged as Torah leaders, teachers, mechabrei sefarim (authors of scholarly works), maggidei shiur, roshei yeshiva and roshei kollelim.

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

**Personal Recollections of Rav Davis**

**Baltimore**

Rabbi Avraham Schwartz, who later became the Rav of Congregation Shaarey Tefiloh in Perth Amboy, N.J., grew up in Baltimore and knew Rav Davis there in the late ’30s. At that time the city had a relatively large but mainly nonobservant Jewish population. Many of those who were affiliated with an Orthodox shul were not shomer Shabbos. Rabbi Schwartz’s family was one of the most religious, and his father, Reb Chaim, a”h, a successful businessman deeply devoted to Yiddishkeit, helped maintain one of the shuls in town.

When Rav Davis and his family returned to Baltimore from Slobodka in 1938, Reb Chaim hired him to be a rebbe for his sons, while Mrs. Davis was engaged to teach the Schwartz girls.

In Rabbi Schwartz’s words, “We were the charedi family of Baltimore in the ’30s, yet everything changed when we got involved with Rav Davis. . . . We wore cotton tzitzis during the summer. Rabbi Davis insisted that we wear woolen tzitzis, and 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 could study Torah and benefit from healthy recreational activities. There were a number of farms located not far from Baltimore, and one of them was inactive. Rav Davis rented this farm and turned it into a camp, where he was both the learning rebbe and sports counselor.
Rabbi Schwartz recalled, “We learned in the morning and swam and rowed in the afternoon. Rav Davis not only taught us Torah, but he taught us how to swim and row a boat . . . There was nothing that the man couldn't do. He knew about everything – history, current events, you name it . . . Whenever we raised an issue, he always asked us, ‘What is the Torah view of this?’”

Reb Chaim Schwartz had planned that his sons would go to RIETS and Yeshiva College, graduate, and eventually take over his prosperous business, but Rav Davis would not hear of it. He insisted that the brothers attend Yeshiva Chofetz Chaim to study with Rav Dovid Leibowitz, zt”l, and in the end he prevailed.

Tragically, Reb Avraham’s brother passed away shortly after their arrival in Chofetz Chaim. During the shiva, Rav Yaakov Ruderman, zt”l, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel, came to be menachem aveil and suggested that he come to Ner Yisroel. Rav Davis agreed, and the decision was made. Such was the extent of the influence that Rav Davis had on the Schwartz family! Reb David Schwartz, Reb Avraham’s brother, recalled, “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, now a world-famous mathematician who received semicha from Rav Moshe Feinstein, zt”l, remembers Rav Davis from Brighton Beach. His family had moved there from the Bronx in 1953. He was 23 years old at the time but had never really studied Gemara before, and 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 Rav Davis.” It was arranged that one Shabbos morning Dr. Ehrenpreis would meet Rav Davis at the minyan that he had in Brighton.

Rabbi Ehrenpreis remembers, “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, 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 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 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 would know 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 bachur who got into trouble with his rosh yeshiva, who had explained a piece of Gemara in a certain way. This bachur pointed out that the text of the Gemara did not support the rosh yeshiva’s explanation. There was some give and take, but the bachur would not back down, and his adamance did not do him any good. Rav Davis supported the bachur’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 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.

“One of the boys in the yeshiva needed a means to earn a parnassa. 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 bachur.

“Rav Davis 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.

“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, and refused to compromise. 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 ’50s 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 that they could go outside. They were outdoors 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. He had a great influence on me and my life; he gave me the wherewithal to learn with Reb Moshe, from whom I received semicha.”

Yeshiva Zichron Mayir – Not Your “Average” Yeshiva

What follows is a description of Yeshiva Zichron Mayir written by Rabbi Zvi Lampel, an author who spent 18 years studying under Rav Davis.

“I came to Rav Davis’s yeshiva when I was 18, in 1968. The yeshiva was located in Brighton Beach during the winter and Mountaindale, N.Y. in the summer. 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 we were urged to spend time swimming. There purposely was no kitchen or janitorial staff. We, the bachurim, in emulation of Yehoshua bin Nun, who ‘swept’ Moshe Rabbeinu’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. As always, to keep closely connected to each bachur, the number of bachurim was kept low. I think the greatest number we ever had was 30.

“The beis medrash was quiet, with learning conducted in conversational tones, in high contrast to the loud pitch heard in most. There was no bein hazemanim -- ever. ‘How does anyone take a vacation from learning?’ Rav Davis would ask. ‘Go home for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur? How can you be away from yeshiva on Yom Hadin? Sukkos, Pesach, Shavuots --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 zeman -- the time for teshuva?’

“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 were 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 Mounta인dale, where the yungerleit could live in affordable mobile homes, Rav Davis would quote the Sforno in Bereishis 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 was the meaning of life.”

Conclusion

Rav Yehudah Davis, was niftar on 23 Adar I 5757 (March 2, 1997).

I once told Rav Avigdor Miller that I thought Reb Yisroel Salanter was a “revolutionary.” He replied excitedly, “Of course he was a revolutionary! You have to be a revolutionary! Anyone who ‘walks’ like everyone else cannot be an oved 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.

Kollel Ohr Yehuda was established in Brooklyn after Rav Davis’s petira, under the leadership of his son Rabbi Moshe Davis, shlita, and serves to perpetuate Rav Davis’s derech of perceiving emes and internalizing it. The kollel also utilizes one of Rav Davis’s methods, which he adopted from Sefer Michtavei Chofetz Chaim. The Chofetz Chaim’s son writes how he learned with his father, starting from the passuk in the Torah and 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 yungerleit with the tools they will need to continue spreading the true light of Torah to Klal Yisrael.”

Recently I had the opportunity to visit Yeshiva Zichron Mayir and talk with its present Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Shlomo Rothenberg. He explained to me that the yeshiva still maintains Rav Davis’s unique approach to chinuch. In particular, each bachur receives an abundance of individual attention. This can be accomplished because the yeshiva remains small. Two years ago a modern new beis medrash was built. Parents looking for a yeshiva where their son “will not get lost” should certainly consider Zichron Mayir.

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