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ISSUE 597
DECEMBER 14, 2022
20 KISLEV 5783

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Remembering Rabbi Moshe Yanofsky, z"l

A mechanech of thousands is mourned



Rabbi Yanofsky speaking in his beloved school

This past Thursday afternoon, the world of *chinuch* said goodbye to one of its most beloved educators. After a lengthy battle with various illnesses, Rabbi Moshe Yanofsky, longtime principal of the Bais Yaakov of Boro Park and founder and principal of Machon Bais Yaakov, passed away at the age of 80.

Rabbi Yanofsky's parents were Russian immigrants. He would emphasize that because of their strict adherence to Shabbos, they were extremely poor. Rabbi Yanofsky's father worked in the same factory for 40 years, "because in those days, having a job where they allowed you not to work on Shab-

bos was a luxury, so he never asked for a raise. This sacrifice stayed with me for many years," Rabbi Yanofsky used to say. They were so poor that he never had his own bike and never learned how to ride one.

That early experience influenced his attitude towards his students, making him sensitive to students whose families were in financial distress. He personally paid for poor girls' dresses when the school went for a Shabbaton, because he did not want them to feel ashamed of themselves or their situation. In Machon Bais Yaakov, he frequently paid off girls' debts in the canteen because he knew that their parents

couldn't really afford it.

"We never had any idea. He didn't let us know. One day when I showed up with \$20 to pay off a portion of the debt that I had accrued, the staff told me that there was no debt. Eventually I realized that it was Rabbi Yanofsky," a former student recalls.

Due to his parents' financial situation, as a young man Rabbi Yanofsky took a job at Zucker's Hotel in Glen Wild, New York, to earn some extra money. As he worked there, he was able to serve many *gedolei Yisrael*, experiences he learned from and cherished for the rest of his life.

"When Rav Moshe Feinstein used to



Rabbi Yanofsky

come, he tried to serve himself, and I had to push for him to allow me to serve him," Rabbi Yanofsky used to recall fondly.

He also had encounters with Rav Aharon Kotler, Rav Leizer Silver, and the Skulener Rebbe, which he would repeat throughout his life. But Rav Shneur Kotler left possibly the greatest impression on the young boy.

"When Rav Shneur came for Pesach, he tipped \$100, which was a huge amount in those days. After Yom Tov, Mr. Zucker paid me too much. But Mr. Zucker explained that the extra money came from Rav Shneur, who thought that I wouldn't accept it if it came from him."

Rabbi Yanofsky often used this story to explain how it was no big deal to take care of each student.

"If a huge *rosh yeshivah*, who already gave me a generous tip, realized his waiter came from no money and had the sensitivity to seek out the owner and make sure that I got the money without feeling squeamish

about it, then taking care of one's own students should not be a big deal."

When Rabbi Yanofsky was 21, still a *talmid* in Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, he married, and when his eldest son, Rabbi Eliyahu Mordechai, was born, he took a job in the Bais Yaakov of Boro Park. He knew he was not going to become wealthy from the job, and he had offers for more lucrative jobs in public schools, but he was passionate about teaching Jewish children and loved doing it.

Rabbi Yanofsky believed that the only way one can teach is if one is passionate. "Students pick up on the vibes the teacher gives over," he told me when I spoke to him at length.

At the age of 25, he was hired to be the principal of the Bais Yaakov of Boro Park. Whenever he had a difficult question come up, he would pose it to Rav Hutner.

He worked closely with Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, but when he disagreed with her,

"When Rav Moshe Feinstein used to come, he tried to serve himself, and I had to push for him to allow me to serve him."

they often went to *gedolim* in order to get a *psak*.

"We visited *gedolim*, and it struck me how the *gedolim* respected her and were almost deferential to her," he said.

(Rabbi Yanofsky himself avoided receiving outward shows of respect as much as possible. When I interviewed him for *Ami* several years ago, he asked me to refer to him as "Mister Yanofsky," as he would often tell others. Only after I told him that I would be very uncomfortable referring to a *mechanech* of so many *talmidos* for so many years in that way did he relent.)

Rabbi Yanofsky was instrumental in changing the way parents viewed a Bais Yaakov education. In those early days, most wanted their daughters to know how to run a household.

"Because people were so poor, they did not want to send their children to school. We had to change the mindset," he said.

It was Rebbetzin Kaplan's vision together with Rabbi Yanofsky's execution that really made inroads and changed people's thoughts on girls' education.

He was also instrumental in making a computer course a staple in today's *frum* schools.

"If girls have to bring in money, they need to be taught how," Rabbi Yanofsky told me.

Rabbi Yanofsky cared for each student of his, and when he realized that many did not have a regular home with a traditionally *frum* Shabbos experience, he began hosting a weekly *shalosh seudos* in his home. The *talmidos* loved it so much that even girls from regular homes began attending, and it

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An uproar ensued. Rebbetzin Kaplan's office was flooded with calls from parents who wanted to know why there was no Shabbaton.

fostered a sense of unity among the students.

It dawned on Rabbi Yanofsky that he had hit on something special, and as the visionary that he was, he saw a bigger opportunity. He wanted to make a Shabbaton in upstate New York; he felt such an event would bring the entire student body together.

But when he brought the idea to the leadership of the school, they dismissed it, telling him that he could do it only if he raised the money on his own. He did, and the Shabbaton was a smashing success. However, the financial burden was too great for him to attempt it again the following year. An uproar ensued. Rebbetzin Kaplan's office was flooded with calls from parents who wanted to know why there was no Shabbaton. After that, it became a beloved annual event.

After 20 years at the Bais Yaakov of Boro Park, he opened a school of his own, Machon Bais Yaakov. The goal was to find every girl's talent and temper the academic competition that he believed causes girls too much stress. Though the focus was still on academics, the main goal was to further the students' self-confidence and develop happy and healthy girls. His approach proved itself in the students that the school produced.

Rabbi Yanofsky's care for each student lasted beyond their years in Machon. He kept a ledger with all of their names and tried to *redt* them *shidduchim*. Even years later, he never forgot them and openly rejoiced upon hearing of a student's *simchah*. When he was not well, students sent letters to their beloved former principal because they knew that hearing from them would bring smiles, joy and happiness.

Though he focused so deeply on his students, his *chesed* did not end with them. Rabbi Yanofsky's home was also open to children-at-risk who had nowhere to stay. Many of them found their way back to *Yiddishkeit* thanks to his kindness. Thousands of students and families from across generations are mourning the loss of a one-of-a-kind principal and father figure.

Yehi zichro baruch. ●