

every
soul
A WORLD



Mr. Yakov Henigson

“Yakov, in his short life in This World, succeeded in becoming a walking kiddush Hashem”

Every Thursday for the past three and a half months, I would get the email: Can you please bake challah for the zechus refuah sheleimah of Refoel Yakov Chaim ben Malya Lieba? And we baked. Women, girls, grandmothers worldwide. The emails kept pouring in with information on Refoel Yakov Chaim’s condition, entreaties to daven, joyful progress, and heartbreaking updates. An absolute roller coaster of emotions, but we were all holding on tight.

On Monday morning, July 13, 2020, the last email pinged into our inboxes:

Baruch Dayan HaEmes.

And even though I never met Mr. Yakov Henigson, I cried with a broken heart.

Mr. Yakov Henigson was a quiet man. The man who unlocked the shul in the wee hours of the morning before the sun came up, and then sat learning until neitz. The man whose name you might never have caught, but he always wanted to know yours. He wanted to know if you needed help, and if so, could he be the shaliach? He wanted to know about you, but he didn’t need you to know him.

Yakov was a Vice President, Actuary at Prudential Financial Life Insurance, yet when asked what he did for a living, his answer would always be: I work as an actuary.

We still bake challah, but now it’s in the zechus aliyas neshamah of Yakov Chaim ben Dovid. May the exalted neshamah of this special man have an aliyah. May his family be comforted, b’shaar avlei Tzion v’Yerushalayim.



Never, “I’m an actuary.” No, always, “I work as an actuary.” Because he wasn’t an actuary, he was a ben Torah. Not only did Yakov work eight to ten hours a day, fit a learning seder in, and make time for his wife and children after work, he would also guide and place actuaries into jobs. Every second was accounted for, yet he had all the time in the world for any person in need. He gave of his expertise, his experience, his connections. And he had all the time in the world for his family.

It was only during shivah that his friends and family found out just how prestigious a position he held in the company. During his career, he was offered numerous promotions that would greatly benefit him financially, but each time he turned them down. His family and his time with them were his priority. It’s very easy to get blinded by money or prestige, yet Yakov understood that adding more to his workload would take away cherished time with his wife and children and no money in the world could make up for that.

In stereotypical actuary manner, Yakov was meticulous about details, listing and charting almost everything in his life. During shivah, his family found papers of time logs he charted during his learning hours. On each line

on the left side was a new date with the exact minutes he spent learning. If at any point he was interrupted, he would write “-4min,” — and make sure to make it up before ending his learning session.

Imagine answering the question, “Were you koveia itim b’Torah?” with the answer, “Yes, for x hours, y minutes, and z seconds...”

Not only would he chart his learning to the second, but Yakov would also meticulously write down his thoughts on different matters, clearly outlining his concerns, cares, and consequent opinions.

One could assume that he was methodical or emotionless since his nature was to be meticulous to every detail, but Yakov exuded only chein and anavah, a genuine sweetness and positivity. He put his family before everything and would give the shirt off his back to anyone in need.

Every morning, with almost no exceptions, Yakov would wake at four-thirty to learn a full seder before going to work. He would daven neitz in his Passaic shul, call his elderly mother living in Florida to wish her a good day, and then drive to work listening to halachah shiurim. Yakov also had a learning seder during his lunch hour, and on his way

In Tribute to Mr. Yakov Henigson

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home, he would stop off at shul to learn some more.

For the times that Yakov couldn't keep to his calculated schedule, whether for work or family reasons, he would calculate the amount of hours he would be missing from learning and then wake up that amount of time earlier the next morning to make up for it, even if that meant waking at two a.m. There were numerous times that Sora Meira, the younger of his two daughters, recalls her father learning through the whole night because the number of hours he "had" to make up left him no time to sleep.

Yakov grew up in a completely unobservant home, a fourth-generation assimilated Jew, where Yom Kipper, kosher food, and Orthodoxy were completely unknown, let alone observed. Through the years, Yakov told over childhood stories to his family, explaining the extent of his religious knowledge. He explained that it had consisted of the one day a year his mother would keep him and his siblings home from school. This made him furious because as an honors student, it was crucial to attend every class. Once he became religious later on in life, he realized that the day he was kept home every year was Yom Kippur.

The story of how Yakov became religious is fascinating. He was set to attend an Ivy League MBA program on a full scholarship, and the summer before he was set to begin, he went to Israel. Yakov's children remember how fondly their father would retell his story, describing how he knew something was different about the country the moment he stepped off the plane. By the end of the summer, Yakov decided that going home to attend college wasn't an option, and he had to keep seeking the truth he had discovered. He signed himself up to join the Aish Hatorah Fellowship program, and at the same time, he reached out to the university to see if they could hold his spot. He was devastated to hear that if he chose not to return in September for the program, he would lose not only his full scholarship, but his slot in the university.

Yakov contemplated what he should do.

He was distraught and felt so torn. Finally, some hours later, he looked at himself in the mirror and told himself that when he was meant to go to university, he would get in somewhere else, because leaving Aish wasn't an option.

Yakov worked on himself night and day to get to where he needed to go. No matter where Yakov stood in Judaism, he was constantly working on himself and seeking growth. From the very beginning of his journey to becoming frum, Yakov took upon himself to learn Gemara to its fullest. He sat for hours and hours every single day with a Hebrew-English dictionary and an English-Aramaic dictionary, teaching himself how to understand the Gemara fluently. Not only did he sit and dwell over the complex parts of Torah, he also studied the basics of halachah with equal stringency and diligence.

His best friend of over 25 years, Michael, whose nephew would go on to marry Yakov's daughter Sora Meira, adds:

"Yakov's return to Yiddishkeit was so pure. He intellectually made the decision that the Torah was true. It was purely rational. Of course he loved meeting all the wonderful frum people and rebbeim along the way, but for him it was not an emotional decision. Torah made intellectual sense to him on every level. Once he started learning Gemara, it was clearly a case of "boy meets Gemara." He fell in love. He realized the genius of Chazal and marveled at their world of thought and incredible levels of consciousness. Besides the intellectual Gemara discussions, Yakov also loved mussar and the moral teachings he was learning. He loved hearing any devar Torah that taught sensitivity to people. He was amazed at the level of care for one's feelings that Chazal taught and the carefulness of all their actions. This made a big impression on him because he was naturally someone with great carefulness and sensitivity and he seemed to finally find kindred spirits like himself in Chazal." It was a love that grew and grew for the rest of his life.

Although Yakov was extremely busy with his



learning and work schedule, the three Henigson children, Shevy, 22, Sora Meira, 20, and Aharon, 14, knew they were the main priorities in their father's life.

"I thought all fathers learned until one thirty p.m. on Sundays and then came home to take the family on trips," Shevy reminisces. "He would put us to sleep every night by reading stories to us, asking us about our day, helping us brush our teeth, and saying Krias Shema together with us."

Every morning growing up the children would find a personalized note written by Yakov waiting at their kitchen seat. Whether it was wishing them good luck in school, good luck on a test, or how proud he was of something they did, he made it a point to specify how proud he was of each of his children. Sora Meira and Aharon both saved their notes throughout the years and at the shivah, they each had stacks and stacks of love letters that their father had so affectionately written to them. Sora Meira fondly recalls how before a hard test, she would call her father from school, scared that she wasn't going to do well. No matter how busy Yakov was, he would know it was one of his kids calling from school and answer the phone. He would calmly and tenderly ask his daughter to grade her effort, and when she replied with a mark, he said "Great! I'm so proud! That's an excellent grade! I know how hard you studied and to me effort is all that matters." Aharon, the youngest, and the only boy, was the apple of Yakov's eye. Every Motzaei Shabbos was "boys' night." Yakov would take Aharon to various restaurants to make sure he never got overshadowed

by his two older teenaged sisters and to constantly remind Aharon how cherished he is. After 23 years of marriage, Yakov and Debbie still tried to sit together every night alone for dinner. Their three children didn't really allow for the date to actually take place, but they still tried. No matter how exhausted or hungry Yakov may have been, that didn't stop him from making Debbie feel like a queen. It was a regular occurrence for a Henigson child to pull open the fridge in search of a snack and find a container of cut-up fruit or a Diet Snapple on the shelf with a small Post-it note proclaiming, "For Mommy only." He understood how much mothers give to their children and he wanted to make sure that Debbie understood how much she meant to him and how much he appreciated her.

"Titein Emes L'Yakov," Debbie says. "Yakov's will to do ratzon Hashem was tremendous. A Jew makes time to learn Torah daily, so Yakov awoke at four thirty to start the day with a learning seder before davening in Ahavas Israel or sometimes Kol Hareyim, and then heading off to work. A Jew asks sh'eilos, so Yakov turned to his rav with sh'eilos when necessary, even when he was ill with coronavirus. A Jew conducts a Shabbos table in the spirit of Shabbos, so Yakov infused his Shabbos table with Torah and zemiros. A Jew provides for his family and helps them any way he can, so Yakov was an involved caring father and husband. A Jew treats others with respect, so Yakov, in his soft-spoken manner, addressed everyone with respect and dignity. When I was cleaning out his car, I found a reminder he made himself and kept in his trunk: 'Middos are caught, not taught.'

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He fell ill Shabbos Hagadol with coronavirus and remained in the ICU almost the entire time until he was niftar, on 23 Tammuz. 🔥