

HARAV GEDALIA DOV SCHWARTZ, ZT”L

By Rabbi Shaanan Gelman



On December 9, 2020 the Chicago Jewish Community lost one of its greatest leaders. Rav Gedalia Dov Schwartz zt”l came to Chicago as the Av Beth Din of the cRc, the Chief Justice of our rabbinical court, and the highest authority for matters of Jewish law and tradition. He was recognized internationally as a *posek* and was renowned for his immense expertise and broad knowledge. Since his arrival in Chicago in 1986, Rav Schwartz established himself as a leading light for the broader community, a mentor and supporter of Rabbis around the country, and a cherished guide for the countless individuals who sought his sage counsel.

The *Gemara* dictates two *halachot* regarding giving respect to the Av Beth Din. Tractate *Horayot* (13b) describes the honor which was bestowed upon the Av Beth Din as he entered the hallowed halls of the Sanhedrin in the *Beit HaMikdash*:

כשאב ב”ד נכנס עושים לו שורה אחת מכאן ושורה אחת מכאן עד שישב במקומו



Rav Schwartz with Rav Ovadia Yosef zt”l

When the Av Beth Din enters, the people form for him one row on this side and one row on the other side, in a display of deference, until he sits in his place, and then they may be seated.

Kidushin (33b) describes another show of respect shown to the Av Beth Din when he is outside of the study hall, presumably in the marketplace:

אב ב”ד עובר עומד מלפניו מלא עיניו וכיון שעבר ד' אמות יושב

If an Av Beth din passes by one stands up in his presence as soon as he is within range of vision, and once he passes four cubits from him, one may sit.

Chazal saw these two *halachot* as part of the same principle, a fulfillment of the commandment of *מפני שיבה תקום וקהלת פני זקן* – yet they also understood that the reality inside of the study hall or the academy was entirely different from the world outside. The Rosh Beth Din commanded respect from his peers for his brilliance but was also required to understand the *facts on the ground* – פוק חזי מה עמא דבר – before finalizing a *halachic* ruling or decree. He was respected universally and was not solely the province of the elite, but also someone who made the Torah relatable and applicable to others.

Such was the dual nature of our very own esteemed Av Beth Din (and later Rosh Beth Din), Maran Harav Gedalia Dov Schwartz zt”l – an individual who was revered by his rabbinic colleagues, students as well as by the man on the street.

It became apparent from the numerous *hespedim* delivered for Rav Schwartz that many admired his disposition and demeanor, his relatability and warmth, his remarkable common sense and *yashrus*. Whether it was the way in which Rav Schwartz made himself available for younger *chaveirim* within the cRc or broader rabbinic community, the sagacious advice he dispensed to us both on a personal and professional level, or the way in which he interacted with people at the most vulnerable moments of their lives, Rav Schwartz was someone who lived among the people, and, therefore, garnered their respect. This was likely due, in part,



Rav Schwartz with Rav Avorohom Chaim Levin zt"l and y"blct Rav Shlomo Amar

to his early years in the rabbinate, when he served as the Rav of a number of congregations in Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. He was not only a classical *posek* but was a *stadt Rav* as well. The Torah he poured over and mastered in the Beit Midrash enveloped him and informed his very character, in every environment.

Rav Schwartz was an expert in the nuances of performing a Jewish divorce, from both technical and human perspectives. I recall one particularly contentious moment in the Beth Din, years ago. Rav Schwartz conducted the proceedings with remarkable equanimity, expertly lowering the temperature in the room. He explained that it is understandable that there was much tension, and then gave his blessing that from this point forward there would, God willing, be much less *agmas nefesh* and sadness. From that encounter, I learned a valuable lesson - *halachic* procedures must be exacting to the highest standards, but they cannot be procedural in nature. Real human beings were going through a transformational experience, and while the legal component was necessary, Torah leadership demanded addressing the totality of the event.

Rav Schwartz, in his capacity as Av Beth Din of the Beth Din of America, was largely responsible, along with other leading *poskim*, for resolving *agunah* cases in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Thirteen years ago, while serving as a scholar-in-residence at our congregation, Kehilat Chovevei Tzion in Skokie, he shared some of the details of the various cases he helped resolve. One shudders to consider the magnitude of responsibility that Rav Schwartz shouldered at the time. It was clear that resolution of those complex and weighty issues took the mind of a giant, but it also took the dedication and compassion of someone who lived in the world and understood the human spirit. The rabbinic world entrusted him to oversee and verify these difficult cases and to lead us through a challenging period.

Upon the birth of my son Shalom, Rav Schwartz agreed to serve as *sandek*. Admittedly, I did not expect him to do so, and when he agreed, I felt guilty for even troubling him, when surely, he had better ways to spend his time. I later heard from an older colleague that he deeply appreciated being given such honors at the lifecycle events of cRc rabbis, not for his honor, but rather for the opportunity to be involved in the lives of his cherished colleagues.

Rav Schwartz was not just revered in Chicago and around the US, but his reputation was renowned around the world.

I once attended a wedding of a congregant that was to be performed by Rabbi Aharon Bina, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Netiv Aryeh. Rav Schwartz, was given another prestigious honor, albeit less so than the highest honor of *mesader kiddushin*. Rav Bina, who had flown thousands of miles to officiate at the *simcha*, laid eyes upon Rav Schwartz in wonderment and awe and announced that he would not dare serve as *mesader kiddushin* in Rav Schwartz's presence. Without a moment's hesitation he "handed over the reins" to the Av Beth Din, a move the *baalei simcha* readily agreed to and wholeheartedly understood.



Rav Schwartz and other Rabbonim meet with the Skverra Rebbe, shlit"ta

Rav Schwartz's greatness was acknowledged not only by those in the Orthodox community but also recognized by local leaders of other denominations as well. I was privileged to join several Jewish Federation missions to European Jewish communities over the years, along with rabbinic colleagues from all parts of the Jewish community. Despite our differences, we were unified in our respect for Rav Schwartz. While in Prague, we sat down for an hour or so to recharge our batteries and study Torah with Rav Schwartz for an in-depth *lomdishe shuir* replete with historical glosses and fascinating biographical sketches of the Rabbinic sources he cited. Every rabbi was glued to their seat, drinking thirstily from this *maayan ha'mitgaber*.



Rabbi Raanan Broderick presenting his *shechita* knife to Rav Schwartz

Rav Schwartz was the leader in the *Beit Midrash*, the academy, but his genius was paired with warmth and relatability in the marketplace, to make *gadlus b'Torah* universally accessible, and respected.

One of Rav Schwartz's most significant accomplishments was that he organized the Beth Din and the cRc for continued success for many years. It is, therefore, most fitting, and

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perhaps the greatest tribute to Rav Schwartz's vision, that the Beth Din is now under the leadership and guidance of his protégé, Harav Yona Reiss who has admirably picked up the torch and continues to advance the Torah and expand upon the *shem tov* of the cRc.

We are honored, as individuals and as a community to have benefited from Rav Schwartz's wisdom and his leadership - a reality reflected in every page of this annual publication. May Rav Schwartz's accomplishments in Torah, communal leadership and his example of refined character guide us and inform us for many years to come.

On Thursday night, January 7, 2021, the Chicago Rabbinical Council hosted a virtual *Shloshim* commemoration for Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz zt"l, which was viewed by well over 1,000 people. Among the speakers were Rabbi Dovid Lau, Chief Rabbi of Israel, who spoke about the great respect that Rabbi Schwartz earned amongst rabbinic leaders throughout the world, and Steven Nasatir, the Executive Vice Chairman of the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, who spoke warmly about Rabbi Schwartz's close relationship with the Federation, his participation in their annual trips, and his tremendous influence among Jews of all spectrums and denominations within the greater Chicago community. Rabbi Leonard Matanky, in his opening remarks, spoke about Rabbi Schwartz's inimitable qualities of vast erudition and sensitivity. Rabbi Mordechai Willig, of Yeshiva University, spoke about Rabbi Schwartz's incredible growth and accomplishments as a great Talmudic scholar and Dayan throughout the decades of his life. Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, a nephew of Rabbi Schwartz, spoke about Rabbi Schwartz's special qualities as a loving uncle and mentor, and Rabbi Daniel J. Raccach spoke about the tremendous mentorship and lessons that he learned from Rabbi Schwartz while serving as a Dayan at the cRc. Finally, Rabbi Yona Reiss delivered the *Siyum Mishnayos* (celebration of completing all six orders of the *Mishna*), drawing from Rabbi Schwartz's own words in his book *Migdanot Eliezer* to explain the idea of many people learning together to complete a *siyum*, since even the performance of a "portion of a *mitzvah*" can count as a *mitzvah* fulfillment when each person is inspired to continue performing the entirety of the *mitzvah* on his or her own. May Rabbi Schwartz's memory inspire each and every one of us to achieve our utmost in learning and fulfilling the Torah.