

Part 6

Loving His Talmidim

Chapter 20

Developing a Rapport

A CLOSE TALMID REMEMBERS: “AS A REBBI, RAV KULEFSKY was somewhat within reach. He was American, he understood baseball, and he had a sense of humor. And while obviously highly intelligent, his greatness was in part due to his efforts and toil and tenacity in learning. His *shiurim* were pieces of art, but they could be imitated to some degree. If one worked hard enough, one could say a *shiur* at least somewhat like Rav Kulefsky. He taught you how to order your thoughts and how to deliver them. What was first, what was second. How to ask, how to answer. Thus, it was Rav Kulefsky who made a unique role model for many guys in the yeshivah. One could theoretically dream of becoming ‘*me’ein*’ (almost like) Rav Kulefsky.”

Within Reach

When Rav Kulefsky was first hired by Ner Yisroel as a *shoel u’meishiv*, his job was to talk in learning with the boys. And when he did, he never sat down. Either he would go to the *bachurim* or they



Rav Kulefsky, third from right, soon after his arrival in Ner Yisroel

would come to him, but he was always on his feet talking and learning with seemingly endless excitement and enthusiasm. That connection, which was forged through learning, just kept growing through the years. When he became a *maggid shiur*, he had even more opportunities to influence and become close to the *bachurim*.

Rav Kulefsky understood the boys. He was one of them. He, too, had grown up in America. He was born in the Midwest and attended public school. He was well aware of the challenges these young men were facing and because of that they felt that they could relate to him. He taught them that American boys can learn, really learn!

Reb Dovid Singer, a noted *askan* and board member on many prestigious Torah institutions, including Ner Yisroel, grew up in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and entered Ner Yisroel at the age of 14. To him, "Rav Kulefsky personified the dream of every yeshivah *bachur*. To grow up in St. Louis and develop into a *gadol baTorah*? Unreal!"

Sure, there were others. Rav Gedaliah Schorr and Rav Elya Svei are examples of all-American boys who became great, but they had some exposure to European yeshivos. But Rav Kulefsky was American through and through. And he still became a *gadol*.

The Gemara (*Yoma* 35b) speaks of several individuals — Hillel, Rabbi Elazar ben Charsom, and Yosef HaTzaddik — who overcame

various challenges to serve Hashem, thereby dismissing any excuses others could come up with, and obligating them, too, to overcome the challenges they face. Nowadays, some may feel that an American boy simply can't reach the levels of a European *gadol*.

Rav Kulefsky proved otherwise.

One could say, "Rav Kulefsky is *mechayev* (obligates) the *Americanim!*"

AFTER A *SHIUR* ON *MASECHES SUCCAH*, IN WHICH RAV Kulefsky articulated a *chiddush* from the *Maharsha*, a *talmid* posited, **Speaking Their Language** "It would seem from Rebbi's approach that if a succah is underneath a tree and the branches are 20 *amos* above the *s'chach*, then it would be kosher."

Rav Kulefsky eyed him warily. "Are you asking *le'maaseh* (for practical purposes)?"

The *bachur* answered, "Yes, I know of a case that fits this description exactly."

In his all-American style, Rav Kulefsky snapped, "You ain't gettin' Kulefsky to be *matir* (permit) no סָכָה תַּחַת אֵילָן (succah under a tree)! No way!"



One of Rav Kulefsky's favorite foods was a frankfurter, or as your typical American boy would call it, a hotdog. When he would speak about *Olam Haba*, he would use this as an example. "What? You think *Olam Haba* is like a hot dog?" This type of American "*shprach*" (lingo) made that which he said so relatable. The boys knew he was speaking their language. And they, in turn, wanted to speak his.



When Rav Kulefsky visited St. Louis in the summer, the members of the St. Louis community looked forward to his visits. It was their hometown hero coming back. Moreover, he knew how to use his Missouri roots to connect to the boys.

Rav Dovid Heber, rav of Khal Ahavas Yisrael Tzemach Tzedek in Baltimore, was a close *talmid* of Rav Kulefsky. He shared how once,



At the bar mitzvah of his nephew, Alan Bresler, in St. Louis. Rav Kulefsky is on the left, with his arm around his son Noson; Rebbetzin Kulefsky is seated near her husband holding Feige. Seated in the middle are Rav Kulefsky's parents. Standing near Rav Kulefsky are his brothers-in-law and sisters.

when debating a *talmid* on the fine points of a Gemara, Rav Kulefsky broke the tension of the moment by saying to the *talmid* in a humorous way, "I'm from Missouri. Show me!" (Missouri is famously known as the "Show-Me State": You can't make an unsupported statement to someone from Missouri.) When the student was able to "show him"

the basis for his understanding of the Gemara, Rav Kulefsky beamed with pride.

In truth, Rav Kulefsky was proud of his background, and always had a special place in his heart for his "*landsleit*" from St. Louis, Dovid Heber included. He often invited the *bachurim* from St. Louis for Shabbos meals and inquired about life "back home."



On Purim with Dovid Heber (with fake beard, acting like he is holding a cigarette)

IT SAYS IN *PIRKEI AVOS* (3:18): חֲבִיבֵינּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בָּנִים לְמִקּוֹם. חֲבִיבָה יִתְרָה נּוֹדַעַת לָהֶם שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בָּנִים לְמִקּוֹם

Care and Concern

for they are described as children of Hashem. It is indicative of a greater love that it was made known to them that they are described as children of Hashem."

Rav Kulefsky felt strong love toward each and every one of his *talmidim*. As one *talmid* paraphrased, it was a חֲבִיבָה יִתְרָה, an even greater love, because this love was known and felt by every *talmid*.

He connected to *talmidim* who were on varied levels and from varied backgrounds. A *talmid* in Rav Kulefsky's *shiur* came from an elementary level background. Nevertheless, he was a big *masmid* and methodical thinker. At the time, the *shiur* was learning *Maseches Beitzah*. When the *talmid* asked a question on the Gemara, he pronounced the word בֵּיצָה as it is usually pronounced in Hebrew: "beitzah." Rav Kulefsky had always used the Aramaic pronunciation of the word, "beiyah." However, when the *talmid* pronounced it the other way, Rav Kulefsky immediately switched his own pronunciation as he answered the question, so as not to embarrass the *talmid*, and also so that he would understand. He wanted to speak his language.

The *talmid* who shared the story summed it up: "He had to teach this *talmid*, so he pronounced the word 'beitzah.' It's a small thing. But that was Rebbi. He knew, like all master *mechanchim*, with whom he could joke around and whom to handle with care. But the one thread that hung us all together was that we knew he cared about us, and boy, did we love him back!"



Rabbi Yosey Goldstein, who felt very close to Rav Kulefsky, shared what happened to him one wintry day while still a *bachur*. As he walked onto the sidewalk outside the dormitories, Yosey stepped right onto a clear sheet of ice. His feet came out from under him and he flew into the air, before landing flat on his back and banging his head on the floor. A bit dazed, he lay there on the ground for a moment.

Before he knew what was happening, a big blue Galaxy 500 came around the bend, with Rav Kulefsky at the wheel. Seeing Yosey lying there, he didn't even bother fully stopping the car before opening the

door, putting one foot outside, and calling out, "Yosef, are you okay?" As soon as Yosef heard Rav Kulefsky's voice, he quickly jumped up and answered, "Yeah, Rabbi. I'm fine." The car had never fully stopped, so Rav Kulefsky just put his leg back in the car and hit the gas.

Reb Yosef later discussed how touched he was by Rav Kulefsky's concern and by his *zerizus* to be ready to jump out of the car as quickly as possible.



Another *talmid* mentioned the care and concern that was apparent in Rav Kulefsky's interactions with his *talmidim*. "I often walked him home, and often asked personal questions. I remember once asking for direction regarding how to use my time, as I weighed different types of *avodah*. I sensed that it was not easy for him to take responsibility and tell me to stop doing something good for a higher consideration. But he did it because I needed to grow and he felt responsible. You knew he was fully responsible for you and cared for you and was invested in you."



Rav Kulefsky with Rabbi Yosef Dana and family; Reb Yosef learned in Ner Yisroel and then became a chaplain in the army. (His father was one of the highest-ranking Torah-observant officers in the US Army.)

IN GENERAL, WHEN A LONG LINE FORMED AFTER *SHIUR*, RAV Kulefsky gave each *talmid* his due. It didn't matter if there were twenty other *bachurim* waiting in line. Rav Kulefsky used his powers of concentration to focus on the *bachur* he was speaking to and give him the time and respect he deserved. It was as if he were telling him, "What you're saying is important and I am going to listen to you." The *bachurim* waiting in line knew that when their time came, they, too, would receive his full attention.

One *talmid* related how he became aware of this fact: "When I first came to the *shiur*, Rebbi would come to the yeshivah during second *sefer* to 'hondel (interact) with the *olam* (the group at large).' When he talked with someone in learning, time stopped. Whatever it took for you to understand clearly, that's what you got. Even if there were 10 people waiting in line to speak to him, it was as if he were alone in the room with you, with ALL the time in the world. Not realizing this at first, I waited in line. But as time dragged on, I got impatient and just left. The next day he asked me why I left. It wasn't until it was my turn that I realized that the wait was well worth it."



After davening, there was also often a long line of *talmidim* waiting to speak to Rav Kulefsky and ask him *kashes*, and he tried to get to each one in this case, as well. A short, quiet *bachur* once waited bashfully as Rav Kulefsky dealt with each person in line. One was told by Rav Kulefsky that he would get to him in 10 minutes, another in 20. Meanwhile, the shy and reticent *bachur* stood off to the side, wondering if he would ever get a turn to speak to his rebbi. Rav Kulefsky, though, had taken note of him and had no intention of pushing him off.

He looked at the crestfallen *bachur* and said, "And I will speak to you right now!" With that, he took the *bachur's* arm and walked with him out of the *beis midrash* — before anyone else.

REB CHAIM ("BUFF") FREEMAN IS A GOOD FRIEND OF RAV Dovid Gruman, Rav Kulefsky's son-in-law. Chaim was a *bachur* learning in Eretz Yisrael when Rav Dovid married Rav Kulefsky's daughter Feige, and flew in from Eretz Yisrael for the wedding. He went

An Unusual Connection...



Wedding of Rav Dovid and Feige (Kulefsky) Gruman

over to say *shalom aleichem* and *mazel tov* to Rav Kulefsky at the wedding. He was so taken with Rav Kulefsky from that small glimpse that he decided he wanted to build a relationship with Rav Kulefsky by learning with him.

But logistics were a problem. By the time Chaim decided to implement his plan, he had come back from Eretz Yisrael and was learning in Lakewood, which is closer than Eretz Yisrael, but not that close to Rav Kulefsky in Baltimore. Nor was learning over the phone going to work. But Chaim decided he would try anything, even if it meant traveling to Baltimore from Lakewood. He asked his father to arrange for him to learn with Rav Kulefsky and surprisingly, Rav Kulefsky agreed to learn with Chaim on Thursday evenings.

On two conditions: First, he was not going to take any money for the *chavrusashaft*. Second, he was not going to allow Chaim to drive back to Lakewood on Thursday nights, because it would be too late by then and it would be dangerous.

And so, a very unlikely *chavrusashaft* was formed. Every Thursday night — for a period of two years — Chaim drove to Baltimore to learn with Rav Kulefsky, and drove back the next morning. Generally,

they spent the time going through Rav Kulefsky's upcoming Sunday *chaburah*. Rav Kulefsky wasn't satisfied with just preparing. He felt it was best to say it to someone, and Chaim filled that spot.

On one occasion, Rav Kulefsky was asked to give a special *shiur* for the dedication of the Beren Campus of Ner Yisroel. He called the payphone in Beth Medrash Govoha so that he could say his *shiur* to Chaim. Rav Kulefsky and Chaim were on the phone for two hours straight!

Those two hours, and of course those two years, became very special to Chaim.

RAV DONIEL PRANSKY TOLD THE STORY OF ANOTHER unusual rebbi-*talmid* connection. When Doniel was in Rav Kulefsky's

...And Another... *shiur*, his father, Mr. Bob Pransky, used to come down from Philadelphia periodically and learn with his son during first *seder* to prepare for *shiur*, and then sit in on the *shiur*. Mr. Pransky loved Rav Kulefsky's *shiur* and developed a rapport with Rav Kulefsky. He would come with his briefcase and try to sneak in and sit in the back, but inevitably, Rav Kulefsky would see that he was in the room and invite him to sit in the front.

Even after Doniel left the *shiur*, Mr. Pransky still came down on occasion to get a chance to be a yeshivah *bachur* learning in Rav Kulefsky's *shiur*.

RAV ZEVULUN SCHWARTZMAN, GRANDSON OF RAV Aharon Kotler, is Rosh Kollel of Etz Chaim Yeshivah in Yerushalayim.

...And Yet Another One When Zevulun joined Rav Kulefsky's *shiur*, he was all of 12; most of the other *bachurim* were about seven years or eight years older than him. Still, he developed a *shaychus* with Rav Kulefsky.

"You see," Rav Schwartzman explained, "if you were speaking to him in learning, it didn't matter if you were 12 or 80; he relished the Torah and appreciated the Torah you said, as well."

Rav Kulefsky was very warm to Zevulun. If anything, the fact that he was a child only enhanced the relationship. Rav Kulefsky was so approachable that Zevulun almost didn't realize that he was speaking to a *talmid chacham muflag* (superlative Torah scholar). Even

after he left the yeshivah, Rav Zevulun made sure not to miss out on an opportunity to talk in learning with Rav Kulefsky whenever they crossed paths.

At the age of 12, Zevulun, who was very impressionable, saw in Rav Kulefsky what he later described as a *חַד בְּדוֹרָא* (one in a generation) type of *chiyus* (vitality) and exuberance in learning. Today, so many years later, Rav Zevulun, a tremendous *talmid chacham* in his own right, marvels at the “phenomenal *ahavas Torah*” Rav Kulefsky instilled in his *talmidim*.

He may no longer be 12 years old, but the wonderment has still not faded.

RAV KULEFSKY CULTIVATED WONDERFUL RELATIONSHIPS with his *talmidim*, many of which lasted many years. Much of the

Sense of Humor

rapport was developed through his sharp and playful sense of humor. Rav Kulefsky was in a perpetual state of *simchah*, and his smile and quips could break through the most anxious and tense situations. Even when delivering *mussar*, he often used humor to soften the blow and make his words more palatable.



Rav Kulefsky surrounded by his *talmidim* in his dining room

A *talmid* painted a portrait. "He was so warm and caring that when a *talmid* didn't keep up with him, he was disappointed. He wanted to maintain a connection in a relationship with all of us, each and every one of his *talmidim*. This is part of the reason he joked with them. He knew that not everyone was capable of his level of learning and *hasmadah*, so he used his outstanding sense of humor to connect with them and to bring them into his world. He knew that once they tasted his world, they would latch onto the contagiousness of Torah."

Rav Kulefsky was a master of the quick comeback. His one-liners are repeated by many *talmidim* to this day. Furthermore, he appreciated the sharp lines or humorous insights of others. He had a certain facial expression where he flashed a smile, indicating he approved of a good line or he was about to share one of his own.

Rav Kulefsky once asked a boy to explain the second answer given by Tosafos to a question on the Gemara. Hard as he tried, the *bachur* could not remember. Desperate for some help, the *talmid* asked if Rav Kulefsky could help him get started. He was sure that once his memory was jogged, he would be able to explain the rest of the answer.

Rav Kulefsky smiled broadly. "Sure, I can help. The second answer Tosafos gives is. . ."

That smile and joke calmed the *bachur* without compromising his dignity.



Although Rav Kulefsky himself smoked, it bothered him if *bachurim* did. If he heard that a boy started smoking, he admonished him and made him stop. He had begun when he was younger, before the dangers were known, and was unable to stop. But he did not want others to get into the unhealthy habit.

After rebuking one such young man, he wanted to lighten the mood a bit, so he asked the boy what kind of cigarettes he smoked. The boy responded, "Marlboro."

Rav Kulefsky retorted, "If you're going to smoke, then at least smoke Benson and Hedges" (the brand he used at the time).



At a certain point, the yeshivah administration decided to crack down on lateness and absenteeism at davening. They appointed someone to take attendance at the beginning of davening and to give the lists to the rebbeim, so they could see who was there on time — and who was not. Rav Kulefsky would go through the list at the beginning of *shiur*. When he noticed that a certain *bachur* had not been showing up to Shacharis on time, he said to him, “You better tell the marker where you sit so he stops marking you absent!”



A *bachur* was involved in a *shidduch* for a few months but had not yet gotten engaged. When Rav Kulefsky asked him how things were going, he responded with words he had heard from an Israeli friend, “עדין על האש” — It’s still on the fire.”

Rav Kulefsky answered, “Okay, but you better make sure it doesn’t burn!”



Among the early *talmidim* of Rav Kulefsky was Rav Hillel Sittner, who was in his first *shiur* and went on to become a ninth-grade rebbi in Ner Yisroel. Years after Rav Sittner had become a rebbi, he attended a *shalom zachar* of one of Rav Kulefsky’s grandsons, a son of Rav Dovid Rosenbaum. Rav Dovid delivered a beautiful *shtickel Torah*. After he finished, Rav Kulefsky, the proud father-in-law, spotted Rav Hillel and smiled, “Nu, what do you say to my son-in-law?”

Rav Hillel, who was Rav Kulefsky’s neighbor and enjoyed a close relationship with him, quipped, “Who do you think made him?” referring to the fact that Rav Dovid had been in Rav Hillel’s *shiur* when he first came to Ner Yisroel for high school.

Rav Kulefsky humorously countered that Rav Dovid was his own *talmid*, and it was he who “made him.”

They went back and forth like this, until Rav Kulefsky, with a twinkle in his eye, ended the conversation with, “And Hillel, who’s the one who made *you*?”

AS MENTIONED, ON FRIDAY NIGHTS AFTER THE *SEUDAH*, the rebbeim in Ner Yisroel have the *bachurim* over at their homes for

The Friday Night Oneg

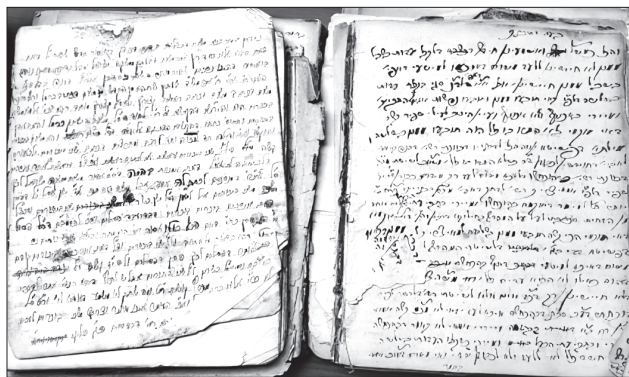
an *oneg Shabbos*. The rebbetzins put out an assortment of pastries and nosh and drinks, and the *bachurim* sing and listen to *divrei Torah* from their rebbeim. This practice was the brainchild of Rav Kulefsky, as another means to develop a rapport with his *talmidim*, with the holy Shabbos as a backdrop.

Friday night at Rav Kulefsky's home was memorable. He often went on for hours on topics connected to the *parashah*, *hashkafah*, and *mussar*. That was when he shared his favorite thoughts and *vertlach* from the *Meshech Chochmah*, the *Malbim* and, of course, his wife's great-grandfather, the *Afikei Yehudah*. As well, with the beautiful singing that went on, even those *bachurim* who didn't shine in *shiur* had the opportunity to connect in this more relaxed venue. Often, past *talmidim* also attended, even some who were already married.

In the words of one *talmid*, who was also a talented singer and composer: "If I could describe properly the atmosphere of his Friday night *oneg Shabbos*, I'd be describing *Olam Haba*... I remember walking away from the *tisch* in a daze. The Torah was so sweet, so clear, so *geshmak*. There was a group who formed to write the *divrei Torah* after Shabbos. It wasn't hard to remember them.

"Then he would ask people to sing: '*Zug ah niggun!*' He asked me to sing a *Tzur MiShelo* I had composed. And he asked me week after week. Did he really enjoy it? I don't know. He enjoyed being *mechazek* people."

Rav Matisyahu Salomon, mashgiach in Beth Medrash Govoha, once



Manuscript of the
Afikei Yehudah



With Rav Matisyahu Salomon

taught a slow, moving tune to the words of *Adon Olam*. This song was sung by the people of Kelm as the Nazis took them to be shot. After some of Rav Kulefsky's *talmidim* learned the tune, they sang it one Friday night in his home, explaining the song's background. Rav Kulefsky sat and listened with his eyes closed. After a few minutes, he began to cry. When the *bachurim* finished singing, Rav Kulefsky requested, "Sing it again!" And they did. And he cried some more.

Another time, the *talmidim* brought Rav Kulefsky another song that was put to the words of *Adon Olam*. The melody had been composed by a Zionist in glorification of one of the wars in Israel. The tune was great and he loved it. When a *bachur* later enlightened him and told him of the tune's origins, he looked at the *bachur* critically. "So what? They were *mekadesh* the tune by putting it to holy words! That's what they used to do all over Europe."



Rav Monish Sax, today a tenth-grade rebbi in Mechinas Ner Yisroel, waxed nostalgic when recalling the *oneg Shabbos* on Friday nights. "The table was covered with fine plates holding the Shabbos cakes. Rav Kulefsky's wife baked the cakes and always used china in honor

of the *bachurim*. Rebbi's beard looked long and full. His face was shining, and you could see a twinkle in his eye. He just looked different. He had the look of Shabbos on his face and the love of Shabbos in his heart. In the house it felt like Shabbos! It's not something that can be explained with words or understood with logic. Whatever Shabbos should feel like, this was it."



A *talmid* told a story that illustrates just how Rav Kulefsky used the *oneg* as another means to connect with the *bachurim*. Because Rav Kulefsky had so many *bachurim* in his *shiur* — sometimes as many as 80 — and he wanted to connect with the *bachurim* on a more intimate level, he divided the *shiur* into groups and invited each group a different week. Every Friday night after davening, the *bachurim* in the yeshivah pass the rebbeim in the *beis midrash* and wish them a *gut Shabbos*. Rav Kulefsky used that time to invite specific *bachurim* to his home for the *oneg* that week. One of his favorite moves was to grab a *bachur's* shirt or jacket lapel, yank him a bit, and then give him the invite. Of course, the *bachurim* had to show up after that.

Since this *talmid* was very busy during the week with the other material he was learning, he designated Friday nights to learn through the *parashah*. As such, he did not go over to his rebbeim's homes on Friday nights for the *oneg*. When he was in Rav Kulefsky's *shiur*, the *talmid* kept up the same practice. However, he knew that once he received the invitation on Friday night as he wished Rav Kulefsky a *gut Shabbos*, he would have no choice but to go.

So he came up with a simple plan: He would not join "the line" to wish a *gut Shabbos*. That first Friday night, he walked out the back door of the *beis midrash* and headed straight to the yeshivah's dining room. This worked for almost three months.

But then one Friday night, after repeating this routine and heading out the back door, the *talmid* was sitting in the dining room when a friend came over to him, grabbed him by the shirt, and said in a perfect Rav Kulefsky imitation, "Tell 'So-and-so' [referring to the *bachur* by his last name] that I know he's avoiding me. I expect him tonight after the meal."

That was that. Of course, he had to go.

When his *talmid* showed up that night, Rav Kulefsky said in his matchless style — with a twinkle in his eye and a smirk — “Aha! Gotcha!”

Then he gave a little chuckle. And another *talmid* was caught up in the spell.

Another *talmid* for life.

Rav Kulefsky had reined him in.