A Eulogy for Rav Chaim Kanievsky zt"l

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It happens a few times every century. We lose a Torah giant who seems irreplaceable. The gaping hole left behind feels irreparable. With the death of Rav Chaim Kanievsky zt"l so much Torah has alighted back to heaven, and we are left to wonder how it can be recovered. Who was this man known, reverently, as the "sar HaTorah" (prince of Torah), and how can his prodigious life inspire our own?

Sacrifice for Torah

Rav Chaim redefined the value of personal sacrifice on behalf of Torah study. Early in his marriage, he and his wife lived in a joint residence with several other couples sharing a common kitchen. The added expense of renting an apartment with a "private" kitchen would have distracted his Torah study. Legendarily, he completed an in-depth review of the of core "corpus" of Torah on a yearly basis, making an annual siyum on erev Pesach. Once, after conducting a non-scheduled siyum, he reported that the current celebration was a "special siyum,” having completed Torah "in his dreams." Though difficult for most of us to conceptualize, theoretically, Torah can become so emotionally internalized, that a cogent form of Torah streams through our subconscious.

To fully immerse in Torah study, he deliberately disconnected himself from the world around him. He was unfamiliar with the street signs in his neighborhood. A few days after gifting a significant donation to one of Rav Chaim's many charities, a wealthy donor paid him a return visit. Prior to the visit, the donor was cautioned that Rav Chaim would not remember him, even though they had met just a few days earlier. Rav Chaim consciously "unburdened" his mind of any non-Torah information to free it for Torah storage.

He will always be remembered by his phrase 'bouha bouha' - an anacronym for the phrase berakha v'hatzlacha (a wish of "welfare and success"). Answering thousands of daily requests for blessings, he could not waste time reciting the entire phrase, but instead uttered this shortened version of "bouha."

For most of us, far removed as we are from this level of commitment to Torah study, this type of behavior would be rude, irresponsible or even grandstanding. For Rav Chaim these measures were completely consistent with his massive lifelong dedication to Torah consumption and his relentless attempts to retain his Torah knowledge.

Passion Not Brilliance

An educator in Israel once encouraged his lesser-talented students by citing Rav Chaim's success as an example of greatness achieved with limited or slightly above-average intellectual gifts. Feeling remorseful about this horrible insult, this educator pleaded with Rav Chaim for forgiveness. Rav Chaim refused the apology and assured the educator that he had been absolutely correct in his assessment. Rav Chaim's massive Torah accomplishments were the product of prodigious and unrelenting commitment and not a function of his outstanding brilliance.

Once Rav Chaim was asked why he married relatively late in life. He commented that he was a "troubled" boy (I can't imagine what that means) and therefore his shidduchim weren’t smooth. His enormous achievements demonstrated that passion and self-sacrifice are far more essential than genius or intellectual firepower.

Avoiding the Limelight

His absolute and unconditional dedication to Torah study severed him from any interest in political appointment or organizational leadership. This shy giant spent his entire life secluded in a small run-down study, pondering the cosmic works of Hashem's will. Toward the end of his life, political influence and public leadership were involuntarily thrust upon him, but it never interested him, nor did he ever actively pursue it. Ironically, he never sought attention or public image, yet he became the most identifiable and beloved Torah figure of the past 50 years, extending his reach far beyond the charedi circles he occupied. He ran from honor, but it chased him down!

Despite his fanatical commitment to Torah study, he answered thousands of daily requests for halakhic rulings, berakhot and general guidance. Several hundred people visited his rickety study, and additionally, he replied to hundreds, if not thousands of daily "questions" and requests. It was undoubtedly 'painful ' for this man to sacrifice so much of his Torah study time to answer these requests, but his love for our people could not be repressed. This private reclusive master of Torah became the most sought-after man of his era, offering comfort and confidence to so many across a broad spectrum of the Jewish world.

Understanding Da’as Torah

So far this profile could apply to many Torah figures: Torah scholarship, prodigious work-ethic and selfless commitment to the physical and spiritual welfare of other Jews. Perhaps the most distinctive and least understood aspect of Rav Chaim's life was his "wielding" of da'at Torah: issuing berakhot, supplying medical and financial advice, rendering important political decisions, and determining social policy.

Many, outside the charedi community struggle to understand the phenomenon of da'at Torah. Why should a Torah scholar render decisions which lie outside of the halakhic and moral domain? Why should a Rabbi issue medical or financial guidance and how can a berakha directed to an unknown name on a piece of paper be effective?

To appreciate the effectiveness of da'at Torah, we need to take a few steps back. We live in a fallen world, which has lost its access to supernatural input. In a more ideal world, decisions were shaped by supernatural input accessed through prophets and through the oracle known as urim v'tumim (embedded in the golden breastplate of the cohen gadol). Life was a blend between personal choice, rational decision-making and supernatural guidance. Where, exactly, supernatural input ended and personal volition began, probably differed from person to person and from situation to situation. For everyone, though, life was a synthesis of ration and of higher wisdom.

Though prophecy was lost around the 5th century BCE, supernatural information remained available through Torah mastery. If Torah is the source of reality, conceivably, all reality can be perceived through mastery of Torah knowledge. Our Chazal operated in a post-prophetic era, but enjoyed access to supernatural information through their colossal command of Torah.

My Rebbe, HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein was once asked if he believed in da'at Torah. His reply astonished me, and it took me years to fully appreciate. He replied that he believed in the concept of da'at Torah, but didn’t think there was anyone alive, whose Torah mastery equipped them to practice it. Fundamentally though, there is a level of mastery of Torah knowledge which grants access to information which science and ration cannot. Perhaps we don’t possess people of that stature, but the concept is valid.

Hundreds of thousands of intelligent and pious people did see Rav Chaim as a provider of da'at Torah and revered his ability to operate in the non-rational realm of ru'ach hakodesh. Once, while authoring a sefer about the kashrut of grasshoppers, he was perplexed by an anatomical question which could only be solved by observing an actual grasshopper. Immediately and unexpectedly, a grasshopper landed on his window sill. These stories do not happen to you and me.

He would often issue differing answers about identical questions. As his decisions weren’t based upon a rational assessment of the facts, identical questions would often yield vastly different answers. Decisions delivered through da’at torah will never be based on objective facts or cold logic but upon higher truths.

Most readers of this article do not conduct their lives based on da'at Torah. We believe that, in a non-prophetic world of empiricism we are "forced" to rely on science, statistics and "common sense" to decide questions unrelated to halakha and to religion. We don’t seek generic berakhot or terse and impersonal abbreviations of "bouha" to provide medical healing. Instead, we solicit personal prayers from those who are familiar with the subject of their prayers. We seek guidance from professionals and medical advice from trained practitioners. Those who do operate through da'at Torah, navigate their lives differently. Rav Chaim was their cornerstone, and his passing is traumatic.

May his life inspire us to become better versions of ourselves, within our own personal ideologies and cultural norms. May his broad-spectrummed appeal expand our own imaginations, so we can better appreciate attitudes which differ from our own.