

On The 10th *Yahrtzeit* Of Rabbi Moshe Portnoy *zt"l*

It's hard to imagine that 10 years have passed since the *petirah* of Rabbi Moshe Portnoy, a visionary who had one goal in his life: To spread Torah and Yiddishkeit. Those who were blessed to know him feel the great loss to klal yisroel and the void that his *petirah* left behind. However, they are also comforted to see his legacy live on through the many *peiros* that a lifetime of accomplishment created.

Rabbi Moshe Portnoy *zt"l* was born on 11 *Teves* 5707 (1947) into an illustrious family of Rabbonim. He was a direct descendant of Rav Tanchum Gershon Bilitzky, who was the last Rav of Yashenovka Poland and *mechaber* of *Shu"t Ginas Bisan*, and Rav Aryeh Leib Shapiro, who was known as R' Leibele Kovner and was the Chief Rabbi and *Av Beis Din* of the city of Kovno. Rabbi Portnoy was the eldest child of Rabbi Eliezer Portnoy *zt"l*, a talmid of the Mirrer Yeshiva who was involved in obtaining visas for the Yeshiva's escape from Europe to Shanghai during the war. R' Lazer, as he was affectionately known, was a noted principal of Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin and a respected Rav in Brooklyn.

At the young age of 17, Rabbi Portnoy began learning in Beth Medrash Gavoha in Lakewood, where he was a talmid and received *semicha* from Reb Shneur Kotler. In the *beis medrash*, he was the youngest member of a *chaburah* that included many future Rabbonim and Roshei Yeshivos. Sensing both his desire to be a Rav and family *yichus* in Rabbonus, his Rebbi and Rosh Yeshiva encouraged him to pursue his aspirations, and at age 23 he accepted his first position in Jackson Heights, Queens as Rav of the Elmhurst Jewish Center.

The community of Jackson Heights was comprised of a close knit *yekkishe kehilla*. Although decades younger than the majority of the *baalei batim*, Rabbi Portnoy earned their respect and devotion due to his distinguished presence, articulate and thought provoking *drashos*, and breadth and depth of his halachic knowledge. The ties that he developed in those early years of his rabbonis remained strong throughout his life.

After 10 years serving the *Kehilla* at Elmhurst Jewish Center and looking to spread yiddishkeit through the building of a community, Rabbi Portnoy, his wife Rochelle, and their young family moved out to Plainview, Long Island to be the Rov of a small community of approximately 25 frum families. With his tireless dedication to all aspects of Yiddishkeit in Eastern Long Island, over the next 25 years the Young Israel of Plainview would expand many times over and the community would grow to become a vibrant shul of nearly 200 families with a Mikvah, eruv and kosher establishments with the highest standards of Kashrus. During his years as the Rav, Rabbi Portnoy established and headed the Long Island Bais Din to handle Gitten and other complicated halachic issues.

As the pillar of a small town community, Rabbi Portnoy gave of himself wholeheartedly to the klal. He would be available to anyone in need at all hours of the day and night, and those who came to see him would leave feeling encouraged, heartened, and most of all, cared for. When he

was asked a *shaila*, he didn't just listen to the *shaila*, he listened to the person. This included knowing the person's background and perceiving the true question. He would make everyone feel important by always inquiring about their families, jobs, and general well-being. When one spoke to him, he was made to feel that he was the most important person in the world. And with his genuine love for people, this was truly the case.

Rabbi Portnoy's genuine sincerity and dedication to others extended beyond his immediate shul. He was known and respected throughout the city by politicians, bank tellers, and everyone with whom he came in contact. With his dynamic personality and ability to relate to people from all backgrounds, Rabbi Portnoy was a walking *Kiddush Hashem*. Truly, the best way to describe him was "*ahuv lamakom vichaviv labrios*." It was this special way with people that enabled him to inspire countless *baalei teshuvah* with his determination and understanding.

Known for his keen sensitivity to others' pain, many amazing stories resulted from Rabbi Portnoy's care and concerns for *Klal Yisroel*. One story involved the mother of a congregant whose look of pain over a Yom Tov prompted a conversation where she expressed her distress over her sister and family's burial in Germany shortly after WWII. After her many hours and thousands of dollars spent unsuccessfully attempting to have their bodies moved to Eretz Yisroel, Rabbi Portnoy singlehandedly undertook the project to help this woman after she had all but given up. Six weeks later, after traveling to Germany and obtaining the necessary permits, Rabbi Portnoy had the *aronos* moved and met the woman's entire family in Eretz Yisroel as he presided over their *Kevurah*, thus providing the family much long sought after *nechamah*.

Rabbi Portnoy's love of and commitment to learning and teaching torah could be seen through the countless *shiurim* he delivered every week, ranging from the most basic to advanced classes in Chumash, Gemorah, Halacha, and Mussar, thereby reaching every *balabus*. To further inspire growth, he arranged a SEED program in the community every summer, where he brought in *bochurim* and *yungeleit* to learn with the *baalei batim* and create a Yeshiva presence in the community. Rav Yosef Irons *Shlita*, a Rav and Rosh Kollel in Lakewood, was one such bachur who spent a summer in Plainview. He writes, "Rabbi Portnoy spent hours with me, teaching me different facets of Rabbanus. His sincerity and unwavering commitment to the truth made a lasting impression on me."

Rabbi Portnoy had a special love for the younger generation and developed a beautiful *keshet* with many of the teenagers and young adults, always encouraging them to learn and grow. He convinced many parents in the community to send their sons to Eretz Yisroel to learn for several years, in order to solidify the foundation that had been laid for them in Plainview. In fact, and to the utter delight of Rabbi Portnoy, many of these *bochurim* became committed *bnei torah* who went on to establish torah true homes.

But Rabbi Portnoy's impact extended beyond Long Island. He served as the President of the Vaad Harabbonim Of Queens, an organization that unites the growing Orthodox Jewish

community under the banner of Mitzvah observance through creating and maintaining the institutions of a Torah community. In addition, he founded and led a Rabbinic training course for young aspiring Rabbonim in which he provided them with the tools necessary to be effective pulpit Rabbis and community leaders.

One mitzvah that Rabbi Portnoy held particularly close to his heart was *bikur cholim*. An amazing story related by one of the Plainview *baalei batim* concerned his elderly father who was in the hospital and was refusing to eat. The family and nursing staff tried to feed him, but to no avail. One day the family came to visit their father, only to be told, “Don’t worry, your father ate already today.” When they questioned the nurse how this could be, she replied that the Rabbi had come and had fed him himself. Not only this, but he had been coming the whole week to personally make sure he ate. The true greatness of a person can often be learned from his quiet, seemingly small acts. Even during his last months, Rabbi Portnoy continued to work tirelessly on behalf of the community, including traveling many hours to visit the injured child of a shul member recuperating several states away. He also used his time in the hospital while receiving his own treatments to look for opportunities to be *Mevaker Cholim*.

Rabbi Portnoy’s *neshama* was taken on 11 *Nisan*, 5765 (2005), and his *aron* was brought to Eretz Yisroel for *kevurah*. He is survived by his wife, children (Eliezer and Ilana Portnoy of Baltimore, Yehoshua and Chavi Portnoy of Baltimore, Yossi and Shira Samsanowitz of Far Rockaway, Moshe Boruch and Chevi Kaufman of Lakewood, and Shlomo and Gila Pollack of Queens), and grandchildren. His family, friends and *Kehilla* gathered in Plainview for the *Yahrtzeit* on Monday night in the *Bais Medrash* bearing his name to learn *l’ilui nishmaso* and to commemorate a lifetime of accomplishment. May his *neshama* have an *aliyah* and may he be a *meilitz yosher* for his family and all of *klal Yisroel*.