

הביטו אל צור חוצבתם



The life and incredible accomplishments  
of our great Mara D'asra

# *Rav Raphael Pelcovitz* ז"ל

מורינו הרב רפאל בן הרב אפרים זצ"ל



THE WHITE SHUL

ק"ק כנסת ישראל

# ***c Acknowledgements and Editor's Introduction***

This *Sefer Zikaron* is dedicated to the memory, the message, the middos, and the mission of HaRav Raphael (Ralph) Pelcovitz *a"h*, one of the most unique American rabbinic personalities to arise in the last 100 years. For just over 65 years, he served our congregation as rabbi, and then rabbi emeritus. During those nearly seven decades, he forged a thriving new Torah community around the concept of a community *shul*. *IY"H*, the ripple effect of his life will continue for another hundred years, as those he influenced pass his teachings and values on to new White Shul generations in the true meaning of the word *mesorah* – to hand over from one to another.

In the four sections of this volume, you'll encounter Rabbi Pelcovitz *a"h* through the eyes of his family, his congregants, his fellow *rabbonim*, and through several print articles and interviews. Indeed, this book is a heritage project, prepared today for those who will perpetuate our White Shul family, through birth and through affiliation, many tomorrows from now.

The book is also the product of much love, care, and attention by several dedicated persons. First, we acknowledge the spiritual leadership of our *Mara d'Asra*, Rabbi Eytan Feiner *shlit"a*, who is so ably assisted in guiding our congregational life by Rabbi Motti Neuberger *shlit"a*. *Ashreinu she'zachinu b'chasdei Hashem* to have such *talmidei chachamim* to teach and lead us.

We thank Chaim Dahan, our Chairman of the Board, for commissioning this book to be prepared. The work involved compressing three months of work into a span of six short weeks. Thank you, Chaim, for your *emunah* and encouragement!

We acknowledge the guidance of White Shul board members who contributed their wisdom to this effort, including Rabbi Tuvia Silverstein, Nesanel Feller, Gittie Neufeld, Barry Salamon, and Yechiel Zlotnick.

Over a third of the submissions in this Sefer Zikaron were compiled through the timely and diligent efforts of Mrs. Ethel Pelcovitz Gottlieb.

Mrs. Felice Eisner and Mrs. Tova Ovits provided professional support in editing this book. Mrs. Yehudit Sanders assisted in transcribing audio interviews and exercising her skills in copy editing.

Due to the speed at which the manuscript had to be prepared, it is possible that we have committed errors of omission, both in textual preparation and inclusion of all the persons we'd hoped to share in this work. For this, we genuinely ask *mechilah*.

That said, we have worked diligently to create a single volume to allow many voices to express *hakoras hatov*, *ahavah*, and *kavod* for the myriad gifts given us through Hashem's messenger to us and our Torah community for over 65 years.

It has been my honor to lend a hand in shepherding this book from concept to pre-press, with the physical edition produced by the very gifted Yechiel Zlotnick and team.

We are all bound together in memory, in celebration, and indeed, in sighs of longing, through the life and legacy of Rabbi Raphael (Ralph) Pelcovitz zt"l. May his *neshamah* have many *aliyos* through the *Torah* we learn, the *mitzvos* we do, and the *tzedakah* we give in his memory.

*Yehi zichro baruch l'olam,*

Gavriel Aryeh Sanders,  
*Project Editor, Sefer Zikaron*

# Forward

The sheer brilliance, the warm charisma, the unforgettable charm. Yes indeed, he was legendary. And we were *zocheh* to be his *talmidim*, his *mispallelim*, his extended family. It is difficult to try and capture the greatness of Rabbi Pelcovitz zt"l, to encapsulate in a mere single volume a lifetime of tremendous achievement in building people and communities.

But we must still try. No, we cannot adequately express the full gamut of emotions swelling within as we contemplate the magnitude of who and what we lost, nor can we honestly convey the loftiness of his character and sterling personality via the written word. Yet, for someone who so very much appreciated the beauty of the word-- and who possessed an insatiable thirst for learning and reading-- we decided it would indeed be fitting to enhance our memorial tribute dinner with a book in his memory.

Not just any book-- and not by just any author. His wonderful family, his loyal and dedicated students, his loving members and admiring *mispallelim*, have penned a smorgasbord of vignettes and personal anecdotes sure to touch and enlighten our lives. Tidbits of delightful encounters with a truly great Yid and a uniquely great community Rabbi that we can preserve and savor for years.

A heartfelt sense of gratitude is extended to all of you who participated in sharing some of your many memories, coupled with special thanks to Reb Gavriel Sanders for orchestrating and supervising the project. We have immeasurable *Hakaras HaTov* to you all for assisting us in perpetuating the legacy of the paradigmatic Rav and pulpit Rabbi from whom we can continue to learn for many years ahead, *B'ezras Hashem*.

So sit back and enjoy the stories and delicious memories of our unforgettable *Mara D'Asra* of many decades. Delight in gleaning all important messages from the life of this special gift that *HKB"H* had blessed us with for so many meaningful and uplifting years, a *matanah tova u'miyuchedes* known throughout the world as "the Rabbi's Rabbi."

I am excitedly looking forward to your involvement in the Shul he so loved and cherished, in continuing the journey he set us on in becoming true

*Ovdei Hashem* and *Anshei Emes*. Let us together do our utmost in giving Rabbi Pelcovitz zt"l everlasting *nachas* in his special place in *Gan Eden Shel Ma'alah*.

בברכת כל טוב תמיד מכל הלב

*Rabbi Eytan Feiner*

# Sefer Zikaron

PART ONE:

## Family Members Recall

Baruch Hashem, Rabbi Pelcovitz A"H lived to see a fifth generation. He knew – and could relate to – each of his extended family members by name, by age, by interest, by concern, and by potential. He spoke to each one as if they were his whole world, and each one felt themselves to be his complete focus. Indeed they were, because Rabbi Pelcovitz possessed a rare gift – to be fully in the moment with everyone with whom he spoke. His ability to care at such individualized levels – from babies to seniors – emanated from his pure love of each person.

The following submissions come from across the family spectrum. They will give you a deeper appreciation for Rabbi Pelcovitz's inspiring ability to offer a guiding hand, a wise word, and a loving heart to each member of the family fold. What he did for one, he did for all. His generous *middah* of *ahavas chesed* flowed beyond his family to encompass all those fortunate to enter his *daled amos*.

*(Rabbi Pelcovitz's biography, authored by his daughter Ethel Pelcovitz Gottlieb, can be found in Section Four: Articles & Interviews.)*



Rebbetzin Shirley Pelcovitz

## *The Final Journey*

We've finally boarded El Al Flight 001, escorted and buckled into our seats.

The doors are locked, and thus we begin the final leg of our journey – Eretz Yisrael...Yerushalayim... Har HaMenuchot.

The drone of the plane's engines seem to lull our shattered spirits and tense nerves, and as we head into the clouds, we can begin to reflect upon what has transpired these past days. Was it really just a few days ago?

Shabbos morning...awakened by a different sound of breathing.... quietly hurrying to Rabbi Brown's Shul to beckon Dr. Zev Carrey, our devoted and beloved doctor. His immediate response upon seeing me there...quickly removing his *tallis*...reaching for his medical bag...and practically running to our house...his kind words, reverent attention, and medical expertise in quelling a worsening situation....

Shabbos afternoon...the nearby children coming "to just be there" ...their presence so calming and reassuring.

Motza'ei Shabbos...by now, everyone is here...*Tehillim* and *tefillas*...tears and supplications...people coming and going...new measures of medication.... Our medical needs all staffed and attended to by our own grandchildren, our own family medical team.

The clock keeps ticking but time stands still. Our focus is in one direction, upon the "Crown of our family." What day is it, no one asks...no one cares...day or night, it was all one.

And then there was the *Vidui*. Dear Rabbi Feiner, solemnly entering the room...sitting down with siddur in hand at the side of the bed...and then head to head, cheek to cheek, together with his beloved *Rav*, he sobbingly recited the final Prayer of Passage – VIDUI.

Tears flowed as we silently witnessed the loving farewell of a *talmid* to his Rebbe.

The sick room became the center of our lives. We sat around the bed and listened for each breath, holding our dear father's hand, murmuring expressions of love...of caring...prayers of supplication...of hope. And finally, the words were exhausted, used up, and as if by some Divine power we began to sing, and sing we did. Ninety-six years of song....

Shabbos *zemirot*, happy songs, solemn songs, favorite songs, old songs, and even some modern songs. We sang, and in amazement, we watched as our father's hand was beating to the rhythm of our music.

The hour was late, fatigue gripped us all. We would rest and let our dear father rest too. But before retiring, we had one request, "DADDY, PLEASE TELL US SOMETHING, SOMETHING THAT WE WILL REMEMBER TO TEACH OUR CHILDREN." He opened his eyes, and with a penetrating look at each of us, in a loud, clear voice he declared, "*Yehiyeh tov*"..."loyalty"..."*seder*"..."*emes*"...and then he drifted off to sleep.

Three a.m. Wednesday morning, 26 Adar, the house is quietly abuzz with movement – whispered words. Fred Schulman, Gittie Neufeld, Rabbi Boruch Ber Bender, Rabbi Feiner, Barry Salamon...members of the Chevra Kadisha...Achiezer...everyone receiving assignments...asking us questions... readying the shul for the

*levayah*...making sure our travel documents were in order.... Before long, the numbers grow, our loyal and wonderful friends, our shul...family and children.... These countless people did not know nor did they care what the hour was. They came...they were there for us in our hour of need...doing whatever was necessary with such alacrity and capability.

There is no need to discuss the funeral service at the shul. It seems as if everyone, our dear friends, relatives, congregants, and neighbors were all there, sharing our grief while paying the *kavod acharon* to a great Rabbi, Teacher, and Leader.

Our thoughts are suddenly interrupted...the stewardess is announcing our approach to *Artzeinu HaKedoshah*, Israel, our final destination.

Our arrival in Israel now is so different...no exhilaration...no great feelings...the joy and delight are absent.... Thanks to Yanky Brach, customs and other entrance formalities are waived for us, and the journey continues on quite smoothly.

Our first stop is to Shamgar, the funeral home, where a royal welcome awaits the honored guest, "THE RABBI'S RABBI" from America. David once again eloquently eulogizes his father and is joined by Rabbi Berel Wein, who emotionally and brilliantly bids his dear friend farewell. And then on to Har HaMenuchot.

Climbing the countless steps leading higher and higher up into that quiet, quiet mountain, the reality of "*Ve'el affar tashuv*" becomes a visual reality...a reality that leaves a very sad and disquieting feeling. This great man, this intellect, this *Tzelem Elokim* is not "*affar*"...he is a man of noble spirit...a righteous person...a Torah Scholar.... What is he doing here?

As we approach the gravesite, I ask a member of the Chevra Kadisha if I may approach the grave. I must see where my Beloved is to be placed to rest. Permission is granted. I approach the *kever*, which is situated at the edge of the mountain. There is nothing there other than Heaven and Earth...a beautiful, restful valley. Perhaps, because of the time of day, I behold a beautiful phenomenon. The sun is shining down from above, spreading its light and glow into the valley. And almost as if in response to greet that glow, a mist is rising from the earth, so as to unite with that Heavenly light. I stand and stare at the vision before my eyes, and I realize that Heaven and Earth are meeting here. It is then that I realize that this is where you, My Dear Rabbi, belong – where Heaven and Earth meet. Your whole life has been dedicated to bringing Heaven to Earth, and to making the earthly Heavenly.... This indeed, My Dearest Husband, was the place chosen for you from the power of Above, Hashem Yisborach. With tears of longing, and with a sense of emptiness in my heart, but with love and eternal gratitude for what you have been and given to us all, I say, "*lech beShalom.*"

With everlasting love,

*Shirley*

## · *Recalling Three Outstanding Qualities*

Rav Yosha Ber Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, said at his eulogy for the Talne Rebbetzin that a person's life doesn't come into full focus until they are remembered in *hespedim*. It is only then that the total essence of a person and his life's accomplishments are truly revealed and recounted. Among the many insights into my father's legacy that I learned about-- after hearing hundreds of stories and vignettes since his death—are ones that manifest the following three areas, and crystallize for me who my father was as a man and a leader:

- (1) **Connection:** My father, *a"h*, was fond of saying that we live in a world of information without knowledge, and communication without connection. The recurring theme of his ability to connect deeply with whoever he was talking to was heard in story after story shared by those who were *menachem avel*. One person after another discussed how much they learned when they helped him on his long walks going into shul. They learned **patience**, and also the importance of connection through taking the time to **really listen** to what was being said.

At the burial in Israel there was a man who I didn't recognize and who cried hysterically throughout the *kevura*. When I went over to him to ask him about his relationship with my father he explained that he had lived in Far Rockaway in the mid-1950's, from the time he was 11 until his

family moved to Israel shortly after his Bar Mitzvah. He explained that during that relatively short period of time he forged a very deep connection with the young new Rabbi of the White Shul. Through his tears he explained -- "For my entire life he was the only person I considered to be my *Rov*; I just buried the only *Rov* that I will ever have."

- (2) **A Deep Understanding of the Essence of Others:** At my Bar Mitzvah in 1964, my father's *drasha* focused on his hopes and dreams for my future. The theme of that talk was that he hoped that he can give the world "a good listener." I'm not sure what he saw in me at that young age, and I'm not sure how much that *berachah* shaped my career path, but I've been consistently amazed by the repeated theme at the *shiva* of people feeling that he had the ability to really "get" them. When he gave me and my siblings a *berachah* on Friday nights, and in his frequent discussions with us as well, we all felt that he recognized the core of who we were and was only interested in each of us reaching **our** potential, without injecting **his** own needs onto us.

The following story further illustrates the theme of my father's skill in understanding the unique needs of each individual, coupled with an ability to creatively help them grow. Among the many *ba'alei tokeiah*, who over the years blew *shofar* on Rosh Hashana in the White Shul, one of them shared the story of how he became anxious at the prospect of bearing the immense responsibility of blowing the *shofar* properly for a packed shul on *Yom Tov*. So in spite of being a talented *baal tokeiah*, he resigned from that position. He then told me that my father tried to build up his confidence by

practicing with him and also reviewing *hilchos tekias shofar* together. But, unfortunately, this approach did not work. Harnessing the power of learning to “fail better” that he so beautifully discussed at the *Melaveh Malkah* celebrating his 65th Anniversary with the shul, my father arranged for there to be a *shiur* on *hilchos tekias shofar*. The assignment of this *baal tokeiah* was to teach those attending the *shiur* what correct *tekios*, as well as mistakes in *tekias shofar* sounded like. Of course, as planned by my father-- the talented paradoxical psychologist-- the *baal tokeiah* performed flawlessly, regained his confidence, and was able to once again blow *shofar* for the shul.

- (3) **Humility:** My grandfather, a *musmach* of Slobodka Yeshiva, said that the older he got the easier it became to conquer his passions. However, the one challenge that became greater with age was that of *gaavah* - the need for honor. Although this insight resonated with my father, one of the most interesting areas of growth that I saw in my father in his last years was a growing openness to others, which was coupled with a receptivity to input, ideas, and feedback even from those many years his junior. This humility was beautifully illustrated by a story shared by one of the women during *shiva*, who attended a *shiur* my father gave a number of years ago. He told the story of then Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who was traveling through Europe looking to be measured for a new suit. Every country he went to told Dr. Kissinger that they didn't have enough cloth available for such a giant of a man. When he came to Israel the Israeli tailor said, “No problem. How many suits would you like?” Kissinger was baffled -- he asked, “How do *you* have enough

material when tailors around the world didn't have material for even one suit?" The Israeli answered, "By us, Dr. Kissinger, you aren't such a great man."

After sharing this story, my father told the women attending the *shiur* - "I am worried that when I get to the *olom ha'emes* - I won't measure up - and will be told, "Here, Rav Raphael, you aren't such a great man." What I learned from the outpouring of love, respect and admiration in the time since my father's *petirah* is that he had nothing to worry about.

*Yi'he Zichro Baruch*

## *My Daddy's Masped*

Over the many years that I heard my father be *maspid*, he would always say that there was a significance of the *zman* of *petirah* and the *parashah* we just *leined* and/or the *parashah* we were going to *lein*.

This past week, we *leined* *Vayakhel-Pekudei* and summarized the *binyan* of the *Mishkan* an *Refael*d its *keilim*. I heard a *vort* teaching that three of the *keilim* were *mikshah* - hammered out from one piece of metal, and not built from many different pieces. These three *keilim* were the *Menorah*, the *Keruvim*, and the *Chatzotzros*. The question is: What is the significance of these three being built in such a manner?

As we know, the *Menorah* and the *Ohr HaMenorah* signify Torah. When it comes to *limud Torah* and living a life of Torah, it must be done with *sheleimus*. It cannot be piecemeal; it must be whole, pure, and true. This signified my father. I cannot even begin to describe his love of Torah as well as his unbelievable knowledge – he was a true *ilui*. He was a *talmid muvak* of HaRav Shlomo Heiman *zt"l*, as well as a *talmid* of Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelovitz.

Not only was my father's knowledge vast and his learning deep; but his life was a life of Torah – *mukshah* – sincere – whole. He was respected throughout our community, and indeed throughout the world, not only by other pulpit rabbis, but by *rabbeim* and *roshei yeshivah*. His quality of transmitting Torah was unparalleled, especially in his writings and *derashos*.

There was a story repeated to me by a few Satmar *chassidim*, about the *alter* Satmar rebbe, who spent his summers in Saratoga Springs in the 1940's. Every *Shabbos*, it used to take him a little longer getting back to his *chassidim* when he visited the local *mikveh*, in the local shul. Why, you may ask? It seems, that he was mesmerized by a young, brilliant rabbi who would speak from the pulpit every *Shabbos*, with *chiddushim* and *divrei Torah* that captivated him. That rabbi was my father – Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz.

The *chatotzeros*—the trumpets—were used to gather *Klal Yisroel* at specific times. They represent leadership. They had to be *mikshah*, because a leader must be *mikshah*; he must be solid in his convictions and whole in his sincerity. My father epitomized leadership and all of us are a testament to that.

He came to a small community on the beach and laid a foundation that became a vast *makom Torah*. Hashem granted him *arichas yomim* and *shanim* to see the fruits of his labor. Countless *yeshivas*, *mosdos Torah*, a *vaad*, an *eruv*, a *chevra kadisha*, a *mikvah*, and most of all - a White Shul. He led through example. He led everyone—*yeshivish*, modern, *chasidish*, *litvish*, or whatever label you want to give someone. Everyone in his eyes, were a part of his *Klal* and had their way and their purpose to serve Hashem. He would never compromise his principles, and always did what he felt was right - not for himself - but for the *kehilah*.

The *keruvim* have faces of children, warm and loving, open and giving, understanding, and selfless. This was my father—to his children, his grandchildren, to his great-grandchildren and to his great-great grandchildren. But the *kruvim* also must be *mikshah*, from a whole piece. So is parenting, to be whole and consistent, *yoshor* and

steady. This was also my father. He exemplified this not only in his public persona but in his private life as well.

And now we are approaching the next *sedra* of *Vayikra*, where Hashem calls Moshe in a loving and endearing way. It is not *vayidaber*, it is *vayikra*. So too, Hashem is calling my father to come join him at the *kisai hakovod*.

*Yehi zichro baruch.*

Altkhie Pelcovitz

## *My Personal Tribute*

Where do I begin to write about one of the most important men in my life?

When I was seven years old, we moved to 754 Caffrey Avenue. My parents were so excited to live down the block from the brilliant Rabbi of the White Shul. As for me, I saw a cute boy riding his bicycle! He used to ride past my house ten times a day, and even then I knew I liked him. That little boy turned out to be Nochi Pelcovitz, Rabbi Pelcovitz's youngest son!

After growing up together, riding bikes together, playing baseball and cops and robbers together, I married THE RABBI'S SON!!! My family's Rabbi, my Rabbi, the Rabbi whose *Drashos* filled with Torah knowledge tied into current events I would listen to in shul every Shabbos morning. Each sermon managed to reach everyone there-- from the youngest to the oldest congregants. Each *Drasha* -- every Shabbos and *Yom Tov*-- reflecting the brilliance and eloquence of our Rabbi. This awe-inspiring giant of a man was now MY DAD! And he was the warmest, kindest, most loving, brilliant man. Anytime he saw me, he smiled that fabulous smile that would light up a room and light up my heart.

My Rabbi/Dad continued to be the driving force of wisdom and reason, compassion and caring, a role model of living life with Torah and for Torah. He guided our family throughout our 40 years of marriage together, *kain yirbu*. My Dad was the loving Patriarch of a community, of a Shul, and of our family. I adored him, and I miss

him every day. I am so grateful that I had the *Zchus* to be his daughter.

May he be a *Meilitz Yosher* for our family, the community and *Klal Yisrael*

Ethel Pelcovitz Gottlieb

# *c 1 · Rabbi's · Daughter*

## *· Reminisces*

While holding my Father, z"l's hand during the last days of his life, a flood of memories engulfed me. I experienced vivid flashbacks of walking home from shul in Akron, Ohio, holding my father's hand when I was about four years old. How happy and safe I felt! These same emotions were supplemented with a feeling of pride when I was six, seven, and eight, and we were walking home from the White Shul in Far Rockaway.

It is a universal truth that the majority of children think about their fathers in superlative terms—smartest, strongest, best, etc. He is their hero and champion. This perception changes for many of them as they mature and notice the human imperfections that every person possesses. Whether or not this changes, their relationship depends on many factors. Personally, as I matured, my “hero worship” has increased and intensified. Over the years, as I observed and could truly appreciate my Father, z'l's brilliance and outstanding *middos*; his Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilus chasodim*;—his *bein adam l'chaveiro* and *bein adam la'Makom*—how could it not?!

So, what is it like being a pulpit rabbi's child? You are in the public eye and there are many expectations placed upon you from multiple sources—family, *shul*, school, and community-at-large. Our parents were wonderful about not pressuring us. They wisely recognized our individual needs and different personalities and treated us accordingly. True, we knew that we had to behave well—especially

in public – but we did it NOT for others, but because we didn't want to disappoint our parents or embarrass them. While growing up, I can't say that I always totally understood certain restrictions placed upon me by my parents. Nevertheless, I never considered disobeying them, especially since even at that time I knew that they were fair and wise. It was not always easy, but it never affected my childhood friendships. *Baruch Hashem*, we had a wonderful childhood.

One of the most amazing things I learned during that period was that so many other people, young and old alike, including my own friends – also revered and really liked my Father.

Far Rockaway was smaller then, and everyone in the community knew each other. It was an ideal place to raise a family and we were fortunate to grow up in such a place. Only years later did we realize the tremendous role our father played in building and developing Far Rockaway into a foremost Jewish community.

Among my earliest and most precious memories is being *bentched* by my Father, *z"l* on Friday nights and Erev Yom Kippur. Receiving this *berachah* at the end of each week engendered feelings of love, care, and security, banishing the troubles of the week. What has made this *minhag* all the more meaningful for me and my siblings is that it continued his entire life. Not only were each of us recipients, and we maintained this beautiful custom with our own families, but our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren were *bentched* by our father as well. Five generations have been *zocheh* to Daddy/Zade/Zade-Rabbi/Saba's *berachah*! In-law children were also included; and at every Shabbos family *simchah*, everyone lined up to be *bentched* by our father. The last number of years, I must admit that for me this was one of the highlights of these occasions. I found myself wondering how it must make our father feel. I can only

imagine the *nachas* and joy it gave him! Since his *petirah*, I sorely miss feeling his hands upon my head and being *bentched* – and I know that this emotion will continue for the rest of my life.

What would a Shabbos or Yom Tov meal have been like without *divrei Torah* from our father, z"l? His *vorts* were always insightful, meaningful, relevant, and geared to its listeners. They usually engendered lively discussions and comments and were always a highlight of the *seudah*. *Zemiros* were one of his favorite parts of the meal, and all the years, our father enjoyed hearing and even learning new *niggunim*. But like most families, there were the old standards that always remained, and which we each also taught to our own families when we married.

Family was **always** our parents' priority. As busy as they were, their children and family came first. We never felt overlooked. We visited our grandparents in Bridgeport, Connecticut, at least once a month and spoke to them frequently, as well as always on Erev Shabbos/Yom Tov. We also got together regularly with aunts, uncles, and cousins from both sides of our family, building lasting relationships.

We were the fortunate recipients of his outstanding teaching skills. Our father, z"l was so gifted in making things clear and understandable. I later learned that this vital quality of clarity – both in theory and practice – was a most important characteristic of his *rebbe*, HaRav Shlomo Heiman, zt"l. Our father was also extremely patient, another essential attribute of a good teacher, parent, and leader. Our father, z"l loved people and had an uncanny ability to connect with **all** ages and **all** types. He seemed to know just what they needed and he never forgot them. Indeed, he was the quintessential "people person" – an *ochaiv es ha'briyos* and *ahuv al ha'briyos* – it was a reciprocal connection.

My siblings and I were so blessed and fortunate to have a father who exemplified so many *middos tovos*, and who always considered the outcome of his actions, which were consistent with what he said. In other words, he taught us by example – the best possible method of instilling lessons and values. What a rich legacy we have, and what a rich legacy we must maintain and bequeath to our children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and future generations, *iy"H*. May we be worthy to keep and pass on the wonderful memories, and live our parents' legacy and build upon it, as well.

A person's name generally conveys his essence. Our father, *z"l*'s name Raphael truly expresses his essence, his core. The *malach* Raphael is the angel of healing and salvation. He is the angel who stands behind each of us (*mei'achorai* Raphael), giving us strength and encouragement to do what we have to. *Malach* Raphael "has our back," so to speak. Didn't Rav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim Pelcovitz *zt"l* do this for people his entire life?! Indeed, he did – and may he continue to do so by being a *meilitz yosher* for his beloved family, shul-family, and Klal Yisrael.

I miss you and love you so much, Daddy.

*Y'he zichro baruch.*

Judy Pelcovitz Gribetz

# *Growing Up in the White Shul as the Rabbi's Daughter*

Our family moved to Far Rockaway when I was five. I was young enough to sit in the men's section and old enough to remember. The White Shul was white then; the congregants were modern Orthodox and the memories are wonderful.

I remember sitting in the front row men's section while my father was speaking, in awe of him. I particularly remember that *Simchat Torah* during my childhood was so lively and everyone participated. My friends and I would tie the men's *talaissim* together while they were dancing. People would go *succah*-hopping from one neighbor to another. Then, everyone had a *succah* and stayed home. Today a lot of people go to Israel.

Every year on Shavuot, my parents made an open house for the shul in our backyard. My mother had a secret punch recipe that everyone wanted.

All four Pelcovitz children had very different personalities and needs. Our parents knew what each of our needs were and raised us accordingly. I was a little bit of a free spirit and they handled me with tender discipline and understanding. There were times I was reminded by teachers and others that I was a rabbi's daughter and had to behave as such. It wasn't always easy to be reminded that I and my siblings always had to set a good example.

As a father, my Daddy taught us respect, *gemilut chesed*, the difference between right and wrong, a love for Torah and how to tell

a good joke. All his stories had a message. He also had the most marvelous sense of humor. He gave us strength and inspiration, support, and sage advice. He was understanding, humble, and a brilliant scholar and Rabbi. He was always there for me and, he always found time to help me with my homework.

What I loved about him was that he was a regular guy. Besides being a *talmid chachom*, he loved Cole Porter and Frank Sinatra music, the Yankees, playing golf, old movies, well-written books and articles. He knew *people*. He got them. Daddy was a great judge of character and he cared as a rabbi and a friend. He taught me to listen, which he emphasized was such an important trait.

In later, more recent, years when I would come for my weekly visits, we had the most wonderful conversations. He was so interested in my life and his other family members' lives. He really looked forward to the family visits, especially the children's. He loved and related so well to the children, no matter their age. I would always go away from those visits having learned something. He will be deeply missed. May his *neshamah* have an *aliyah*.

## *Sbloschim · Remarks*

*B'reshus* Bubby, my parents, aunts and uncles. It is a big *zchus* to speak about my wonderful Zaidy at his *shloshim*.

We recently *leined parshas Tzav*. In Zaidy's wonderful book, *Table Talk*, Zaidy writes about the consecration of Aharon and his sons as *kohanim* its significance. Moshe was to take the blood of the inauguration ram and place some of it "upon the lobe of Aharon's right ear and upon the thumb of his right hand and upon the big toe of his right foot."

Zaidy goes on to explain this process in the most brilliant way. He writes that this is a lesson for not only *kohanim*, but for all of us.

How do we do this?

We should use our ears to hear what Hashem and our fellow men have to say about us, for without a listening ear, there can be no communication between Hashem or between mankind.

Our hands represents doing and producing, it is not enough to have a listening heart, it is not enough to know all of *Torah*, the king of the Jews had the *Torah* attached to his arm at all times to show that we need to take the *Torah's* teaching and put it into action, without this all our knowledge and good intentions are for naught.

Our feet represent movement, progress. The lesson here is to teach us to be *holchim*, and not stagnant or frozen. We have freedom of will and the choice to move and progress. This is a man's mission and

purpose, as man is called a *holech*! Angels cannot move without directive and cannot take any initiative on their own. That is why they are called *omdim* and not *holchim*.

These three attributes personified Zaidy. Zaidy was a true leader of his community, he was a *melech* in his family, and also in his *kehillah*. Zaidy had a *lev shomea*. He listened to his congregants and communicated with them in a way that only a true leader could. Zaidy also knew *kol HaTorah kulah*, he was learning at all times.

When I would come visit, Zaidy would be sitting in his chair or in his study, there was always a *sefer* next to him. Zaidy was constantly connecting to his beloved Torah; he was like the *melech* of *Yisroel* with the Torah on his arm at all times. He put that Torah into action; it was always implemented. Lastly, Zaidy was a true *holech*, never ever stagnant, even in his later years, Zaidy was always growing, progressing, learning and active.

I would like to take this moment to express my appreciation to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* for allowing me, my husband and my children and all of us to have such a wonderful and amazing Zaidy in our lives and *iy"h* I know we will carry him with us forever.

Aliza Pelcovitz Katz & Family:

## ***Zaidy's Personal Care***

To the Jewish world, Rabbi Pelcovitz was the “Rabbi’s Rabbi,” “the pillar of our community,” “a Torah Scholar.” While he was, indeed, all those things, to me - Rabbi Pelcovitz was my beloved Zaidy. His guidance, advice, and wisdom helped me navigate some challenging times in my life. I learned so much from him and am forever grateful for his loving support.

Zaidy was always interested in whatever I had to say, and what I was doing. He was constantly complimentary and proud of my accomplishments. How fortunate I was to have such a caring and wise man like him in my life.

I often think about our special relationship and all the wonderful things he did for me and my family. His warm smile, excellent advice, and Torah teachings will remain with me forever. I miss him very much and share these sentiments with love, great respect and admiration.

Grandson Baruch Pelcovitz Describes  
“*The Special Connection*”

There are many incidents and experiences I’ve had with my grandfather. I was privileged to grow up living near my Zaidy. Privileged to *daven* in his *shul*, spend *Yamim Tovim* together, and honored to learn *b’chavrusah* with him as well. Each experience was accompanied by unforgettable lessons and created lifelong memories.

It seems that when most people reflect on their experiences with my Zaidy, they always mention his inviting smile. But there was something else that I found very unique. He knew just how to make eye contact with people, and it assured them that they had his full attention.

His gaze was soft and powerful as he explained something to you or listened to your stories, opinions, or thoughts. No matter how many others were also there, he made you feel like he was speaking only to you.

I know that this quality is what made him an effective Rabbi, teacher, and confidant. It enabled the *tzibbur* to connect with him and feel welcomed and valued. This is part of what made him the unforgettable leader that he was.

I can vividly remember this special connection, and I will carry it with me forever.

*Yihe zichro baruch.*

## Zaidy & the Homework Assignment

I have so many beautiful memories of my Zaidy. I had the *zechus* of living only a few blocks away, so I was able to see my Zaidy whenever I wanted to.

I remember having Friday night meals at my Bubby and Zaidy's and singing beautiful *zemiro*s together. To this day, we still sing these songs, and they make me smile and think of him.

I remember even looking forward to Erev Yom Kippur because I knew I was going to get a *brachah* from Zaidy. I truly believed that receiving this *brachah* from him really made me have a great year!

The list goes on and on, but there are two specific memories that really stand out as my favorites: Because I lived close to my Zaidy, I was so fortunate to be able to go with my father on Shabbos morning to pick up Zaidy and walk with him to shul. Zaidy would always ask me how things were going in my life. He even seemed interested in the mundane details. It amazed me that someone of Zaidy's *madraigah* would take the time to discuss such things. I came to realize that he did this only because he really cared about **me**. He just knew that this was the best way to relate to me and show his love and concern. How lucky I was to have such an amazing Zaidy!

Another special memory that I have of my Zaidy is when I was in high school and had to write a *Chumash* paper with multiple sources. I was so very fortunate to learn with him from the very commentary on the *Sforno* he wrote and published. How awesome my Zaidy was! Such a wonderful teacher, explaining everything with such clarity.

I will never forget these truly remarkable times. In fact, all the times spent with Zaidy were special for **all** of his grandchildren, because we were *zocheh* to have a close relationship with a *Gadol* in Torah, *avodah* and *gemilus chasodim*.

I miss him & love him so much.

Mari Pelcovitz Platschek Recalls

## Zaidy's Last Simchah

To most of the Jewish world, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz was known as a great man, but to me, he was my Zaidy. As his youngest granddaughter I got to spend a lot of time in my grandfather's home. I have wonderful memories of our *Pesach Sedarim* together, when we would be privileged to hear excellent *divrei Torah* from Zaidy.

What I did not realize when I was younger was that my Zaidy was busy with many things in the shul and the community, and also gave everyone the time and attention that they needed. The reason why I was unaware of this fact was because my Zaidy made me feel that everything in **my** life was what mattered-- every subject in school, the details of a class trip, etc. I now understand that his interest in my life demonstrated his love for me. How fortunate and blessed I was to have this caring.

My husband and I had the *zechus* of Zaidy being the *Mesader Kedushin* at our wedding. Recently, towards the end of Zaidy's life, I gave birth to a baby boy. It lit up my world to see my baby in Zaidy's arms! I will never forget the huge smile my Zaidy had when I brought the baby to his house for the first time. Zaidy's smile could light up a room! When we had the *Pidyon Ha'ben*, my Zaidy summoned all of his strength to attend. It was the highlight of the *simchah* for all of us! I could not stop smiling, all because my Zaidy was there! We were all so grateful that he came—especially me. It was the last *simchah* that he attended and none of us will forget it.

I miss him and love him very much--- *Yi'he Zichro Baruch*

## · Recall “Zayde”

As we reflect on the many years we were blessed to have with Zayde, our specific childhood memories are a haze of hugs, stories and walks to shul. The details have been somewhat obscured by the reality of Zayde’s importance to the larger community. All four of us can recall the pride of sharing our last name with him, and how, when meeting someone for the first time, the look on their faces when they realized that we are the grandchildren of THE Rabbi Pelcovitz. We can also remember our confusion at that recognition sometimes being followed by the excited statement, “Your grandfather married me!” We hold those memories dear and appreciate how much Zayde meant to *Klal Yisrael*.

In addition to the great pride we feel in carrying his name, what has stood out to us more is the evolving relationship that each of us was able to have with Zayde as we got older. Anyone who has walked into 781 Caffrey knows the familiar feeling of Zayde sitting with you and beginning his loving investigation into the details of your life with an inquisitive “So...?” And it was through those conversations that Zayde got to know us as we became adults and developed a special relationship with **all** of his grandchildren. This is best encapsulated by a recent story that our Abba shared with many people during *shiva* – At a commemoration of our Grandma’s 30th *yartzheit*, almost two years ago, after Zayde gave one of the most beautiful speeches to the family that we can recall, he took the opportunity to say an individual goodbye to each of us at the end of the night. When he said goodbye to Ari, as he gave him his signature kiss on the cheek, Zayde simply said, “Ari, don’t stop being Ari.” His

message was loud and clear and we think it was meant for **all** of his grandchildren—Zayde loved us all for who we were and wanted nothing more than for us to continue to be that way.

While “Rabbi Pelcovitz” belonged to the community, **Zayde** belonged to **us** and he appreciated each of us for our uniqueness. That is something we will never forget.

*Yi’he Zichro Baruch*

*With love,*

*Ari & Sara Pelcovitz, Karen & Simcha Herrmann, Michal Pelcovitz,  
Ronit & Jonathan Weitzman  
Ephraim, Leora, Yonah, Dani, Judah, Kira, Leo, and Ella*

Granddaughter Miriam Gottlieb

## *Heartfelt · Reflections*

My Dearest Zaidy,

I can't believe that it's almost two months since we lost you. I'm still in shock. It is still so surreal. Every time I walk in to your house, I expect to see you sitting in your chair learning, or reading or even resting, with a huge smile on your face, greeting me as you always did - so happily!!

Oh, how I miss our *Shabosim* together, how I yearn for your bracha, your hands on my head just one more time.

NOTHING is the same anymore. I don't know how we are going to continue life without you. You were the true meaning of a Patriarch. *Klal Yisroel* lost a Torah giant and we lost a loving, caring Zaidy.

I can literally go on and on about all your incredible attributes, but that in and of itself would fill an entire volume. Suffice it to say, you will be sorely missed by your loving family and the entire community!

I know we will somehow regain some strength and move on, as hard as that will be. You lived a beautiful full life with lots of *nachas* from five wonderful generation of Torah Jews *b"h*! And that brings me a lot of *nechamah*.

All my love forever yours.

Grandson Mordechai Gottlieb Remembers

## Zaidy's *Leumen* in Torah

When I think of my grandfather and the impact that he had on my life and that of my family, three images come to mind: Zaidy at the pulpit; Zaidy standing at his *shtender* in his office; and Zaidy with the family on Friday night, waiting on line to get a *brachah* from him. These images shape the relationship he had with us as a family.

Zaidy at the pulpit: How many *drashos*, classes, and *shiurim* did he deliver from the pulpit? His *drashos* were articulate, brilliant, and peppered with great stories and insights. My grandfather would hear a slogan from a company or see a message in an ad, and somehow derive a Torah or *Mussar* lesson from it. As a child, I always marveled at the collection of *Reader's Digest* he had in his home from the 1960's and 70s. They all had check marks next to various stories, jokes, and anecdotes, which at some point must have made their way into a *drashah*.

Over the years, I have met many *rabbonim* and lay people who would comment to me that my grandfather spoke at their shul or yeshivah, and they would then proceed to tell me what *dvar Torah* he said. The next time I spoke with my grandfather, I'd mentioned whom I had met and started to repeat the *dvar Torah* they said in his name, and he—more often than not—remembered what he had said. Sometimes, this had been twenty or thirty years prior! So much more can be said about this, but there are so many people who can elaborate on that better than me.

The next image is that of my grandfather standing at his *shtender* in his home office. He spent countless hours, learning, preparing for *shiurim*, and writing *drashos* at his *shtender*. Whenever he was home

not attending to shul business, he had a *sefer* in his hand. He once commented to me that for him, one of the biggest difficulties he faced when he was sitting *shivah* for a relative was that he was not permitted to learn. Learning was his life.

The final image I think about is with the family on Friday night, waiting on line to get a *brachah* from him. Family was of utmost importance to him, and he was the patriarch of our family. The *chinuch* of his family and the *mesorah* that he wanted transmitted were foremost on his mind. Every family get-together always included a *dvar Torah* from him, and he loved to hear others share a *dvar Torah* as well.

A few years ago, on Erev Rosh Hashanah, my son came home from yeshivah and recounted a *shiur* that he heard from his *rebbe* in the name of HaRav Shlomo Heiman, *zt"l*, who was my grandfather's *rebbe*. My son called Zaidy to repeat the *shiur* to him. A few minutes later, I got a phone call from my grandfather, telling me how much it meant to him to hear his great-grandson repeat with such clarity a *shiur* from *his* *Rebbi* and *Rosh HaYeshivah*, HaRav Shlomo Heiman, *zt"l*.

During the last visit my family had with Zaidy, each of my sons discussed with him – each on his own level – what he was learning in yeshivah. It is an image that will forever be etched into my mind.

My grandfather was *zocheh* to be the *sandak* at the *bris* of a great-great-grandson (actually two of them!). He told over the story of Rav Elyashiv: When he was *sandak* at the *bris* of a great-great-grandson, someone went over to tell him that a person who is *zocheh* to be the *sandak* at a great-great-grandson's *bris* goes straight to *Olam HaBa*. Rav Elyashiv responded, "I'd prefer to get there on my own merits." Zaidy turned to the crowd and said, "I'd like to get in there any way

I can!" In many ways, this sums up my grandfather: He never took himself too seriously, he had a great sense of humor, and he was always humble.

We will truly miss him — *Yi'he zichro baruch*.

Tamar Gribetz Feder & Family

## *Shabbos with Zadie*

Ever since I was a little girl, going to Zadie for Shabbos was a magical experience. There was a holiness in the air in his house and an aura of safety that wiped away the worries of the week, shielding me from my concerns. This feeling continued to be present when I visited as an adult with my husband and children. It started with Zadie blessing us on Friday night, then continued with Zadie leading us in heartfelt *zemirot*, and Zadie delivering an inspiring *dvar Torah*. And there was always a delicious meal that we ate in a leisurely way, as if time had stopped. I enjoyed going to the White Shul on Shabbos morning, where I was always greeted warmly by the community. It was special to be the Rabbi's granddaughter and I was proud of that role. I will forever cherish these Shabbos memories in Far Rockaway.

Lisa Gribetz Lederer & Family

## ·*Recall the Ray's* ·*Magnetic Smile*

My fondest memories of Zayde are all accompanied by an image of his broad, complete smile. It lit up his whole face, made his eyes sparkle and extended from ear to ear.

They're also accompanied by the feel of his hand holding mine: the skin cool, the grip attentive and loving. Zayde's eyes shone with a keen understanding and warmth. His head nodded in agreement, or conveyed support. Always support.

Those memories take me to childhood Pesach *seders* and listening to his many fascinating *midrashim*; Shabbat meals with happy *zemirot* and *brachos* for my cousins and me; and as an adult watching him engage with my husband and son.

Zayde, I'll cherish these memories... the memories of you, blessing us with the gift of you.

We miss you & love you.

Vicki Gribetz Witkin

## *My Last Letter to Zaidie*

To my dear, dear, loving, warm, brilliant Zaidie,

I can't believe that this moment has arrived-- that you are no longer with us.

I remember you once telling me how much you love sunshine. And I told you that I feel like sunshine is Hashem's way of smiling down at the world. Well, now I can just picture you basking in the light of the *Shechina* - reaping the tremendous reward for all of the Torah that you learned and taught in your warm and loving way; for being a true *yerei Shamayim* and *oved Elokim*; for genuinely caring for all of your congregants as though they were your own children; for serving as an example as an *ish emet* and an *ish chesed*; for being the most wonderful husband, father, Zaide, and great-Zaide.

I believe that you are being greeted by your loving ancestors, as well as the *Sforno* whose Torah commentary you so eloquently made available to so many people.

Zaidie, you so loved *Eretz Yisroel* and conveyed that love in so many of your speeches. Soon you will be hugged by your *ima adama*. And, we here in *Eretz Yisroel* will have the *zchut* of being close to you.

Zaidie, when I look back on your life I see Hashem's hand every step of the way, especially how he sent you two such special *ezers kenegdecha*; Grandma and Bubby Shirley were both there to take care

of your every need, so that you were available to do your important work and write your works of wisdom. Without them as your other half, you could not have accomplished all that you did, and for that we all thank them very, very much.

Zaidie, your *petirah* has left such a void in this world. I don't know how we are going to fill it. I believe that I'll somehow fill it by reliving my wonderful memories of precious time spent with you ever since I was a little girl: Receiving your special *berachah* on Friday nights.

Oh how I long to feel your loving hands on my head and hearing those words- *Y'semaych Elokim...*, Singing *Shalom Aleichem* and *Eishes Chayil* with you in your living room. Singing *Ka Rebbone* and *Yom zeh mechubad* at your Shabbat table. Sitting with you and hearing your brilliant *divrei Torah* – of which I drank every word with thirst.

Walking with you to shul on Shabbos and stopping every few steps in order to greet someone who wants to wish you well or ask a *Sh'eilah*.

Sitting with you on your front porch and enjoying the flowers and nature.

Our weekly calls after I made *Aliyah*. I love the way you started every conversation with "How do you feel?" You really wanted to know how I was and genuinely cared.

Getting advice from you on anything – I always loved the way you paused, took it all in and then gave me brilliant advice.

I feel blessed and lucky to have those beautiful memories which I will *b'ezrat Hashem* cherish each one of them forever, and pass them on to my children and grandchildren.

Since I said goodbye to you last night, I keep thinking of the song that says so much about you:

“And Zaidie made us laugh, And Zaidie made us sing and Zaidie made us Kiddush Friday night, And Zaidie, oh my Zaidie, how I love you so...”

# ·Remembering Our Zayde-Rabbi

It is only two months since Zayde's passing, and we continue to find ourselves reaching for the phone to speak to him and hear his hearty "Hello." This, of course, is something that we will miss. However, it's the loss of what came after the warm greeting that will forever leave a void in our and our families' hearts. It was his interest in us and our lives, his kind words, listening ear, sound advice, and witty remarks that would always put a smile on our faces. Zayde's advice – that was solicited and never given on a whim – was sage, discerning, and always right!

Zayde-Rabbi (as we affectionately called him) played a very dominant and ongoing role in our daily lives, and we miss him dearly every day! May we instill in our children and grandchildren all the Torah values that he not only taught us, but lived by as well!  
*Yi'hei zichro baruch!*

With love, admiration & respect,

*Debby (Gottlieb) & Simcha Mendlowitz & family*  
*Nechama (Gottlieb) & Danny Saks & family*

Great-granddaughter Ayala Mendlowitz-Jeger

## ·Remembers Zayde

Where does one begin when looking back and trying to recall incredible memories of a great-grandfather? To me, my great-grandfather was not just my Zayde, he was a Rabbi, a leader, a *baal middos*, a *talmid chachom*, and, most of all, a warm, loving, and incredible person.

I was *zoche* to visit my Zayde weekly during the past year, and I spent quality time with him and Bubby Shirley. When I would walk into their house, I was always greeted by their huge smiles and welcoming arms. Zayde would always say, "Oh, my Tuesday girl has arrived!" Even at age 96, he was as sharp and witty as ever. Looking back, I don't even know what we would talk about, but somehow I would spend hours at 781 Caffrey Avenue and would always leave feeling truly happy, whole, and already anticipating my next visit.

While in the presence of Zayde, you could not help but feel this magical aura that would always surround him. His smile, his warm personality, his sensitivity to others, and, most of all, that love that he had for every Jew, always shone through. Zayde was the type of person that everyone wanted to know and spend time with.

I hope that one day, I will be able to raise the type of family that Zayde did. I hope that I can teach my children how to care for and be tolerant of others, the way Zayde was. I hope I can instill in my family how to be an *eved Hashem*, the way Zayde was. And I hope

that I make my Zayde Rabbi proud of who I am and who I will become.

I love you, Zayde, and miss you so much.

Great-grandson Dovid Saks (age 10):

## ***Zaïdy · Remembered · Babe · Ruth!***

One of my favorite memories of my Zaide is when we spent a Shabbos with him in Far Rockaway. I was reading a book about Babe Ruth and I told him about it and he had a big smile on his face. He told me how he remembers when Babe Ruth played and how amazing he was. Zaide was a big NY Yankee fan and knew so much about baseball. I remember thinking that it was so special that he knew so much about baseball and went on to become a great Rabbi. He remembered so much about the old NY Yankee teams and I loved listening to it. I am a big Yankee fan now and it connects me to my Zaide. I miss him very much.

## ***Their Great- and Great-great Grandfather***

Some people are so much a part of the tapestry of your life that you take them for granted and assume that they will be around forever. I still can't believe my "Zaidy- Rabbi" is gone, it seems so strange. He was supposed to live forever!

I called him "Zaidy-Rabbi" since I was a little girl, but truth be told, I never saw him as a Rabbi. Yes, he had a big office in the White Shul and sat up on the *bimah*, but to me, he was just my Zaidy. Now, I regret that I wasn't mature enough to seize all the golden opportunities then, because there was so much I could have gained from him.

It was always a pleasure to visit my Bubby and Zaidy, indeed, it was a privilege. Zaidy and Bubby made anyone who walked through their door, feel like "a million bucks." They remembered everything about you. Whatever you spoke about last time is what they asked about first. What a wonderful *middah* that is! It indicates genuine caring and interest in the person. What's really remarkable is that they treated everyone this way! Bubby always made sure to have food on the table, ready to host at any time, and Zaidy always had a great joke, or an amazing story or quote to illustrate any point. Yet they were both so humble. The conversation never revolved around them. The focus was always on you. When you asked anything regarding them, the answer always was "*Baruch HaShem*" and the

subject was closed. It was YOU that they wanted to talk about. What amazing role models!

Zaidy taught me, and so many others, by example. The life lessons I learned from him on how to treat a spouse, a friend, and especially a child will stay with me forever. They are also something I hope to be able to emulate, implement in my daily life, and teach my children. I feel so blessed that my children, husband and I were *zocheh* to have such an incredible Zaidy-Rabbi in our lives.

*Yi'he Zichro Baruch*

With love, respect & great admiration,  
*Tamar & Ezi, Dovid, Teela & Yaakov Beinhorn*  
(great-grandchildren & great-great grandchildren)

## *Saba's Last Yom Kippur*

*Erev Yom Kippur* was always an especially busy day for Saba. From early morning, the phone calls would begin, and the *brachos* for a *Gut Yohr*, that he would so lovingly *bentch* the endless stream of callers from young to old, became the theme of the day. For his family, for each child, grandchild and great-grandchild, there was a special *Bracha* reserved, that he would bestow upon them with a full measure of love and heartfelt sincerity.

This year, to lessen the strain on Saba, all family members joined in on a conference call to receive Saba's *Bracha*. And what a *Bracha* it was! Each on the call felt as though Saba was addressing him or her personally. After the *Seudah*, we made our way to Saba's beloved shul, where he was greeted by throngs of people waiting patiently for his *Bracha*. And slowly but surely we made our way onto the *Bima*, to Saba's *Makom Kavuah*. He stood tall, clenching his *shtender*, and with a warm smile on his face, and pride and joy in his heart, he looked out upon his *Mispallelim* with whom he would journey over the next 25 hours.

I had the *Zechus* to assist Saba in donning his freshly pressed *Kittel*, fastening the buttons and tying a bow on his *gartel*. All bedecked in his white *Kippa* and *Kittel*, I felt as if our Saba was now transformed from our rabbi to our *Kohen Gadol*. Saba was not merely ready to begin the *Kol Nidrei Tefilah*, rather he was preparing to begin the *Avodas Yom Hakippurim*. As the *Kohen Gadol* of old donned his *Bigdei Lavan* to begin his *Avoda*, so too, was our Saba dressed and ready to transport all of us with him to the *Beis Hamikdash*. Beginning with *Kol Nidrei* and throughout the *Tefillos* of the day, I observed how Saba's

mood ebbed and flowed, enraptured and inspired by the melodious *niggunim* selected so carefully to bring forth the true flavor and meaning of each particular *tefilah*.

And then began the *Seder Haavodah*, reaching its climax with the *Kohen Gadol* entering the *Kodesh Kodashim*. Standing alongside my Saba, I felt as though he too was entering *Lifnai V'Lifnim*, as he poured out his heart in prayer and supplication to the *Ribono Shel Olam* for his family, his shul, his community and for the greater *Klal Yisrael*. He petitioned the *Boreh Olam* for those in need of a *Refuah Sheima*, a *Shidduch*, *Brachos* for children, *Parnasa*.

And who better than Saba knew the rest of the list?

And just as the *Kohen Gadol* would emerge from the *Kodesh Kodashim* — his face radiant and aglow, our Saba too was glowing and elated as he sang the *Tefilla* of *Mareh Kohen*.

At that moment we all felt that our *Kohen Gadol* had delivered our *Tefillos* directly to the *Kiseh Hakavod*, and were confident and assured that our *Tefillos* had been accepted.

As the sun was setting, and the Heavenly Gates were closing, we completed the final *Tefillah* of the day proclaiming the Oneness of Hashem.... And as the *Shofar* was sounded, our Saba was standing tall once again, facing his beloved congregants, as we all raised our voices and enthusiastically sang and danced *Leshana Habaah B'Yerushalayim*.

Ora Lee Kanner and Gila Schwerd:

## *Ode to Saba*

The love for a father is inborn;  
The love for a stepfather is earned.

The connection to a father is in your shared DNA,  
The connection to a stepfather is in his warm welcome and in the  
twinkle of joy in his eyes when he sees you.

Saba, you won our love, our adoration, our admiration, and our  
awe.  
You lit up our lives with your Torah, your sage wisdom, and your  
unassailable advice.

You broadened our horizons with your breadth of knowledge and  
expansive all-embracing *weltanschauung*. Your perspicacity was  
stunning in its complexity and its precision.  
You re-filled our lives with Torah, *kedushah*, song, and laughter.

You gave us a father,  
Our children, a Saba,  
And our beautiful mother, a second round of love, meaning, and  
happiness.

Though our hearts yearn for the sound of your voice and thirst for  
your wise advice and brilliant insights, we are comforted with the  
beautiful memories that are etched in our hearts and the indelible  
impact that you inspired in our lives.

## *Saba's Inner Greatness*

My first time at the White Shul was almost thirty-five years ago, when I visited for a friend's *aufruf*. Though I had heard of Rabbi Pelcovitz, I had never actually heard him.

And then the *drashah* began – I remember being overwhelmed by the sheer power of his presence – his command of the stage as he occasionally removed his glasses, waving them like a symphony conductor waves his baton as he conducted his unique symphony. He spun words mellifluously, weaving stories and profound insights – making difficult ideas both easy to digest and enjoyable to hear.

He seemed so tall, so strong, and so powerful that one couldn't help but be surprised by his actual physical stature, which belied the majesty of the man.

And thirty years later, as his legs betrayed him – when every step took so much time and effort – he fought against sitting down in a wheelchair, refusing to be condemned to the chair. The situation was frustrating but Saba would not, could not, give in. He had an indomitable spirit – the spirit of a fighter. Perhaps it was all those causes, ideals, and values that he stood up for that made it impossible for him to capitulate.

But those who saw him will always remember – when Saba reached the podium to deliver words of Torah, he was transformed. He was rejuvenated, as he miraculously cast off decades, and once again became the man I had seen some thirty years before – it was simply amazing!

Saba was a great man in a small frame. On the outside, he was warm and engaging, cheerful and soft, comforting and reassuring. But on the inside, he was indefatigable and relentless, proud and powerful, insightful and accepting. He stood steadfast in his beliefs and pleasantly ignored those with whom he disagreed.

For ninety-six years, he walked tall among us, towering over us, guiding us, and leading the way.

As we are orphaned, we cling to his memory as a guiding light.

Granddaughter Avigayil Neuberger's

## *Sbloschim · Remarks*

My family had the unbelievable *zechus* to move to Far Rockaway nearly three years ago and as such, developed an even closer relationship with Bubby and Saba.

Between Shabbos meals, walks to and from Shul, Sunday or weeknight visits, Motti, our children, and I were able to benefit from Bubby and Saba's guidance, learn from the way they conducted themselves both personally and with others, and observe the beautiful relationship they shared- one of true respect, giving, and love.

And although we all feel so fortunate- so blessed that we had you, Saba, for 96 years, the loss is so deep, so painful.

There was something about your presence that felt timeless, almost immortal that lulled us into a fall sense of security that you would always be there- for the next Bris, Bar/Bat mitzvah, wedding, *yom tov*... That you would be home waiting the next time we came to visit or call and hear your trademark "hello."

But Saba, it is a testament to you that we all feel so devastated.

You had such a remarkable way of connecting with every one of us. The youngest baby would invariably smile at you and be comforted in your arms. Toddlers and children loved to hug you and share their experiences with you. And as adults, how much we enjoyed mining your brilliant mind, sharing *Divrei Torah* with you, seeking your

counsel, marveling at your wit, or just spending time talking about our lives.

Saba, looking back I don't believe I fully understood who my grandfather really was when I was younger. Of course I knew you were a Rabbi-I can still hear you laughing when I, as young girl, trying to make adult conversation, asked that now that you had retired does that mean you are no longer a rabbi?

Yes, of course, I knew you were the Rabbi of a tremendous Shul and I felt so proud to tell people my Saba was the Rabbi of the White Shul as I ran through the lobby and snuck into your office during davening.

As I grew older, I began to appreciate the beautiful Divrei Torah you would share, at Shabbos tables and *simchas*.

But I never internalized that I was connected to, and had free access to, a bastion of Torah, to a leader of leaders, to a prince--- a prince of impeccable character, razor sharp genius, and unyielding principles and vision.

Because to me, you were just my grandfather- a grandfather who was effusive with genuine warmth, love, and interest in every detail of my life. A grandfather who had unlimited time and attention for my childish concerns.

And therein lies your true greatness, Saba. Someone of your caliber could have lived aloof, superior, simply too busy learning, teaching, or being *osek betzarchei tzibbur* to develop close relationships with each and every grandchild of *Baruch Hashem* a very large family.

But with your greatness masked behind your genuine humility, you managed to come across as so accessible and relatable. You were able to meet each person on his/her own level, sharing the appropriate *chizuk*, direction, inspiration, support, and love. This is what made you such a beloved grandfather and leader of this community and beyond.

And how that greatness was evident until the very end, Saba.

To watch you, struggling for breath, break out in smile each time a new person walked into the room, to see you trying to show interest in people's conversations when I knew you had no strength to even keep your eyes open.

To hear you express appreciation when you could barely talk, telling those around you how grateful you are for their help, what a pleasure it is to see them, how lucky you are.

Your true essence was to be a giver, Saba. How you hated to be dependent and needy. But you gave until you were unable to speak. And among the many directives you shared as you seemed to make a transition from this world to the next was to repeat the word *tov*- its good- it'll be good- it's all good over and over.

It seemed to me that you were comforting those around you- that you really were ok despite seeming so uncomfortable - and that from your vantage point at that moment you were able to see that everything Hashem does is *kulo tov*, only good.

In leaving us, you demonstrated for us, once again, the true essence of your life, as in the time of your greatest suffering your focus was solely on those around you.

In leaving us, you were giving us the eternal *nechama*. May your tremendous legacy continue to be a guiding force in our lives.

Grandson Sender Gross Recalls

## Saba's "Krias Yam Suf"

It was the summer of my tenth grade year, and I had the *z'chus* of spending an *Erev Tishah B'Av Shabbos* with Bubby and Saba. Towards the end of Shabbos, we were discussing how we were going to get to the White Shul that night for the reading of *Eicha*. As it turned out, Saba himself actually drove us to Shul. At that time in his life, Saba was having issues with his balance and walking, so he took hold of my arm as we entered the building. I'll never forget the way he always would tell me, "Cadence, we must walk with a rhythm, a flow."

As we approached the doors of the main Shul and I saw through the windows hundreds of people sitting on the floor, I got worried. Nearly every aisle was blocked, the Shul was extremely crowded. I thought to myself that there is no way that we are going to be able to make it to the front of the Shul--it was too packed to move. I honestly thought that I wouldn't even be able to open the doors! But then when I looked at Saba, I felt this wave of confidence. Without thinking twice, we headed in. Immediately, I realized that what I saw through the windows was only half the crowd! Again, I thought, no way are we making it through.

What came to mind was what happened at Yam Suf, and how the *Bnei Yisroel* wanted to turn back. "There's no way we're making it through that sea!" they cried. I felt like one of those criers. Yet, it takes a Nachshon ben Aminadav to step forward and say, "NOW is the time to go right in." Saba only had to take one step forward for

the White Shul's "sea" to split. And when I tell you the sea split, boy, did that sea split! We started to walk, and one after another, every single person on the floor, stood up and made a pathway for my Saba.

My feelings during that walk were indescribable. Nearly a hundred people stood up and waited for Saba to get to his seat and then begin the reading of *Eicha*. The silence in the room while we were walking, the looks of awe, gratitude, and admiration on the faces of the *Kehillah* was a scene I'll never forget. When we sat down, I knew I was sitting next to a king.

Over the years, I noticed how different people would stop Saba in Shul on Shabbos and say, "Rabbi Pelcovitz, thank you for helping us out all these years, you put so much into everything-- so much work-- and look around at this community, look at what you've accomplished." Saba would humbly quote to them Shlomo Ha'melech's famous words from *Mishlei*, "*Ka'mayim ha-panim la-panim*--Just as when one looks closely at a river, he is greeted with a reflection of himself, so too, a *Rav*. Although I may have given much, it was because I received so much more from this *Kehillah* and community."

Saba's ability to connect with everyone was amazing! He always knew what to say, and how to say it. When I spent Shabbos with him last September, we were discussing if we should go to the first *Elul Slichos* at the White Shul which was that *Motzaei Shabbos*. Since it was the opening *Slichos*, I knew that Bubby didn't stand a chance of convincing him that it was too late and that maybe he should go to the Sunday morning *Slichos* or that perhaps because he was 95, nobody is expecting him to go so late. Yet, Saba passionately wanted

to make it to this first *Motzaei Shabbos Slichos*. So I offered to drive and, as we got into the car, Bubby tried one convincing last shot: "Please, listen, you don't have any *averios*, why do you even need to go to *Slichos*? What did you possibly do wrong? You can't even hurt a fly! Honey, you have nothing to atone for." And Saba, holding his cane, softly replied, "Shirley, it doesn't matter how old we are, we all have our *averios*." Saba never gave up the fight. He always yearned to do what he felt was right, important.

Saba always had *vorts* up his sleeve, and a joke on the side. Every Shabbos, every visit, I looked forward to hearing one of his wonderful *Divrei Torah*. When I wasn't with them for Shabbos, then on *Erev Shabbos* when I called I would usually request a short, quick *vort* from him. I particularly liked to have one that could be shared almost anywhere you go. It's the ultimate "back-pocket *Dvar Torah*." How fortunate I was to hear so many Torah "gems" from him.

I have learned so much from my Saba, not only from what he said but by observing how he acted. I will try to live my life by emulating his incredible example. May Hashem grant me the ability to do so.  
*Yi'he Zichro Baruch*

May Rav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, z"l, be a *Meilitz Yosher* for our family and *Klal Yisrael*.

The Kanner Grandchildren Recall

## “How Our Saba Achieved *Gadlus*”

We feel as though we have won a special sort of lottery to be counted amongst the grandchildren of our Saba, Rabbi Pelcovitz. It gave us the unique privilege and opportunity to learn and observe how one achieves *gadlus*.

- He achieves *gadlus* by never veering from his scheduled time of *tefilah*, no matter how hard it may have been to get there.
- He achieves *gadlus* by spending countless hours poring over the pages and writings of *talmud*, *mefarshim* and *baalei mussar*.
- He achieves *gadlus* by having a true knowledge and awareness of the world around him.
- He achieves *gadlus* by truly loving and caring for those around him, wanting to know and understand them.

Saba, we miss opening the door to your home and hearing your reverberating hello. We miss our chats, and that feeling of being so beloved that you can recall every last detail of our lives. We miss your boundless knowledge, your poignant stories, your sharp quips, your brilliant words of Torah, and we sorely miss the sound of your *zemiros* sang in unison with our beautiful Bubby.

We will be forever grateful for the profound impact you have had on our lives. We love you.

## *Our Saba—c 1 Health of Wisdom*

While it pained me to watch our *Saba* grow physically weaker and older, it simultaneously amazed me to watch him grow more dignified, more regal, and more honorable. Wherever he went, he always inquired as to the well-being of others. How were they dealing with their challenges? How did they resolve their conflicts? How were they handling their various issues—health, family, Torah learning, *parnassah*, etc.? He always had wisdom and insight for those who sought his guidance and was always a source of encouragement to those who needed a kind word.

But where *Saba* truly excelled was in his incredible grasp and mastery of the depth and breadth of our sacred Torah. Whenever we referenced an obscure *Gemara* or *dvar Torah* that we once heard, perhaps years ago, *Saba* would pause, focus his mind, and then offer the source and explanation of the passage in its entirety. Frequently he would reinforce the theme taught by *Chazal* or the giants of *Mussar* with a quote from a famous author, playwright, politician, or even baseball player. He was familiar with all of them and would draw on secular sources to expound upon the universality of our Jewish values.

We were in his house for *Shabbos* two weeks before his *petirah*. In the late afternoon, he was visited by several young men. One was a *rebbe* in a nearby *yeshivah*, and he related that he and his *chavrusa* were learning *Maseches Sotah* and had an explanation for a difficult passage. They wanted to know “the *Rav’s*” opinion of their *chiddush*.

I watched *Saba* listen attentively, praise their insight, then gently tweak it with his own addition, so that it answered the difficulty even more appropriately. They left his home beaming, encouraged by *Saba* that their efforts were noble, their contribution valuable, but with his guidance it was even more radiant.

Saba was a living *Sefer Torah*, our family treasure.

יהי זכרו ברוך.

## *c 1 c Nephew · Reminisces*

When I was 10 years old, tragically, my mother was sick and dying. My father was going through a very difficult time and my brothers and I spent a lot of time with our Aunt Frumie and Uncle Ralph. During the last weeks of my mother's life, we stayed exclusively with them and our cousins. My uncle and aunt treated me and my brothers like we were their own children. And, I felt as if they were my parents.

Uncle Ralph, who was a very busy man with a shul to take care of and the many responsibilities of a community rabbi, somehow made time each and every day to spend with me. We even watched my favorite cartoons together!

Years later when my father was ill, we stayed with them again, and the way they loved and cared for us was the same as the last time. This time I remember watching Hank Aaron break Babe Ruth's home run record with him! I'm sure my uncle had more pressing matters to take care of, yet he saw how important it was to me. Therefore, every day he set aside time just for me, which made me feel special and loved.

As the years passed, we always could count on our uncle to guide us with any *halachic* concerns we had. He was not only our uncle but our family *Rebbi* as well.

Besides the Torah that I learned from him, he taught me by example the proper way to treat **all** people. I am forever grateful to him & will truly miss my dear uncle.

*Yi'he Zichro Baruch*

Robert Pelcovits Remembers

## ***“My Ghost Writer Uncle”***

My most cherished memory of my Uncle Ralph, z"l is of the help he gave me as my *dvar Torah* ghost writer. Both for my Bar Mitzvah and high school graduation speeches, my father encouraged me to ask Uncle Ralph for help. I can safely say that I gave memorable speeches, not because of skill on my part, but rather because of the beautiful words I read which were written by my uncle.

*Yi'he Zichro Baruch*

## His Uncle's Family Dedication

לזכר נשמת דודי האהוב והנכבד, הרב רפאל זצ"ל בן הרב אפרים זצ"ל

My Uncle Ralph had a profound influence on me and my family. As a recognized rabbinic leader, he inspired us to live as proud and serious observant Jews. As my father's brother, he demonstrated the inseparable bond between siblings. This bond could be observed in their personal interactions, their great respect for each other's professional accomplishments, and their concern for each other's families. The *chesed shel emes* that my uncle provided at the time of my father's *petirah* was of lasting meaning and importance to all of my family.

I am most grateful for the role my uncle played as the paternal figure for my family, following my Father's *petirah*. He expended great effort to attend as many of my family's *simchas* as possible, including a trip in 2010 to my youngest son's wedding on the shores of Cape Elizabeth, Maine. This was an arduous trip to Maine that he took with my Aunt Shirley and Cousin David, which included a ride down a steep hill from the parking lot in a golf cart. Yet, he stood proudly under the *chuppah* by the Cape reading the *ketubah* for Aryeh and Stephanie. This brought us such joy and inspiration.

What I cherished the most over the past twenty years was the opportunity for my children to feel and experience the warmth, penetrating intellect, and enormous personal charm that my Uncle Ralph had in common with my Father (זצ"ל). His actions perpetuated the family legacy for my children's generation and for generations to come.

יהי זכרו ברוך

Ann Pelcovits Bartel

## *Memories of Uncle Ralph*

Charlie and I have wonderful memories of Uncle Ralph; he touched our lives in many ways. He was *Mesader Kiddushin* at our wedding and attended all of our family *simchas*, providing words of Torah at the Bar and Bat Mitzvahs of our children. To this day, our friends in Teaneck still recall the speech that Uncle Ralph gave at Joseph's Bar Mitzvah in 1990 and often remind us of the impact that speech had on them.

I am indebted to Uncle Ralph for the kindness he showed my mother during my father's five-year illness and the many years my mother was alone. He (along with Aunt Frumi and then Aunt Shirley) regularly invited my mother to spend Shabbat in Far Rockaway and I remember how much joy this gave my mother.

In recent years, Charlie and I had the opportunity to see Uncle Ralph at family *simchas* or speak with him on the phone before *Yom Tov*. Our conversations with him were a delight. He wanted to know all about our children and grandchildren, the classes I was teaching or the research projects I was working on, and he and Charlie loved to discuss the latest prospects for the Yankees.

Of course, a conversation with Uncle Ralph was not complete without *Divrei Torah* and sage advice. While only a nephew and niece, Charlie and I always understood the great *yichus* we had being related to Rav Pelcovitz and we, like *Klal Yisroel*, suffered a profound loss with his passing.

Laura Levovitz Recalls

## ***Forging Family Ties***

The rabbi shared with us his beloved son, Nochi, and we in turn, shared our beautiful first born, Altchie. Together we created a wonderful and vibrant family.

Most recently, Friday nights at the Rabbi's gave us the strength we sorely needed. We laughed, we cried, and with love and sensitivity, we found our way forward.

For this and so much more, we're grateful, and will forever be your *mechutanim* and dearest friends.

Linda Schwartz Storch

## *The Pelcovitz's Became Our Mechutanim*

When you think of Far Rockaway, you automatically think of the “White Shul” and Rabbi Pelcovitz! He was my Rabbi! He embodied Far Rockaway when I was growing up there. We moved to our newly built house at 635 Oak Drive in 1954, when I was four years old. Our town at that time was a small, intimate, and beautiful place where all the streets were open and many ended in swamps. Our shul was the “White Shul” and it was really white. We *davened* there among a very cohesive group of mainly young families raising their children. Rabbi and his wonderful *Rebbetzin*, Frumie, were our leaders and mentors and guided us through thick and thin. They and the “White Shul” were our nucleus and we were so blessed to have them! Rabbi Pelcovitz was an orator *par excellence* and the world revered him for his knowledge and teachings.

When I married Steven Storch in 1972, Rabbi Pelcovitz was our *mesader kiddushim* and he became our *mechutan* in 2000. How lucky was I to have had him as my Rabbi and also wonderful friend. Thank you for all the priceless memories!

Rabbi Albert & Gloria Schwartz

## ·Remembering Our *Mechutan*

Rabbi Pelcovitz was our dear Rav and an outstanding friend. How many *Rabbanim* have we ever heard of who stayed in one position, in one shul, for over 65 years and was truly beloved and revered? Before we ever got to know Rabbi Pelcovitz, his reputation preceded him as being very wise, a great speaker, a warm and friendly person, who, aside from becoming our *mechutan*, became a dear and cherished friend. There was never a *shailah* big or small that we were uncomfortable about asking him. He always guided us and gave us a clear and satisfying answer without a moment's hesitation. It was a pleasure for us to be in his company at his *Shabbos* or *Yontif* table, and his *Divrei Torah* were outstanding and a pleasure to listen to.

We have been greatly enriched for having known him, and will always remember him for his charming manner and his beautiful and welcoming presence. May his *Neshama* have an *Aliyah*, and may he always be a *gutte beiter* for his entire *mishpacha*, and for all of us who have had the special honor of knowing him.

Jackie Friedman Goldman's  
·*Personal Letter to the Rav*·

Dearest Rabbi Pelcovitz,

Very few people call me by my Yiddish name nowadays – as you probably knew, it wasn't my favorite name. But when I hear from Ethel and David that you continue to refer to me by this name, it feels like the sweetest sound in the world.

I think of you often - with respect, love, and gratitude. I am always so proud when people talk about the White Shul – despite the memories of holy competition with Shaarei Tefila long ago. I hear the White Shul mentioned often, both in Israel and in the States, always with *shevach* and *kavod* for its original and forever *Rav*.

*Kvod HaRav*, you built a *Beit Tefilla* that stands not only in its “new” location, but high on the list in the history of *Am Yisrael*.

I think that as a child, I spent almost as much waking time in your home as in mine. I have so many memories of coming into your home (through the side door!), and seeing you deep in a *Sefer Kodesh*. Although young girls are not always so successful at being quiet, I hope that Ethel and I didn't disturb you too much.

I will always remember the WHITE White Shul social hall on *Simchat Torah* night. I knew as a child that since Shaarei and the White Shul could receive the Torah together, *Achdut HaAm* would not be far behind. The room was filled with the highest joy until the early hours of the morning. Remember the *Kiddushim* in the middle of Caffrey Avenue on Simchat Torah?

Fast forward to today – when *Baruch HaShem* I have the *zchut* to continue to have the love and friendship of Ethel and David. And to be blessed with your love and concern for a little girl and older woman named Jackie.

Thank you for always making me feel loved. I hope I've been able to do the same for you.

בכבוד רב ובגעגועים

# *Sefer Zikaron*

PART TWO:

## **Congregants' Reflections on the Rav**

Rabbi Pelcovitz not only built a large shul; he built large people. He them “as they were” and guided them in discovering their personal place in *Torah* and *mitzvos*, achieving their potential as *ovdei Hashem*. Many of the families and individuals he touched through the years became people of influence, serving the shul, shaping the community, and spreading the light of Yiddishkeit for a new generation of American Jews. The stories shared here provide a window of insight into the Rav’s gifted personal interactions, public leadership, and sensitive shepherding of a dynamic, expanding *Torah*-centric *kehilah*.

## • *Personal Encounters*

Many, no doubt, will remember Rabbi Pelcovitz's depth of Talmud, but his breadth of knowledge encompassed the secular as well.

In preparation for a White Shul dinner commemorating one of Rabbi Pelcovitz's decennials, I was assigned to write an article about him for the shul's *Bulletin*, which was published before each major holiday. I sat with the rabbi in his office and asked him, "What do you think has been your greatest accomplishment during your tenure in Far Rockaway?"

Without batting an eyelash, he answered, "Survival!"

If someone has the archives of the *Bulletin*, you will find the entire article on Page 1.

At another White Shul dinner at The Sands, Rabbi Pelcovitz already required some assistance to move around. He refused to take the elevator to the second floor, and I was elected to give him an arm to lean on. I don't know how it happened, but, as we climbed the steps, we started discussing, of all things, George Bernard Shaw.

I don't recall what the original subject was, but it must have had something to do with whatever was happening in the shul at that time. "Rebbe," I said, "you can't have an Orthodox shul without fifty-one percent nuts."

"You're *yotzeh* with forty-nine," he responded.

Richard and Beverly Berry

## ·Remember the ·Ray's Imagination

Rabbi Pelcovitz was a major influence over us and our family during the years of raising our children and afterwards, our grandchildren. He constantly asked how each member of our family was doing and always knew where they were and what was happening with them. He was present at all our life cycle events and added dignity and *kedushah* to every celebration. He was our role model of how a Torah Jew should think and live.

Encapsulating all the years of Torah and *mussar* he gave us would be impossible to do; however, here are some of his messages and memories that constantly cause us to remember him: 1) His short Friday-night *divrei Torah* in shul would turn into an entire evening of discussion at our Shabbos table. 2) His constant concern re: childrearing left us with two messages that we, and now, our children always repeat: a) "No is also an answer;" b) "There is great wisdom on a Coke bottle — 'No deposit, no return.' "

He used imagery in his *drashas* to drive home a message—for example:

Pre-*Ne'ilah*, Yom Kippur — man wants *rachamim* from the *Ribono Shel Olam*. Rabbi Pelcovitz said "*Keil malei rachamim* — G-d is full of mercy; how do we get this mercy for ourselves?" He said, "Imagine a full glass of wine — all you have to do is touch it, and it will overflow to you." (Beautiful!)

His most stirring words that we will never forget were in his last sermon as *Mara d'Asra* prior to his "retirement." He ended his sort of farewell by saying that whatever *schar* (reward) G-d will give him for leading us all these years, he will turn over to us (his congregation). This represented his

humility, his caring for us all, and how he had true love for his *kehillah*. Even when he fell ill, we felt enriched and uplifted every time we came to visit; he made us feel good — we were blessed to have had him mentor us.

He will be alive forever in our thoughts and in our hearts, and his image will be before our eyes always.

Randy and Naftali Blinder:

## *No Job Too Small for Rabbi Pelcovitz!*

Our son, Yaacov, was married over 20 years ago in Yerushalayim at the Great Synagogue. The wedding took place a few days before *Succos*, and luckily for us, the Rabbi and Rebbitzin were also there to celebrate the Yom Tov. We were thrilled that our very own *rav* would be able to be the *mesader kiddushin*. There are many *minhagim* that are different in Israel from what is done here, both in regard to the wedding itself, as well as the catering service.

The one event that stands out the most in my memory was when the caterer came into the *chasson's tish* and told me that it was time to tell the guests to go upstairs to the *chuppah* so the wedding could start. I told him to flash the lights or do what *he* generally did to get the crowd moving to its next destination. He answered that that was not his job.

The Rabbi, who was seated next to me, looked at me and said, "Well, Naftali, let's go. I'll take the left side of the room and you take the right side." So off we went, each of us telling everyone, "Please stop eating and make your way up to the main shul for the *chuppah*."

The *Rav* did not hesitate nor think that this was not his job. He was in charge there, and he took his job seriously. It was quite a sight! Randy and I never forgot that incident or the lesson it taught us. May his memory always be for a blessing.

Reuben, Deborah, and David Blumenthal:

## ***Looking Back to 1955***

Over the years, the Isidor and Chanchy Blumenthal family have enjoyed the wisdom and personal friendship of Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz, *a"h*. He was a sage who inspired us with his teachings, letters, visits, and phone calls, enhancing our connection to the Jewish community of Far Rockaway and beyond. Our parents, Isidor and Chanchy *z"l*, felt especially close to him.

As newcomers to the community in 1955, we felt his warmth and benevolence, which attracted us to the White Shul's services, lectures, and important milestones. Our own personal affection for the Rabbi only grew deeper and more profound with time.

May his memory continue to bless us and all of his family, congregants, acquaintances, and *Am Yisrael*.

Shlomo and Tzurtie Braunstein

## ·Remember Their Rav·

For the last fifty years living in Far Rockaway we have been privileged to be neighbors and friends of Rabbi and Rebbetzin Pelcovitz.

We have enjoyed watching the Rav and Rebbetzin as they walked home from shul on Shabbos mornings. Men, women, teenagers, the young and the old would cross the street for a “Good Shabbos” greeting from the Rav. He was never in a hurry, always had a warm smile and an uplifting word for all. He was a true *Ohev Habrios*. We too would always look out for him, and then rush to give him our Shabbos greeting and to have a few words with him.

We personally took advantage of his sage advice on consequential decisions we faced... and yes, he always followed up on whatever was discussed... he cared and was truly concerned... he had no agenda other than your welfare.

We continue to be blessed with a very special close relationship with Rebbetzin Shirley. Her friendship has enriched our lives in many ways and we treasure every moment we have with her. The Rebbetzin added many good years to the Rav's life ... while filling their home with love, *Chesed* and *Divrai Torah*.

Rebbetzin Shirley was the Rabbi's crown... אשת חיל עטרת בעלה.

We wish her many good healthy years with an abundance of *nachas* from all their children.

With love and admiration.

Sussie Brecher, daughter of Harold and  
Blanche Schechter, sister of Shelly Schechter,

## **·Remembers: “But that’s the halacha!”**

In reflecting on my life growing up in the White Shul, a few brief stories come to mind. When I was a very young girl, I remember my parents speaking with enormous pride about how Rabbi Pelcovitz had taken on the issue of mixed dancing at the annual dinner. He set out to eliminate it. Of course, he was not well received when he took this on, but he stood his ground and prevailed. My parents admired him for this.

My grandfather *a”h* owned the Pioneer Country Club in Mountaindale, NY. My grandparents were Hungarian. Out of 600-700 guests, there were perhaps two or three tables that sat in the sukkah on the second days of *Sukkos*. When I was about 12, we sold the hotel and we had our first ever sukkah at home and Rabbi Pelcovitz told my parent they had to eat in the sukkah on *Shemini Atzeres*. They said, “But we don’t.” To which he replied, “But that’s the *halacha*.” My parents were *mesh’ubad* themselves to the *daas* of the Rabbi, and even though my father was not a youngster he said, “The Rabbi said to do it, so we have to do it.”

My mother *a”h* was once honored in the White Shul. In her speech, she spoke so much about the shul and the Rabbi and his great influence in shaping our family.

My brother Shelly *a”h*, who would grow up to serve the White Shul as one of many fine presidents, used to accompany my father back to shul on Friday nights to hear the Rabbi’s Chumash class. A number of leaders and people of merit emerged from that class.

As a young teen, I was moving more to the right than my parents, and while at one level they didn't mind, they did also think that I was missing out on some fun in life. I would tell them certain activities weren't permissible for me. At one point, we went together to the Rabbi, my parents and myself at 13, to ask about these subjects. Can you imagine such a thing today? And in going, my parents and I agreed that whatever the Rabbi said, we would do. The details of what we discussed aren't so important, but what is noteworthy is that each of us left feeling good about what the Rabbi said to us. His natural sensitivity to each person won him great admiration near and far.

Rabbi Alan G. Ciner:

## · **Rabbos & Machshavos**

*Rabbos Machshavos*---many thoughts cross my mind regarding my relationship, both as a child and as an adult with Rabbi Pelcovitz zt"l.

For my parents, the Rabbi was a spiritual anchor, a *Moreh Derech* and a source of ongoing inspiration. The respect that my mother and father held for Rabbi Pelcovitz was transmitted to my brother and me. My relationship with my Rav spanned almost seven decades.

My Dad was president of the Shul when the Rabbi assumed the position at the White Shul and would always relate stories about that moment in time. I remember hearing that during the *probeh Shabbos*, the Rabbi, in his *D'rasha*, compared a Rabbi's talk to a *cholent*---one puts many ingredients into it and then hopes for the best in terms of the outcome. At the installation of the Rabbi, Rabbi Pelcovitz senior spoke and concluded his remarks with --*Zein Gut Tzu Mein Zun* (Be good to my son) --reminding the *K'hillah* that they must show the proper *Derech Eretz* and kindness to his son.

Rabbi Pelcovitz never hesitated to discuss contemporary issues. When the movie *The Graduate* came out, most people were taken by the word "plastic," reflecting the superficiality of our times. That Yom Kippur, before *N'eilah*, Rabbi Pelcovitz would speak, as was his custom, about different Middos. The year of *The Graduate*, the Rav spoke about the movie and emphasized not plastics, but the fact that the underlying theme of the movie undermined the moral fabric of our society with its vulgarity and inappropriateness.

Not long ago, when I visited the Rav, I asked him, as a political scientist (his major in college), about his feelings about the world situation and the challenges that seemed to be unprecedented. He answered, not as a political scientist, but as a Rav, as a theologian, as a true *Maamin*. As he did this, I recalled the Rav's ongoing emphasis on *emunah* and *yiras shamayim*. I reminded him of a story he told of the Kotzker Rebbe.

It was after *Succos* and the *talmidim* of the Kotzker came to see him, very excited, thinking their Rebbe would be most pleased with what they had to say. The *talmidim* indicated that when they welcomed the *Ushpizin*, they actually saw Avraham, Yitzchak, and the other personalities who are our guests in our succahs. Responded the Kotzker, "It's interesting, you say that you see them—I do not, but I *believe* that they are there." What a lesson in *emunah*; it has stayed with me all these years.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was always concerned about the future commitment and devotion to *Yahadus* of the young people once they left the environment of the White Shul. When I was growing up, there was an article in the OU magazine—"K'Far Rockaway—Torah Suburb by the Sea." It reflected the positive elements of our community. I remember Rabbi Pelcovitz repeating again and again (not commenting directly on this article) that although our community offered its young people an integrated Torah lifestyle, with everything neatly in place, the true test would be when the young people went off to college, where being an observant Torah Jew would not be that comfortable or easy.

A few weeks before the Rav passed away, I visited with him. As always it was a delight, with new insights emerging from the discussion. Rabbi Pelcovitz left us an extraordinary *yerushah*---that last visit and so many other moments with the Rav will continue to accompany me on my spiritual journey.

An Attorney Remembers His Rabbi:

## •*Baruch Cohen, Esq.*



I grew up in Bayswater in the 60's and 70's. When my parents, Rabbi Dr. Samuel and Mira Cohen, moved to Lawrence, the biggest benefit, by far, was my parents' connection to Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz. (Rabbi Eytan Feiner sat behind us in shul growing up.)

At that time, I was learning in the Chofetz Chaim Bais Medrash in Forest Hills. When I came home for Shabbos, I was able to see firsthand, how close my father was to Rabbi Pelcovitz and how he marveled at his masterful Shabbos *drashas*. At the Shabbos table, my father would dissect each speech, pointing out to me the nuances of the Rabbi's substance and delivery, literally word-for-word.

Since Rabbi Pelcovitz learned in Torah Vodaas, he always told my father that my Torah learning at Chofetz Chaim followed the *mesorah* of Reb Dovid Leibowitz (the Rosh Yeshivah of Torah Vodaas), and he always took a keen interest in what I was learning.

As a *bochur* I liked to try to be *mechadesh* Torah, and I called my ideas the "Chiddushei Baruch." After Shabbos davening as the crowd assembled to socialize and mingle, my father would always wend his way through the crowd to thank Rabbi Pelcovitz for his *drasha* and point out a *vort* he particularly loved. Without missing a beat, Rabbi Pelcovitz would break out into the warmest smile, draw his attention to me, give me a wink and ask: "*Nu, vos zagt der Chiddushei Baruch?*" His constant interest in what a 20-year-old had to say was incredibly validating, and he always encouraged me to be *mechadesh* Torah on my own.

Sometimes, my “*Chiddushim*” were insights into the *parashah*, sometimes they were observations in general, and sometimes they were corny puns and plays on words that I came up with. It didn’t matter; Rabbi Pelcovitz encouraged it. I vividly remember him telling my father that everyone has to chart his own course and find that area of Torah learning that appeals to him, be it *lomdos* or halachah, or *mussar*, or history, or *hashkafah*. If I liked to create, it should be encouraged. Rabbi Pelcovitz recognized my hunger for Torah, and the pride I felt in being innovative.

In one of our last conversations before I went to law school, Rabbi Pelcovitz told me, in front of my father, that he looked forward to reading my *sefer* one day. At that time, there was no *sefer*, only weekly ideas, most of which I had forgotten.

After marrying, I moved to Los Angeles and became an attorney. Rabbi Pelcovitz’s stepson, Rabbi Carmi Gross, called me to tell me that he was having dinner with Rabbi and Mrs. Pelcovitz in Beverly Hills and that I should come over to say hello, which I did. I handed Rabbi Pelcovitz my law school paper entitled, “The Ethics of Using Medical Data from Nazi Experiments,” and his eyes lit up in approval. He promised to read it. Weeks later, he called me to tell me it was “masterful.” My head was swimming from the compliment.

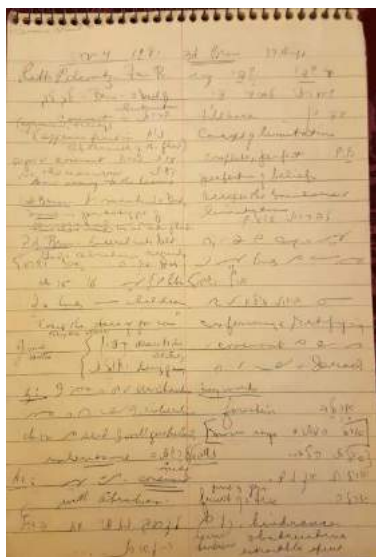
When Rabbi Pelcovitz published his *sefer* on the *Sforno*, he sent me an autographed copy, and he reminded my father that in time, the *Chiddushei Baruch* would see the light of day.

Many years later, I had the occasion to return to New York for a family *chasanah* and saw Rabbi Pelcovitz. I ran up to him to give him *Shalom*. Without missing a beat, he winked at me and asked: “How’s everything in California? *Nu, vos zogt der Chiddushei Baruch?*” It was heartwarming to see that he remembered our weekly ritual, and his weekly jingle urging me to be true to my unique approach to Torah learning.

Rabbi Pelcovitz eulogized my father at the funeral and spoke magnificently about their warm friendship. He will be sorely missed.

Faya Cohen:

## *Steno & Notes Capture the Pelcovitz Flame*



Many decades ago, my mother a"h went religiously every Wednesday morning to the Torah U'Mesorah classes for women in Manhattan. She took copious notes and happily reviewed them with us at the Shabbos table a few days later. Rabbi Pelcovitz z"l was, of course, one of their most popular speakers (as he was at the long-gone Pine View Hotel in the Catskills). I'm sending in a page from her steno pad, penned in 1981, which brings back happy memories to me, and perhaps to others as well.

*Yihei zichro baruch.*

## · *Recalls the Rav and the Eruv* ·

My appreciation for Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz *a"h* began when we moved into this neighborhood 51 years ago. I attended the White Shul and was impressed by the Shabbos *drasha* and the rabbi's Shabbos afternoon *Gemara shiur*. His explanations of the *sugya* were always clear and relevant.

I soon approached the rabbi with my request to organize and build a community *eruv*. His advice to me was positive, but he asked that we wait until the Bayswater *eruv* was completed. The work on the *eruv* was done by volunteers, and the rabbi was consulted on details. He went out with us to meet the mayor of Lawrence and to explain to him that we needed wires above ground in certain locations. The Rav even called in outside *eruv* experts to check on the work we were doing.

In September 1976, Rabbi Pelcovitz and other community rabbis met with then-Borough President Donald Manes to obtain the halachic right to the streets and the *eruv* was born.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was always invited to the *siyumim* of *masechtos* as completed by the learners of the *Daf HaYomi*. His words of encouragement spurred us on.

When it came to support for Israel, Rabbi Pelcovitz inspired the entire congregation — and me in particular — to appreciate the need for financial support for our land. His influence on me especially was overwhelming.

Our rabbi will be sorely missed. I reread his book *Table Talk* almost every *Shabbos*.



### *Special decree*

Queens Borough President Donald H. Manes (seated right) presents his official document establishing the Far Rockaway "eruv", a common community area within which Orthodox Jews are permitted by religious law to carry certain items on Saturdays and other Jewish holy days. Taking part in the Queens Borough Hall ceremony are Rabbi Ralph Polkovitz (seated) of Congregation Knesseth Israel and

chairman of the Rabbinic Board of Far Rockaway; and (left) Rabbi Abraham Blumenkranz of Bais Medrash Ateres Yisroel; Rabbi Walter Wurtzberger of Congregation Shearay Tefila; Simon Helligod of the "ERUV" Committee; Rabbi Mordecai Berkowitz of the Hebrew Institute Jewish Center; and Melvin Cohen, a committee member.

*Rockaway Journal 2/2/66*

Mr. & Mrs. Aaron Feder

# *·Reflect with Five·Decades of Gratitude*

It has been an honor and a pleasure to have Rabbi Pelcovitz as our Mara d'Asra for almost 50 years. In more recent times, assisting the Rav to his seat every morning at the minyan, as well as attending the Monday night shiur in his home, has been an especially gratifying duty and privilege.

Dr. & Mrs. Lenny Feiner

## •Beautiful Memories

Our family had a close and beautiful relationship with Rabbi Pelcovitz from the time we moved to Lawrence in June 1976.

We knew that we could rely on him for all of our halachic questions. Before the community *eruv* was established, he made a special trip to our home to inspect the *eruv* that Lenny had put up before Succos. He helped Bobbee with all the questions about *kashering* when she made her first Pesach in her home.

We remember all the Youth Shabbatonim when our son, Eytan, was chosen to speak from the pulpit as the "*Rav*," and he would sit next to Rabbi Pelcovitz. Little did we ever dream that someday Eytan would sit up there near his beloved *Rav* every Shabbos!

Rabbi Pelcovitz was the *sandek* at Dani's and Yoni's *brissim*; he spoke at each of our five sons' bar mitzvahs; he was present at so many of our *simchas*, including the out-of-town weddings.

When Altchie and Nochi moved across the street from us, we were able to see the Rabbi more informally. He would always greet our children and us so warmly, and we truly felt that he was part of our family.

Our memories are beautiful and many; we will always cherish the wonderful times that we shared with our beloved *Rav*, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz *z"l*.

Nesanel Feller:

## *c 1·Ray for Generations in Our Family*

Six generations. Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zt"l* knew, and impacted upon, six generations of my family. I am certain that there are many others in our shul who can state that our legendary *rav*, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, *zt"l*, in his sixty-seven years of rabbinic relationships, likewise knew and impacted multigenerational lives in their respective families. Rabbi Pelcovitz knew my great-grandmother.

He was very close with my grandparents, Chaim and Esther Davis. My grandparents moved to Sage Street directly across from the newly built (not) White Shul in the early 1960s. My grandfather wished to be physically close to our shul and have a relationship with a *rav* of the caliber of Rabbi Pelcovitz. Our extended family proudly displays a 1975 letter, signed by Rabbi Pelcovitz and my grandfather, introducing our shul's highly regarded *Daf Yomi* shiur. My uncle, Rabbi Ruby Davis, has celebrated five *siyumin* on *Shas*, and my cousin, Mark Gross, has likewise made multiple *siyumin* on *Shas* as part of our shul's *Daf*. This learning is a result of Rabbi Pelcovitz's continuing impact on our family's *limud HaTorah* and *avodas Hashem*.

Rabbi Pelcovitz read the *kesubah* at our wedding and officiated at the weddings of many of my cousins. His presence and messages delivered at our lifecycle events always made a lasting impression. My aunts and uncles, my cousins, my daughter and son-in-law, Yoni (who is also a member of the "six generation club"), my children and grandchildren have all benefited from Rabbi Pelcovitz's leadership, Torah knowledge, and learned from the manner in which he conducted himself.

In 2008, when Tuvia Silverstein and I undertook the revitalization of our shul, we had multiple meetings with Rabbi Pelcovitz that were invaluable. We had the *zchus* and privilege to benefit from his wisdom, insight, experience, and wit. He taught us how to listen. He pithily summarized complex issues, very often with a sharp, humorous observation. When he slowly and deliberately took off his glasses to accentuate a point, it was a hold-onto-your-seat moment! We could see the twinkle in his brilliant eyes getting brighter as he began to see his lifelong mission, his beloved shul, coming back to life under the energetic and inspiring leadership of Rabbi Feiner who grew up in our shul under the *rav's* leadership.

Rabbi Pelcovitz's unparalleled oratory and teaching skills enabled him to transmit Torah lessons as no other. Many *mispaleilim* relate *divrei Torah* and life messages they heard from Rabbi Pelcovitz decades ago. Every word was measured. Every sentence was artfully crafted. His *drashas* were masterpieces of creative thought, weaving timeless Torah messages into contemporary terms in a manner that was easily understood and unforgettable. Who can forget the pre-Yom Tov *shiurim* given by Rabbi Pelcovitz, Rabbi Feiner, and Rabbi Neuburger? Is there any shul that can boast such rabbinic leadership and Torah knowledge? All these stem directly from Rabbi Pelcovitz on so many levels and are a testament and an everlasting legacy of his sixty-seven years of stewardship and guidance.

Having had the *zchus* to *daven* next to him for many years, I observed and learned the power and majesty of his *tefillah* experience. He immersed himself in his *Siddur*, concentrating on every word. No wild movements. Ever so gentle and slight movements, always measured and controlled, as this diminutive *Gadol davened* to *Hashem*, humbly pleading on behalf of himself, his family, members of his extended shul family, and *Klal Yisroel*.

A memory that left an indelible impression upon me was this past *Simchas Torah*, when a large contingent from the *shul* sang and danced a *Sefer Torah* down Reads Lane towards the home of Rabbi Pelcovitz. People came out of their houses to join the growing procession. We crammed into the Rabbi's house and fondly danced around Rabbi Pelcovitz as he lovingly

embraced the *Sefer Torah*. Words cannot describe the vision of *kedushah*, *taharah*, and pure *simchah* radiating from Rabbi Pelcovitz at that memorable and emotional moment as he was surrounded by his family, his congregants, and his neighbors. In my mind, it reflected the recognition by all who had the *zchus* to witness this vision that Rabbi Pelcovitz and the *Sefer Torah* were one, inextricably linked.

While Rabbi Pelcovitz is no longer physically present at the shul, his presence and impact are forever embedded in the shul and the community that he developed and nurtured and to which he devoted his life. The Rebbetzin and entire Pelcovitz family should take comfort in knowing that the holy *neshamah* of Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, *zt"l* will have a perpetual and eternal *Aliyah*. His legacy of *limud Torah*, *tefillah*, *chesed*, and *avodas hakodesh* continues as his cherished shul thrives and perpetuates his mission of bringing his *tzibbur* closer to Hashem as we all learn, daven, and grow together.

# ***Memories from Krunchy and Dovid Friedman and families and Shimmy Newman***

Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zt"l* & Louis Newman, *a"h* — A very rare, special and productive friendship.

Louis arrived in the USA in 1929. He was 12 years old, and he was also adjusting to a new stepmother. He entered an entirely new world and a new yeshivah, and he was confronted with "The Great Depression."

Learning Torah was of minimal interest to him.

As soon as he came of age, he joined the Army.

After five long years, Sergeant Newman came home.

The military was an environment, he often recalled, that didn't enhance one's *Yiddishkeit*.

Nevertheless, Louis Newman turned out to be a *Yid* whose life became immersed in studying and growing in Torah.

He ALWAYS had a *dvar Torah* on his lips.

He became deeply involved in *chessed* and *askanus*.

He was *zoche* to raise generations who have, *bli ayin hara*, followed in his illustrious path.

What turned this aimless young man into everyone's amazing Uncle Louis?!

The answer is ONE simple fact: With *Siyata d'Shmaya*, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, *zt"l* entered his life!

*Nafsho keshura b'nafsho!*

One served as *Rav* of the White Shul, the other as “MR.” White Shul!

Our family will remain eternally grateful for the Rabbi's extraordinary daily spiritual and intellectual influence on our Patriarch and his *mishpachah*.

The Rabbi was Louis' GPS for life.

In addition: Our community has limitless *hakoras hatov* for the joint legacy that these two gentlemen have, *ברוך ה'* left behind.

May the *zechus* of all that Rav Raphael did for Louis, as well as what he did for so many other individuals and his entire *kehillah*, serve as an *aliyah* for his *neshamah* and a *berachah* for his *mishpachah*.

We miss them both so very much.

Sholem Golembeck:

## *c lishes Chayil / c lishes Style!*

Rabbi Pelcovitz *a"h* was uniquely gifted in making people feel special, a quality that was liberally present in both his public and private life. One Shabbos, perhaps some six months prior to the *Rav's petirah*, I had the honor of wheeling him home from shul. I assisted him into the house, and he busied himself with preparing to make *Kiddush* for the day meal. Just before taking up the *kos*, the *Rav* turned to his Rebbetzin, Shirley, and warmly said, "You look particularly nice today." She replied, "Oh, you've seen this outfit a dozen times at least." The twinkle in his 96-year-old eyes and the unfeigned smile on his face gave the impression that he was seeing his wife in this outfit for the first time.

# ·Beyond·Physical Therapy:

The Rabbi's PT, Louis Greenspan, Reflects

In March, 2006 I began to treat Rabbi Pelcovitz. He was referred to me by his neurologist after being diagnosed with a condition that caused a major gait and balance disorder. The Rabbi realized that he'd have to spend a great deal of time over the next few months retraining himself to walk safely. I could see he was very uncomfortable spending time on physical needs. So we came up with a plan: Before starting each session, we would have to speak for at least ten minutes in learning; afterwards, he'd allow himself to be subjected to the rigorous treatments that were part of the therapeutic process.

This began the most wonderful period of my life. Over the next 12 years, I had the *zechus* of over 400 one-on-one PT/Torah sessions with the greatest pulpit rabbi of our times. My children, grandchildren and friends also benefitted greatly when I shared with them not only Rabbi Pelcovitz's *Torah*, but also his incredible understanding of life.

After a few sessions, I realized I was dealing with a person who had a powerful *ratzon*. It was rather frightening for someone with balance issues to go through the kind of training to return to health. But Rabbi Pelcovitz would not be deterred. He had to get back to his flock at the White Shul. There were many who required his help and guidance. He broke through barrier after barrier quickly. Nothing would stop him.

After a while, he was able to walk safely in the house with a cane. Now it was time to venture out of the house and out on to the sidewalk. This would be another demanding step forward. We walked down the sidewalk, cane in one hand and therapist holding tight on the other arm. I was praying to Hashem that we'd both make it safely down the block.

At one point in our little expedition, the Rabbi asked me to stop for what I thought would be a well-deserved rest. But I was wrong. Rabbi Pelcovitz asked me to call over a gentleman to speak with him. Why? That week, the entire street was literally wide open to accommodate workers replacing the giant water lines under Caffrey Avenue. The gentleman the Rabbi wished to speak with was actually the foreman of the project. He was happy to come over to this elderly gentleman.

Rabbi Pelcovitz began asking him technical questions about the slope and angle of the pipes and the flow of the water and how the street was being put back in place. I could see that the foreman was stunned. He couldn't believe that this man knew so much about such a mundane matter. I told Rabbi Pelcovitz that perhaps we were standing in one place too long. He replied, "This is an opportunity to learn. I won't give that up."

After ten minutes, they parted ways and we continued walking. I asked the Rabbi, "Why do you care so much about the street and pipes?" He answered, "Of course I care about it. Hashem gave us this *chochmah* and we have to learn everything we can about this and every aspect of life. All of it is Torah; all of it is *Hashem's* ways."

On October 1, 2017, Rabbi Pelcovitz suffered a severe stroke. The doctors and the family informed me that Rabbi Pelcovitz was nearing the end; he had perhaps a few days to live. But once again, this great man rallied himself to this new test with that incomparable *ratzon*. Not only did he survive those days, but his mental capacities, which were other worldly, returned almost 100%. Again, he worked so hard during his PT sessions that he willed himself to walk with a walker in his house and even out in the street. I believe that Rabbi Pelcovitz wanted more time to attend a few more simchas and to properly say goodbye and give more *brachas* to his beloved family and friends. Rebbetzin Pelcovitz had an enormous part in the Rabbi living such a vibrant life and with his remarkable recovery. She cared for everything. She'd frequently call me saying, "Please come over and work with the Rabbi." She deserves a great debt of gratitude from all

of us for keeping him in such great shape throughout all the years. My wife and I continue to gain enormously from her advice and wisdom.

We have lost a giant. Few have attained the heights and plumbed the depths as he did. We were privileged to live with a true *gadol*; only now are so many realizing what a priceless gem we had. I, for one, will treasure every one of those over 400 encounters with Rabbi Pelcovitz. May his memory be for a blessing, and may we all merit to preserve his vision, his values, and his Torah for generations to come.

Naomi Davis Gross:

## ***He gave us wisdom for good times & challenging times***

It was Shabbos Nachamu 1979 and my boyfriend (now husband) came for Shabbos. Rabbi Pelcovitz's speech was, "We all need a little *nechamah*." Throughout the speech, he would repeat, "We need a little *nechamah*." My name is Nechamah, and I was hoping my boyfriend wanted "a little Nechamah," too!

Last week was Yom HaAtzmaut, Israel's 70th birthday. Reflecting brings me back to a not-so-euphoric time, Yom Kippur, 1973. By midday, we already knew of the surprise attack on *Eretz Yisrael* and it was real fear we were feeling. There was much anticipation by the *mispallelim* that day, waiting to hear from our *Mara d'Asra* how such a thing could happen on the holiest day of the year and what our response and our thoughts should be at this crucial time.

I was pretty young at the time, and I don't remember much of what Rabbi Pelcovitz said, but clearly my takeaway was – and would continue to be for the rest of my life – when something important happens in the world, particularly if it affects Jews and *Eretz Yisrael*, we have a gem, a brilliant, magnificent *Rav* who will guide us and shape our thoughts to be Jewish thoughts and Torah thoughts, and who will lead us and teach us the proper way to behave and think like Torah Jews.

I am grateful to my *Zaide* Chaim, who moved our family from Williamsburg to Far Rockaway, so we would have the *zechus* of having Rabbi Pelcovitz as our *Rav* for over five decades. I miss him so much. *Yehi zichro baruch*.

Sandy Herskowitz

## · *Reminisces*

Having grown up in the White Shul, both the original “White” one and the current one, my memories of Rabbi Pelcovitz go back for as long as I can remember. My parents had moved to Far Rockaway in 1953, with the main attraction to them being a young dynamic rabbi who had recently taken over the leadership of the shul. During the next fifty years, my parents would establish and maintain a very close and warm relationship with Rabbi Pelcovitz, both as congregants and as friends. This relationship included not only sought-after advice for many life decisions, but it also included a closeness that allowed them to attend concerts of the New York Philharmonic together over the decades.

It is interesting to note that my father *a”h*, changed his *minhag* regarding standing for Friday-night *Kiddush* when he was close to 80 years old. I noticed this and asked him why he was now sitting during the second half of *Kiddush* and not standing till the end, as he had done for the previous 50+ years. He mentioned that he recently had been invited for a Friday-night meal at the Pelcovitz home and saw that this was the way that Rabbi Pelcovitz sat during *Kiddush*. My father explained that if this was the way that his Rabbi did it, then this was the way that he was going to do it.

I have many recollections of Rabbi Pelcovitz over the years: Working together with him on my bar-mitzvah speech in the living room of his home on Caffrey Avenue. My wedding day on August 17, 1976, the morning on which Rabbi Pelcovitz suffered a severe heart attack. *Baruch Hashem*, he recovered completely and was *zoche* to lead the shul and the community for another 42 years. Every year, on my and Boondi’s anniversary, I would look for him in shul to personally wish him another year of good health.

One insight that revealed to me (again), the wisdom of Rabbi Pelcovitz and the intuitive sense that he had in responding to a congregant: My father *a"h* passed away shortly before Rosh Hashanah. On Yom Kippur morning, I went over to Rabbi Pelcovitz and told him that I was torn as to whether or not I should say *Yizkor*. On the one hand, I had recently suffered the loss of my father and could not feel comfortable leaving the shul for *Yizkor* along with all the others who thankfully had both of their parents. On the other hand, the loss was so fresh that I felt that I could not properly say the *Yizkor* prayer along with the others. Rabbi Pelcovitz, without hesitation, simply said "What you should do is stay in shul for the *Yizkor* prayer but do not recite it along with everyone else. This way you will feel the mourning but still allow yourself to personally come to terms with your loss." It was a brilliant and sensitive solution (which did bring me *nechamah*), based on the wisdom and intuition culled from decades of Rabbinic leadership.

In December 2016, it was my honor and pleasure to work together with Rabbi Pelcovitz on the details and commemorative journal for his 65th Anniversary Shabbos that was celebrated in the shul. We reviewed his writings, old photographs, and memories in the same living room where we had worked together on my bar-mitzvah speech 50 years earlier. Indeed, the presence of Rabbi Pelcovitz has spanned and inspired the years of my life.

As has been mentioned, Rabbi Pelcovitz was insistent that there be no clock in the main shul. Perhaps this was done so that he would feel no time pressure in his eloquent and insightful weekly *drashas*. Looking back, I feel that it was much more than that.

It symbolized that the life lessons given and delivered by Rabbi Pelcovitz over the years were themselves *timeless*. Whether the topic was Jewish education, family and community, the Land of Israel, or all aspects of Talmud Torah, his messages continue and will continue to resonate with his congregants.

We are all fortunate to have had such a leader and personality as Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz in our community for so many years.

*Yehe zichro baruch.*

Debby Horowitz:

## *How He Chose Our Rabbi*

Not long after our former revered rabbi passed on, the Shul board decided to invite a number of young rabbis for *proba* so that they could choose a successor. Rabbi Selig Fortman, *a"h*, was very European. He came to us before the Shoah, and he gave his *drashas* in Yiddish. Now the board was looking for an American-trained Rabbi who would speak to us in English and have an outlook on life similar to that of the members of the congregation.

All the rabbis were very much alike, except for one who stood out. When it was his turn to give a sermon, he started by saying, "A sermon is very much like making a cholent. You prepare the ingredients carefully, put them in the pot, mix them, and put the cholent in the oven. And then you pray that the next day it will taste great."

After all the *probas*, everyone remembered Rabbi Pelcovitz's cholent sermon and nothing much else. So he was our 1st-prize winner and invited to become our rabbi.

After all these years, nothing much has changed in our shul. Whenever we have a hot Kiddush, everyone runs for the cholent.

On a more serious note, Eli and I became very close personal friends with Rabbi and Mrs. Pelcovitz over the years. We spent many wonderful evenings together traveling to and from the Philharmonic Symphony in New York. As much as we enjoyed the concerts, the *divrei Torah* discussed in the car were the highlight of the evening. Rabbi Pelcovitz admitted that he enjoyed these discussions even more than the music.

After we were too old to drive to New York, Eli visited the Rabbi at home and they continued their Talmudic debates. One would throw

out a proposition and the other would build on it or destroy it. Eli really treasured their time together and enjoyed the fact that our Rabbi was a brilliant Talmid Chochom whose mind stayed alert all his life.

David Kaszovitz

## *My Neighbor and Friend*

We grew up across the street from Rabbi Pelcovitz *zt"l* from 1963 until my father, Gabe Kaszovitz, *a"h*, passed away in February 2017.

Fifty-three years as a *Rav* — and also a friend. We grew up listening to amazing sermons and brilliant words of Torah. My father was always very involved with working tirelessly for the shul in many aspects, so he would get to interact and hear the Rabbi for many more years than I.

But once I was married and moved from the White Shul, I very much looked forward to coming back and hearing Rabbi Pelcovitz's words of Torah — sprinkled with very poignant words of the world around us — and always with a message.

It always amazed me that even in his advanced years, if I hadn't seen him in several months, he would always greet me by name — "How have you been, David?" and we would always chat for a bit.

His ability to personalize everything for each individual was quite amazing.

He was a pulpit *Rav*, so dedicated to the shul — an art that just doesn't exist the same way anymore.

He will be missed terribly.

Eli Katz

## •*Powerful Messages*

I remember that even as a young boy, although we davened in other shuls, I would go to hear the *Rav's* Shabbos HaGadol and Shabbos Shuvah *drashas*. I loved the way he would weave so many different ideas into a beautiful and powerful message. His beautiful smile and the warmth of his eyes will stay with me forever.

Jay Kimmel Remembers

## *"The Last Link"*

Our family moved to Far Rockaway in 1952. Rabbi Pelcovitz had been the rabbi of the White Shul then for only a short time. My father, *z"l*, had been a rabbi in a nearby town and had recently left the rabbinate to practice law full time. Rabbi Pelcovitz welcomed him into the community with great warmth and respect. Before long, Rabbi Pelcovitz enlisted some of his talents in teaching a women's *Perek* class and a Talmud class in English (At that time, Rabbi Pelcovitz's Gemara *shiur* was given in Yiddish). I remember a couple of occasions when, at the Rabbi's request, my father delivered the sermon when the Rabbi was away for Shabbos.

About two years later, both we and the Pelcovitz family moved to new homes on Caffrey Avenue, and we became friends as well as congregants. As I grew up, Rabbi Pelcovitz was there for us both at *s'machot* and at more difficult times. He "officiated" at my bar mitzvah, my *aufruf*, and my wedding. I still remember his inspiring message to my wife and me under the *chuppah*.

He was my last link to the adult generation from when I was growing up, and he will be sorely missed.

*Yi'he zichro baruch.*

Chaya (Corrine Bluth) Lang

## *Shares a Timeless Memory*

I grew up in Far Rockaway over 50 years ago. My father, *a"l*, was very involved in the White Shul and even served as the president. He also was very close to Rabbi Pelcovitz, *z"l*. The Rabbi was a gifted and renowned speaker and teacher. My sisters and I increasingly appreciated his *Drashos* as we matured.

One particular speech truly impacted me and 50 years later I still "quote" from it. Rabbi Pelcovitz was talking about commitment to others. He mentioned how the young will participate in marches for the unfortunate people of Biafra, yet they never even call their parents! This behavior indicates that they care more about strangers, and it's because there is **no** commitment involved, and it makes them feel noble. However, they fail to be there for their parents because that actually requires commitment and selflessness!

This was just one timeless lesson that I learned from Rabbi Pelcovitz. He was a wonderful rabbi, teacher and role model. We will truly miss him.  
*Yi'he zichro Baruch*

## ·Remembers

As a young man, I had the opportunity to spend a Shabbat in Far Rockaway. I grew up in Akron, Ohio, where the Orthodox population was 14 (7 in our family, 7 in the other). Walking down Reads Lane, everyone who I passed on the street said, *Good Shabbos*. I never experienced that before and decided then and there, if I was to ever live anywhere other than Israel, Far Rockaway would be the place.

**I later found out that the "Good Shabbos" was an initiative of Rabbi Pelcovitz.**

One of the first things I volunteered for in the shul after becoming a member was to be the chairman of the Youth Department. I asked the Rabbi to speak to the youth leaders about the Torah perspective on working with youth. He proceeded to tell a story and ended with the following parable and directive. "Imagine you are an archer and remember that the closer you bring the arrow to your heart, the farther it will go."

**That directive has guided me for the last 40-plus years.**

The Rabbi began a young-couples group soon after Sheila and I joined the shul in the early 80's. We met once a month on a Friday night throughout the winter. One of us would host, and the Rabbi would speak to us, and then we would socialize. The friends we made from those Friday night get-togethers have remained all these years.

In the late 80's, when the Iron Curtain fell and Far Rockaway became home to Russian immigrants, Rabbi Hillel Weiner approached the Rabbi about starting a "Russian *Minyan*." He was overjoyed and gave his *brachah* and encouragement. The success of that *minyan* is because of the Rabbi's leadership and is the reason that this *minyan* has continued for more than thirty years.

Before I took on the responsibility of becoming shul president, I went to speak to the Rabbi asking for a *brachah*. I was expecting a short meeting, but he spoke with me for more than an hour, explaining the intricacies of a shul. He was so on target!

I had the great opportunity to drive the Rabbi to shul for Shacharit and Minchah over the last few years. Always greeted with a gigantic smile and even a larger thank-you, every step down the stairs from his home to sitting down in his seat in the *beis midrash* was accompanied by another *dvar Torah*, clear, concise, and right on the mark. ***Rather than me helping him, he helped me learn to take advantage of every second for Torah.***

Blanche Lerer

## ***Looks Back Over Fifty-Three Years***

I feel at a loss for words to describe a lifetime relationship with our beloved Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz *a"h*.

My husband Murry *z"l* and I moved to Lawrence in 1965 — fifty-three years ago. Our rabbi, Rabbi Joseph M. Baumol *z"l* from Crown Heights Yeshivah, told us that we would be moving to *galus*!

But such a surprise awaited us with Rabbi Pelcovitz. He attended all of our *simchahs*, the bar mitzvahs of Paul and David, and the marriages of all our children. Rabbi and Frumi *z"l* even came to Los Angeles to be at Paul and Esther's wedding. He shared in our *simchahs* and we, in turn, shared in many of his, as well.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was there for us in the most difficult times, too. I often joked, "Rabbi, you spoke so well. I want you to speak at my *levayah*."

Of course, he will be sorely missed. May he be a *gutta beitar* for our community and Klal Yisrael.

Dr. Hylton and Leah Lightman

## *c 1 Life Changing Effect*

They never had a conversation. Nor was there ever a face-to-face encounter. Yet Rabbi Pelcovitz *zt"l* changed the life of one of our daughters. Immeasurably so, and in the most profound way.

Our daughter was growing in *davening*. Struggling comes with *davening* and growth. And she struggled. She tried standing for *Neilah* on Yom Kippur and would then sit. Then she'd stand again and then sit and would remain sitting.

Yom Kippur 2016 was different. *Neilah* came, and she stood throughout the entire *davening*, investing herself in the *tefillos*.

At our dinner table that evening, she asked whether we had noticed that she stood for all of *Neilah*. We nodded affirmatively. Then she asked if we wanted to know why she stood for and *davened Neilah* in its entirety. Again, we nodded affirmatively.

She explained: It was hard. I only wanted to sit. But I looked down and saw that Rabbi Pelcovitz was standing, and I said to myself, "If Rabbi Pelcovitz is standing, then so should I."

Thank you, Rabbi Pelcovitz. You role-modelled for our daughter and all our children how a Torah Jew should conduct oneself.

May his memory be for a blessing.

Frieda Lowenthal

## ***Working at his Side***

I'm not a writer *per se*, but this much I can share. I worked with Rabbi Pelcovitz during his last years of service in the Shul office. Afterwards, I assisted him with some of his books and publications. He was a perfect gentleman always and a genuine pleasure to work with. His brilliance was only exceeded by his sterling character, which was consistently displayed, whether addressing a large group or while engaged in a two-party conversation. His knowledge was broad, and his *middos* were correspondingly deep. His word was always true, and his smile was always genuine.

Sandra Engelstein Maron:

## ***Growing Up & Around the Rav***

My earliest recollection of Rabbi Pelcovitz was when he and his family moved into their first house, across the street from my parents at 744 Caffrey Avenue. Even though he was the new Rabbi, to me, he was my new friends' father. Together, he and Mrs. Pelcovitz welcomed me into their home for Shabbos lunch, or simply to play with Ethel and Judy. Their house became a second home for me (as did their second house at 781 Caffrey). Ethel and I remain friends to this very day.

As time passed, I came to respect and observe the Rabbi's capacity to accept everyone, regardless of their *hashkafah*. He instinctively knew how to treat everyone with respect and had the ability to adapt to the growing and changing community while keeping his own identity. This is an important skill, worthy of a great *Rav*. Over the years, whenever I met him, be it at a *simchah*, restaurant, etc., he graciously asked me about my husband, children, and extended family with genuine interest and concern.

My family's association with the shul goes back over ninety years. My father's *aufruf* was in the original White Shul on Nameoke Street. The Rabbi knew that my father had a strong attachment to the shul. And, indeed, when the new shul was being built, my parents, Harold, *a"h* and Dora, *a"h*, Engelstein were committed and involved. They didn't think twice about working with the Rabbi on the project. They donated the stained-glass windows (which my mother designed) and the new *Aron Kodesh* that was installed later. Neither of them wanted an acknowledgment. This troubled Rabbi Pelcovitz, who felt that this significant contribution should be known. He was so sensitive and wanted to right what he considered a wrong. So, nearly twenty years later, Rabbi insisted that a plaque that acknowledged my parents' contribution be hung in the shul lobby.

My father and the Rabbi shared a long friendship (and enjoyed playing golf together). After my father's passing, about twelve years ago, I discovered some tape recordings my father had made of the Rabbi's classes, so I decided to visit him to see if he would like to have them. He was moved and very gracious, and we spent quite a while reminiscing about my family, the community, and old memories of Far Rockaway. For me, it was a poignant and special encounter. I admired and greatly respected him. To me he was never just "The Rabbi" — he was my friend's father, a gentleman, a mentor, and above all a *mensch*.

Linda (Bluth) Miller

## ***Recalls the Ray's Impact on Her Family***

For the 20th *yahrzeit* of my father, Jack Bluth, in December, 1988, we decided to make a gathering in the White Shul in his memory. We invited several of his friends and the family to the memorial. We felt very happy about saying *Kaddish* in the Shul he helped to build, and we walked around looking at the plaques that bore his name.

The guest speaker was of course Rabbi Pelcovitz, who was not only my father's Rabbi but also a close friend, golf partner and school mate. We always looked forward to hearing him speak. I remember when I was growing up, coming home from Shul and discussing the Rabbi's speech at the Shabbos table every week.

The Rabbi started the speech with a statement that made a big impact on me and the audience: "When something traumatic happens, you know exactly where you were and what you were doing when it occurred. Like when JFK was assassinated, you can describe where you were when you heard the news. Or, when the Yom Kippur war broke out, you also can detail exactly where you were. Well when Jack Bluth died, I was in Washington!" He continued to tell us in detail about what he was doing when he heard.

When I think of my years growing up in Far Rockaway, it is always the White Shul and Rabbi Pelcovitz that made the experience so very special. I am very lucky to have been raised in such a warm and unforgettable community.

*Yi'he zichro baruch*

Brian Nadata

## *We found a Shul. a Rav and a Home*

August 22, 1955. As a six-year-old, I moved with my parents and older brother to Far Rockaway from Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, to a house that would be my home till I married, and our mother's as long as she lived, until just shy of her 96th birthday.

That first Shabbos, my father, my brother, and I walked in the general direction of the shul; I knew little more than that. In retrospect, in light of our present times and sensibilities, it is shocking to think that my parents hadn't picked out a shul as definitively as they had picked out a yeshivah (the fact that there was only one yeshivah — HILI — may have had something to do with that decision). As we walked along, we were met by our new backyard neighbor, a lovely, warm man with an outgoing personality. We later learned that he went to shul every Shabbos, while his wife was not *shomeret Shabbat*, which was unusual but not unheard of in the mid-fifties in Far Rockaway.

He wished us a "Good Shabbos," and asked where we were headed to shul. My father answered he wasn't sure, but he knew we had a few choices. Our neighbor said he was right, but there were two main choices, one was Shaarey Tefila, where he was headed; the other was the White Shul. What he next said changed our lives forever. He said "I think you might be more comfortable in the White Shul. It's more Orthodox."

My dad thanked him, and we made our way to Nameoke and Dinsmore to the old White Shul. We found a pew, a *rav*, and a home. My brother and I both had our bar mitzvahs there, then moved to the new White Shul in 1963, and had our *aufrufs* there. Rabbi Pelcovitz, who was by now a family friend, of course presided over all our lifecycle events, including our weddings, and since I continued to live in the community after my

wedding — to the daughter of another White Shul family — he was an integral participant during the *brissim* of our two boys, and the bas and bar mitzvahs of our children, as well as their weddings, all family *levayos*, and even the naming of our first granddaughter.

The year was 1992 and the occasion was the Bar Mitzvah of our oldest son, Shmuel. *Rabbi P*, as the entire shul fondly referred to him amongst ourselves (no one would have the temerity to abbreviate his name while directly addressing our august and revered rabbi) was newly making a graceful transition to Rabbi Emeritus when Rabbi Flaum was chosen to become our *Mara d'Asra*. I respectfully asked Rabbi Flaum if he would step aside to allow Rabbi P., our rav for generations to speak on behalf of the shul, and he graciously agreed. Rabbi P, took his measured approach to the podium, collected himself, and in his inimitable signature style began with the following story:

Two stockbrokers were having their regular lunch and were ready to begin their regular conversation centered around business and the market. One stops the other mid-sentence and says:

“You know, we’re always talking about business. What do you say to us talking about something else?”

The other gentleman, a bit puzzled, agreed and asked what the new topic would be. The first said: “How about we talk about children?”

His friend, not skipping a beat asked, “Common or preferred?”

And it was at the *sheva brachos* for Shmuel’s marriage to Debbie on a Monday night in June when the Rav thrilled us by coming over to the family backyard to wish our family mazal tov after giving the shiur that he would never miss.

Can I ever forget when my father, Sol Nadata *a"h*, recently moved his butcher shop from East New York to Far Rockaway and was enjoying the luxury of being closed on Sundays for the first time in his life. A wholesale kosher butcher opened his store to the retail market on Sundays, forcing my father to do the same. To my layman's mind it sounded like a clear-cut case of *masig gvul*, Torah prohibited business encroachment, and I suggested we consult with our Rav. Rabbi P. listened carefully and told us that *masig gvul* was a very difficult area, more grey than black and white. In short, it would be a tough case to bring before a *bais din*. But without skipping a beat he said: "But there is no *halacha* preventing you from competing like h—!!"

And can I ever forget when Naomi and I were beside ourselves with a tuition bill we had no way of paying, and we came to the Rav to ask his guidance. He said let me get back to you, and he did...with a congregant who graciously and unceremoniously paid our tuition that year.

It's odd how the things you think you have outgrown become the things you come to appreciate more as you mature. In my case the *drashas* that awed me as a boy became too long as a young man and became treasures to be savored when they were infrequently delivered from the pulpit after Rabbi P's retirement.

So outstanding in so many ways, our Rav's *métier* was the *hesped* at a *levayah*. He was unmatched at finding the words to eulogize, commemorate and comfort. As more and more of the parents of our contemporaries passed on, I would often think of how the Rav felt about officiating at the funerals of his contemporaries.

So, it is no surprise after my mother's *petirah* in 2012, after I called the *chevra* from the hospital, and then Rabbi Feiner to ask him to be *mochel* his *kavod*, that I called Rabbi P at home to ask if he would deliver a *hesped* at the *levayah*. I will never forget his words: "If I wake up, and I feel well, I will be there."

Knowing our beloved Rabbi, as you all do, he didn't just show up, he found the perfect words to celebrate the virtues and importance of a simple woman who raised a frum family into the fourth generation.

It is only fitting that now, *we* eulogize this remarkable man. *Lech b'shalom!*

## “He Was Not a Textbook Ray”

As a young child growing up in the White Shul, Rabbi Rafael Pelcovitz, *zt”l* was a towering giant to me. I saw him from afar, listening to his *drashos* in awe, and taking pride in the connection he forged with my parents. My father, Eliezer Horowitz, was very close with the Rabbi, and on several occasions, he would call my father to give a *shiur* in shul or get involved in a shul project. Nothing gave my father greater pleasure than “talking Torah” with Rabbi Pelcovitz and sharing his own insights. In those early days, I saw the rabbi from a distance as a great *talmid chacham*, a man of brilliance who carried the whole *kehilah* on his shoulders.

But as a young adult, when I had to build up the courage and confidence to approach him for answers to my *shailos*, I saw another side to Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zt”l*. To my surprise, I discovered that he was a great listener. When I met with him in his study, Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zt”l* was sensitive and caring, patient and insightful. His responses were not ‘textbook,’ as I had thought they would be. The rabbi first wanted to know where I was in my life and to hear about specific circumstances. Only then did he give me guidance, all the while weaving in an understanding of *halacha* with tremendous sensitivity. Over the years, I have heard from others as well, how meaningful it was for them to meet with the rabbi privately and seek his personal guidance.

Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zt”l* was a true *Gadol*, who dedicated his life to our *kehilah*. He was present for all our family events, and he was under the *chupah* when Brian and I were married. He was there for our children, and even our grandchildren, always inquiring as to their wellbeing, whenever he saw us. It was the greatest *z’chus* to attend his *shiurim*, and I will always cherish the Torah learning that he imparted.

Through my mother’s very close relationship with Rebbetzin Shirley, we knew he was frail, but for us, he was always immortal. So when we found

ourselves in Eretz Yisrael celebrating the bar mitzvah of our eldest grandson, and we heard the news of his *petirah*, we were devastated. Being in Yerushalayim, we were able to join with many of his friends and congregants for the *hespedim* before his *kevurah*. It was our opportunity to truly give our rabbi *kavod acharon*. He will be greatly missed.

*Yehi zichro baruch.*

David & Gittie Neufeld:

## *Some glimpses*

Many years ago, Rabbi Pelcovitz gave a great series of *shiurim* on *Iyov*. They had both depth and breadth and were a model for me of what to aspire to as a teacher. Fast-forward about twenty years. I'm on *Jeopardy* and the Final Jeopardy question is about the book of Job. *Baruch Hashem*, I nailed it. When the show aired, I was in Israel. I returned to a message on my answering machine: "Congratulations champ! This is Coach Pelcovitz calling to tell you, you made us proud." When I called to thank him, he said, "I probably would have been better off as your agent than as your coach."

I visited him recently, and he was reading *The New York Times*. The news of the day was two mistrials in headline corruption cases. I asked him what he thought about that. His response: "*Gittieleh*, we have mistrials, because people are afraid to vote their consciences."

We once had the privilege to host the Pelcovitzs and the Neuburgers for Shabbos lunch. I will never forget the conversation at the table. Torah, politics, history, jokes, doting on the Neuburger kids.... The rabbi was incandescent.

חבל על דאבדין.

Yosef Newman

## · *Recalls Observing* · *Rabbi Pelcovitz in c Action*

Looking back at my time spent in Far Rockaway, I regret not gaining a closer *kesher* to Rabbi Pelcovitz.

What could I say I observed about him? Determination, consistency, and love. Watching him walk into *shul* on *Shabbos* was a sight to be seen. He would spend 20 minutes walking from the back of the *shul* to his *makom*. He could have gone in his wheelchair, but seemed to refuse. I'm not sure what his reason was, but watching him walk and stopping every few steps to catch his breath or to greet someone, I almost felt like it was watching a *kohen* do the *avodah* in the *Beis Hamikdash*. Every step he was taking was service to *Hashem*. I made sure to point out to my daughter when she used to come to *shul* with me to just watch him. One of my daughter's highlights every week was going up to wish "Good Shabbos" to Rabbi Pelcovitz.

The consistency of attendance in his daily minyan, whether snow, rain or cold, for someone at his age was also something not to be taken for granted. After he was honored for his 65 years of community service last year at the *Melaveh Malkah* which ended after midnight, I was curious if he would come to the 7:45 minyan. Myself, personally, or most other people would have probably told themselves, "I had a very late night; let me sleep in and go to a minyan that starts a little later." Sure enough, Rabbi Pelcovitz's car pulled up right in time for the 7:45 minyan. I was amazed.

I learned some many valuable life lessons for improving my own *avodas Hashem* just by watching how Rabbi Pelcovitz conducted himself. His actions themselves spoke volumes.

Laya Davidowitz Perlysky

## · *Recalls the Uniqueness* *of the · Rav*

My grandfather, Rozi Davidowitz's father, Naftali Selengut, *zt"l*, used to quote Mark Twain, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." When Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz spoke, it was always lightning.

As I recall his speeches, it seems to me that Rabbi Pelcovitz would start out with an engaging story or witty joke, ask a question, and then take you on a journey. He would go deeper into the topic, quote both the Torah and secular wisdom, an anecdote(s), include Israel and current world events, and always come full circle at the end. Then he would tie everything together to answer the original question, while having taught and shared so much along the way. It was so eloquent, incisive, enjoyable and intellectually satisfying. It left you with a real appreciation and love of the beauty, wisdom, and depth of Torah. And it always left you thirsting for more.

Rabbi Pelcovitz meticulously chose, articulated, and enunciated each word and thought with precision. His wit was razor sharp. His insight, scope of knowledge, worldliness, storytelling, message and delivery were all phenomenal and unparalleled. As my mother, Rozi Davidowitz's mother, Emily Selengut, *ztl*, used to say, "Listening to Rabbi Pelcovitz was a treat and a treatment."

Rabbi Pelcovitz had strong convictions and stated them eloquently and unequivocally. I remember going to one of Rabbi Pelcovitz's *Pirkei Avot* classes. He recalled an incident where a girl called to ask him about a potential *shidduch*. Her question was, did the boy wear a black hat? Rabbi Pelcovitz said no, and that was the end of her questions and the *shidduch*. This was upsetting to Rabbi Pelcovitz. He was astonished that the black hat

was her only question, and that she didn't ask anything about the boys' *middos*. He strongly felt that this emphasis on the external dress of someone, rather than their character was misguided and wrong.

He was also a believer of being "*mekaraiv krovim*." He felt that with all the *kiruv* that was going on, there wasn't enough emphasis on keeping those who were brought up religious from dropping out of religion (and going "off the *derech*"). Rabbi Pelcovitz thought that just as there was *kiruv* (outreach) to the irreligious, there needed to be more of a concerted effort placed on inspiring and reinvigorating the religious kids and adults who were uninspired, under-stimulated and opting out of religious observance. In other words, there was not enough emphasis on "keeping our own." He was ahead of his times on this specific issue.

With all of his obvious and tremendous brilliance, Rabbi Pelcovitz was incredibly humble. And when he spoke to you one-on-one, he used that same intellectual prowess to understand and connect with you. You knew he really cared about you on a personal level. You revered him, yet you loved him. Although he was a world renowned Rabbi and masterful speaker, simultaneously he felt like a loving and concerned father or Zaidy, a knowing mentor, and devoted friend.

I sit with tears in my eyes because, as it says of Moshe Rabbeinu, "There never was, and there never will be another like him."

Esti (Glick) Pluchenik

## ·Remembers the ·Rabbi's Early·Days

In the late 40's and early 50's, my parents were living in Bayswater. After my father, who was part of the faction to support keeping the *mechitza* at his shul, lost the battle, he decided to move his young family to Far Rockaway.

At the time, Far Rockaway was a small town. The White Shul was struggling to maintain an Orthodox presence in a world that was threatened by the energetic and flourishing Conservative movement. America was at its infancy in its development as a stronghold of Torah life, and Far Rockaway was no exception. Although many congregants didn't have the opportunity to learn in *yeshivah*, they were committed to adhering to *shmiras Shabbos* and *kashrus*. This was before Rabbi Pelcovitz, zt"l arrived.

Rabbi Pelcovitz attracted a strong following. His eloquent speeches exposed us to a solid Torah perspective concerning the political issues of the time. More importantly, his *shiurim* in *Gemara* raised the level of Torah learning and exposed his congregants to the richness and beauty of the world of his *Rebbe*, *Rav Shlomo Heiman*, zt"l. I went to shul every *Shabbos* with my mother, and this formed my early connection to Torah and *tefillah*.

My parents were active in community affairs. My mother, z"l, who attended Rabbi Pelcovitz's *shiurim* regularly, was a member of the *Chevrach Kadisha* and my father, *yibadel l'chaim*, who, with the late Daniel Meyers, built the first *mikveh* in Far Rockaway and supported many *chesed* and *tzedakah* causes, felt a personal sense of appreciation to Rabbi Pelcovitz for his role in shaping a community from its early humble beginning into a burgeoning Torah center.

Our family will always be indebted to Rabbi Pelcovitz's contribution to our lives and the lives of our future generations. May *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* bless the Pelcovitz family and may they be *zocheh* to continue the legacy of their illustrious father.

Leslie (Benn) and Sol Rosenberg

## ***The Kiddush Cup***

We are, I'm sure, just one of the many couples who were married in the White Shul over the past decades.

Standing under the *chuppah* back in 1967 with HaRav Pelcovitz *a"h* as our *mesader kiddushin* and as a close family friend, we first sipped from the silver *kos* given to us by the Rabbi and Rebbetzin Frumi *a"h*. Our names and date were, of course, engraved, to mark the auspicious occasion.

We have sipped from this very same Kiddush cup every Shabbos and Yom Tov for over 50 years, drinking in not just sweet wine, but tasting and indeed toasting sweet memories as well.

One day, the Rabbi was driving us home from our local yeshivah high school (HILI). We drove by the construction site of the New White Shul building. And, as we all "oohed and ahned" on the progress of the large circular structure beginning to take shape, it suddenly dawned on me... the RABBI of this shul was driving our carpool!

Do Rabbis of shuls do that? Drive carpool?

Well, obviously, Rabbi Pelcovitz did. At this moment, he was just a father driving home a carpool of chatty girlfriends.

I remember that as a young girl sitting high above in the woman's section, listening to the Rabbi's Shabbos sermons, my attention was always well rewarded.

Rabbi Pelcovitz often shared a humorous story or anecdote that seemed to be effortlessly woven into his *drashah*, which then would later serve as an easily remembered story to repeat at our Shabbos table. The Rabbi's sermons were truly food for thought!

And so, after many years of listening, it was inevitable that Rabbi Pelcovitz's oratory would become my Gold Standard against which I have continued to measure all other public speakers.

A last word...

My husband, Sol and I noted the poignancy that the day of our *shivah* visit to his daughter Judy, my HILLI classmate, and to the entire Pelcovitz family, coincided with our wedding anniversary... a bittersweet memory that will now be added to all the other memories of our Kiddush cup.

Barry Salamon

## ·Remembers the·Rav· c *Amkus d'Pashtus*

One of the things Rabbi Pelcovitz appreciated was what he called the “*amkus d'pashtus*” – the depth of simplicity. He revered the notion. That’s who he was. He seemed to be a simple, down-to-earth person, yet he was deep, multifaceted. He personified the very concept. I remember as a teenager in the White Shul listening to his *drashas* on Shabbos. Israel was being bashed in the UN at the time, even by the United States. He would tie current events to the *parashah*. When he gave over the Jewish perspective, we felt that he should be the spokesman for the Jewish people to the UN and to the American president. His concepts were simple, straightforward, rationally put, and made so much sense. So much so that anyone could see the truth.

I go back 50+ years with him. We were together throughout great times and challenging times. He spoke at our *simchahs*. He spoke at my son’s *bris*. I remember when his first Rebbetzin passed and he sat *shivah* for her. He spoke at my father’s *levayah* and graciously labored with me to get the wording just right for the *matzeivah* that rests on Har HaZeisim. The epitaph is so magnificent.

I remember when he married Rebbetzin Shirley. My father went to all the *shiurim*, especially the Monday-night shiur at Rabbi Pelcovitz’s house. My father schlepped me along for about twenty years, and that signaled a turning point in my life – to be at that table learning such depth in such a simply put context. My father used to play golf with the Rav. Imagine that? And he’d come back from those rounds of golf and say, “I’m flying! I’m out there in Hashem’s wonderful nature, in the fresh air, exercising as we walk, and the Rav is giving out amazing *divrei Torah*, clever jokes, and inspired stories – *A Shtick Gan Eden!*”

In those Monday night studies, he gave over such elucidation of the Gemara, interweaving it with humor and illustrations through stories that gave us anchors of thought by which to remember. I was the junior member of that study and so appreciate the treasure that we had when we had it — every week.

Another *ha'arah*. About a month before his *petirah* at age 96, I called him because I'd seen a beautiful *Sforno*. The Rav loved the *Sforno* and indeed published his own commentary on it. But I decided to give the Rav the *pasuk* first that had caught my attention. And sure enough, he started to say precisely what the *Sforno* said on it. It was immediate.

I remember something noteworthy he said several years ago concerning how some observant Jews may regard the non-observant in a less than accepting manner. In my notes, I wrote down that he said, "You may say what you want about secular Israel. But let me show you a true display of Jewish spirit there." Rabbi Pelcovitz explained that that year, I believe it was 2011, *Yom HaZikaron* — the Remembrance Day for the fallen, which is accompanied by sirens all over the country, fell out in proximity to Shabbos. In order to prevent *chillul Shabbos*, the country put it off for a day, which also ended up bumping *Yom HaAtzmaut* by a day as well. Can you imagine any other country doing something equivalent for the cause of *kedushas hayom* — the holiness of the day?

Rabbi Pelcovitz was so moved by that calendar adjustment for the sake of Shabbos, a decision made not by the religious Jews, but by the secular Jews. He looked to find the good and the honorable in all people — and as my history with him shows, he always found it.

Bert Schonbach:

## ***Lignettes***

*The Friday night Chumash class:* When I was about seven or eight years old, my parents would faithfully attend Rabbi Pelcovitz's Friday night *Chumash* class. Since my sister was already married, there was no convenient baby sitter in the Schonbach home. So, I, too, faithfully attended the Friday night *shiurim* as well.

Let it be understood that I was not taken along under protest. I actually enjoyed Rabbi Pelcovitz's classes. They were comprised of clear explanations of the text, followed by interesting derived messages, and were always accompanied by illustrative stories.

To this day, I can recall many of the deeper and meaningful interpretations he presented.

*Bar Mitzvah:* Rabbi Pelcovitz authored my bar mitzvah speech. He then discussed the content with me to make sure I understood both the content and the message. He also stood me at the lectern of an empty White Shul to make sure that the volume of my voice was raised sufficiently to reach every person in the room. Notes were for reference only, as eye contact was to be made with members of the congregation.

Rabbi Pelcovitz demanded perfection — but not in a strict, off-putting manner — and expected (i.e., hoped that) his students would demand the same of themselves.

*The Mesader Kiddushin:* Rabbi Pelcovitz made no secret of his feeling that it was the privilege and responsibility of the community rabbi to officiate at the weddings of the *chassanim* of his community. To my mind, there was no question that I wanted Rabbi Pelcovitz to be *mesader kiddushin* for Yaffa and me. I recall the three of us meeting in the Rabbi's study to discuss the matters and questions on our minds and receive the Rabbi's patient advice.

Over the years, we met on many occasions and the Rabbi would always be interested in us and our family. And I always received the impression that he felt, just as we felt, that our lives and families were closely bound together. *Yi'he zichro baruch*

We will miss him. May he be a *meilitz yosher* for his family and all of us.

The Children of Lou & Evelyn Schreiber, Z"l

## *Share Their Memories*

I grew up listening to Rabbi Pelcovitz's Shabbat morning *dvar Torah drashos*. He "spoiled" me for virtually anyone else's *divrei Torah*. His insights, explanations, organization and references were unique. When I moved out of Far Rockaway, I requested from the Rabbi that he record his weekly *dvar Torah* and I would then have it typed. Unfortunately, this only lasted for a short time. I have to say that even now, almost every Shabbat, I regret that I do not have Rabbi Pelcovitz's cogent thoughts to read.

The Rabbi had a great impact on me, my parents and siblings — through his words and deeds, he taught us so much. We will always be grateful.  
*Yi'he Zichro Baruch*

Sincerely,

*Saul Schreiber, MD*

The Children of Lou & Evelyn Schreiber, Z"l

## *Share Their Memories*

My older brother Saul's bar mitzvah in 1952 was among the earlier bar mitzvahs celebrated in the White Shul after Rabbi Pelcovitz came to Far Rockaway. I was a young boy then, but as I grew up, I also came to appreciate the many wonderful abilities and special character traits of the Rabbi.

My father was one of the people who was instrumental in bringing Rabbi Pelcovitz to the White Shul. He was very active in the shul and community. A warm friendship developed between them — they even played golf together. My dad actively supported and worked with the Rabbi and others, more than six decades ago, in building Far Rockaway into the community that it is today.

Far Rockaway in the 1950s and 60s — the time period when I was growing up together with Rabbi Pelcovitz's children — was a small, close-knit community where everyone knew one another. I remember how on Succos, we used to play stickball on Dorian Court — a dead end — and the Rabbi would serve as umpire sometimes! As so many people have said over the years — he knew how to relate to everyone, even the kids. Not only that, but you could tell how much he liked and cared about everyone.

May Rabbi Pelcovitz be a *meilitz yosher* for his family, community, and *Klal Yisrael*.

*Avie Schreiber*

Lou & Evelyn Schreiber, Z"l

## *Share Their Memories*

Our parents were very involved in the White Shul and were active participants in many of the classes and programs that Rabbi Pelcovitz initiated. Two of the most popular classes that he founded was the women's weekly *Chumash* class and the women's Shabbos afternoon *Perek* class in the summer. My mother enjoyed attending both of these *shiurim*. The Rabbi always included a touching, amusing, or witty anecdote that was relevant to what he was teaching. These classes attracted women and girls from all over the community, not just White Shul members.

To show their appreciation to the shul, and to memorialize the lives and legacy of our grandparents, our parents dedicated the *Bais Medrash* in the "new" White Shul building. The plaque is still hanging there after all these years!

The Louis and Evelyn Schreiber Family have so many wonderful, fond memories of Rabbi Pelcovitz and the White Shul. He did so much for us personally, and the community-at-large. Indeed, he was a pioneer who had the vision, ability, and *mesiras nefesh* to actualize the dream of establishing a vibrant Torah community in Far Rockaway. He will always have our family's heartfelt *hakaras ha'tov*.

*With deep respect and admiration,*

*Honey Schreiber Levinson*

Shira Rosenblatt Schrier:

## ·*Down the block from* ·*Rabbi Pelcovitz*·

We grew up down the block from Rabbi Pelcovitz on Caffrey Avenue, 55 years ago.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was *mesader kiddushin* at my wedding. Till today, I can picture that “Rabbi Pelcovitz” smile under the *chuppah*.

Rabbi Pelcovitz recognized fine *middos* in our father, Robert Rosenblatt *a”h* and constantly told him so.

Rabbi Pelcovitz spoke lovingly and beautifully at our father’s *levayah*, and he told everyone how our father was the first to arrive at the White Shul for davening and the last to leave; most of all, he recognized that my father never ever uttered a word of *lashon hara*.

Rabbi Pelcovitz greeted us every time he saw us with that “Rabbi Pelcovitz” smile for the past 55 years.

We will greatly miss him as our Rabbi, friend, and neighbor.

Sender Schwartz:

## •Daily Walking with the Rabbi

As anyone who davened in the 7:45 *Shacharis minyan* would know, I sat nearest to Rabbi Pelcovitz. Almost every morning for a good 20 years, we were in very close proximity. Being by nature an acute observer of anything and anyone around me, I notice so many things naturally. And over those 20 years, I was privileged to be there, virtually at the Rabbi's side, to anticipate his needs and to render whatever service I could. Sometimes it involved bringing him a *sefer*, a tissue, or calling someone over to speak with him. Whatever he needed, I was there and I was honored to assist him, especially in his later years.

Rebbetzin Shirley once told me, "Sender, the Rabbi tells me that you know what he needs even before he knows he needs it!" It made me feel very good to offer my support. It was a big *kavod* to do little things for him. I was able to be *meshamesh* a *talmid chacham* almost daily.

During those years, I was the one that put together his *tefillin* and in later years, held his *tallis* for him. If I wasn't there to fold his *tallis* one day, he would joke with me the next time and say, "Look at the job these other guys did on the folding. It's not quite up to the Sender Schwartz standard." He said, "Sender, we have to make a video on the proper way to fold the *tallis* as a precondition to substituting for you, right?"

There were several people that assisted the Rabbi into and out of the *shul*. Stanley Zahner and I helped him leave most often. In the winter, when Stanley was away, I walked with him solo. Every morning through all those years, the Rabbi always had something unique to say, whether a *dvar Torah*, a joke, an anecdote, or a comment on current events. In all those years, he never repeated anything. Every morning I had a private audience with a great *talmid chacham*. He was talking to me, not the *tzibbur*. He was telling it over to me. I'd return home and share the Rabbi's words with my wife. She saw how much joy and fulfillment I brought into the house

following my “daily dose of Rabbi Pelcovitz.” This was the highlight of my day and looking back, a major highlight of my life – just to be in the serenity of his presence. It was better than breakfast!

I do regret that I didn’t write down the many wise and wonderful things I heard from him during our walks each morning. At the *shivah* house, the family told me how very aware they were of this important part of the Rabbi’s morning, how much he appreciated the escort, and how he loved me as a son. I left the house with tears of *hana’ah* flowing, hearing of his great love for me.

Everyone desires to be needed and to know she or he is bringing benefit into the world by serving another. It gave me such satisfaction just to be there for this wonderful man who had given decades to enrich all of our lives through his love, wisdom, scholarly knowledge and fatherly care. The degree to which I miss him and those days is immeasurable.

When he stopped coming to shul, I sat there every morning for over a year, gazing at his empty seat and for all he did for me in those precious, timeless walks out of the shul. Such a simple context; such a deep experience.

We were all so fortunate to live in his shadow, to thrive through his radiance and guidance. He knew us. He knew who we were and what we needed. And he was a rabbi’s rabbi too, as we’ve all read recently. I shared 35+ years with him and every one of them is significant because of Rabbi Pelcovitz’s leadership and love. The words “I miss him” sound hollow as they echo through the vacancy in my heart. I felt such emptiness looking at his vacant *shtender*. I cannot ever repay or fully express the depth of feeling I have. *Yehi zichro l’bracha tamid*.



*Rabbi Pelcovitz & Dr. Eli Shapiro at Havdalah*

Miriam and Tuvia Silverstein:

## Ten · Remembrances

אשרי עין ראתה כל אלה  
הלא למשמע און דאברה נפשו

We joined the White Shul as a newly married couple in 1993. Our family has been immensely blessed to have known Rabbi Pelcovitz z”l, and to have learned so much from him these past twenty-five years. In the Mussaf of Yom Kippur, we recall the splendid sight of the Kohen Gadol emerging from the *Kodesh HaKadoshim*, and we think of a time suffused with miracles and majesty. Shortly after, we are forced to temper our joy and acknowledge our current reality by reciting a list of the many items sadly absent in a world deprived of such grandeur. We were fortunate to observe Rabbi Pelcovitz during our time here, and below we share some aspects that are now sadly absent from our shul. However, these impressions no doubt live inside each of us.

1. **His “L’shanah Tova” wish on the first night of Rosh Hashanah to each person on the long line of well-wishers.** Rabbi Pelcovitz seemed to know everyone, including their forebears and progeny, and who wouldn’t want his *berachah* on such an auspicious night?
2. **His “sing song” calling out of the *tekios* on Rosh Hashanah (which differentiated, by tune, a beginning *tekiah* from an end *tekiah*).** In all his mitzvah performance, we sensed purpose, precision, and pride.
3. **His saintly appearance in *kittel* and white yarmulke on Yom Kippur.** Rabbi Pelcovitz set the proper tone at every venue, and regardless of where he was, his dignified comportment was that of a *Rav* and emissary of Hashem.
4. **His most calm and serene way of davening.** He didn’t *shuckle* much and always looked in the siddur. We found this simplicity awe-inspiring.

5. **His crystal-clear *drashos*, *divrei Torah*, and Haggadah *shiurim*, all articulated with his perfect cadence.** Even when age had weakened him, he spoke with incredible vigor. He certainly had command of the room when he spoke, and his presence demanded *kavod haTorah*. Yet, he was humble and expected nothing for himself.

6. **His honesty and integrity.** This stemmed from an unshakable *emunah*, a towering strength and confidence, that his advice or *psak* was right for the person asking. Rabbi Pelcovitz shared with us his views of the world (popular or not) from the pulpit and individually to urge us to be better and more committed.

7. **His wit, wisdom, and perspective on every emerging challenge we face.** He understood human nature and perceived cultural shifts. He had laser focus when you spoke to him, understanding what he was being asked, and he answered with clarity.

8. **His respect for all.** He expressed genuine happiness when you called and was always gracious when you entered his home. As his pace became more measured and the trek from the shul entrance to his seat took more time, he smiled and said “good morning” to all as he moved forward.

9. **His boundless love for Torah, Judaism, Jews, and Eretz Yisrael.**

10. **His fierce loyalty to the White Shul and its members, their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.** He would ask members about family by name, and he always remembered the details of their lives. This loyalty of *Rav* to “*balabus*” is what made it so easy for us *balabatim* to reciprocate. His *balabatim* lovingly honored him three times after he retired (at his 50th, 60th and 65th Anniversary Shabbosim). We still cry when we remember him being danced to the *bimah* for his *aliyah* by dozens, and in front of hundreds, to the tune of *Orech Yamim Asbi'eihu*.

With love and respect,

*Miriam & Tuvia Silverstein and Family*

Morris Smith:

## ·Remembering the Rav's ·Diplomacy Skills

The Shul was having its third *siyum* since Rabbi Pelcovitz's arrival, but I don't remember if it was a *chevrah Mishnayos* or a *masechet* Gemara. Rabbi Pelcovitz invited HaRav Aaron Schechter of Chaim Berlin to be the guest speaker on that occasion. HaRav Schechter agreed but said he would speak only in Yiddish. Rabbi Pelcovitz said, "You were born in the United States, and you know how to speak English, and my congregants are fluent in English — not Yiddish."

Rav Schechter demurred and said that at the prior *hadrans* at the White Shul, Rav Moshe *zt"l* and R' Yaakov *zt"l* had spoken in Yiddish. Rabbi Pelcovitz replied, "I told them they can speak in Yiddish as that was their mother tongue — your mother tongue is English!" Rabbi Pelcovitz won the discussion, and the *hadran/siyum* was conducted in English.

Naftali Solomon:

## ***Walking with a Living Sefer Torah***

I've had the extreme *zechus* of being *melava* a living *Sefer Torah* every Shabbos morning for the past two years.

Rabbi Pelcovitz's grandchildren would drop him off at the shul, and I would take him by his arm and make the often twenty-minute trek from the front door to his seat.

That twenty minutes transported me to a bygone era as the *Rav* would tell me stories of his youth and the early days of the White Shul.

As a *Levi*, I feel this is my job until the Third *Beis HaMikdash* is built: to provide *kavod haTorah* to giants like Rabbi Pelcovitz and his *talmidim*, Rabbis Feiner and Neuberger. And it's a pleasure to see my children carry on that tradition. My son, Yitzchok Menachem, will run to do anything for our Rabbonim, from as simple as holding a door open to carting the (very large) bag of *sefarim* they each carry.

The time spent with Rabbi Pelcovitz has left an indelible impression on my family and me. It has given me more patience to help the elderly of our community and, even more important, my own aging parents.

# *Mark Four Generations of Memories*

How does it feel to be part of a legend? To be part of the history of a community? To see greatness in action; to see the living Torah embodied in a person; to see brilliance clothed in humility and strength combined with compassion; and to see the finest oratory skills matched by the profound written word.

All those who knew Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz *zt"l*, and especially those of us who were part of the awesome White Shul, were blessed and privileged to have Rabbi Pelcovitz as our Rabbi, teacher, leader and mentor. We lived in the aura of his powerful persona and the impact he made on so many lives he touched.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was a leader of the broader Jewish community and a leader of the evolving generations. The Rabbi's opinions were eagerly sought. His *seforim* were enthusiastically read and his counsel in all matters was widely pursued.

We moved to Lawrence and were in the White Shul from the very first Shabbos the doors of this rotund structure opened. For the next many decades, we were proud to be part of the White Shul. One just need to say the name "Rabbi Pelcovitz" or "the White Shul" and know it was synonymous with greatness. The White Shul and Rabbi Pelcovitz were one and the same and both garnered the respect of all who heard the name.

We literally grew up in the White Shul - two, then three, now four generations, under its eclectic roof. It was with pride and happiness that we would tell people, "Yes, we go to the White Shul - Yes, we have Rabbi Pelcovitz as our Rabbi and - Yes, it's the most remarkable place to be."

Our Shul was a magnet for people of all ages and from varied backgrounds. From around the world they came to visit. The halls and entrance area would overflow and people would discuss the Rabbi's brilliant speech and would socialize warmly. This was our "go to" place for the family, whether it was for a Bris or our first son's *Bar Mitzvah* or *Aufrufs* and *Sheva Brachos* made more personal by our Rabbi. Most recently, we were among the Guests of Honor at the White Shul Annual Dinner, as were our esteemed parents before us. Rabbi Pelcovitz spoke so beautifully on the video. We will treasure his personal tribute. After all, we love the Rabbi and the White Shul and feel a deep *Hakaras Hatov*.

And we had only to go to the White Shul Shabbos to see a diverse, multigenerational, close knit community. And the Rabbi's speech was the highlight. Sprinkled with amusing stories, moral lessons, SAT vocabulary words, and Torah wisdom which we could meld into our own daily lives. The Rabbi's wit, humor and delivery put his sermons, *shiurim* and life advice in a superb class of its own. Rabbi Pelcovitz was a *Gadol Hador* because he truly was a giant in *Torah* and *middos*.

We miss this *Talmid Chacham* and *Tzadik*. We pray his loving wonderful extended *mishpacha* derives comfort in knowing that Rabbi Pelcovitz genuinely impacted our entire family in so many ways and we will be forever grateful.

Shelley Steinmetz:

## ***Words are Inadequate***

Words are inadequate to describe Rabbi Pelcovitz's influence and impact on the lives of those of us who were fortunate to have had him as our Rabbi and teacher.

Rabbi Pelcovitz showed us how a person should live his life as a Torah Jew. His every word, his every action, indeed his every thought, was Torah. He was the embodiment of Torah. The Torah's way is *darchei noam*, sweet and caring. The Rabbi cared for us with love, sweetness, and great wisdom.

No problem that was brought to him was insignificant. If it was our problem, it was his problem. It became his, and he dealt with it as if it were his own. His interest in our own personal growth and development was exceptional.

I was fortunate to escort the Rabbi into the Beis Medrash for *Shacharis* on many a morning. The few moments it took from the car to the Shul were filled with the wisdom of Torah that the Rabbi so inspirationally offered.

His impact and influence is incalculable. His legacy will be realized, not only by the Torah that he taught us, but by our trying to emulate how he lived his life of Torah. The words "*gadol*," "*gaon*," and "great" are used often to describe great men. For Rabbi Pelcovitz, they are inadequate.

Sylvia (Neustadter) Teplitsky:

## **c 1 *Chillul HaShemesh!***

Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz, z"l, was not only my "*Rebbe*," teacher, mentor, and friend, but he was also that to my dear parents, Jack and Rhoda Neustadter, and to my husband, Michael Teplitsky, and our entire family, as well.

My parents considered Rabbi Pelcovitz one of their closest friends as well as their Rabbi.

When I was a nurse at the Albert Einstein College Hospital in the Bronx and I would come home after a busy week for Shabbos, I couldn't wait to go to shul on Shabbos and listen to Rabbi Pelcovitz's *drashah*. I was always able to repeat (not exactly verbatim) the message of his speech to many of my friends and how it applied directly to me as a *shomer Shabbos* nurse.

Occasionally, Rabbi Pelcovitz would not speak on a given Shabbos. This really upset me, because I had come to shul and given up my "sunshine time" and did not even get to hear the good rabbi's sermon! I once called Rabbi Pelcovitz after a Shabbos when he did not speak and told him it was a "*chillul HaShemesh*" for me to come to shul and not hear him speak. From that point on, whenever Rabbi Pelcovitz was not going to speak, he kindly called my parents to give me a message that I didn't have to give up my "sunshine time," since he would not be speaking on that Shabbos. That was "my" Rabbi Pelcovitz, who was able to communicate with all, regardless of age, and do it with humor as well.

Early in my nursing career, when I was in my early 20's, I wanted to become a member of the White Shul's *chevrah kaddisha* and do *teharos*. When I asked Rabbi Pelcovitz if it would be OK, he told me he would have no objection, but I had to have my parents' stamp of approval. When I approached my father for permission, he told me that I should always be a "*rodef mitzvot*" and it would certainly be OK for me to be a member of the *chevrah kaddisha*. When I told this to Rabbi Pelcovitz, he had a big smile on

his face and said that he knew that my parents would give me permission, but he wanted to make sure that I did the mitzvah of *Kibbud Av v'Eim* as well. This was the start of my becoming a member of the *chevrah kaddisha* in every community where I lived—in Far Rockaway; Augusta, Georgia; Woodmere; and Deerfield Beach, Florida—I've been doing this *mitzvah* for over fifty years! Years later, when my husband Michael and I told Rabbi Pelcovitz that we had endowed the *chevrah kaddisha* of the Young Israel of Deerfield Beach in memory of my parents, his eyes lit up and he smiled his signature smile and told us how proud he was that we had done this in memory of my parents.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was an integral part of our family. We were privileged to have him attend so many of our family *simachos*: He was the *mesader kiddushin* at our wedding. He participated in the *berachos* under the *chuppah* at our children's weddings, and gave *hespeidim* at my parents' and at my mother-in-law's *levayahs*. When we were going to make a fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration for my parents, Rabbi Pelcovitz informed us that he would not be able to attend, as he had a previous engagement which could not be rescheduled. So we sent a video crew to his home to record his message to our parents, because we could *not* have a *simchah* without Rabbi Pelcovitz in attendance! We showed the video on a large screen at the affair and when he began speaking, even though there were over 150 people at the celebration, everyone was quiet and you could have heard a pin drop in the dining room. When he finished speaking, everyone stood up and applauded the wonderful and inspiring message he delivered.

As the years went by, whenever Rabbi Pelcovitz would see me, he would always ask, "Sylvia, are you still *rodef mitzvot*?"

I will miss him, but never forget him.

May he be a *meilitz yosher* for us all.

Norman Turoff

## · *Reality Checks*

The most memorable feature of Rabbi Pelcovitz *zt"l* was the warmth of his smile.

Additionally, I remember his sharp insights. When I was a young parishioner, one of his thoughts resonated with me as an extremely realistic take on social relationships. Rabbi Pelcovitz would cite the *pasuk* in *Hallel*, “*Hashem li be'ozrei, veAni ereh b'sonai*; Hashem will protect me from my ‘friends’, and I will see to my enemies.” That was just one of Rabbi Pelcovitz’s reality checks derived from Torah.

Sheldon Weinreb, Oleh to Israel,

## ·Remembers the Early Days

In January of 1954 my parents, older brother, and I moved from Brooklyn to Far Rockaway. I was in second grade, and - frankly - do not remember when I first met or spoke to Rabbi Pelcovitz. At that point, making new friends in the middle of the school year at HILI (Hebrew Institute of Long Island) was our main concern, not who our shul rabbi would be.

I later learned that the decision of which shul to join was not an easy decision for my parents. They also considered joining Shaaray Tefila because our immediate neighbors (the Samets, Jacobs, and Marrus families) were all Shaaray members and they encouraged us to join them. In addition, the Rabbi of Shaaray Tefila, Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman *zt"l* was active in the Mizrachi movement, as was my father.

However, after davening and attending *shuirim* at both shuls, the decision was made relatively quickly. My parents joined the White Shul, led by Rabbi Pelcovitz, for its higher level of Torah learning and observance. The issue of *hashkafa* regarding Israel, while important, was resolved over time as I will explain later.

Moreover, Rabbi Pelcovitz was very interested in the education of the youth. Under his leadership, a pioneering youth program with a Shabbat Youth Minyan and afternoon Oneg groups were established. I recall a meeting with Rabbi Pelcovitz shortly before my Bar Mitzvah. During the conversation I told him that I had not yet prepared my speech for the Bar Mitzvah reception. He quickly took out index cards and outlined a *d'var Torah* for my *parashah*, *VaYechi*. Boy, was I grateful and relieved!

Not too long ago I found those original (from 1960) handwritten cards in the Soncino Chumash given to me by the Shul. The message of the *dvar Torah* is still relevant today 58 years later.

The end of the world is close to all of us  
up to it is far from all of us.  
Because in the 1780 comes the  
eternal world of the 1780  
which allows us to see the end  
and gives us the world of the 1780.  
1) They were born raised in 1780

and still remained loyal Jews.  
2) No alloy on the part of Jew.  
No alloy " " " " " " "  
With these two qualities - ① To  
be a good Jew even tho isolated  
② To have alloy, and alloy - one  
can live thru any alloy.

Fast Forward to 1971. Shortly after my engagement I met with Rabbi Pelcovitz to introduce him to my future wife, Janice Cohen, and asked him to be our *mesader kiddushin*. Towards the end of the discussion he asked us what our long-term plans/ goals were. We told him our intention to make *Aliyah* in 3-5 years. Most people reacted with polite skepticism. Rabbi Pelcovitz was not only encouraging, he made a strong case to make *Aliyah* as soon as possible before getting too settled in the US. He spoke highly of our plans with encouragement, even exceeding our *Aliyah Shaliach* in the Jewish Agency.

I mentioned my father's initial *hashkafic* difference with Rabbi Pelcovitz regarding Israel. This changed dramatically in 1967. I specifically remember a *drasha* by Rabbi Pelcovitz how the results of the '67 war not only redeemed Jerusalem but also liberated additional holy places mentioned in the *Tanach* such as Hebron, Jericho, Bethlehem, Shechem.

After my father reached retirement age in 1976, my parents made *Aliyah*. Janice and I, with our children, followed in 1980.

My parents kept in touch with Rabbi Pelcovitz and they enjoyed hosting him for Shabbat dinner in their Jerusalem apartment during his many trips. I last saw Rabbi Pelcovitz on a visit to New York for a Schulman wedding over 10 years ago in Atlantic Beach. Recently, here in Israel, I watched the *Melaveh Malke* celebrating the 65<sup>th</sup> year of service of Rabbi Pelcovitz on YouTube.

Today, partly due to the encouragement of Rabbi Pelcovitz, our Aliyah was successful and *B"H* all of our children are married with children – all living in Israel.

I wonder what Rabbi Pelcovitz's reaction would have been to the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem!

For those who care to write, we are at: 3 Sirkin Street, Raanana, Israel.

## *c 1 Glimpse of Greatness*

Rabbi Pelcovitz was an extraordinary person! He was beloved by all who met him. His infectious smile, respect for young and old, and brilliant mind were some qualities that made him so dear. Softly spoken yet powerful words of Torah and *hashkafah* emanated from his lips, making him an excellent orator who impacted upon many.

May his holy *neshamah* have an *aliyah* in *Shamayim* and may he be a *maylitz yosher* for our community and all of *Klal Yisrael*. Rabbi Pelcovitz is truly missed.

## ·Remember the Community ·Building·Ray

My earliest memories of Rabbi Pelcovitz are from about 1950, when I was 10 years old and the Rabbi came for a “*probah*” at the White Shul. At that time, the Shul was *actually* white and in a different location. My father, Joe Weissman, was president. Soon thereafter, Rabbi Pelcovitz began his long and illustrious career at the White Shul. Immediately, my parents fell in love with the Pelcovitzs who lived around the corner. To my father, the Rabbi was perfect. My father impressed upon me to learn from the Rabbi’s *middos* and behavior. For example: The Rabbi **always** came to *minyan* on time, or early. He was always dressed properly, and greeted everyone pleasantly and by name.

Rabbi Pelcovitz’s classes — and they were many and varied — were attended by my parents religiously. They made every effort **never** to miss one, and they would return home discussing the subject and what they had learned. The Rabbi’s sermons on *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* were always topical and usually over my head, though my parents absorbed them like sponges.

The Far Rockaway community in the 1950's was very small. I clearly remember how relatively empty the large white building was on *Shabbat*, but that changed. As word spread that Far Rockaway had a dynamic young leader of an Orthodox Synagogue, the Shul began to grow and continued to do so.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was an integral part of my bar mitzvah, and I clearly remember looking up at him addressing me. By the time the Rabbi officiated at my and Sheila’s wedding in 1962, the White Shul was no longer white, nor small. Much credit goes to Rabbi Pelcovitz for the growth of the Far Rockaway community. Aside from the Shul, the Rabbi was instrumental in establishing the *eruv* and the *Vaad Ha’kashrut*, among many

other institutions. My father, under the Rabbi's direction, established and led the *Chevre Mishnayot*, which functions till this day.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was the perfect teacher. He continually gave Torah classes in the Shul, in the community, and in private homes. My parents considered him not only as their Rabbi and teacher, but also their honored friend, someone they turned to for advice.

Through the years, Rabbi Pelcovitz became known and respected worldwide. We who grew up in Far Rockaway, and those who came during Rabbi Pelcovitz's long tenure in the White Shul, truly benefitted from his wisdom and leadership.

I feel honored and blessed to have known him, and to have benefitted from this wonderful man.

# Sefer Zikaron

## PART THREE:

### **Rabbonim Remember Rabbi Pelcovitz**

Had time permitted, this section of our Sefer Zikaron could have rivaled a volume of Shas for all there is to say about the rabbinical legacy of Rabbi Pelcovitz *a"h*. We are grateful to the sixteen *rabbonim* who generously gave of their time, some on *very* short notice, to share their thoughts, impressions, observations, and life lessons learned from their personal relationships with our beloved Rav.

Rabbi Eytan Feiner:  
*The Legacy He Left Us*

*Adapted from the video transcript for the White Shul dinner, June 11, 2018.*

Every time I think about Rabbi Pelcovitz, something that always comes to mind is how I grew up in the shul. When I grew up in the White Shul, growing up in the Five Towns community, I still remember it was a shul that, *baruch Hashem*, was packed. The community was growing. It was incredibly advantageous to grow up with that role model, that persona of somebody who carried a certain rabbinic presence, a rabbinic aura that, when you were in his company, when you were in proximity to Rabbi Pelcovitz, you just always felt you're in the company of someone special. You're in the company of a scholar, a world-class scholar, a world-class orator. You're in the presence of someone who might not have been personality-wise the most dynamic fire and brimstone, and yet at the same time you're always captured by this awesomeness of wow, that's a rabbi. That's a rabbi.

Imagine growing up in the shul, sitting in that section, listening to him speak, just watching the masterful way that he would remove his glasses. The pause, that beautiful pause at just the right moment in time, captivating everybody's attention. You wanted to listen to him. You were thirsting to say, "Well, this world-class scholar, what new gem of information is he going to share with me today?"

He was the type of person who practiced what he preached. He would talk about davening, talk about *tefillah*, he himself was the type of person, and you wouldn't catch him talking in the middle of

davening. You watched, you witnessed his sincerity, every precious word of *tefillah* that escaped his lips.

Something that I've mentioned on a number of occasions is the *gadlus* couched in *pashtus*. When people think about the Chofetz Chaim, they think about the *gadol hador*, the *tzaddik gadol*, the Chofetz Chaim, and he carried himself like an *ish pashut*. Rabbi Pelcovitz - he didn't wear the rabbinic attire of some of his colleagues. He didn't come with that long, white beard; he didn't come with the long *payos*, the regular black hat. But you saw him, you witnessed him, and you said, "Wow, look at the way he davens. Look at the beautiful *kavanas hatefillah*." Especially on Yom Kippur with the white *yarmulke* and the white *kittel*, and just watching the pure, pristine *neshamah* daven in front of the *aron kodesh*. It was just a beautiful picture, a beautiful model of wow, that's an *eved Hashem*. That's an *eved Hashem*.

When we think about the world resting on Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilus chassadim*, Rabbi Pelcovitz is one of the first people that comes to mind. It's something that I elaborated on by the *seudas shloshim*, as he was an all-star in those three areas. In the area of Torah - Torah was always of paramount importance. That was top priority. Torah was, that's got to be his regular *shiurim*. The growth in the shul has to be built not just around *tefillos*, not just around *chesed*, great events, great programs, lectures *v'chadomeh*, it's got to be predicated, it's got to be *mevusas*, built on Torah. It's got to be built on *limud haTorah*. That's something we try here today now in the White Shul to always emphasize repeatedly and emphatically that it's got to be Torah, Torah, Torah.

He always prepared. I wish I had the time; I don't know where he got the time for it. But every *shiur* was prepared. Every *shiur* was

organized, was structured. Systematic brilliance, is how I would sum up many of his masterful *shiurim*. It was structured. It was clear, concise. Every word weighed, every word carefully selected. The *shiurim* were brilliant. Again, it wasn't the fire and brimstone approach; it was the approach of sit back, listen and admire and revere. You knew that you were in the presence of somebody who knew his material ice cold. He knew it on his fingertips. It was a joy, it was a pleasure to just listen and to just watch.

That was Torah. When it came to *avodah*, as we discussed when it came to the *tefillos*, just watching him *daven*. Not *shuckling* all over the place, but just watching that stillness, that quietness of an *eved Hashem*, an *eved* talking to his creator, talking to the *Adon Olam*. It was beautiful and it was inspiring just to watch him, just to observe him. Again, a role model in the area of *tefillah*.

*Gemilus chassadim*. Again, programs, *chesed* – and never did he focus exclusively on one area in the shul. Youth department of the White Shul, he was always extremely *makpid*, very meticulous about the youth department. We have to have the best youth department in the entire neighborhood. He was involved and he was concerned and he cared.

My wife had heard this story in the family that one time, perhaps when I was younger, I davened a long *shemoneh esrei*, perhaps I had been very inspired by something, and I was maybe getting very into it and somebody complained. My father said, “Okay, let's ask Rabbi Pelcovitz.” He said, “If that's how he davens, let him daven that way he needs to daven.”

That was Rabbi Pelcovitz, a genuine care and concern for

everybody's growth, for the growth of the community overall, and that's what he was spearheading, that's what he was orchestrating behind the scenes, whether presiding for years over the *Va'ad*, the *Va'ad* that was really many of the meetings running out of the White Shul. So many activities going on in the community, building up the infrastructure of this beautiful community, of the Five Towns-Rockaway neighborhood. Whether it was the *eiruv*, whether it was the *Va'ad Hakashrus*, always involved, never losing sight of the growth of each and every individual.

Caring about everyone's growth, everyone's *avodas Hashem*, and always making himself available. You wanted to sit down, you wanted to schmooze with him? Again, you felt you had the best listener around. You had someone who wasn't going anywhere, he didn't have to make that appointment and looking at his watch. That's something I do my best to emulate. He gave you all of himself.

He listened, basically never interrupted, just listened. You got it all off; he let you express everything you wanted to. He listened attentively to each and every word, and then he guided you. Each person, *kol echad k'fi darko*. *Chanoch lana'ar al pi darko*, that was Rabbi Pelcovitz's MO, that was his *modus operandi*. That's everything that he did was catered to each and every individual.

Wherever you were holding in your *avodas Hashem*, wherever you were holding in your Torah, *avodah*, *u'gemilus chassadim*, everything was catered specifically to where you're holding and what's best for your growth. He was on top of it. He would follow up and he would say, "Okay, *nu*, how are things doing?" He cared and you noticed that care. You noticed that concern. It came off ever so subtly every time he lectured and every time he spoke and he ascended that

pulpit, and he wasn't a person of large stature. With the glasses on, with the glasses off, it didn't make a difference. When he was speaking, you knew that he was speaking to each and every individual not just *b'ofen klali*, but *b'ofen ishi*, *b'ofen prati*. He was speaking to each and every person present.

So for me to sit there with my father, as a young child growing up, and I'm one of eight – five boys – we would sit there on that bench and come back to the Shabbos table and to discuss the *drashah*. In many shuls, the young boys want to run out during the *drashah*. We didn't care to run out during the *drashah*. We were curious, what's the Rabbi going to speak about this week? We'd get back to the Shabbos table, father and five boys, we'd have lively discussions about what the Rabbi said. Everybody sensed, you know what, he was speaking to me. There's a message that I could extract, something that I could take, absorb, and then apply henceforth to my life.

I think we felt that by all the sermons. We felt that by the *drashahs*. We felt that by the lectures. Whatever was going on in the shul, we felt we have the role model, we have the perfect rabbi who is on top of the Torah, the *avodah*, and the *gemilus chassadim*, and no *bedieveds*. No *bedieveds*. Rabbi Pelcovitz, as I wrote about in the article and as the family communicated at the *levaya* as well, he was an *ish emes*. He lived the *emes*. He breathed the *emes*. He wanted nothing more than every member of his *kehillah* doing the *emes*, but doing the *emes* that was apropos for where you were holding in your stage of life, with your life circumstances, what you need to hear.

It was *emes*, but it was an *emesdikke* approach. Living the life of *emes* but in accordance with your *kochos hanefesh*, with your *techunos*

*hanefesh*, with your *middos*, *vechulei*. Catering every single one-on-one conversation and every *shiur* was something that everyone could take out something on a different level.

It's the same way as I've mentioned in the past the *Hagaddah shel Pesach shiur*. How many children, how many young kids, teenagers, are running, are excited, come with a notebook to take notes at a pre-*Pesach Hagaddah shel Pesach shiur*? But it was informative, it was *gadlus*, it was brilliant. It was sheer brilliance, the way that he packaged it, the way he put it together, and the way that you could walk out with something to take and apply to your Seder. And not just apply to your Seder, but indeed to apply for the rest of your life.

He wanted to see his *kehillah shteig*, to grow as *emesdikke ovdei Hashem*. That was Rabbi Pelcovitz, because that's what he was. He was an *emesdikke eved Hashem*, and that's what he tried to convey. That's how he lived. He lived it by example, he practiced what he preached. That gave him the greatest *nachas*, when he would see his *kehillah* grow as *anshei emes*, as a *kehillah amitis*, to give the *Eibishter nachas ruach* and to follow his guidelines of Torah, *avodah*, *gemilus chassadim*.

He demanded excellence, demanded excellence from everybody, the shul, everything. Any correspondence coming out of the office had to be perfect. The letters and the way things were orchestrated behind the scenes, everything had to be picture perfect. That's what he was. He had exacting, demanding standards. You had no problem complying because that's his persona, that's what he was and you wanted so badly to please him and to give him the *nachas ruach*.

We hope that this dinner *im yirtzeh Hashem* will continue to give his

*heilige neshamah* in *Gan Eden shel ma'alah* continuous *nachas ruach* from, I hope my humble self, having the *zechus* to follow in his footsteps.

On that note, I have an overwhelming sense of gratitude, forever indebted to the master rabbi of all rabbis and as I mentioned, the rabbi of this personal rabbi, who taught me so much not only one-on-one, not only verbally, but he taught me so much by being the perfect role model, the quintessential rabbi, trying our best to emulate his ways, which takes a lifetime of work. His brilliance was brilliance not only in the Torah, it was in the *avodah* and *gemilus chassadim*. That's what he ingrained and implanted inside each and every one of us, a *she'ifah* to want to become the biggest and best we could be.

There are so many things that I am *makir tov* to Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zecher tzaddik livracha*, and the list goes on and on. One thing that I think he embedded into my psyche that I'm forever grateful for is something he stressed repeatedly: Never let yourself lose sight of the individual, especially in a person's time of need. That when it comes to a loss, when it comes to a person in a state of bereavement and they just lost a relative, you have to give of your time, you have to give of your energy and put everything else on hold, and you have to be there with the family.

You have to be there as the one to console them, as the one to comfort them, as the one to be the rabbi, whether it's 12 o'clock at night, whether it's one, two, three o'clock in the morning. Believe me, those cases have happened but I think one of the biggest lessons that I've learned from him was if any lesson is going to really make an impression on you, grow up. This is your role model. The rabbi of

rabbis, the master orator, the world-class lecturer, and he is telling you that when it comes to people in a state of loss, put that all on hold. That's incidental. That's secondary. Number one is just be their friend, be their *yedid*, be their rabbi, be their comforter. Show them love, care, and genuine concern every single step of the way, no matter how much time it's going to require, no matter. Not only during the *levaya*, not only during the *shiva*. Following up after the *shiva*. Be there for them, be there with them in a time of need, in a time of pain. Those are the moments they will never, ever forget.

So, yes - in that area, Rabbi Pelcovitz was an amazing, amazing *darshan*, a lecturer, all-star. Spectacular. But perhaps one of his best lectures was always within the area of a *levaya* and a *hesped*. It was a *hesped* of someone who you knew, knew the individual about whom he was speaking. He knew the person he was eulogizing. He knew them in their lifetime and he knew them especially in those recent days leading up to the *levaya* because he was there with the family, he was there in the time of need. Everything else was put on hold. That's how he lived, and that was one very important lesson that he taught that I hope, with *siyata dishmaya*, I can continue carrying through *ad biyas go'el tzaddik im yirtzeh Hashem*.

So we hope that we continue to give him that *nachas ruach* in *Gan Eden shel ma'alah*, and his *heilige neshamah* should grow *m'chayil el chayil le'olam le'olam*, and to help be that conduit, *im yirtzeh Hashem*, the unparalleled *meilitz yosher* by the *kisei hakavod* to bring us ever closer to *mashiach tzidkeinu, bimheirah b'yameinu amen v'amen*.

Rabbi Motti Neuberger:

## ***“He was a personality that was larger than life.”***

In the short time since the *petirah* of our beloved Rabbi Pelcovitz *zt”l*, I have been asked on a number of occasions to attempt the impossible: to describe a personality that was larger than life, to articulate what it was that made him a giant among men. But, as I would inevitably find myself unable to find the words that might do him justice, I chose instead to remember the final message he shared with our community, the community he adored so much. As we prepared for the *Yom HaKadosh*, just nine months ago, we turned once again to the sage Rav Pelcovitz *zt”l* for words of inspiration.

The image of this elderly *rav* expending every last ounce of energy as he struggled to make his way to the front of an audience eager to drink from his wellsprings of knowledge and wisdom, as well as the words he imparted, will remain forever emblazoned in my mind and heart. With what seems now to have been an eerie premonition, he cautioned us to appreciate the eloquence of carefully placed silence in times of loss. He pointed to the statement in *Maseches Berachos* (6b) “אגרא דבי טמיא שתיקותא,” where Rav Pappa explains that very often one can provide more comfort with sympathetic silence than with verbal expression. It is irrational fear of the “awkward silence” that compels us to engage those who are mourning in undesired and sometimes insensitive conversation. Rav Pappa is teaching us, explained Rav Pelcovitz *zt”l*, that silence does not have to be empty or lacking in character; at times, when words fall short, it is silence alone that can most eloquently express our deep and heartfelt emotions.

As I continue to mourn the loss of a dear grandfather, beloved *rav*, and mentor, I realize that words cannot capture his multifaceted persona and the impact it had on our people. It is only in my silence that my emotions find expression; unbound by the limitations of the spoken language, I find a small measure of comfort.

And how appropriate that his final message to his beloved congregation related to the art of communication, an art he had by all accounts mastered – נאה הדברים למי שאמרן! For it was his ability to express the perfect sentiments and to offer tailor-made words of encouragement for each particular situation, which made him the most beloved and impactful leader that he was. He put a premium on proper communication, and he emphasized the barriers and obstacles it could overcome.

And while he was a legendary orator whose grasp of the language would mesmerize, he was constantly communicating – with his every action, gesture, and, yes, even with his silence. When escorting him to comfort those in mourning, I would often marvel at how his mere presence and manifestations of grief would provide more consolation than any words could. He would often bemoan the state of relationships in the modern world, disappointed that “the advancements in communication have not been matched by the art of connectivity.” In his world, every word was like gold – invaluable if appreciated and used properly, but worthless if spent flippantly and undiscerningly. Every word that left his lips was chosen precisely, with much forethought and care; he never uttered an empty word or a throwaway line.

It was this focus on true communication, communication that engendered connectivity, which made him the iconic rabbi, the “rabbi’s rabbi,” and ultimately would change the face of the American rabbinate. When Rabbi Pelcovitz *zt”l* began his career, most *rabbanim*, including his very own father, Rav Ephraim Pelcovitz *zt”l*, still hailed from the great Lithuanian yeshivos. They spoke a language which was, both literally and figuratively, vastly different from the vernacular of their American constituents. These Yiddish-speaking Rabbis were from a different world, a world that had been decimated before their very eyes, and it was nearly impossible for them to relate to the young American Jew who was raised in a culture of baseball and Broadway.

It was upon the next generation, and at its helm, our own Rav Pelcovitz *zt”l*, to bridge that wide gap, if American Orthodoxy was to survive. The task was a daunting one, but he prevailed with tremendous success. Against all odds, he managed to communicate the timeless values and tenets of our sacred heritage in a language that spoke to the modern man. Without compromising any standards, he succeeded in presenting the seemingly archaic laws and principles of our tradition in a language that spoke to the hearts and minds of the young American Jew. And for this, we, together with all of American Orthodoxy, must be forever grateful.

Upon his passing, Rabbi Berel Wein *shlit”a*, reflected on the life and accomplishments of a person whom he considered to be a mentor and dear friend. He pointed to the mysterious small *ס* that attracts so much attention to the opening verse of *Sefer Vayikra*, the *parashah* that coincided with the *petirah* of Rav Pelcovitz *zt”l*. Rabbi Wein suggested that the small *ס* represents the true secret of Moshe Rabbeinu’s successful leadership: his ability to sacrifice of himself to

better the lives of others. A true leader must be eager to diminish his own נ to grow the נ of those around him. "There isn't an American rabbi," exclaimed Rabbi Wein, "who doesn't have within him, knowingly or unknowingly, a piece of Rav Raphael Pelcovitz's נ!" Yes, indeed, our every accomplishment is built upon and supported by the foundation he tirelessly worked to lay—we stand on the shoulders of a giant!

יהא זכרו ברוך.

## **“A Constant Vision Of Greatness.”**

“A writer once wrote that all education requires *a constant vision of greatness*, in order to spur us on and motivate us to reach noble goals.” — Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, *Table Talk*, p. 3

“Watch him, just watch him,” my father would tell me. “For all the years I’ve known Rabbi Pelcovitz,” my father said, “he has always been an extremely calm and composed person; Shay, there’s a lot to learn from him.” Throughout my four-year tenure at Congregation Kneseth Israel, I was privileged to watch a constant vision of greatness as I sat next to and watched Rabbi Pelcovitz. He would often tell me, “I appreciate you, because you are from the old school,” never admitting that he served as my personal connection to that magnificent “old school.” He was that stately “older Rabbi” in our lives, always sharing his profound insights and wealth of experience to those born into a world of confusing conditions and entirely new ideals.

What tribute can one give to an unusually accomplished man who treated an inexperienced young rabbi like his own grandchild? What can one give back to a man who so often went out of his way to encourage and reassure a 26-year-old novice that there was ample space for him to make a relevant impression on the 21st-century world of the American Rabbinate? How can I say thank-you to an individual who was always the one to listen most attentively with an affectionate smile of approval during almost every *drashah* that I timidly gave in his presence? How can one ever forget the deeply

respectful, kindhearted, generous, soft-spoken, and self-effacing humble giant that was Rabbi Pelcovitz? Who has not been touched by this highly resourceful human being, who always seemed to know how to articulate the flawlessly meaningful words for every occasion?

Rabbi Pelcovitz's sense of honesty was legendary. I will never forget the times when I would sit down after delivering a *drashah*, and he'd turn to me and say, "Shay, was that really a *drashah*?" In due time, I learned to appreciate such comments, as I understood that they came from the sweetest and most delightful critic who simply wanted to help sharpen my ability to communicate. It was that same person that would wave his hand at me and so lovingly say, "Now today, Shay, that was *gut gezukt*!"

When discussing my hesitation to move from the White Shul to another potential community, Rabbi Pelcovitz was exceedingly reassuring. In fact, in the start of my final year in the shul, Rabbi Pelcovitz, of his own volition, called me to his home and said, "Shay, I know you like it here, and I know it's comfortable for you as well, but I feel that it's time for you to move on and expand your horizons beyond the confines of the White Shul." I carefully listened to his very deliberate advice, though at the time I certainly did not understand it at all. We discussed various challenges of the contemporary rabbinate and desirable communities where he suggested I consider a position. With his typical humor, he ended the conversation by saying, "Shay, you should look for a position in which you can live close enough to your in-laws that they can walk to you, but far enough away that they can't come in their slippers!" He explained, "This is the way to ensure that your wife will be happy, and if your wife is happy, you will be happy." And so, when the position at the Young Israel of Woodmere presented itself, I once

again went to seek his perceptive guidance. We discussed several points, but there is one that stands out in my mind. "Rabbi Pelcovitz, over the past few years I have become so accustomed to addressing members of the White Shul/Far Rockaway community," I asked him, "how will I learn to adapt to a completely new assortment of people and to a community with different needs?" I will never forget Rabbi Pelcovitz's authoritative response: "Shay, a Rabbi is only worthy of being listened to when he speaks words of absolute and unconditional honesty. Sincerity is a universal language that can be understood by all people, in all communities. I suggest you don't change your style one iota."

Every interaction with Rabbi Pelcovitz was a learning experience. In the summer of 2011, Rabbi Feiner was serving as the Rabbi in Camp Simcha, and I was serving as the Rabbi of the White Shul in his stead. Word quickly spread on Monday afternoon, July 11, about a missing Brooklyn child named Leiby Kletzky, who had been abducted and whose whereabouts were unknown to his family and friends. After a massive search by Jewish volunteers and local and federal investigators, the horrific news came in that Leiby Kletzky had been brutally murdered by another Jew. Our community, along with the global Jewish community, was completely terrified and shaken by what had happened.

Many local *askanim* and Rabbanim discussed the details of an appropriate communal response to such a tragedy and how they could effectively alleviate the gripping fears of local parents for the safety and well-being of their own children. I did not have any life experience to voice an opinion in either direction, but what I did have was my beloved mentor, Rabbi Pelcovitz. So, I went to his home to discuss the issue.

I mentioned that the White Shul presidium had suggested that we arrange an evening with a seasoned psychologist, Dr. David Pelcovitz, and create an open forum for parents to learn how to appropriately discuss this gruesome story with their children. Rabbi Pelcovitz was adamantly opposed. "There is something very wrong with the way parents of your generation raise their children," he said. "In the olden days, when we had something weighty that needed to be discussed with our children, my wife and I would stay up, after all of our children went to sleep, and we would examine and review all of the relevant issues. We understood the mentality of each one of our children better than anyone else would, and we deliberated how we, as parents, would deal with each one of them on his or her own level. It was a way of maturing our relationship as a couple, and it was a way of best dealing with our own children, whom we certainly knew best. Nowadays, you all opt for others like my son, a professional whom I deeply love, but who does not know or understand your children the way only a parent can! How did he become the surrogate parent in your place?! Why would you rob couples in our shul of the unique opportunity to grow together and manage a challenge geared to the specific needs of their children?"

"What the listener should really attempt to do is to evoke his own personal *shofar*, to awaken himself from his spiritual slumber, sensitize himself, and attempt to become aware of his own potential." —Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, *Table Talk*, p.188

Our family was so lucky to receive Rabbi Pelcovitz's legendary *brachos* before every Rosh Hashanah, as well as every Purim. We always made a point to bring our children to his home. This past Purim, just a few short weeks before his *petirah*, I brought my children to 781 Caffrey Avenue to visit and personally deliver

*mishloach manos*. Though wheelchair-bound and physically weak, Rabbi Pelcovitz was in a very talkative mood. Before entering, I spoke with my children about the unusual privilege that we had to receive his *brachos* and to speak with someone of this great stature and age. Rabbi Pelcovitz never missed an opportunity to encourage people and do whatever he could to make them feel good, and this time was no different from any other. He turned to my children and said, "Young boys, you come from a very rich legacy. I cannot say this about many, but I have been *zoche* to have learned Torah from your great-grandfather, from your grandfather, and I have also learned Torah from your father. You come from a strong שלשלת המסורה, to teach Torah with clarity and elegance. I give you both a *brachah* that you should grow up to appreciate what that means to you and how special it is for you to be a part of it." Standing there, sixty years younger than he was, I was in awe of his humility and generosity. Even when one was completely undeserving, Rabbi Pelcovitz always spoke with tremendous grace and dignity.

These last words I heard from him will be eternally etched in my heart and soul. He reminded me of my responsibility and mission. He lived each day actualizing his potential and empowering others to reach theirs as well. The best and only way to describe a man of this incredible character, of this seasoned intelligence, of this heartfelt sensitivity, and of this impressive magnitude is to simply say his name — "Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz."

Rabbi Berel Wein:

## ***“He Has Right & And They Were Wrong”***

*[The following is the more complete transcript of Rabbi Wein’s comments given during the video interview for the White Shul dinner, June 2018.]*

I met Rabbi Pelcovitz in 1964 when he came down to Miami Beach to be a guest speaker and deliver a lecture. I was the rabbi then in Miami Beach, and that was the first time I met him, though I had heard of him many times previously. Every generation needs inspirational figures—heroes, if you will. In the 1950’s, the Orthodox rabbinate in the United States was in great difficulty. Many Orthodox synagogues no longer were Orthodox; the wave of the future certainly looked as if it were going to be somewhere else. And there were a few rabbis that held the fort, so to speak. Not only did they hold the fort, they inspired others that something could be done. And I had the great pleasure of meeting a great number of them: Rabbi Leo Jung was one, and Rabbi Teitz of Elizabeth; and Rabbi Pelcovitz in Far Rockaway; the White Shul was known even in the wilds of Chicago. Here was someone who was able to maintain not only the halachic and traditional aspects of a synagogue, but who was able to inspire others as well and who had a vision that all would yet come right and that one should never give up. And that was very important to the younger generation of rabbis of that time, many of whom went into the rabbinate in desperation and felt that the best thing they could do was compromise; the only question was--how much to compromise?

He was a symbol of someone who stood differently, and he was enormously successful. He was an author, he was an orator, he was a scholar, and he was everything a rabbi was supposed to be. But the inspiring thing about him was the fact that he was tenacious in his belief—in his faith—that Torah would not desert the Jewish people, that the Jewish people would not desert the Torah. Therefore, operating on that premise, a great deal could be accomplished in the United States—and not only just in New York, but everywhere in the United States, wherever a person devoted himself to that cause, he would be blessed with success.

Another point that I always felt about Rabbi Pelcovitz was his resilience. After all, Far Rockaway almost died a number of times during his lifetime, but he never allowed it to die. I remember that when my family and I moved to the New York area in 1972, we went house hunting to see what neighborhood we should live in. One neighborhood I was interested in was Far Rockaway; and everybody told me, “Don’t move to Far Rockaway, it’s dead; it’ll never be back again, you’ll be wasting your money.” And like a fool, I believed them, because everybody said so. The only one who said, “Why don’t you come and be a big asset, and we could do great things together,” was Rabbi Pelcovitz, and I said, “But Rabbi, they said your neighborhood is dying; your synagogue is not viable anymore.” And he said, “Who cares what they say?” He was right, and they were wrong.

He was a person of great integrity and great faith, and he was personally a very good friend--in good times and bad. In better times, he needed a friend, he needed someone to talk to, and he needed someone to help. After his second marriage, when he married my friend Shirley Gross from Miami Beach, we developed

an even closer bond, because I had known the Grosses for decades. He and I had both a professional and a personal relationship.

He had a good sense of humor; he was a realist. Sometimes realists require a good sense of humor, because the real world is not so funny, the Jewish world especially is not so funny. It's very easy to become cynical, very easy to take a hard line on things and to be judgmental. That was not him. He didn't have that in him. I always remarked that his was a sunny personality; in a cloudy world he was a sunny personality and he maintained that even until his last days. In his remarkable old age, he continued to do everything. We did an interview together on video. It took place in The White Shul, ten or twelve years ago. It was a rollicking, funny, good evening for everyone, but it had a great deal of content, and *that was him*: He was good fun, with lots of content, but above all, he had that supreme faith that he inherited from his ancestors that Torah would preserve us. He had faith that we should do everything possible to preserve Torah, and that if somehow we didn't lose that sense of vision, if we saw the forest and not just the trees, everything would come right, it would be good; that especially characterized him.

I knew his daughter Judy in Monsey. She and her husband were members of my shul there. Dr. David I knew — every rabbi needs to have a good psychologist that he knows. Especially important was the fact that Rabbi Pelcovitz was the magnet that held it all together. He had a very long and productive life, but great people are always missed. They're not replaced. All of us who were fortunate enough to know him, to deal with him, to call him our friend, know that he cannot be replaced, so the fact that he is not here leaves a certain void in our psyche and in our hearts.

Just the fact that such a person existed and was successful and was a spokesman for Orthodoxy and was not afraid to say it the way it was – that itself was and is an important influence. There always has to be someone who says, “This is where we stand, this is what it is,” and he lived in a generation where many rabbis could not say that-- or were afraid to say that.

He was a very good person; being a good person means someone who looks for the good in people. He sought to help people, he was sensitive to others, and he was not a political animal. He was Agudah and Mizrachi—he was a *Klal Yisrael* Jew. He was interested in Jewish people-- all types of Jews. That also was very impressive to me, especially in our time when people think the first question they'll ask in heaven is, “Which party did you belong to?” That was not him. I think that a great deal of his appeal, his strength, and his influence lay in the fact that he was above all of that.

He was his own man. He was what he was. There is a famous statement by the Kotzker Rebbe, “If I am you, and you are me, then I am not me and you are not you, but if I am I, and you are you, then I am I, and you are you.” You have to be your own person. He didn't follow the herd; he was his own person; that was true in his rabbinic career, and it was true in his public appearances, in his attitude towards life and towards the Jewish people. I think that's very important, especially today when there is a herd mentality. People worry, “What will other people say, what will other people do, everybody does it, everybody is this, and everybody is that.” The Jewish world was built upon the strength of individuals to be honest with themselves and with others, and I think that that's an important lesson that he left us.

His father was a Lithuanian rabbi, which makes an imprint on people; Rabbi Pelcovitz did not come from Yeshiva University – though he was never opposed to Yeshiva University. It was “out of the box” at that time to be a rabbi and not come from that milieu, so to speak. He had the advantage of the influence of Eastern European Jewry upon him. I say about our generation: The Talmud says that Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi said that he achieved greatness because he once saw the back of Rabbi Meir. He said, “If I had seen him face to face, I would have been greater.”

During Rabbi Pelcovitz’s generation, and to a certain extent [mine](#) as well, we still “saw the back” of Eastern European Jewry. That’s something that does not exist today; it’s almost indescribable, although the memories of it have been distorted. Nevertheless, that *mesorah* had a great influence on him, it had a great influence on me, and it had a great influence on anyone who was privileged to know those people. They had a sense of satisfaction that whatever life gave them – and life was very hard – was correct. Their material expectations were minor; they lived in a world of thousands of years of Torah and they wanted to see where they fit into that pattern of Torah. And Rabbi Pelcovitz knew where he fit.

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky Recalls

## ***“The Last American Rabbi of an Era Gone By”***

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky, a native of Woodmere, is the Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivah Toras Chaim Bais Binyamin at South Shore. He recently published *Flowers in the Desert – The early history of the Orthodox Communities of the Five Towns*. This article was adapted and expanded from one that appeared in *Ami Magazine* the week after Rabbi Pelcovitz’s *petirah*.

I clearly remember the discussion. It was back in 1976, and I was in Monsey at the home of my *zeide*. Just a few short weeks earlier, Rav Yechezkel Abramski, *zt”l*, had passed away. My *zeide* knew him well. My *zeide* told me about his reverence for Rav Abramski, the Dayan of London, and how Rav Abramski’s judgment was extremely influential. He told of an incident whereby a single letter from him prevailed to prevent a certain event from occurring when no one else – not even men who were deemed greater than he – was able to stop it. Rav Abramski’s word or edict carried a weight that was heavier than all others.

My *zeide* then segued into a fascinating discussion about periods in Jewish history and the episodic demarcation lines that create different *tekufos*. Indeed, when did *Rishonim* end and *Acharonim* begin? What occurred that distinguished a person between being a *Gaon* and one of the *Rabana Savrai*? It is a long *shmuez*, but my *zeide* held that with the *petirah* of Rav Abramski, the *tekufah* or “age” of *rabbanus* ended. Rav Abramski was the last of the generation of European *Rabbanim*, and with his passing, an era had ended and a new era had begun.

I do not remember if my *zeide* said “European” *rabbanim* in particular, but I added the word “European” for simply one reason: If I dared to make another era, one that I would call “the era of the American *Rav*,” I would venture to say that even if it did not end with the passing of Rav Raphael Pelcovitz last Wednesday, it certainly is ebbing to a close. Barring a few names that I can perhaps compare him to, I would like to consider Rabbi Pelcovitz as one of the last American “*Shtetl Rabbanim*.”

For all of us growing up in the 1960s and 1970s, and maybe even the early 1980s, he was widely considered to be the *rav* of the entire community of Far Rockaway. His illustrious son, Dr. David Pelcovitz, recollected that his father had quipped that he wanted to live long enough to have a small funeral. Indeed, passing at 96, it would seem as if he was granted his wish. However, although most of his contemporaries both in the lay world and in the rabbinate predeceased him, he constantly made new friends and admirers, and they packed the large, cavernous shul to say goodbye.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was the quintessential rabbi and, yes, he was more than just a pulpit rabbi. He was indeed a *rav*. In addition to a serving as a *posek* and *darshan*, whose clarity and eloquence were remembered by anyone and everyone he spoke about or for, he was a leader among leaders.

He assumed the position of rabbi of Congregation Kneseth Israel, the iconic White Shul in Far Rockaway, in the very early 1950s, after the passing of Rav Shimshon Zelig Fortman. Rav Fortman was a Litvisher *rav* who had served as *rav* in the towns of Kopatkevichi and Osipovichi in Belarus, and was a Rosh Yeshivah near Slutsk, Lithuania prior to World War I. He was a member of the European

generation of *Litvisher Rabbanim* who spoke in Yiddish, and was revered.

Like his illustrious sons-in-law Rav Moshe Sherer and Rav Dovid Hollander, Rav Fortman was an unbelievable *darshan* and a master orator. When he passed away after 32 years of serving as the *rav* of Far Rockaway, the *kehillah* was in a quandary. They wanted a major *talmid chacham*, yet they also wanted someone who was not only eloquent in Yiddish, but in the language of the American *baal habas* as well.

Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelovitz could not have sent them a better choice than the young Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz.

Rabbi Pelcovitz had originally lived in Saratoga Springs. He later moved to Akron, Ohio, and finally to Far Rockaway. He entered the *rabbanus* more than 65 years ago, making him perhaps one of the longest-serving *rabbanim* in American history. Though he had assumed a powerful position of leadership, from the very onset, he endeared himself to the entire community with his firm, yet refined, demeanor.

His countenance was not something that he only learned in yeshivah; it was engrained in him. Rabbi Pelcovitz's father was a Litvisher *rav*, known in Europe as Rav Ephraim "Lomzer." Rav Ephraim Pelcovitz was a *talmid* of Radin but was mostly influenced by his years in the Slabodka Yeshivah. He eventually came to America to raise a family and served as the *rav* of a *kehillah* in Canton, Ohio, and later in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Even in his small community, Rav Ephraim, like his son to follow, engendered a reverence from those who surrounded him.

Though Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz grew up in Canton, Ohio, he gleaned wisdom from the world of the European *rabbanim*. Besides living under the tutelage of his own father, he learned in Chevron and Torah Vodaath, under *gedolei Torah* including Rav Moshe Cheveroni, Rav Shlomo Heiman, Rav Yaakov Kamenetzky, and his *rebbe* in leadership, Reb Shraga Feivel Mendelovitz. He bridged worlds that were totally lost to the community that he served so ardently. Maybe it was the Slabodka part of him that reminded me of my *zeide* every time I heard him talk in that slow, perfectly enunciated style that was reminiscent of my own forebears. His words were measured and powerful, with the diction of a statesman and the comportment of a prince. He never spoke a contrary word about his constituents or about his detractors.

He would treat me like a king when I came to visit and always had a *machshavah*, a story, a *mashal*, or a *ma'aseh* that was so appropriate to the particular situation. During one summer visit, when I explained to him somewhat sheepishly that a historical project that I was undertaking was more of an extracurricular activity and not part of my duties at the Yeshivah, which others perhaps deemed a waste of time, he comforted me with a story about my *zeide*. It was a story that Rabbi Pelcovitz repeated when he was *maspid* my own father some seven months later.

Rabbi Pelcovitz related that when his mother passed away, my *zeide*, who was the Rosh Yeshivah of Mesivta Torah Vodaath, did not hear of the *petirah* until a while after *shivah* had ended. My *zeide* still wanted to visit Rabbi Pelcovitz's father, Rav Ephraim, who was, by then, a *rav* in Bridgeport. My *zeide* asked the younger Rabbi Pelcovitz, "*Vee azoi fort men in Bridgeport?*" i.e., "How do you get to Bridgeport?"

In Rabbi Pelcovitz's own words, "That was like asking how to get to Mars." Indeed, it meant taking a subway to Grand Central Station to catch a train and then taxis or buses to the final destination. Rabbi Pelcovitz was astounded when he had heard that his *rebbe* had made the arduous trip to console his father, Rav Ephraim. To his father, the opportunity to behold his old *chaver* from Europe was especially meaningful.

When Rabbi Pelcovitz called my *zeide* to thank him for visiting his father, my *zeide* turned the tables. "It is you whom I have to thank," he explained. "*Ah mentch darf a mohl oislufteren* – a person has to air out once in a while," meaning that the trip and the change of scenery and pace were important to my *zeide* as well.

During the course of the *levayah*, I learned of his loyalty to the teachings of his *rabbanim*. He did not have a beard, and it was something that had always made me curious, especially when most of the *rabbanim* of the old generation with his commitment to *Yiddishkeit* had already grown one. His grandson, Rabbi Mordechai Gottlieb, who was a *talmid* of our yeshivah, addressed the issue for the crowd of 1,000 community members who had gathered to pay their *kavod acharon*. When Rabbi Gottlieb had been a young boy, his grandfather had explained, "My *rebbe*, Rav Shraga Feivel, told me that I am going to a modern American *kehillah* and that I should not wear a beard. 'They will not relate to you the same way if you do not shave,' Rav Feivel said."

Decades later, when his sister passed away, the *shloshim* beard that ultimately grew looked good on him. "I really wanted to keep the beard," Rabbi Pelcovitz had told his *einikil*, "but my *rebbe* said not to and I would not overrule him." But bearded or shaven, it made no difference. He was revered by his *kehillah* and later by all the newer

shuls and smaller communities that had sprung up in the exponential growth of the Five Towns and Rockaways.

Toward the end of his life, he became franker about the situation of *rabbanus* in America. The changes in the infrastructure of the American attitude toward *rabbanus* bothered him. He lamented over the fact that small shuls were popping up on every block not as a way to build the community but rather to entertain the various *baalei batim* who were looking for a young *rav* to say a nice *vort* or humorous anecdote each Shabbos. He felt strongly that the *rav* of a city should serve as the resident *talmid chacham*, *mara d'asra* and *posek*, and he should mold the outlook and attitude of the community. He should tend not only to the community's needs, but also to their spiritual lives, challenging and elevating its members. "Otherwise," Rabbi Pelcovitz said, "The shul is no shul and the rabbi is no rabbi."

In a conversation with Rabbi Berel Wein, a ninth-generation *rav* himself, Rabbi Pelcovitz related a story about a pastor who was a very weak student and landed at the bottom of his class in his theological seminary. The school shipped him out to some rural town, where he served for several years. The administrators of the seminary were surprised that no one complained, and everyone seemed happy with this poor excuse for a preacher. They decided to visit and ask the worshipers the secret of their student's success. The community members sent the president of the congregation, who explained, "His success is no secret. In reality, we did not even want a minister, and this fellow you sent is the closest thing to what we wanted."

He recounted a story in which he was going to be *mesader kiddushin* at the wedding of the son of one of his congregants. At the time, the Ponevezher Rav, the great Gaon Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman was

in America. Because the White Shul congregant was a supporter of the Ponovezh Yeshiva, Rav Kahanamen joined the *simchah*. Upon seeing the Rav, the father of the groom immediately asked Rav Pelcovitz if he could give the honor of *siddur kiddushin* to the Rav. Of course, Rabbi Pelcovitz deferred to the Gaon, but the Ponovezher Rav absolutely refused. "*Mesader kiddushin?*" he asked. "I am a Rosh Yeshivah! I can give a *shiur* in *Meseches Kiddushin*, but the *rav* of your *kehillah* is the one who will be *mesader kiddushin*." The Ponovezher Rav refused both to be *mesader kiddushin* and to read the *kesubah*, leaving those honors to the Rabbanim of the community. He relented and accepted to recite one of the *sheva berachos* under the *chuppah*, but he taught an eternal lesson in the role and dignity of a *Shtetl Rav*, something that Rav Pelcovitz felt was unfortunately eroding.

At 95 years old, Rav Pelcovitz, like a lion, garnered his strength to be *maspid* my father at a very public *hesped* in one of the largest community shuls in Woodmere. He very well could have said, "I have no strength," but in his own words, the blessing of "*hanosain layaeif koach*, Who gives strength to the weary," means that there are occasions in which Hashem gives people superhuman strength to perform difficult tasks.

I remember as a young boy that during the difficult years of my father's yeshivah in Woodmere, Rabbi Pelcovitz's shul hosted my father and grandfather, who would make an appeal on behalf of the Yeshiva of South Shore. My father was forever grateful for his support, and my family and I are indebted to him for his efforts to give our beloved father the proper *kavod* at his *levayah*, even when no other person that age would have found the strength.

And that's because he was a Rabbi's Rabbi, and in my humble opinion, maybe the last of a great breed.

## ***The Torah Giant around the Corner***

My earliest memories of Rabbi Pelcovitz *a"h* were the summers when we rented bungalows in Far Rockaway and occasionally davened the White Shul. My father *a"h*, who was a classmate of Rabbi Pelcovitz in Yeshiva *Torah Vodaath*, had already depicted him as the "Master *Darshan*." And now, I had the privilege to experience it for myself. In addition, I was amazed by the number of *shiurim* Rabbi Pelcovitz gave and his ability to motivate members of the shul and community to learn.

I've had the privilege to be in the Young Israel in Far Rockaway since 2004. Living so close to our shul, Rabbi Pelcovitz often davened with us on Friday nights, *Shabbos Mincha's*, and *Shabbos* mornings when the weather didn't permit him daven in the White Shul. It was a tremendous *kavod* for all of us. We all felt we were in the presence of a *Torah* giant, who happened to live around the corner.

There are so many praiseworthy attributes to note. His compassion for people, his love for people and for *Torah*. Everyone wanted to take time with him to ask questions, to discuss things with him. He had all the time in the world for you and made you feel you were the only person in existence for that moment. He was a remarkable human being, and, frail as he was, his memory was keen. When he got up to speak it was with the power of a man half his age; we were so impressed.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was blessed with a wide breadth of knowledge, both *Torah* and secular, along with original insights. Besides his

phenomenal memory, he possessed a sharp and witty sense of humor, and a most gracious smile. His warmth, care, and concern for everyone endeared him to all.

Furthermore, we were all the beneficiaries of his *seforim*, and anytime we had the chance to engage in a conversation with him, we were uplifted and enriched.

One cherished memory comes to mind. When I came to the shul in 2004, they were making an installation for me on that Shabbos and they asked who the guest speaker should be. I said, without hesitation, "Rabbi Pelcovitz, the master *darshan*." When I found out he agreed to do it, I went over and said, "Thank you so much! And you should know, this is the second time you are speaking for me at my installation."

He said "Really?"

I said "Yes. Fifteen years ago, in 1989, when I became the president of the *Vaad HaRabbonim* in Queens, I asked you also to speak and you spoke! So, this is the second time."

He said, "Really? When I spoke at your installation in 1989, did I speak well?"

I said, "Rabbi Pelcovitz, you were great!"

He responded "Good. Tell me what I said and I'll repeat it!"

Rabbi Pelcovitz was never at a loss for words.

May Rabbi Pelcovitz be a *melitz yosher* for Klal Yisrael, especially for his wonderful family. What a *zechus* to have known him.

*Yihi zichro baruch.*

Rabbi Yaacov Horowitz of the  
Bostoner Beis Medrash

## •*Divrei Zikaron*

It is a singularly difficult task to articulate proper *divrei zikaron* for such a singular *Talmid Chacham*, community leader, and Rav as Rav Raphael Pelcovitz *a"h*. He was truly a rabbi's rabbi. He was an exceptional writer, orator, educator, and a man of very great *Torah* wisdom, wit, and worldly understanding. Through his many years of productive *rabbonus* he enhanced the lives of many thousands of families and individuals across the world.

I remember when I came to the Lawrence Five Towns community 26 years ago, how I visited him, wanting to introduce myself and ask for his *bracha* in the opening of the Bostoner *Beis Medrash* of Lawrence. I was immediately much moved by the warmth of his personality, along with his keen perception and rabbinic insight.

He was exceptionally cordial and even effusive in his *bracha*. It was obvious to me that he was someone special I could turn to for sage counsel, guidance, and friendship. I was also pleasantly surprised with his extensive knowledge and understanding of *Chassidus*. When I heard him share *Torah* and many *mamarei Chazal* from the *gedolei Chassidus* both publicly and privately, it was obvious that here was a *talmid chacham* who could convey not only the *Torah* of *Chassidus*, but also the spirit and *geist* of *Toras HaBaal Shem Tov*. In so doing, he not only demonstrated that he understood it on an intellectual level, he really felt it and could transmit its warmth and *ahavas Yisroel*.

There is a famous *maimar* of the *Baal Shem Hakodesh*, that the main thrust of our *mitzvos* at this time of *Ikvesei d'Moshicha* is a love of

*Torah*, the love of Hashem, and the love of *Klal Yisroel*. The legacy of Rav Raphael Pelcovitz z"l, is his embracing and spreading these concepts lovingly, eloquently, and powerfully to so many talmidim and friends. It will certainly endure after his passing, and will bring comfort and *nechamah* to his loved ones and to *Klal Yisroel*.

*Yehi zichro baruch.*

Rabbi Kenneth Hain:

## ***“He was truly a Rabbi’s Rav.”***

I was fortunate to know Rabbi Pelcovitz from the time I entered *rabbanus*. In the early 1970’s, my parents moved to Far Rockaway and were congregants of Rabbi Pelcovitz and Rav Nachman Bulman, *zichronam livrachah*. I was immediately struck by his interest in everyone he encountered – particularly a young rabbinic prospect. Of course, it became a much closer relationship thirty years ago when I moved to the Five Towns, in nearby Lawrence. I will offer a perspective of what I was influenced by. Rabbi Pelcovitz connected to me with the many, many rare qualities that he had.

First, as a young rabbi, I was struck by the fact that he approached *rabbanus* with a sense of relationship: “*Aseh lecha rav, u’kneh lecha chaver.*” A rabbi isn’t just a figure, a teacher, a *posek*, rather he is someone you can actually have a relationship with, talk to and be understood. I think it was very significant that he was able to do that as his community changed and transitioned. This is something that I’ve thought about a lot in my own *rabbanus*- of how one maintains oneself in the *makom*, in the place that you are, and it fundamentally devolves to how you relate to individuals – and he was a master at that.

Second was his awareness that we as Orthodox Jews are also living in historic times. To be a *rav*, post-Shoah, with the emergence of *Medinat Yisrael*, meant that you had to recognize the time that we’re in and how that affects us; how we respond. Putting aside rabbinic politics, or Israeli politics, as a *rav*, he was so tuned in to what was happening in the world. He conveyed that constantly, above and beyond the sort of squabbles within the Jewish community. He had

a perspective of the time that we were living in, and he knew that it meant that the *rav* had to act as an interpreter of that time; that affected me continually whenever we would meet.

Third, his extremely rich knowledge in Torah and in the secular world meant that he applied a particularly remarkable approach in dealing with issues. Not too long ago we read that when a Kohen looks at a *nega*, a blemish, it is stated in a rather unusual way: *v'raah haKohen es hanega*, and the end of the *pasuk* states, "*v'ra'ahu haKohen* – And the Kohen looks." Why the double looking of the Kohen? The *Meshech Chochmah* famously says that "double look" means that he not only looked at the issue, but he looked at the larger picture. What is this person about? What is the time that he's living in, what is the situation he's confronting? Or to put it another way, to look not only at the text, but to look at the context of that situation. And to me, that's what Rabbi Pelcovitz embodied: He not only saw an individual question, a *she'ailah*, a problem, but he saw the larger picture, and for that reason he was able to be so wise in how he responded and how he would counsel people. To me, that awareness of his *makom*, of his *zman*, together with his incredible *limud* – that was his *mazal*, and it was *our mazal* that we were blessed by his presence, his leadership, and his friendship. May our community, may his family, may all of *Klal Yisrael* continue to be inspired by his memory.

He was someone who was a "*bar eitzah*," a person to whom you could talk easily and not feel that there was a judgmental distance between him and the person he was speaking to. He was the opposite of intimidating. That's an extraordinary quality of someone that great and that knowledgeable...and really very humble.

He also appreciated the fact that in a certain sense we shared a similar kind of trajectory in the rabbinate. That is, he had come to a community that was moderately Orthodox and had seen it develop, and he knew that I had come to a community that was in a similar setting. He had some wise thoughts of how to manage that, and so we sort of shared. My community, in a sense, was doing that twenty or twenty-five years later than his community was. Therefore, I had similar issues that he had experienced, in terms of the degree of commitment to Orthodoxy and standards, and questions that would confront a rabbi in that kind of changing landscape. That's what he confronted here in The White Shul and what I've, in a sense, also been fortunate to have to deal with as well. I feel that that's what makes him so remarkable; as I said, he did not have trouble moving from one time period to another. I'm sure there was never a moment when people in this community said "Oh, he's old school; you know, he doesn't get it today," because he totally did get it.

Rabbis are busy, and there's not a lot of downtime for chitchat, but when we would see each other at *simchahs* or at dinners or at whatever multiple moments that rabbis are seen, he was incredibly gracious and warm.

Many of my congregants are actually alumni of the White Shul, as well, so we've shared that. Overall, I always saw him as a model of someone who could actually move a congregation and move *with* a congregation from point A, to B, to C, and not compromise his basic principles. The classic illustration is that he never grew a beard (I sort of compromised a little bit). But he really was someone who knew who he was, stuck to his principles, and just enjoyed not only such enormous affection, but also respect.

Interestingly, he didn't engage in many rabbinic political activities; he was not part of the larger rabbinic organizations, but he did clearly have an impact through his writings and his speaking. He was gifted in both of those areas, and what made that work was that he was so genuinely American. So, it wasn't that "Oh, you don't get it; you're old school, you're old world, what do you know?" He was American, and unabashedly proud to be an American as well as loving Klal Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael. He certainly had the credentials to be considered someone who got what's going on in the real world.

There are people who would know better than I, but I think there was clearly a passion developed by the *talmidim* of Rav Shraga Feivel Mendelovich, who inspired people and motivated them to do for Klal Yisrael, and Rabbi Pelcovitz would often invoke his name as a role model as well as a rebbe. Clearly, he also connected with many of the YU rabbis who were the predominant majority of the American Orthodox rabbis. At the same time, he remained true to the yeshivah world he had come from.

Rabbi Avrohom Davis:

***“Torah saturated our  
every conversation.”***

Rabbi Davis is best known for his seforim, siddurim, and machzorim from  
Metzudah Publishing.

Since moving from Reads Lane to Ramat Shlomo, I would often call or receive calls from Rabbi Pelcovitz, *a”h*. He was always quick to inquire about our welfare and about the latest events in *Eretz Yisrael*. But beyond those pleasantries, he was laser-focused on sharing substantive *divrei Torah*, which saturated our every conversation. Every phone call was built around the weekly *sedra* or an upcoming *moed* or a particularly meaningful *chiddush* that he’d heard. He had the unique ability to make me feel as if I was the only thing that mattered to him at the time of the call. I surely knew that his range of concerns knew no end. I shared the joy of this *chavrusascheft* with him for several years. Even at the age of 96, his acumen remained sharp, his passion for Torah was unabated, his thirst to know more stood unquenched, and his compassion for others was always palpable. I will sorely miss the warmth of his long-familiar voice, transporting us both to higher realms in *yiras Shamayim*, *limud HaTorah*, and *avodas Hashem*.

## ·Recalls the Ultimate Rabbi

*Along with the entire Far Rockaway community, I was very deeply pained by the petirah of the beloved and revered Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz zt"l. I shed many tears as I absorbed the words of hesped shared at his levaya - and many thoughts and emotions filled my head and heart which I will try to convey some.*

When my siblings and I were growing up in the White Shul, Rabbi Pelcovitz was part and parcel of our lives. We would walk to the White Shul from Lawrence each and every Shabbos, and even as children all of us always sat through his remarkable *derashos*. Even though they might have been long, and we did not yet appreciate their content and depth, we never felt bored or uninterested. His words were soothing and captivating; they seemed to drip with sweetness out of his mouth. Only later, when I grew older and began to B'H give *derashos* myself, did I truly appreciate the unbelievable *golden tongue* and power of speech that our esteemed Rabbi had. He never failed to mesmerize and captivate his listeners.

My family's relationship with Rabbi Pelcovitz spanned generations. My mother's family was among his first *baalei batim* when he became Rabbi of the White Shul sixty six years ago. Rabbi Pelcovitz was *mesader* my parents' *Kiddushin* and spoke at all of our Bar Mitzvahs. Through it all, Rabbi Pelcovitz influenced us not just through his powerful oratory, but simply by who he was and what he stood for.

One example of this influence can be clearly seen in my mother's a"n diary where she pens on one *Motzei Shabbos* in 1962: "Rabbi Pelcovitz

*spoke today about the passing of Rav Aharon Kotler Zt'l this week...his words were very moving and inspiring..."* (My mother was all of 15 years old at the time!)

My wife's Zaydee, Mr. Bernard Brickman *a"h*, used to often walk from Bayswater on Shabbos to hear Rabbi Pelcovitz; eventually moving to Far Rockaway in order to be closer to the Shul. He remained very close with the Rabbi for his entire life, and he merited that Rabbi Pelcovitz spoke at the *sheva Brachos* of every one of his grandchildren. We were *zocheh*, too, to benefit from his indescribable *hespedim* for my Zaydee, Mr. Jack Bodner, *a"h* and for my mother *a"h*.

Mere words cannot do justice to his greatness, but I feel that I would be remiss if I did not at least try, *Be'H*.

The words that come to mind in thinking about this *giant of a man* are those of Shlomo Hamelech: "*Pihah paschah b'chochmah v'soras chesed al lishonah*" 'Her mouth opens with wisdom and the Torah of kindness is on her tongue.' Every single time that I merited speaking to our beloved Rabbi, from my childhood until just this year, I noticed a remarkable thing: When Rabbi Pelcovitz opened his mouth, only words of wisdom came out; and every word was filled with kindness. He had an uncanny ability to listen and at the same time express himself in a way that made the recipient feel honored and appreciated.

The joy of life that radiated from his face was palpable. His stature was regal and princely; he exuded warmth yet commanded respect in the way he carried himself. His presence was ever so keenly felt, and his charisma overpowering. Rabbi Pelcovitz was a precious and

beautiful person that infused love and appreciation in others. His every step was filled with love of life and love of people. The unstinting *mesorah* of Torah and truth that emanated from his every move and every word went deeply into everyone he encountered. I, as a humble recipient of his greatness and teachings, cannot possibly express how much I loved him, nor can I possibly convey how much I mourn over his passing. But Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz' powerful legacy will continue forever, and the Far Rockaway community which he laid the incredible foundation for will, *b'ezras Hashem*, be a continuous merit for his beloved and pure soul.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Goodman:

## ***“He led our community from obscurity to renown”***

Rabbi Goodman is the Rabbi Emeritus of the Young Israel of Far Rockaway.

I still recall my first visit to Far Rockaway, decades ago, when I spent a Shabbos with my uncle and aunt. At that time the White Shul was indeed white, and Rav Pelcovitz had been Rav for about two or three years. The Orthodox community was small, and the area very mixed.

The dramatic change that has seen this area become internationally known as a powerhouse of Yiddishkeit, Torah, and tzedakah can be attributed primarily to the tremendous influence of Rav Pelcovitz, whose powerful inspiration ignited this community with a spiritual fire that has not been extinguished. His dynamic leadership, immense scholarship, and inspiring sermons are unequaled in the American Rabbinate. That is why his legacy will remain in our hearts and minds in the decades ahead. How fortunate that our community chose him decades ago to lead us from near obscurity to international renown.

Rabbi Dr. Shnayer Leiman:

## ***Reminiscences of Far Rockaway and the White Shul 1951-1961***

At the 70th anniversary banquet of the White Shul, celebrated at the Sands in Atlantic Beach in 1992, Rabbi Pelcovitz was honored for “40 years of service to our congregation and community.” The hefty journal distributed at the banquet included a chronology that highlighted the key events in the history of the White Shul. Two entries, listed next to each other, deserve special attention:

**1951 Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz named as spiritual leader of Kneseth Israel.**

**1961 Land purchased on Sage and Empire for construction of new Synagogue.**

Indeed, 1951-1961 was the first decade, and arguably the most important one, in the history of Rabbi Pelcovitz’s rabbinate in the White Shul. In 1951, the White Shul was not known nationally even among Orthodox Jews in the United States. By 1961, it was ranked among the most vibrant and significant Orthodox shuls in the world. To speak from the pulpit in the White Shul was an honor that no one could turn down; to make an appeal in the White Shul was an opportunity that virtually every Jewish organization sought. To address the White Shul was to address Orthodox Jewry. This remarkable transformation was largely due to the inspired

leadership of Rabbi Pelcovitz. He, of course, could not do it alone. But it was Rabbi Pelcovitz who orchestrated the transformation. He had the vision and the wisdom that were essential for leading the White Shul to greatness.

Truthfully, only a professional historian could do justice to a history of Far Rockaway's Jewish community in general, and to the history of the White Shul in particular. All I can contribute are some memories of what it was like to live in Far Rockaway, and to *daven* in the White Shul, in that first decade of Rabbi Pelcovitz's tenure as rabbi of the White Shul.

**1. Background.** My memories of Far Rockaway begin in 1948, when my father was appointed principal of the Hebrew Institute of Long Island, popularly called HILL, an Orthodox day school (grades 1-8) with some 200 students at the time. It was the only Orthodox day school in all of Long Island, and it would play an important role in attracting young Jewish families to Far Rockaway and to the White Shul.

I still remember my first view of Far Rockaway in the spring of 1948, when my father drove us (i.e., my mom and brother as well) through the sites and streets of Far Rockaway. Sandy beaches, cool ocean breeze, golf course, trees, green lawns, flowers, beautiful homes, and more. All of six years old at the time, and bursting with excitement, I joyfully announced: "We are going to live in the country!" Indeed, for those moving to Far Rockaway from the Lower East Side, the Bronx, and (as in my case) from Brooklyn, Far Rockaway was a resort, "a Torah Suburb by the Sea," as it was famously labelled by Michael Kaufman in his essay on Far Rockaway published in 1960.

In 1950, Far Rockaway could boast two well-established shuls, the White Shul, at Dinsmore and Nameoke, and Shaaray Tefila, almost around the corner, on Central Avenue. Throughout the years 1951-1961, there would be (for the most part) a friendly rivalry between the two shuls, each seeking to attract new members as new families settled in Far Rockaway. Not a few Jews took out membership in both shuls. It is all to the credit of their two distinguished rabbis, Rabbis Pelcovitz and Rackman, that they worked together to advance every cause that would enhance Jewish life in Far Rockaway. One of the great highlights of Jewish life in Far Rockaway (at least between 1951 and 1961, when I lived there) took place every Simchas Torah, following the *hakofos*, when the two rabbis came together in the same room, were carried high on chairs by their ardent enthusiasts, and the members of the rival shuls danced together in honor of the Torah and in honor of their rabbis.

**2. Rabbi Pelcovitz as *Darshan*.** Early in 1951, Rabbi Zelig Fortman died, having served the White Shul as its second rabbi from 1930 until his untimely death in his mid-fifties. I was too young (and ignorant) to appreciate his Yiddish sermons, but all who heard him recognized him as a master *darshan*. What I recall vividly is the *kavod haTorah* that was rendered to him by the members of the White Shul. Every Shabbos morning, when the services ended, the *ba'ale-battim* didn't simply run down to the nearest *kiddush* or out the nearest exit to the street. All stood on a massive line and made their way to the podium in the front of the shul, where they greeted Rabbi Fortman, exchanged a word or two with him, and then left for the *kiddush* or home.

Until the appointment of Rabbi Pelcovitz later in 1951, I would ordinarily sit next to my father in the White Shul for much of the *davening*. At the time, there was neither a Youth Program nor a Youth

Minyan in the White Shul. But I was a youngster, with ants in my pants, and whenever possible, made my way either downstairs or outside the shul, where all the kids gathered, ran around, played games, and did whatever it is that kids do. For the most part, I disappeared during portions of *kerias haTorah* and during Rabbi Fortman's Yiddish sermon, both of which moved well beyond my attention span, and, in any event, I often didn't understand a word of what was being said. That would change with the arrival of Rabbi Pelcovitz. Initially, I was just curious to hear what his sermons sounded like. It very quickly became apparent to me that I could follow at least parts of his *derashos*. Indeed, they were really interesting. The sermons were expertly crafted; there was a beginning, a middle, and an end. It all made sense. And he sprinkled his sermons with wonderful stories from the Talmud and Midrash, and with *bon mots* from all of literature. You always walked away with treasures after hearing Rabbi Pelcovitz speak. I agonized over my natural instinct to play outside the shul or to stay inside and listen to the sermon. I equivocated for a while, but ultimately Rabbi Pelcovitz won. What he had to say was far more important than anything I could possibly learn running around with my friends outside the shul.

**3. Ba'ale-Battim in the White Shul.** The White Shul has always been blessed with a cadre of *ba'ale-battim* whose commitment to Orthodoxy is uncompromising. Among the old-timers who were present in the White Shul when we arrived in 1948 were Carl Austern (always described to me as one of the founding fathers of the White Shul); Daniel Meyers (a Torah activist who was an ardent supporter of Mesivta Torah Vodaath, and who led the campaign for Far Rockaway's first *mikveh* in the 1950's—the *mikveh* previously used was in Edgemere); Al Goldman (the *ba'al tokea* of the White

Shul); and Rabbi Sam Genauer, one of the many ordained rabbis (without a pulpit) and major *talmidei chachomim* who served as *ba'ale-battim* in the White Shul. By the end of the first decade of Rabbi Pelcovitz's incumbency, there were as many as thirty-five ordained rabbis who served as *ba'ale-battim* in the White Shul. It was these *ba'ale-battim*, and many more whose names cannot be listed in this brief account, who in 1951 appointed Sol Septimus as head of the search committee to select a new rabbi for the White Shul. There were many applicants for the post. Ultimately, a short list was settled upon, and I still remember the candidates who came on *probeh*. And that committee had the wisdom to select Rabbi Pelcovitz as the third rabbi of the White Shul. The rest, as they say, is history.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was a master at getting everybody involved in the shul. He always taught that everyone had a share in Torah, and he made certain that everyone had a share in good deeds. A shul was not merely a room where people convened to *daven* and learn; it was a community, a *kehillah*, where everyone, men and women, had something to contribute. And so, for example, Isidor Zwiebel was a *gabbai*. (He almost kept me from attending my own bar mitzvah in 1954. I was all of 4' 5" at the time and looked much like a seven-year-old. As I entered the shul, he stopped me at the door and said, "Sonny, there is no running around in the shul this Shabbos; there is a big bar mitzvah today." With a proud smile I explained to him that I was the bar mitzvah boy.)

Jerry Rubenstein, for example, was in charge of the shul kitchen, and set up the *kiddushim* and *shalosh se'udos*. What I never knew until recently is that, apparently, he played a significant role in what ultimately led to the appointment of Rabbi Pelcovitz in the White

Shul. According to a newspaper account published in *Yated Ne'eman* in 2016, the following occurred:

When the Rubenstein family moved to Far Rockaway, they joined the White Shul, a shul committed to Torah ideals, led by Rabbi Fortman. Two years later, in 1951, when the *Rav* passed away, the town was slowly drifting away from Torah and *mitzvos*....The *shul* was at a crossroads. One of the richest members of the community was not religious and was pushing strongly for his modernization agenda. Jerry Rubenstein got up at a shul meeting and put the ringleader in his place. "This is our shul and we have worked to preserve it as a place of Torah-true *Yiddishkeit*. That is the way it must remain." With that, he motioned for the ringleader to be thrown out, so that he could be stopped from sabotaging the shul's spiritual growth. The people were moved by this plea and ended up voting to hire Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz as their spiritual leader. Rabbi Pelcovitz's influence had a profound impact on the spiritual growth of the community.

Under the rubric *ba'ale-battim*, one can include here a brief discussion of the cantors who graced the White Shul with their presence, for, ultimately, they were replaced by the *ba'ale-battim* themselves. Rabbi Pelcovitz inherited the old Chazzan Moskowitz, who for many years had led the services in the White Shul. It was wisely decided to allow him to retire gradually over a period of time. His cantorial efforts were now confined mostly to reciting *Pesukei d'Zimrah* on Shabbos morning. Several very able cantors were hired over a period of years, include Cantor Handel and Cantor Oscar Berry, who led the Shacharis and Mussaf services every Shabbos. But as the shul kept growing larger and larger during its first decade, it became obvious

that the shul was blessed with excellent *ba'alei tefillah*. A vote was taken, and the six or so best were selected; they were given exclusive rights to lead the Shabbos services in rotation. If you were making a *simchah* in shul (e.g. a bar mitzvah or an *aufruf*), you could select any one of the six, even if he wasn't scheduled for that particular Shabbos. For the connoisseurs who insisted on hearing the best cantors in the world, the White Shul would, every once in a while, sponsor a concert by a world-class *chazzan*. In the 1950's, Chazzan Sholom Katz officiated for a Shabbos in the old White Shul. It was my first exposure to a first-rate *chazzan*. (I recall, too, that shortly before his death, perhaps in 1965 or 1966, Chazzan Moshe Koussevitzky officiated for a Shabbos in the new White Shul. I was a student at the University of Pennsylvania at the time, but I made sure to make my way to the White Shul for that occasion. It was a Shabbos to remember.)

One cannot possibly remember the first decade of Rabbi Pelcovitz's tenure in the White Shul without mentioning perhaps the most important *ba'al habayis* in the White Shul at the time, Reb Pinchas Osowsky (pronounced: Osofsky). He was officially the sexton, with numerous responsibilities. But he will be remembered by all mostly for his *leining*, which was immaculate. I doubt that I have ever heard a better *ba'al keriah* in my life. And there is a moral lesson here as well. In his first years at the White Shul, he often erred in his reading of the Torah. The listeners were quick to correct him. It was an embarrassment, for he was hired precisely in order to *lein* regularly and perfectly. He took the criticism to heart, applied himself to the task, and became one of the all-time great *ba'alei keriah*.

**4. Rabbi Pelcovitz's Disciples.** Rabbi Pelcovitz devoted great effort in his first decade at the White Shul to provide youngsters with a

meaningful experience in shul. Under his aegis, youth programs were introduced, where youngsters could learn how to *daven* at their own pace, and how to participate in and lead their own services. He established a Youth Minyan (downstairs in the *Beis Medrash* of the old White Shul) and provided it with mentors who taught the youngsters how to *daven* properly. Needless to say, everything was done *k'halachah*. Twice a year there would be a Youth Shabbos upstairs in the main sanctuary; the youngsters would take over the entire *davening*, including the Rabbi's sermon! Not only did we learn how to *daven* properly; we learned how to overcome stage fright as well. The ultimate proof of the success of the program can be seen in the postcard sent in a general mailing to the entire White Shul membership, announcing that Shabbos Parashas Yisro, February 11-12, 1955, would be a Youth Shabbos upstairs in the main sanctuary. It listed the various youngsters who would participate in the program, and their specific roles. These are among the first disciples of Rabbi Pelcovitz and the White Shul, who would go on to become the rabbis and the *ba'ale-battim* of the future. Alas, I'm no longer in touch with some of them, but I will list the names and professions of the ones I know (or: knew) best.

George Samet is Rabbi Yehuda Samet. He and his wife Yehudis went on *aliyah* in 1967. He is a master teacher who has devoted his life to teaching Torah to *ba'alei teshuvah*, or more precisely, to Jews who never learned much about Judaism. He teaches at Yeshivat Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem.

Lawrence Kaplan, well known author and lecturer, is Professor of Rabbinics and Jewish Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal. Among his recent publications is *Maimonides between Philosophy and Halakhah: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Lectures on the Guide for the*

*Perplexed at the Bernard Revel Graduate School* (Ktav Publishing: New York, 2016).

Sheldon Rubenstein (son of Jerry Rubenstein, mentioned earlier) became Rabbi Asher Zelig Rubenstein, *a"h* (d. 2013). He served as Rosh Yeshivah of Yeshivas Toras Simcha in Jerusalem, and authored a variety of rabbinic works in Hebrew and in English. His most recent work, published posthumously and edited by Rabbi Yosef Tropper, is entitled *Wings of Faith* (Jerusalem, 2017).

Charles Septimus is Rabbi Chaim Septimus, a distinguished Jewish educator who has taught thousands of students, mostly young women who spend a year or two of intensive Torah study in Jerusalem after graduating from high school. He lives with his wife in Jerusalem. His younger brother Barry, also listed on the postcard, lives in the Five Towns and needs no introduction to a White Shul audience.

Howard Joseph, distinguished rabbi and scholar, is an Ashkenazi raised in Far Rockaway, who serves as Rabbi Emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Montreal.

Bernard Septimus (son of Sol Septimus, mentioned earlier), distinguished *talmid chacham* and scholar, is Jacob Safra Professor of Jewish History and Sephardic Culture at Harvard University. (I believe that he is presently Professor Emeritus.)

In closing, I'll mention one more sample of Rabbi Pelcovitz's profound impact on the youngsters who made up the first graduating class of his efforts in the White Shul from 1951-1961. By

chance, I noticed an interview that was recorded in 2007 and was posted on the Internet. Alan G. Ciner was interviewed by Peggy Kaplan for the Columbus [Ohio] Jewish Historical Society's Oral History Project. Alan Ciner, born and raised in Far Rockaway, earned his *semichah* from the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University. He also earned a Master's degree in medieval Jewish philosophy at Yeshiva University. He has served in the rabbinate in Baltimore, Columbus, and Palm Beach, and is currently Vice President of the Touro College and University System, and he serves as CEO of Touro College South. Alan's father, William Ciner, was a former president of the White Shul. Alan's older brother Sammy was my best friend (and in 1948, when the Leiman family moved to Far Rockaway and settled in the Reads Lane area, I regularly walked a mile to the Ciner home on Greenport Road in order to find a *shomer Shabbos* boy, Sammy, to play with).

At one point in the fascinating interview, Rabbi Ciner was asked, "Who had the greatest influence on you while you were young?" He answered unhesitatingly, "My mother and father." He then added, "I want to add also my rabbi who still lives, Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz. I don't know if he's aware of the influence he had, [which was] very much so. I value that I was exposed to such a *talmid chacham*, to such a good person, to whom values and *mussar*, and whether you are a good person as well as a [good] Jew, and [possess] *yirat Shamayim*, are the important things. And I was not one of those kids who was playing outside during the rabbi's sermon. My father insisted [that] I sit in the shul."

Look at the first fruits of Rabbi Pelcovitz's, and the White Shul's, labor of love!

יהא זכרו ברוך

Afterword: This brief essay focuses on a few themes, and on a brief period, in the long history of the White Shul. I could not mention endless names and anecdotes that came to mind, and I deliberately kept references to my own family at a minimum. But I must make mention of my aunt and uncle, Jean and Bernie Gross, who left an indelible imprint on the White Shul and on the Far Rockaway Jewish community in the very period treated by this essay. And I must make mention of my favorite aunt, Shirley, who in a later period enabled Rabbi Pelcovitz to engage in so many more wonderful years of learning and teaching and growing. He was always learning, always teaching, and always growing. We owe her a debt of gratitude that only G-d can repay.

Rabbi Nosson Scherman:

## ***“One phrase . . . stuck in my mind for 70 years.”***

*[The following is the more complete transcript of Rabbi Scherman's comments given during the video interview for the White Shul dinner, June 2018.]*

The first time I saw Rabbi Pelcovitz and heard Rabbi Pelcovitz, I was a young teenager in Torah Vodaas, and there was a *yahrzeit* for Rav Shlomo Heiman, *zichrono livrachah*. Rabbi Pelcovitz was a *talmid* of Rav Shlomo, and he was one of the speakers. He said one phrase that stuck in my mind all these years — it's been almost 70 years — he said about Rav Shloime that he had “the *amkus* of *pashtus*.” That is, the depth of simplicity. In other words, the *shiur* on the surface was very simple, clear, and made a lot of sense. But when you thought about it, and the more you thought about it, the more you realized how deep it was. I got to know Rabbi Pelcovitz only slightly over the years, and I think that phrase describes him very well. He was not bombastic, he didn't make a big deal over himself; he was a brilliant man, he was a *talmid chacham*, he was a wise person.

I heard him once more when I was twenty or twenty-one years old, at was a fundraiser for *Bais Medrash Elyon* where I was learning. Rav Schorr, *zichrono livrachah*, asked me to speak, and Rabbi Pelcovitz was the speaker. I remember one thing that he said; it's a famous story, I don't know how famous it was then, but it was the first time I ever heard it: Somebody is coming to see the “Mona Lisa,” and he says, “Eh, the ‘Mona Lisa,’ it's smudged, it's not clear....” He's criticizing it, and someone in the museum looks at him and says,

“Sir, when you’re looking at the ‘Mona Lisa,’ you are not here to judge the ‘Mona Lisa’ —the ‘Mona Lisa’ is judging you.” Rabbi Pelcovitz said, “When you’re talking about a *yeshivah*, you’re talking about a *yeshivah gedolah*, it’s not your place to judge the *yeshivah*. The way you evaluate the *yeshivah* is not a judgment of the *yeshivah*, it’s how the *yeshiva* is evaluating you. Do you understand what it’s all about?”

The next time that I had any really close relationship with him was when he published his translation and commentary on the *Sforno* on Chumash, and, *baruch Hashem*, ArtScroll was his publisher of choice. We were very proud to publish it; he took the *Sforno* and he made it so clear —there was the “*amkus* of *pashtus*.” He didn’t just translate. In just a few words, he was able to capture the nuances and explain them in real depth. That’s when I came to appreciate him most of all as a brilliant *talmid chacham*, because he took a *Rishon* and he saw the *amkus*, and he explained it in a way with *pashtus* that could have meaning for everyone—and that’s not an easy thing to do. As a writer and an editor, I know how hard it is—and he was able to do it. He was a gentleman; it was a pleasure to talk to him. It was a pleasure to spend time with him. He always treated me with so much courtesy, and after all, he was a senior *Rav* and I was a relatively young man. He was a *talmid chacham*, and yet he treated me with the upmost respect. I think that’s how he treated everyone and that’s why he was able to make The White Shul an institution that’s famous all over. When you talk to anyone, almost everywhere: “Oh, The White Shul, Rabbi Pelcovitz.” It was my privilege to know him for the little bit that I did.

They are very interesting, the books that he published together with his son, Dr. David. The Rabbi and the psychologist: two views of the

same question, the same problem, with the opinion of the psychologist and the *Rav's* opinion. When you read them both carefully you saw that really, they're saying the same thing; the answers come from different perspectives, but they're saying the same thing. Both of them spoke with great wisdom; the *amkus* of *pashtus* carried through in everything that he did and everything that David does.

Far Rockaway as a community grew by leaps and bounds when he was there and he was one of the major forces in making it so. The White Shul may have started out as a small shul, I don't really know, but in his prime he brought up the shul, and the shul was a major institution not only in the community but throughout New York. It was a famous shul, it was a prestigious shul, and he's the one who made it prestigious.

He always spoke with great admiration about his father, a Litvisher *Rav*, a *talmid chacham*—and I know from my own youth growing up in a city that had many, many such *rabbonim*—they couldn't relate. They couldn't relate to us, they couldn't relate to Americans, they couldn't relate to the new American society, and Rabbi Pelcovitz was a bridge; he was a bridge between the classic European *Rav*, the *talmid chacham* who sat and learned, who could *pasken* a *she'aila*, and the American young people, English-speaking people. Rabbi Pelcovitz had an unusual talent of being able to bridge both cultures and to show that they weren't really two different cultures, they were really one; but you needed someone who could be the spokesman with the eloquence to understand what was and relate it to what is, and what will be—and he was able to do that.

Not many *rabbonim* were able to. He could, and he did.

## · Rabbi · Pelcovitz's *Shabbos I šit to the c Igudah*

The one time that Rabbi Pelcovitz *ztz"l* davened in the Agudah on Shabbos was at the *aufruf*, I believe it was, for his granddaughter's *chosson*, Avraham Chaim Platschek, who married Mari Pelcovitz.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was there throughout the whole davening and in my presentation. I recognized his presence among us for this momentous family event. After so many years of shul and community service, he was in our midst as a private citizen, able to daven wherever he might choose, not restricted by previous scheduling demands.

I then proceeded to remind the *tzibbur* of a story which relates that the *Chiddushei HaRim*, the revered head of the *Gerrer* dynasty, once had ten sons – and *lo aleynu*, he lost them all. The dynasty was continued by a grandson who would become known as the *Sfas Emes*. Being a grandchild, he became the *Rebbe* while still in his youth. He was young when his father was *niftar* and still so when his illustrious grandfather was *niftar*.

People asked the young Chassidic leader how he was *zocheh* to become the *Rebbe* at such a young age and at a time when there were great *rabbonim* and *talmidei chachamim* who were his contemporaries. He replied, "I will answer you with a *mashal*," and proceeded to relate this tale.

A certain mountain climber decided to challenge himself with an arduous ascent up a steep range to reach a very lofty peak. Few had succeeded before him. The slope at times was near vertical; the rocks

were loose; the footing was treacherous; the winds howled relentlessly, and danger from tumbling rocks was constant.

At long last, he hoisted himself up and over the last ledge to gaze upon the craggy mountain top. His breath was labored in the rarified air. Simple movements were strenuous. Suddenly, he noticed a child running about near a small hut just below the summit. He was dumbfounded. How could such a small child scamper about so freely in this hostile terrain? Wearily approaching the lad, he asked, "How did you get up here? It took me days of exhausting effort to reach this place. How could you so small and frail have climbed this mountain?" With a look of pure innocence and candor, the young boy said, "Oh, I never climbed up here. I was born here."

I said to the tzibbur gathered that Shabbos aufruf morning that Far Rockaway became what it became - with the expanded population, the mosdos, the eruv, the mikveh, the kosher restaurants and the celebrated *achdus* - not by chance. At the time I was sharing these thoughts, (and we're talking of quite a few years ago), people were comfortable; a new generation was born here. Not as many remembered that there was an architect behind the relaxed and contented Jewish life they enjoyed.

That architect faced enormous challenges; he built his *mikdash me'at* and the surrounding *machaneh* as it were brick by brick - *kav al kav, kav al kav*. He scaled heights through diligence and tireless toil with one idea in mind: To establish and elevate an entire community to be *shomer Torah* and *mitzvos*. It was an audacious goal and he applied himself with *azus d'kedusha*. He singlehandedly set out to reverse the trends leading to the evaporation of American Jews into the common culture. He scaled the heights so we could live on the plateau.

All that we have today in this *makom Torah* - be they shuls, yeshivos, or community services -derives in some way from his pioneering

efforts. We are the beneficiaries of a seer who perceived what we would need long before we were even here. And he set out to engage the means and mechanisms to bring it all into being. He did it with determination, graciousness, humility, and a kind of all-encompassing love that embraced Jews near and far.

I heard afterwards that morning that Rabbi Pelcovitz remarked to someone, "That sounded like a very nice *hesped*!" Looking back on his illustrious life, the half had yet to be told.

Those of us gathered that Shabbos morning of simcha needed a moment to reflect. Why could we have such a celebration in our community that day? Because Rabbi Pelcovitz had already celebrated our community when it was still just a vision in his prescient soul.

I am grateful to the *Ribono Shel Olam* that I had the *zechus* to serve with Rabbi Pelcovitz *A"H* on the local Vaad in building up a community that is recognized around the world as a center for *limud Torah*, *achdus*, and *gemilus chasodim*.

May we always remember who went up the mountain to make the way easier for us. And may he be a *maylitz yosher* for all of us who live in the tall shadow of his greatness.

*Yehi zichro baruch.*

Rabbi Tzvi Flaum Writes:

## ***In Loving Memory Of Harav Hagaon • Raphael • Pelcovitz. ztl***

I would like to take this opportunity to honor the holy memory of *Harav Hagaon* Raphael Pelcovitz for his incredible lifetime of dedication and *mesiras nefesh* on behalf of the Torah community of the entire Five Towns. He was a Torah pioneer and established the infrastructure of Torah true Judaism in our illustrious community. I want to acknowledge his manifold activities on behalf of *Klal Yisroel*--both in this community and throughout the world as well--and emphasize the incredible *hashpa'ah* that he had on thousands upon thousands of Jews throughout the world who--because of him--have dedicated themselves to Torah and mitzvot because of the spiritual inspiration that he had given them as part of their daily life experience. He was an incredible role model of *Torah, Avoda* and *Gemilus Chasadim*. I personally consider him on the level of the *Anshei Kneset Hagedola* of our Five Towns community in both the breadth and depth of impact he had on our entire community.

He built The White Shul--Congregation Kneseth Israel--as the main bastion of Torah observance in our community. As the Rav of the shul, as well as being the Chairman of the Vaad of Rabbanim of Far Rockaway and Lawrence, he served as the spiritual architect developing the Torah true infrastructure of our entire neighborhood. He inspired the *baal batim* of his prestigious *bais haknesses* to be involved in intense activities of *tzorchei hatzibur*. It was he who encouraged them to both build and support the Yeshivos and *Bais*

*Yaakovs* for boys and girls that were established in our community. By doing such, he laid the foundation for our community to develop on the level that it has and to be known as one of the most Torah true, dedicated and oriented community perpetuating the principles of Torah in all facets of Jewish life. If the Five Towns is currently known as the premier Torah community of the United States, it is because of his incredible foresight, insight and directives that he gave to others under his influence to develop all the needs that a Torah community must have such as a kosher *mikveh*, a halachically reliable *eruv*, and strict rabbinic supervision as it relates to the kashrus of the stores selling food to the members of our community.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was known world-wide as a Torah scholar on a very high and sophisticated level. There was nothing that was equal to the sermons that he gave weekly in his shul to thousands of people who regularly attended the services in his synagogue. He had the unique ability to take the words of Chazal written thousands of years ago and make them very germane and applicable to contemporary needs of modern Jewry. He was able to speak to people on different levels at the same time and leave them with Torah messages that many have told me have stayed with them and guided them throughout their entire lives.

As a Torah educator and *mechanech*, he was able to take difficult *sugyot* in the *Talmud Bavli* and other Midrashic material and interpret them on a very sophisticated level that allowed his talmidim to grasp not only the discussion and debate in the *Gemara* but to be able to apply the principles of that debate to their daily halachic life. He was a master at teaching *Tanach*. People came from all over to hear his unique and contemporary applications of Tanach literature to our modern society.

As a pastoral *rav*, he was full of tremendous *Ahavat Habriot* and therefore people from all over came to consult with him concerning all types of questions and problems that were confronting them and their families seeking his brilliant and enlightening guidance. The warmth of his personality was simply magnetic and that in turn drew thousands of people over the years to seek his counsel and apply what he told them to their daily life experience.

What was amazing about him was that despite his brilliance in all areas of Jewish thought, theology and Torah practice of mitzvos, he nevertheless conducted himself outwardly in an incredibly humble manner. This trait of greatness and humility attracted to him thousands of *chasidim* from around the world who were in continuous contact with him as their official mentor and guide.

One of the many *zechusim* that I had in my life was the privilege of becoming the Rav of the White Shul after Rabbi Pelcovitz retired and became the official Rabbi Emeritus of the synagogue. I made sure during the term of my rabbinate there to ensure that his *kavod harabbanus* and prestige and honor of the past should be continued and maintained even during my ascendancy to become rav of the shul. I was very *makpid* that he walk ahead of me in escorting the Torah from the *aron hakodesh* to the *bimah* so that the members of the shul should be able to see the appropriate *kavod* that a younger rav should be giving to a very accomplished senior colleague of the rabbinate.

This activity caused a tremendous *kiddush Hashem* in the shul and unquestionably enhanced the *kavod* that people had for the rabbinate of the White Shul. In my own personal development as a Rav and *manhig*, I was able to learn a great deal from Rav Pelcovitz and will always consider him to be a major role model in my life as it relates to the successes that I have accomplished in the world of the

*Rabbanus* and in the world of Torah education. He was a father figure to me. His earnest and honest concern for my professional health, welfare and success was ever present in our ongoing relationship together in our dear Congregation Kneseth Israel of Far Rockaway.

In his life, he accentuated in all of his *divrei Torah* four major Torah theologies, namely the concepts of: *Ahavat Hashem*, *Ahavat Hatorah*, *Ahavat Habriot* and *Ahavat Eretz Yisroel*. He personified what Torah true religious Zionism is all about and was a pioneer in America in that specific field.

In conclusion, I would like to say that it is hard to believe that he is no longer physically here. He was so full of life to the very end that we all thought that he would never leave us that he would always be there, with his guidance and love for all of the members of the Congregation and for Klal Yisroel. I would venture to say that he is indeed still here, because the influence that he left behind is alive and is flourishing, and his vibrancy is still being felt by all of the people who knew him over the years. I personally will never forget our unique relationship and will always be *makir tov* for the love and concern that he had for me and for my family. I pray that the *Ribbono Shel Olam* will grant his wonderful Rebbetzin Shirley Pelcovitz and the entire *mishpacha* the appropriate *nechamah* that they deserve for all that they did to help him, support him, encourage him and take care of him throughout his entire life. May his memory be a source of blessing to both his family and to Klal Yisroel at large. May he be *misparallel b'shamayim* in front of the *Kisey Hakavod* for the ultimate redemption of *Klal Yisroel*, the ultimate rebuilding of *Eretz Yisroel* with the *Beis Hamikdash* and the coming of *Mashiach tzidkeinu*, *bimeheira b'yamenu*.

# *Sefer Zikaron*

PART FOUR:

## **Selected Articles: Interviews & Transcripts**

Our *Sefer Zikaron* concludes with selections gleaned from print media, as well as transcripts from a few of the interviews featured in the Shul dinner video the night of June 11, 2018. Taken together, this collection provides further insight into the height, depth, breadth of Rabbi Pelcovitz's charisma, character, acumen, and accomplishments.

Ethel Pelcovitz Gottlieb provided extensive assistance in the preparation of this *Sefer Zikaron* to honor her beloved father. More than a third of the content was compiled through her generous labor of love. Her heart beats to let the Jewish world comprehend the beauty and reality of her father's path in *Torah, avodah, and gemilus chassim*. In recognition of her tireless efforts, we place her insightful biography of Rabbi Pelcovitz *a"h* first.

# ·Diversity in ·Pioneering Torah

We gratefully acknowledge The Living Memorial — a project of the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland-- for graciously permitting us to reprint the biography of Rabbi Pelcovitz, written by his daughter, Ethel Pelcovitz Gottlieb, from their book, *The World That Was America*.

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A pioneer courageously dares to go where others fear to tread. He prepares and cultivates what is barren and void, transforming into a vibrant and flourishing entity. He is relentless in his commitment, working tirelessly to achieve results, as he confronts many hardships. Many of the Torah pioneers in America in the 1940s–50s were influenced and shaped by the legendary Reb Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, menahel of Torah Vodaath and founder of *Torah Umesorah*. Reb Shraga Feivel directed young *musmachim*, rabbis (who were also his students), as to what *derech* they should follow, based on their individual strengths. He encouraged these men to pursue the fields of Jewish education and the rabbinate.

The influence of their Rosh Yeshivah guided them on the difficult and challenging odyssey upon which each one embarked over 70 years ago. It was a journey that required *mesiras nefesh*, hard work, and the ability to stand up and fight for a Torah way of life. These men represent what Reb Shraga Feivel meant when charged his students with the dictum to go out and build Torah in an “*eretz lo zeruah*” — places that were unsown and religiously barren.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was willing to heed Reb Shraga Feivel’s call and go to uncultivated areas of the country and build Torah. In each

community that he served, Rabbi Pelcovitz brought the people closer to a Torah way of life. His relentless pursuit of establishing a firm Torah foundation made it possible for today's shuls, yeshivos, kollelim and all aspects of an Orthodox Jewish life to flourish in Far Rockaway, N.Y., and the Five Towns, where he has served as a *rav* for 65 years.

## Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz

**BUILDING THE TORAH COMMUNITY**  
*- An American Rabbi's Retrospective*

*The dynamic leadership of a rav was essential to the growth and development of Orthodox Jewish communities across America, especially during the 40s and 50s. He served several functions – rabbi, teacher, and all-around community developer and activist.*



Instrumental in laying the foundation of the American Jewish Community in the 1940s and 50s was the pulpit rabbi. The dynamic leadership of a *rav* was essential to the growth and development of Orthodox Jewish communities across America, especially during that period. The rabbi of that era served in several capacities – he was rabbi of the *shul*, ministering to his congregant's spiritual and physical needs; a teacher; the director of the synagogue Talmud Torah, and all-around community developer and activist. Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, who has spent more than a half century in *rabbanus*, personifies this type of *rav*.

Born in Canton, Ohio, in 1921 to European parents, his father, Rabbi Ephraim Pelcovitz, was the rabbi of the *shul* in Canton and a foremost *talmid* of the Slobodka Yeshiva. The family moved to Bridgeport, CT, in 1928, a difficult time in America, just before the Depression. As was the norm, young Raphael attended public school and afternoon Talmud Torah.

"Walking there was an adventure –

the non-Jewish kids would lie in wait and you had to be a good runner! You felt very vulnerable."

The older Pelcovitz sons were sent away to yeshiva, and soon it was Raphael's turn. His father decided on a different course for his youngest child –

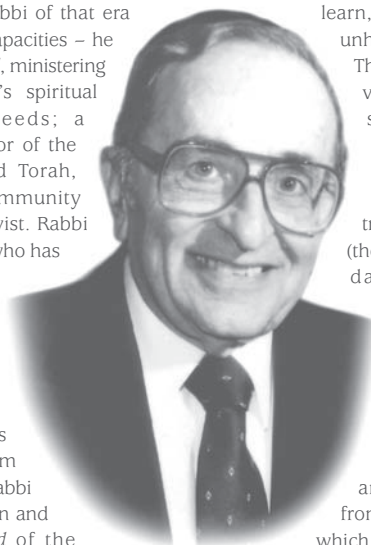
he would go to *Eretz Yisrael* to learn, something that was unheard of in those days.

There was another motivation for this decision – a suitable *shidduch* was needed for the eldest daughter.

Rebbetzin Pelcovitz traveled to *Eretz Yisrael* (then Palestine) with her daughters and the youngest son, Raphael, who was then 12 years old.

It was a long trip by boat and train – two weeks. A wonderful *shidduch* was arranged with a *talmid* from Chevron Yeshiva, which had relocated to

Jerusalem. Rabbi E. Pelcovitz traveled from America to attend the wedding and the family returned to the States, while young Raphael remained in *Eretz Yisrael* to attend Tiferes Tzvi, the *mechina* of Chevron Yeshiva. He stayed with his sister and brother-in-law while



attending yeshiva. His parents were unable to return to Palestine to attend Raphael's *bar mitzvah*. After almost four years at Tiferes Tzvi, where he learned extremely well, Raphael returned to America because of the Arab unrest and riots.

The next stop in Raphael's education was Mesivta Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, New York. There were no dormitories at that time and out-of-town students rented rooms in private homes. Generally, meals were not provided by the family and the *talmidim* ate in the yeshiva. Arrangements were made for Shabbos meals with different families for the out-of-towners. Occasionally, Raphael returned home, but the expense and time involved precluded this from occurring frequently.

It must be stated, once again, how important it is for us living comfortably in the twenty-first century to be aware of the tremendous *mesiras nefesh* involved in sending a child to yeshiva at that time (1930s-40s). There were very few yeshivos in America then and young boys had to be willing to essentially give up their families and live away from home in order to learn Torah. This sacrifice affected the entire family, but those who valued Torah learning appreciated what was at stake. This lifestyle fostered independence at a young age and a level of maturity not evident in most of today's youth. Such self-sacrifice is worthy of our admiration and respect.

"My *rebbe*, Rabbi Shlomo Heiman was a very outstanding individual. By nature humble and modest, he did not push himself into the public eye... Reb Shlomo taught his *talmidim* how to approach learning. He was a gifted *baal hasbarah* – he had a great ability to explain a *blatt Gemara*. I cannot overemphasize how very beneficial

this was – to know, simply, how to learn a *blatt*. The trouble, later on, was that *bachurim* would be involved in intricate *pilpul* and did not know how to learn a simple *blatt*. This was especially detrimental for *rabbanim* who had to know how to teach a *blatt* to *baalei batim*, but they didn't have the training. Reb Shlomo taught us how to present a *blatt* to others. In his case, it was the *amkus of pashtus* – he conveyed a depth perception to us that was deceptively simple, seemingly elementary, but it was far from elementary – it was clear and straight to the point.

"Rabbi Heiman was completely dedicated to his *talmidim* – he never had children of his own – he was extremely accessible, soft and kind. You felt you could go to him to discuss everything.

"In those days, not too many *talmidim* felt the need to be pampered or paid special attention. Then, at an early point in life, one stood on his own two feet – you did not have the dependency more evident today. You lived at a time when you were not spoon-fed in a material or spiritual sense; so you learned to cope yourself, with yourself and by yourself. As a result you did not have dependency on anyone, including your *rebbeim*." Although his father supported him by paying his tuition and board, Raphael earned expense money by teaching in Talmud Torah.

When he first arrived, Reb Shlomo gave a daily *blatt shiur*, but it was phased out after a while and the *Rosh Yeshiva* only gave a *shiur kelali* on Thursdays. All week the *talmidim* in the



Rabbi Ephraim Pelcovitz

"My *rebbe*, Rabbi Shlomo Heiman, was a very outstanding individual. He was a gifted *baal hasbarah* – he had a great ability to explain a *blatt Gemara*. He taught us how to present a *blatt* to others."

higher *shiurim* learned with their *chavrusos* – such was the practice at that time.

Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, the *menahel* and unofficial *mashgiach*, knew the *talmidim* very well. While the *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rabbi Heiman, had tremendous impact on their learning, Reb Shraga Feivel impacted on their *hashkafa*, fundamental outlook on life. Reb Shraga Feivel gave *shiurim*



Raphael Pelcovitz as a young man

to a select group of *talmidim* (Rabbi Pelcovitz was among them), on *Ramban*, *Ramchal* and Rav S.R. Hirsch, whose philosophy greatly shaped his own *hashkafa*.

The *menahel* was not interested in Torah Vodaath being the type of yeshiva that just trained rabbis; to him that was incidental. He was more concerned with shaping Torah-oriented *baalei-batim*, but those who had an inclination and talent for *chinuch* and *rabbanus* were encouraged to pursue it. The yeshiva did not have a course of study for *rabbanus* per se. Reb Shraga Feivel arranged to have a *bochein* (one who administers tests) test those *talmidim* who wanted *semichah*. At that time, Torah Vodaath did not give *semichah*, since that was not the philosophy of the European yeshivos. The *bochein*, Rabbi Schneider, had a phenomenal memory and tested the prospective candidate for a few days. He then reported to the *Rosh Yeshiva*, Rabbi Heiman, who only granted *semichah* to those *talmidim* he personally knew and taught. Raphael Pelcovitz was awarded

*semichah* at a relatively young age by the *Rosh Yeshiva*.

Reb Shraga Feivel's policy at that time (late 30s - early 40s) was to permit certain *bachurim* to attend college at night – only those who were entering *rabbanus* or *chinuch* were allowed to go. Those *bachurim* that he felt were better suited to be diamond cutters (a trade that was becoming popular then), or work in other

businesses, did not go to college – it was considered unnecessary. The yeshiva served supper early to accommodate those who attended college classes. The vast majority attended CCNY (City College of New York), which was considered a very good school, tuition-free; 95% of the student body was Jewish. Rabbi Pelcovitz was one of the *talmidim* who attended college at night.

It should be noted that during the early 40s a *bachur* had to have his own *parnassah* if he wanted to get married. The *kollel* as we know it today was not in existence then. Reb Shraga Feivel was perceptive enough to realize that professionally, college was necessary for those Torah Vodaath *talmidim* who wanted to become rabbis or teachers. He also helped those young men who were ready to leave the yeshiva and start working to find suitable jobs.

Rabbi Pelcovitz's first position was in *chinuch* – he became the principal of the fledgling day school in Hartford, CT., after being recommended by Reb Shraga Feivel. At that time (1942-44),

*"In those days... you did not have the dependency more evident today... you were not spoon-fed in a material or spiritual sense; so you learned to cope yourself, with yourself and by yourself."*

the day school movement was in its infancy. It was an alien concept to the vast majority of Jews (even some religious ones), who felt that it was disloyal and un-American, since being an American meant being part of the mainstream. Establishing your own school (then called a parochial school) was considered isolationist and placed one's patriotism under a cloud. This was the prevailing attitude that confronted Rabbi Pelcovitz. Only a very small group of parents were supportive and interested in the day school. It was truly an uphill battle, in the face of apathy and even hostility. A few rabbis, lay leaders, and pioneering parents were the only supporters.

In the two years that he was in Hartford, Rabbi Pelcovitz managed to expand the school and recruit new students. In those days, the principal had to teach as well as administrate. The teachers in the Hebrew/religious studies department primarily came from Bais Medrash Le'morim and from some of the yeshivos. The experience was very worthwhile, but validated what Rabbi Pelcovitz already knew – that by upbringing and environment he was more suited to the rabbinate than *chinuch*.

Rabbi Pelcovitz received a call from Torah Vodaath to apply for the rabbinic position in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., if he was interested. It could not have come at a more opportune time. He applied and was chosen for the position of rabbi of the Orthodox *shul* (the only *shul* in town) and principal/teacher of the Talmud Torah.

Saratoga Springs was a typical small town, with one difference – it was a resort town offering mineral baths, spas, and healthful waters that attracted visitors during the season (Pesach -



*Rabbi Pelcovitz and Rabbi Moshe Sherer*

Labor Day), including Jews from New York. There were several kosher hotels and rooming houses. This influx of “big city Jews,” who were more learned and sophisticated, presented a challenge for the young rabbi, because they attended his *shul*. Otherwise, the attendance was not that large – there was a small nucleus of European Jews and a segment comprised of American-born families who were respectful and retained loyalty to Orthodoxy in their own way. The younger group provided the leadership while the older members were the *daveners*. Only a handful were *shomer Shabbos*. Given the *shul*'s make-up the *drashos* were delivered in Yiddish.

When Rabbi Pelcovitz first arrived there was only a *minyan* on Shabbos. He worked on expanding this to weekdays, at least on Mondays and Thursdays when the Torah is read. It was difficult to get people to come because of the harsh winters. During the Season, however, there was a large *minyan*.

Their attitude regarding the Talmud Torah was different – they **wanted** their children to learn. Nonetheless, it was relatively small and was comprised of

*It should be noted that during the early 40s a bachur had to have his own parnassah if he wanted to get married. The Kollel as we know it today was not in existence then.*



(L-R): Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz with Dr. Joseph Kaminetsky at the 29th Annual Dinner of Torah Umesorah

*The challenges faced by young pulpit rabbis at that time were many. The prevailing attitude of most people regarding religious matters was one of apathy and sometimes negativity.*

children from many different grades. It was like a one-room schoolhouse and the rabbi had to accomplish as much as he could with each student.

*Kashrus* was another area of the rabbi's responsibilities. There was a local *shochet* for chickens and a kosher butcher, while kosher meat and many food items were imported from Albany or Schenectady. Rabbi Pelcovitz also instituted some adult classes. Considering everything, it was an excellent experience for a new rabbi. Saratoga Springs was always viewed by the *rabbanim* of that period as a stepping-stone position.

After two years, Rabbi Pelcovitz was offered a rabbinic position in Akron, Ohio. There were several advantages – it was a bigger community, the job did not involve teaching in the Talmud Torah and there were other *rabbanim*, hence colleagues, so more could be accomplished.

Unlike other places, in Akron there was a community Talmud Torah with a director and staff, instead of individual synagogue schools. Although the rabbis were involved in the Talmud Torah, they did not teach there. At that time,

there was no day school. However, during Rabbi Pelcovitz's tenure in Akron, the Conservative movement started making inroads and when they opened their own Talmud Torah, the community Talmud Torah was weakened. Their encroachment also affected the Orthodox *shul*. People left for business or social reasons; since their commitment was not very strong, the "defectors" did not feel it mattered where their *shul* affiliation was. This phenomenon was unfortunately occurring across America and presented a new challenge to the Orthodox rabbi.

"To a certain extent, the presence of a young Orthodox rabbi who is committed and able to reach people in itself was able to counteract this, but how much? You're swimming against the current. What kept you going were those who held fast and remained loyal. Then you felt you could hold the line until reinforcements would come."

Rabbi Pelcovitz's *shul*, Anshei Sfard, also called the Polische Shul, had many European Jews, and they comprised the leadership. As time progressed, there was a shift in the power structure and the American-born members came to the fore. The European Jewish contingent gave the rabbi more problems than the American group. The reason was that they were enamored with the American milieu and were convinced that the only way to hold on to their children was to become more Americanized and more "modern" at the expense of religious observance. Although this was a misguided notion, it still prevailed and created serious problems for the Orthodox rabbi. In essence, this attitude meant that the backbone of the *shul*, those who came to *daven* and participate, were very attracted to modern approaches anti-



*New building of Anshei Sfard, Akron, Ohio, 1951*

thetical to Orthodoxy, and the rabbi had to contend with this very serious issue. Those who should have been the strongest supporters were in fact behaving like the weakest link.

On the other hand, the younger American congregants, who were not yeshiva educated and had very limited religious knowledge, could not provide the logistical support to the extent that was necessary. Consequently, the rabbi found himself quite isolated in principle and policy, since there was no group within the *shul* who understood, or were committed to sustaining the Orthodox spirit and ideology. True, there were loyalists to the *shul* and rabbi, but it was on a personal level. The rabbi had to be a strong leader in order to accomplish anything.

"That period (1945 – early 1950s), in out-of-town communities, you were dealing with *baalei batim* who were basically not learned, not observant, and not committed to Torah values, hence it was a difficult time for one in a leadership role. [As a] rabbi [you] had to be firm and convince them that you (a) are sincere, (b) have a position of authority, and (c) are unswerving – that you mean what you say. If you could do this, then the majority would follow you; most peo-

ple go with the current. The rabbi had to feel that there was hope of accomplishing what he set out to do and that he is not just spinning his wheels."

One of Rabbi Pelcovitz's major accomplishments in Akron was spearheading the erecting of a new *shul* building. The main issues of contention which confronted him in this venture was the *mechitzah* and the installation of a microphone. The primary reason *mechitzah* was such a problem for the membership was that they were exposed to the American concept that a house of worship is for families, hence there should not be separate seating. At countless meetings, as well as from the pulpit, Rabbi Pelcovitz tried to educate them on these issues. Although opposition was strong it was not militant and the rabbi prevailed – a *mechitzah* was built, and there was no microphone. "If you are strong and willing to do what is necessary, putting yourself on the line, 99% of the people will accept what you say."

*Kashrus* in Akron was on a communal level, overseen by the rabbis – there were *shochtim*, kosher butchers, and *mashgichim* who required supervision.

The greatest challenge was overcoming the lack of knowledge in Jewish learning, and especially its effects on the younger generation.

*A misguided notion that created serious difficulties for the Orthodox rabbis was that many of the Jews in their communities were convinced that religious observance and being Americanized were mutually exclusive. Am ha'artzus was the biggest problem.*

"You could count on the fingers of one hand those people who sent their children to yeshivos."

To combat this knowledge-gap, Rabbi Pelcovitz arranged several classes to teach his congregants and educate them in fundamental areas of *Yiddishkeit*. In addition, another venue utilized by the rabbi was personal friendships and teaching by example.

"It was not a conscious type of thing like today's *kiruv* work – there was no label associated with it then. You also could not allow numbers to measure your successes or failures. As the Chazon Ish said, 'The Mishnah does not say *harbei talmidim*, but *talmidim harbei* – the numerical quantity is not at issue; you work as hard as you can with what you have. You try to have a lasting impact on them, so they will continue to be your *talmidim* for years to come and become your supporters.

"In the rabbinate you never know how many people you affect or how. Years later, a person will come over to you and repeat something you said which you may not even remember, but to them it was important and made an impact.

"Just the rabbi's presence can have an effect. I learned this from a man in Saratoga Springs. He came over to me and said, 'I'm glad you're in town, because Pesach is coming and when a rabbi is in town I don't eat *chametz*. When there is no rabbi I feel differently.' Similarly, in Akron people would say, to me, 'Your presence has an impact.' Such remarks give you *chizuk*."

Akron was a typical out-of-town community in the late 1940s and early 50s. Apathy was the prevailing attitude regarding religious matters for most of the Jews. There was almost what could be characterized as a neutral spirit. It

was dependent on the rabbi to take a position on important issues and be a leader, as well as educate the people. In this way he could make inroads and dispel some of the Jewish ignorance.

This period was also one of transition – there was no longer a strong presence of the European generation. They were dying out and those who remained had little energy or self-confidence. Additionally, they had provided little or no *chinuch* to their children, so even the younger generation was resigned to a low level of observance. Consequently, the rabbi had no strong nucleus to work with in order to accomplish anything exciting or innovative (i.e. day school).

"The rabbi tried to conserve what was there; he was "the keeper of the flame." The rabbi had to set the tone. Through persistence, he protected the status quo – the *shul*, *minyán*, *mikveh*, learning groups, *shochtim*, kosher markets. In a small town, if you lacked even a small nucleus of support you were, unfortunately, not in a position to do much... it was a challenge to preserve *Yiddishkeit*. You were like the "*neturei karta*" – the guardians of the city."

It must be noted that despite the limited level of Jewish knowledge and observance in a small town such as Akron, there was sufficient commitment to support the kosher butchers and bakers. Not only that, but the rate of intermarriage was surprisingly low. The answer may be, says Rabbi Pelcovitz, that:

"There was a certain stubbornness that they felt – the older generation was still around and the level of sophistication and higher education was moderate, because at that time their involvement in society at large was not as great as it later became... Assimilation and intermarriage accel-

In order to accomplish anything, the rabbi had to be a strong leader and educator, and convince the *baalei batim* that he was sincere and consistent in what he said and did.

erated with the degree of involvement in general society. The majority were plain people, who have a tendency to stick to the familiar. Not only that, but it also depends on what society accepts or frowns upon. At that time, intermarriage was not accepted, so it was minimal.

"If you were to ask me what was the greatest threat to *Yiddishkeit* at that time, I would say *am ha'artzus*, ignorance; and the deviation movements (Conservative and Reform) capitalized on this great ignorance of the Orthodox Jewish community, who did things by rote or because their parents did it, and they could not defend their position and commitment to their children."

The rabbinical position offered to him by the Far Rockaway, N.Y. *shul*, Kneseth Israel (a.k.a. The White Shul) had a strong nucleus of Torah-true Jews, as well as many other advantages.

"The Far Rockaway position offered a great opportunity – people were moving to this community who were *shomer Shabbos*, yeshiva educated and

committed Jews. It was a breath of fresh air. It was 1951, and the climate was such that there were only islands of Torah; there was a general lack of confidence in a Torah society and many *pesharos*, compromises, had to be made. Many rabbis found it hard to hold on and to take a position on issues of contention, such as *mechitzah* and microphone – it was easier to give in. Whoever dreamt of a maximal position? You were content with the minimal – you wouldn't talk about such things as T.V. in the house, wearing a *sheitel*, glatt kosher etc. – the majority were not on that level. Even though you, the rabbi, felt that Torah was primary and not *chochmas ha'umos*, you had to be careful expressing this. You had to choose your battles... The unsung heroes were those who preserved the little islands of Torah in the midst of an ocean that militated against *Yiddishkeit*."

Far Rockaway was a small community when Rabbi Pelcovitz arrived, but it was growing. Young families were mov-

*"You had to choose your battles... The unsung heroes were those who preserved the little islands of Torah in the midst of an ocean that militated against Yiddishkeit."*



Group picture of awardees at Israel Bonds dinner. (Seated far left): Rabbi Pelcovitz, center - Rabbi S. Goren and Rabbi Walkin



The original "White Shul" which stood on the corner of Nameoke and Dinsmore, 1925-1964

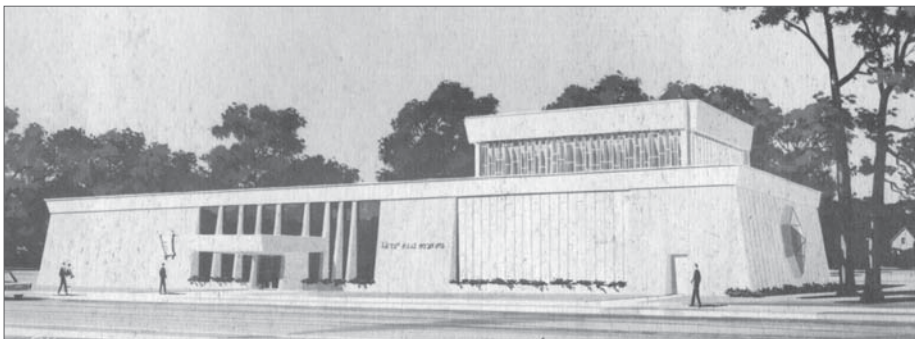
ing there who wanted to live in suburbia, in a place with all the necessary religious amenities and in commuting distance to their jobs in the city. Many were yeshiva educated and hailed from Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx. Hence, they identified with the large Torah communities that were always strong in the large metropolitan cities like New York, Chicago, and Baltimore.

"A definite advantage of this was

that you were dealing with those who were receptive to what you wanted to present and accomplish... Even here, it was important to keep educating the people as to the importance of ongoing *talmud Torah* – that you have to have a *kevius*, an established time to learn, and improve your commitment and add to your knowledge. This had to be preached constantly.

"The climate of the community was such, and it was amazing to see, that as time passed there were social pressures to be *more observant*. For example, out-of-town, having a *succah* was an act of courage. In Far Rockaway, even in the 50s, it had reached a point in certain neighborhoods that if you did not have a *succah* you were ashamed. People built *succos* who were not even that *frum*. The benefit was that, eventually, some of these people became observant for the proper reason and not just "to keep up with the Joneses."

"It was also a time when you began to notice that some parents were less *frum* than their children. Religiously, the children were begin-



New building of the "White Shul," Knesseth Israel, in Far Rockaway, New York



*Ponovezh Yeshiva Dinner - the Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, is seated next to Charles Bendheim; Rabbi Pelcovitz is guest speaker.*

*In the 30s, 40s and 50s the definition of a frum Jew was different than today. It progressed...*

*All these standards are still in a state of flux.*

ning to outpace and surpass their parents – they also brought religious pressures on their parents.”

In the 30s, 40s and 50s, the definition of a *frum* Jew was different than today. “Remember, the norm was not the same as it is today. It progressed. For example, how did one define a *frum* Jew? Then, it meant a person who was *shomer Shabbos* and learned (even a little), but it became more as time went on: Does this person keep *glatt kosher*, *chalav Yisrael*; does the woman cover her hair; do the children go to yeshiva? Then it progressed to another level – does he wear a black hat, learn in *kollel*, etc.? All these standards are still in a state of flux, but you have to have something to measure against.

“In those days there was nothing to measure against, so you had to create the standards. A combination of three forces – the family, *shul*, and yeshiva – and the leadership of parents, rabbi and *rosh yeshiva* created the standards. Then, there was a much

closer relationship between the rabbi and *rosh yeshiva*, but even then friction was emerging. What you did have at that time was a greater mutual *derech eretz*. Why? Even in the 50s you could see this. The *roshei yeshiva* felt, and they were probably right, that the conduct of the *shuls* and rabbis – especially out-of-town – was not according to the highest Torah standards. There was a breakdown in the reli-



*Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky is delivering a message at the Dedication Ceremonies of the new “White Shul” building*



Rabbi Pelcovitz delivering his address at the Dedication Ceremonies, June, 1964. Seated on the dais (R-L): Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, Rabbi Benjamin Kamenetsky, and Emanuel Neustadter, President

Rabbi Pelcovitz was involved from the very outset in the development of the Far Rockaway Jewish community – *kashrus*, *mikveh*, *yeshivos* and day schools – as well as building up his own *shul* and its activities.

gious aspects of many communities, and the problems mentioned earlier of not making waves, taking a stand, and just going with the flow vis-à-vis religious matters. The focus in these places was more on organizational and community endeavors, so these rabbis became political figureheads and social directors. Such rabbis lost the respect of the *yeshivos* and the serious-minded congregants. That's when the tendency began, and it was believed that *chinuch* was more the vehicle to strengthen and accomplish things in *Yiddishkeit* than *rabbanus*."

Rabbi Pelcovitz was involved from the very outset in the development of the Far Rockaway Jewish community – *kashrus*, *mikveh*, *yeshivos* and day schools – as well as building up his own *shul* and its activities. When he first came to Far Rockaway, there were only two Orthodox *shuls*: the White Shul, and Shaarei Tefilah – which was more "modern." There was only one day school – H.I.L.I. (Hebrew Institute of Long Island), which was co-ed at the

time, as was the norm. The community rabbis were on the Board of Education and helped formulate policy. There was a mixed parent body, religiously speaking, but there were no alternative schools.

As time passed and the community grew, an all-boys' *yeshiva ketanah* opened and then an all-girls' school, as well as another day school, which was more modern and Zionist. Eventually, a *mesivta* and *bais medrash* also opened. All of this was a natural type of growth, which transpires in every vibrant community. The *shul* Talmud Torah that was there when he came eventually closed (early 60s), because the membership sent their children to day school or *yeshiva* and no longer needed it.

As part of this evolutionary process, the *baalei batim* on the H.I.L.I. Board of Education phased out the participation of the community rabbis. As strong professional leadership was brought into the school, the lay leadership gained more confidence. They wanted to retain their own identity, so the rabbis lost their influence. This phenomenon did not occur everywhere across the United States, but depended on the community.

There was no *Vaad HaKashrus* when Rabbi Pelcovitz arrived. At that time, the *shamash* of the *shul* served as the *mashgiach* of the kosher butcher shop, and the butchers felt that they had their own *chezkas kashrus*, established claim of *kashrus*. There were no *shomer Shabbos* bakeries or take-home food establishments and pizza shops. As the community developed, these types of stores opened and a central *kashrus* organization was needed. Rabbi Pelcovitz, together with Rabbi Rackman of Shaarei Tefilah and Rabbi Berkowitz,

established the *Vaad HaKashrus*, and as it slowly evolved additional *mashgichim* were hired as needed. It served Far Rockaway, the Five Towns and outlying communities.

The *mikveh* serving Far Rockaway was then in Edgemere, a nearby community; it was very old and the growing Far Rockaway community wanted to build a modern facility in Far Rockaway. Rabbi Pelcovitz was very instrumental in making this dream a reality. One important area that was a potential minefield that he dealt with was satisfying the various factions of the community and addressing their different standards – after all, it was a *community mikveh*. Property was purchased and a new *mikveh* was built, serving not only Far Rockaway but the surrounding neighborhoods and communities.

Although there was a *Chevrah Kadisha* when Rabbi Pelcovitz arrived, only three men were involved. Rabbi Pelcovitz wanted to expand the *Chevrah Kadisha* and attract new members to



(L-R) standing: Rabbi Dovid Lifshitz, seated: Rabbi S.M. Kalmanowitz, Rabbi Y. Gorelick, unknown, Rabbi E. Machlis, and Rabbi Pelcovitz

this vital organization, especially the younger segment of the *shul*. He instituted a halachah class for them and designated the 7th of Adar as *Chevrah Kadisha* Day to give recognition, support, and honor to its members. Rabbi Pelcovitz also organized a women's *Chevrah*, with a nucleus formed from the experienced women who came from other communities. For many years this was the only women's *Chevrah* in the community. The veterans helped teach the new members, and the rabbi gave "refresher courses" on a regular basis, as the *Chevrah* grew into a large organization.

The newcomers to Far Rockaway, as well as a large segment of the *shul's* membership, were young families. A vibrant and strong youth activities program was important to them, and so was adult education. Rabbi Pelcovitz formed two committees to address these needs – a Youth Activities Committee and Adult Education Committee. The programming for

*The newcomers to Far Rockaway, as well as a large segment of the shul's membership, were young families. Vibrant youth activities and adult education programs were important to them. The rabbi instituted and guided this programming.*



(L-R): Rabbi Pelcovitz, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein



(Seated L): Rabbi Kahaneman, the Ponovezh Rosh HaYeshiva; Rabbi Pelcovitz (standing on right).

An interesting phenomenon that existed in the White Shul, and was not that common in other communities, was that the establishment was not all that strong. Therefore, newcomers who wanted to play a role, were able to do so.

both was initiated, instituted and guided by the rabbi. When the Talmud Torah existed, they hired someone who could serve in two capacities – teacher and youth director, guided by the rabbi. After the Talmud Torah was discontinued, a professional youth director was hired. The youth leaders for the program came from the shul. A varied program was offered, primarily on Shabbos and Sunday. A youth *minyan* and junior congregation were instituted, as well as Shabbos afternoon *Oneg Shabbos* groups. Eventually, a teen *minyan* was added and classes were organized to teach *davening* and *leining*. Special events were arranged for *Yamim Tovim*, as well as *Chol Hamoed* trips. On Sundays, such activities as cooking, arts & crafts, and *bikur cholim* were offered in a club-like setting.

Adult classes were instituted by Rabbi Pelcovitz from the beginning of

his tenure – for men, for women, and some co-ed. *Shiurim* in Gemara were offered on Shabbos and also during the week. At first the Gemara *Shiur* was given in *Yiddish*, but this changed. As the make-up of the shul became primarily young families, for whom *Yiddish* was not their mother tongue, the switch was made to English. The subject matter of the classes was varied – *Chumash*, *Nach*, *Hashkafa*, and specific halachah topics. Initially, it operated by trial and error, as the rabbi tried to ascertain what interested the people. The various classes had wide appeal and people attended from other shuls and communities.

The Shul Sisterhood was very weak when Rabbi Pelcovitz arrived. His *Rebbetzin* helped him revive it to become a meaningful and active group. In those days, most women did not work outside the home and it served as an important vehicle for their social needs. Special programs and activities were arranged – luncheons, family picnics, and, most important, fundraisers. The sisterhood raised a lot of money for the shul which helped to finance some of its programs. *Chesed* projects were instituted, as well as women's classes in *Chumash*.

An interesting phenomenon that existed in the White Shul, and was not as common in other communities, was that the establishment, the old guard of the shul, was not all that strong. True, there were a few who played a prominent role and were among the leadership, but by the time Rabbi Pelcovitz came, they had dwindled in number and strength. Besides getting older, their interests had changed and did not necessarily coincide with those of the new young families, who helped shape the programs.

"This may have been an attraction to new families. They could make a difference, because although there was an establishment, it was not that entrenched. The newcomers who wanted to play a role could do so and did not have to go up against the old guard who may have resisted.

"Similarly, in the early 60s when the building campaign for the new shul was launched, there was a broad base of donors, as opposed to a small group of major contributors. Consequently, the power generally associated with such a group was not a factor, and policy decisions were arrived at more equitably."

Over the course of half a century Rabbi Pelcovitz devotedly and indefatigably shaped and developed his *shul* and community. Today, Far Rockaway is one of the premier Orthodox Jewish communities in America.

We would be remiss if we did not mention the *Rebbetzins'* role. Every successful *rav* was supported and aided first and foremost by his wife, his *ezer k'negdo*. Without her personal *mesiras nefesh* – her willingness to move far and near, to start over again and again, not to mention often tending the family and home single-handedly to enable the rabbi to pursue all that he had to – much of what was accomplished never would have been realized. The active role these women played in building the *shuls*, along with their husbands, cannot be overlooked. These women truly personify the quintessential *eishes chayil*. Many a rabbi has echoed the words of Rabbi Akiva:

"All that is mine and yours is because of her" (*Kesubos* 63a).

Everything we have today and likely take for granted in the Jewish community – *kashrus*, *shuls*, *yeshivos*, and day

schools, *shiurim*, *tzedaka*, *Chevre Kadisha*, *bikur cholim* etc. – began with the *rabbanim*. Do we even consider the difficulties and obstacles which they had to overcome? The *rabbanim* were the architects who helped lay the foundation and build the vibrant Orthodoxy that we have today.

"As my father said to one of the founders of his *shul* who complained that no one knows him, 'Look at the building – it stands on a foundation which can't be seen; it's in the ground. But the building can only be built if there's a strong foundation.'"

This is true of all areas in the development of the Jewish community. We may not "see" those who came first and toiled to cultivate the landscape that was the America of the 40s and 50s (and before), but these *rabbanim* helped lay the critical foundation, and then crafted the essential components that make for a dynamic community. Through their *mesiras nefesh*, hard work, creative talents, teaching abilities and personal example, they were instrumental in the regeneration and resurgence of Orthodoxy in America. The gratitude and respect we owe them is incalculable.

Through *mesiras nefesh*, hard work, creative talents, teaching abilities and personal example, the *rabbanim* were instrumental in the regeneration and resurgence of Orthodoxy in America.



At bris of a great-grandson – 4 generations: Pictured, Rabbi Pelcovitz, infant Efraim and grandson Mordechai.

## *Saying Goodbye to the Rabbi's Rabbi*

Rabbi Eytan Feiner

**Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz a"h, the quintessential rabbi**

Wednesday, April 11, 2018

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Perhaps it was the unmatched oratory skill, his innate aptitude for captivating you from the outset with his command of the vernacular and his brilliant words — each one handpicked and weighed carefully, woven to form enlightening tapestries and yes, delightful sermons, always sprinkled with his classic trenchant wit. Oh,

what a master *darshan* he was...

I can never forget the lectures laced with gentle *mussar* and *tochachah*, nestled in a backdrop of humor and coupled with just the perfect story. And always the best quotes one can find. (Where did he get them all from?) But maybe it was just the sheer power of his persona — a charismatic yet gentle personality, and always the attentive listener with choice and succinct words of sage counsel and advice.

Or perhaps it was his unique ability to lead, to guide, to steer an entire community on the right path, one paved with Torah and *derech erez* and perfection of one's *middos* — a point he stressed repeatedly and emphatically.

What, indeed, made the renowned Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz *a"h* the quintessential rabbi, the one known for decades throughout North America and beyond as “the rabbi of rabbis”?

This has got to be it his truly defining trait: his tireless efforts to ignite our thirst for learning and growth, and propel us all to strive incessantly in our *avodas Hashem*; to learn *Toras Emes* and to lead a life filled with *emes*. In his waning moments, with but a few sporadic words escaping his sacred lips, one word was emitted far more frequently than all others: “*emes*.” And it wasn't to anyone's surprise, for it was incessantly at the forefront of his mind. Rabbi Pelcovitz valued and cherished the truth above all else. The *middah* of *emes*, loving and living *Toras Emes*, sat atop the glorious pedestal of his myriad noble traits.

Shortly before crossing the delicate threshold to the next world, I had the difficult task of reciting *Vidui* with him — an experience that I will never forget. There I stood, bent over his bedside, clutching the hand of this giant of a man, albeit of short and humble stature. *Gadlus* couched in *pashtus*. Looking at my dear and beloved rabbi, the Rav of my family for several decades, the pulpit rabbi whom I admired from my fledgling years, in whose shul I grew up, and whose shoes I'm attempting to fill, I simply could not hold back the tears. “*Ashamnu, bagadnu...*”

And while those tears flowed, I had a flashback: Married and learning in Ner Israel's Kollel Avodas Levi in Baltimore, I joined the National Council of Young Israel's inaugural program to earn a degree in rabbinic administration and synagogue management in conjunction with Touro College. *Yungeleit* from Ner Israel joined with others from Lakewood, Chaim Berlin, and several other yeshivos, to spend many nights over the course of a year hearing and learning from the experts in the field. The all-stars of the rabbinic world presented on a vast array of topics, and, of course, homiletics earned its rightful place on the curriculum.

Then I spotted his name. Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz would be giving the class on homiletics. My Rabbi Pelcovitz — yes, my very own Rav, the paradigmatic orator who crafted the most stellar of speeches.

The illustrious pulpit rabbi of Congregation Kneseth Israel, better known as the White Shul, walked in that evening, and I was overcome with pride. I recall listening carefully and wondering how difficult it must be for Rabbi Pelcovitz to get up and speak regularly in the White Shul, at sundry *simchahs* and somber *levayos*, and always present with utmost poise and perfection, precisely catered to the audience at hand. He was constantly creative, and clearly also enjoyed sharing an abundance of insights culled from the gamut of *litvish* and chassidic sources.

As I scrutinized the master in action that night, I still couldn't help but think what it must be like for him to deal with the pressure of perpetually meeting such high expectations, along with the day-to-day dealing with diverse *balabatim* with a wide array of issues. "Why in the world would anyone ever want to take such a difficult job, serving at the helm of the large and diverse White Shul?" was a

question that kept popping into my mind. Little did I know... HaKadosh Baruch Hu never ceases to surprise us all.

Truth be told, Rabbi Pelcovitz himself quipped at a *simchah* a few years ago, "People ask me why a rabbi would remain at one shul for so many decades. And I answer them, 'Either he's insane or he really does love his job.' " Well, it was evident that he truly loved the job, and never did I see him rattled; the image of a rabbi possessing perennial poise, always calm and collected, was one of Rabbi Pelcovitz any time of the day, every day of the year.

Back to the room that evening. The rabbi of rabbis concluded his presentation, and I joined the rush to the front as he fielded a flurry of questions from the many *yungeleit* thirsting for yet another helpful tip on the art of homiletics. As the crowd of aspiring rabbanim yearned for more, it struck me: Look at these *talmidei chachamim* from various yeshivos all over the East Coast, all soaking up Torah tidbits from a clean-shaven rabbi with his smaller-than-most black hat. Donned in his typical attire of a regular blue suit (yes, sometimes even in sport jacket and slacks), there he stood teaching, educating, and inspiring the next generation of rabbanim.

In a powerful *hesped* delivered for Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky ztz"l (printed in a special edition of the Torah journal *Yeshurun*), Shaar HaTorah rosh yeshivah Rav Zelig Epstein ztz"l shared with his audience how it was not possible to describe and fully capture the essence of the *gadol* that Rav Yaakov was. To best convey his message, Rav Zelig pensively noted that, while he could recall everything from his time spent learning in the Mirrer Yeshivah back in Europe — indeed even every conversation he merited to have with famed mashgiach Rav Yeruchem Levovitz — he could not

express in words the “*neshamah*” of the “*maamad kadosh*” that was the holy Mir, and that was the Mashgiach himself. The words and actions, the practical details and nuances, were forever at the tip of his fingers and etched in his mind. But the core essence of what it was like to bask in the proximity of the dynamic persona of Rav Yeruchem could never be articulated in mere words.

And so it is regarding the gargantuan *neshamah* of Rav Yaakov as well: What was lost in the aftermath of his demise, the true *adam gadol* that he was, can never really be encapsulated in words.

In a somewhat similar vein, I wondered that night what it was that made Rabbi Pelcovitz so special — to me, to his beloved kehillah, to multitudes the world over. No, he did not look or dress like the European rav of old, nor did he project a majestic, august rabbinic appearance like some of his contemporaries. And yet, there was this rabbinic aura that enveloped you and captured your attention from the moment you met him and engaged in any conversation. The broad-based knowledge, the keen perception, his “*pikchus*” in Torah and worldly matters, all merged to inform you from the start that you were with someone special, a unique rav who bespoke *emes* in both word and action.

“*Gazalnu, dibarnu dofi....*” I was back with the Rav — my shul rabbi of four-plus decades — in his room, by his bedside, surrounded by his incredible rebbetzin and extended family. In his final moments, frail and infirm, that mystical rabbinic aura was still there. Even as he neared the century milestone, you still saw in his eyes that proud Torah Vodaath Rav Shlomo Heiman *talmid*; that devoted disciple of Reb Shraga Feivel (who instructed him upon entering the American rabbinate in the middle of last century not to grow a beard); that

loving and caring husband, father, and *zeide* to five generations of descendants — who shared that boundless love, care, and concern for Klal Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael with his congregants.

A biographer of Winston Churchill was once asked how he would summarize the Churchill he had come to know fairly well over the course of many years. His reply? “He was all about the three I’s: 50 percent independence, 50 percent intelligence, and 50 percent intensity.”

“But that makes 150 percent!” queried the interviewer.

To which the biographer responded: “Well, you see, Churchill was bigger than just one person....”

Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, likewise, was “bigger than just one person” — a concatenation of myriad accomplishments that marked his career, a *talmid chacham*, scholar, author, and lecturer who lived modestly while selflessly devoting his life to serving his kehillah and Klal Yisrael. He was, indeed, larger than just one person, larger than just one rabbi.

Even in his final moments, he stood tall as the quintessential rav, as the rabbi of rabbis. And certainly as the rabbi of this rabbi.

“*Shema Yisrael...*” My hands let go. My special memories never will.

*Yehi zichro baruch.*

## *Sixty Years of Jewish Communal Life*

by Brian Nadata

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Used by permission.

In 1951, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz came to Far Rockaway to become the *rav* of Congregation Kneseth Israel in Far Rockaway, fondly known as The White Shul. Rabbi Pelcovitz remained in that position for more than 40 years, when he retired as rabbi emeritus – an active retirement, to say the least. I had the privilege to sit down with Rabbi Pelcovitz, a renowned teacher, orator, and leader, and reflect on his perspective on the rabbinate and the role of the rabbi – then and now.

*B.N.: As a young rabbi starting out, whom did you turn to for guidance?*

*R.P.:* You must understand that I was a *rav ben harav*. If I were going to be a plumber and my father a *rav*, it wouldn't fit. I also absorbed from those around my father. If you read and are curious and pursue the history of leadership in the Jewish community in the 20th century, you're going to find a group of people whose lives reflect the challenges of your own time even though they preceded you.

When I did the work on translating the Sforno's commentary on the Torah, people involved in publishing it felt that even though the Sforno lived in the 16th century, in many ways the conditions and pressures of that Jewish society were similar in the sense that we were exposed to the outside world and were no longer insulated as we were in the past. Those living in the Western world, unlike those living in the Eastern European ghettos, were beginning to reach out and absorb some of the culture. As I grew up, there were people who appealed to me, because they lived in similar times, for example Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch, who lived at a time when society was going through some seed changes. Also, the loyalties and the commitments you see in your own life, growing up in a time when the Orthodox Jewish Rabbinate was not exactly on the ascendancy – on the contrary, it was on a downward spiral. And if you see someone who is committed and does not give in, that has its impact on you as well. I grew up in a home in the *Litvische* world that did not shut out the rest of the world, unlike those who were isolating themselves from the so-called "*Goyische* World."

*Rabbanus* and *rabbanim* were associated with the *Litvische velt*. There was not so much of a *yeshivische velt*. It was a world that was open to other cultures and influences. Nevertheless, they were very, very strong in their commitment and did not bend and change with the winds of the times.

*B.N.:* Today with many of the *gedolim* of the past century no longer among us, who do you see the *rabbanus* today turning to for guidance?

*R.P.:* Today we live in a time of specialties, a time we did not experience in the 1940's, 50's, or 60's, the era of *kiruv rechokim*. When I was growing up, it was very low down on the list. The educational field was also not as strong. In my time, being a rabbi was much more prestigious than being involved in Jewish education, certainly more prestigious than being involved in so-called *kiruv* work. As a

result, the pulpit world was much more prestigious and more attractive to me and my father as well.

When I first left the yeshiva and I was thinking of getting married—in those days you didn't think of getting married without having a *parnassah*, unlike today—it was easier for me to get a job in the *chinuch* world, and I became a principal at a young age, in Hartford, Connecticut. My father was not happy. He did not, in his dreams, see his son becoming a *mechanech*. He wanted his son to be the *rav* of a *kehillah*, not the principal of a school. Even in the yeshiva, there was more respect for our classmates going into the *rabbanus* than for those going into *chinuch*.

The rabbinate was defined differently than it is today. In YU, which is the only yeshiva that is serious in the forming and shaping and fashioning of *rabbanim*, they have divided it, consciously, into three or four different areas—*kiruv*, social work, educators, and community leadership.

Today, there are few models in community leadership, because the field itself has become truncated, lessened, to a certain degree, watered down, because shuls are no longer the major institutions influencing communities. The role of the shul has become diminished because of the various areas of specialty. Schools, shuls, community and political leaders, charitable organizations, and Israeli causes all share the responsibility. You can't just go to one address and say: Here, this represents the power structure of the community.

Young rabbis should look to their *rebbeim* and teachers, their mentors, although many come to older *rabbanim* for guidance. Just three or four weeks ago, a young man who had taken an associate rabbi position in a neighboring community, who was very serious and sincere about his career, spent several hours with me. I'm sure they would do this with other senior rabbis in Manhattan and

Queens. I don't believe, however, that the aspirations of a young rabbi are similar to those in my time when the rabbinic organizations, the RCA, the Igud Harabonim, were stronger and everything flowed through them. It was important for you to have that collegial feeling and to feel that you were a part of the larger organizations playing a major role on the scene. In my time, the OU was not as strong as it is now.

*B.N.: Do you believe that holds true for the larger Jewish community, or more so for places that contain the greatest concentration of Yiddishkeit such as New York, LA, or Chicago?*

*R.P.:* Out of town, the impact of the various shuls is more felt than in a community such as ours, where there is this division of power.

*B.N.: Do you think the OU is stronger because of the rabbanim or the baal habatim?*

*R.P.:* In the OU, it's the *baal habatim*. In the RCA, it's the leadership. But the leadership in the 60's and 70's was much stronger and the organization much more influential. That intrigues me. I think it's because of what has happened to the Jewish community. There were big shuls led by *rabbanim*. Over the passage of time, there are communities with thousands of Jews who belong to shuls, but there is no one big shul in the community.

*B.N.: Do you see this as a negative?*

*R.P.:* Both a negative and a positive. A negative in that you lack an address—and sometimes you need an address—you lack that concentration of influence and power. Yet it is advantageous, because today people are more knowledgeable and feel that they have the right to be more actively involved in the leadership of the community. They are not going to be content in just being *baal habatim* and just asking for direction; they want to be more involved in making policy.

I'll give you an example: Kew Gardens Hills has tens and tens of synagogues that did not establish themselves as large congregations, but cater to the needs of a special grouping. Those who are more intellectually inclined will go to a shul that stresses adult education, or to a shul that is more religiously intense. People will choose the shul that is to their taste. Or they'll start one. And these are things that we did not have in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's. There was more of a readiness to accept *hanhagah* and *hadrachah*, and to accept the leadership, both rabbinic and lay.

*B.N.: Would you say that Klal Yisrael is more apart than it is together?*

*R.P.:* It is more apart in that there are more shadings and different areas of interest and more kinds of different approaches to *Yiddishkeit* in general, and less of unanimity of what a community believes in or what they want to be, where they're going to put their money and their power. We have gone through many changes. There was a time when a shul played an important role in the community, both in and out of New York. Then there was a time when Israel was the force of unifying people on a common agenda, in the early part of its existence. There was a time when you could say that all Jews are going to support the State of Israel, support, defend, and give *derech eretz* to it. Today, that is no longer true. Today, we have the Left and the Right. The Right say Yom Haatzmaut is not that important, and strangely, they are met by the Left on the campus who agree for a different reason. The Right will do it because they feel that the State has not been loyal and committed to the spiritual eternal truths of the Jewish people. They meet with the Left who feel that the State is no longer committed to what they feel are Jewish ideals and are ready to cast it in the most negative light. And for their various reasons, they both agree to oppose it.

*B.N.: You seem to be saying that there is a lack of unifying causes to bring Klal Yisrael together.*

*R.P.:* Yes. But at the same time we must be careful to say that today there is much more of a strong core of people who are committed and who believe that Judaism is not a superficial part of life. They are more serious in what they believe in. They are more self-critical and critical of the communities in which they live. And that is a major change.

*B.N.: So you see that the role of the rabbi has changed greatly. More fractionalized?*

*R.P.:* Yes. I see the role of the rabbi today as being more of a challenge to try and hold together a congregation which is not a “cookie cutter” congregation. He has to hold together a congregation that is probably better educated and more sophisticated, and who have prioritized, each one in their own way, what they feel is a priority. And you cannot have 100, 500, or even 300 Jews who will agree on priorities.

*B.N.: So the kehillah looks for the rabbi who meets their specific need.*

*R.P.:* I think the *kehillah* has always clustered around the rabbi who represented to them a spokesman for their core values. Or a projection of what they would like to be ideally. Once upon a time, there used to be a saying that a community hires a rabbi to keep kosher for them. Or they hire a rabbi to keep Shabbos for them. Today, you’re not going to find it in the Orthodox community. In the Orthodox community, there is a lot of judgment – whether the rabbi is *frum* enough. Does he reflect their basic ideologies and prejudices as well. To be successful, a community shul must create an environment in which different emphases and ideologies can coexist, without cancelling out one another. In our shul, I was always proud that there was a consensus on core values about the State of Israel. I feel that today there is still more that unites us than that

separates us. The job of any good rabbi will be to feed and strengthen the areas where there will be more agreement than disagreement.

I recently came across a quote that I like. What holds a family or community or shul together is not chains, it's threads, a multitude of threads. A wise rabbi should make sure that those threads don't fray.

*B.N.: Is there an effective method of outreach for our affiliated brethren – Conservative and Reform?*

*R.P.:* By nature, I'm not the right person to ask that question. There are rabbis, leaders, individuals who are interested in being *m'kareiv* the *rechokim*. To them, it's not just a challenge, it's their mission, for example the Lubavitcher. I have argued that perhaps there is too much emphasis on the *rechokim* and not enough on the strengthening of the *kerovim*, that they should remain with us and not leave.

*B.N.: Today, how does a shul compete for the attention of the youth when everyday life is a multimedia extravaganza?*

*R.P.:* Well, we're not going to do it by competing with the attractions and the lure and the sex appeal of the world around us. The only way any Jewish organization is going to be successful is by offering them that which the world does not. When all is said and done, it's human nature to stand back and see that the emperor is naked, to realize that it's all very artificial and there is very little substance. As a man gets older, he looks for substance, something not of a passing nature. That which has stood the test of time is not the glitter and the glamour, but the core values.

*B.N.: If you wait for this realization to settle in, don't you again find yourself in the position of needing to mekareiv rechokim? How do you attract as a positive force?*

*R.P.:* There are three forces that have not changed in any civilized community. One is the family, another is education, the last

is the communal—*chesed*, civil, the machinery by which we get things done, adding a social cohesiveness. People are by nature social animals, because none of us can live alone. If you create healthy organizations of this nature, where social acceptance, the approval of your peer group, the acceptance on the part of your neighbors and friends, which is very important because no one wants to be ostracized, all these forces together and individually will ultimately be able to hold people together and create a common kind of a goal.

*B.N.: You've probably been the mesader kedushin at hundreds, thousands of weddings. Has the nature of the advice you give to couples changed over the years?*

*R.P.:* I don't really spend too much time giving advice. I'm really much more focused on that which they're interested in the mechanics of the wedding than in the marriage. They want to make sure they have a nice wedding. As far as the marriage is concerned, how many parents sit down with their child before the wedding and have a long, serious conversation of direction? It's an ad hoc situation. A kid comes with a problem, we deal with the problem. When the marriage is in trouble, and they are looking for a way to salvage it, then they come.

*B.N.: Do you see this as a root cause for the alarmingly high rate of divorce among the Orthodox community?*

*R.P.:* The major reason is because it's become accepted. The major deterrent in the past was because it was frowned upon by community and family. Even stronger, it was condemned. Once it became acceptable, you just went ahead and did it.

*B.N.: Among the Torah Jews of today, over the past 30 years we have seen a proliferation of translations and an availability of texts to the public – let's call it the ArtScroll Revolution. Has it affected which sheilos are asked to you today?*

R.P.: If we had to compare the *sheilos* of 40 years ago with those of today, the *sheilos* today are more sophisticated and complex. They used to tell young *rabbanim* when you begin your first position you need a *luach*. People are going to ask you ‘Rebbe, which *perek* of *Pirkei Avos* is this Shabbos,’ ‘When is the *moled*,’ or ‘When will we have two days *rosh chodesh* instead of one?’ Today, the revolution of accessibility has changed a lot. It’s like Home Depot. People figure, ‘Why not try and do it myself? I won’t have to hire somebody.’ To a certain extent, there is a change in the relationship of a *baal habayis* to a *rav* also.

B.N.: *As a world-renowned homiletic orator, when did you first discover that you could move and motivate people in this way?*

R.P.: There is no specific time, date, or moment. Only as you begin to do it, it becomes part of your weekly task and you have to work at it. You understand it’s very important and you can’t take it for granted. As you realize that you have a natural ability, the two come together. I’m sure it’s true of a painter, a sculptor, or an athlete. It’s not an epiphany. It’s exercising and practicing, and as time goes on, it becomes both easier and harder. Easier in the sense that you’ve had your fielding and batting practice before the game. At the same time, if you are honest with yourself, you become more self-demanding, and you’re not going to be satisfied with being mediocre.

B.N.: *Of the thousands of derashos you have delivered over the years, the vast majority have been on Shabbosim and yomim tovim where, perhaps appropriately, only your kehillah experienced both your eloquence and your powerful delivery. Do you ever maintain complete texts of your derashos?*

R.P.: No. I have a lot of notes and outlines but as for texts, very few, mostly given at dinners, conventions, and conferences. I have never been a prisoner to the text. It becomes mechanical and lacking

in spontaneity. I have always told students, 'If you want to be a good speaker, you need to be a good listener and a good reader. You have to do an awful lot of reading and absorbing to have tools.' A good craftsman, whether a carpenter or a tailor, needs good equipment. For a speaker, his only tools are his vocabulary, his language, his clarity of thinking, and his ability to put it together in an orderly fashion.

*B.N.: I've seen you countless times come in to shiurim with only a few notes. It seems that most of these shiurim, such as the Pesach Hagaddah, do not exist in print, and only lately has there been the technology to record them faithfully. Do you have an eye on posterity?*

*R.P.:* There are a lot of tapes. Most *shiurim* in these fields are what a person has read, heard, and studied over many years. He distills and tries to organize these thoughts in a coherent fashion. That is something that comes with time and to people who have a gift for organization which carries over into many areas – and we're not talking about the condition of your desk. Organization is a native talent. I sometimes listen to young people speak and I can tell you who has the native talent and who does not, and who will never have it. It's a gift like any other. If you have it, use it and don't abuse it. The *Ribbono Shel Olam* gave me certain talents, and I find in my retirement that using these gifts and talents does manifest itself. If not it becomes rusty and loses some of its luster.

*B.N.: Today, when you speak, it is an opportunity to sharpen yourself, and you get ample notice. But when you were doing this week in and week out for 40 years, how did you motivate yourself?*

*R.P.:* Anyone who does things in public needs to have a certain degree of pride, the self-effacing individual lacking this will not be *matzliach*. The *baalei mussar* say there is no *middah* of a human being that should be totally destroyed or rejected. Take *gaiva* – pride can become arrogance, so he needs to be able to temper his pride

with a degree of humility, to realize he will not always be on the top of his game. He has to be self-critical, that he won't always be on his A game. But he can't be so deflated as to lose his self-confidence. He must always retain that and constantly challenge himself to do something that he will be proud of, and that people will admire, and that people will look forward to experiencing in the near future. You can neither be the greatest *anav* nor the greatest *baal gaiva* in this profession and be successful. I tell young rabbis that every once in a while, you have to say, 'I'm not going to take myself that seriously.' And you are the one that punctures that inflated ego, not somebody else. If you can do that, you'll be a happier person.

*B.N.: We've spoken before of your major work on the translation of the Sforno. Is there any reason why you chose it?*

*R.P.:* First, in my younger years, I used to do a lot of teaching of *Chumash* and *Meforshim* — for 30-some years every Friday night. I found that this commentator was very succinct; he focused in on a concept, and rarely went far afield. By and large, he was concerned with *pshat*, and a narrative, but he also infused it with certain ethical teachings. He was a Universalist, and that appealed to me. The *Litvischer baalei mussar* were great, great admirers of the Sforno, and I had a brother-in-law, *z'l*, who was a fine *baal mussar*, and wrote many *seforim* and was a *talmid muvhak* of the Alter of Slabodke. He introduced me to the Sforno. The Sforno is pithy, real, and relatable to the century in which you are living and had a great understanding of the psychology of human nature. I saw him as a *meforosh*, largely unknown to the vast majority of students, and we can open him up to them — and this is what we did.

*B.N.: Is there anything else you are working on in print?*

*R.P.:* Right now I am finishing a second book with my son (Dr.) David Pelcovitz. We finished one, *Balanced Parenting*, now we're finishing one called *Balanced Living*. It's on certain *middos*

*ha'adam* — happiness, forgiveness, gratitude, and we are practically at the conclusion.

*B.N.: What were your great challenges in parenting, in having to divide your time between the kehillah and your family?*

*R.P.:* I hope that I was successful. If my children needed help, or if they needed guidance or resolution, I never allowed my public responsibilities to get in the way. I always gave my number one priority to the family. I felt that if you have a balanced and satisfying family life, it will *pashut* make your life a more balanced and happy one. Then you'll be able to do your job in your professional life better too. A person who is not content with himself and his family, it will certainly spill over into his performance on the job. This was always a guiding principle for me.

*B.N.: What do you miss most after leaving the position of mara d'asra?*

*R.P.:* When you have been very active and wrapped up in your career, when you retire and these challenges are no longer there, you miss the challenges. I preach to others that I agree with the statement that it's better to wear out than to rust out. But when you retire, this daily activity is missing, and missed. I certainly don't miss being bothered all the time.

*B.N.: Finally, which of your many honors is the one you most cherish?*

*R.P.:* If you are referring to these (points to the plaques on the wall), none is as important or meaningful as the many enduring friendships I have made with truly special people, and these I keep with me always. □



## · Rabbi · Ralph · Pelcovitz, z'l: c In c Appreciation

By Rabbi Yair Hoffman, Five Towns Jewish Times  
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The dean of the Orthodox American rabbinate, a graduate of Yeshiva Torah VaDaas, and a *talmid* of Rav Shlomo Heiman, z'l, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz, z'l, served as the *rav* of the

White Shul in Far Rockaway for decades and lived in the Far Rockaway community for six decades. The Torah community mourns the loss of a remarkable *rav*.

Rabbi Pelcovitz loved people and he loved his congregants. He was a great *talmid chacham*. He was an author and a translator; his translation of the *Sforno* is truly a Torah classic. The footnotes in the translation demonstrate his profound erudition and understanding.

Rabbi Pelcovitz prompted people to think and to reexamine aspects of their lives. He combined his persuasive words with a warm, infectious smile that helped in this task.

I was privileged to see his remarkable Shabbos *parashah* notes. The published *sefer* of his *derashos* are only a small part of it; the unpublished notes are a treasure trove for any *rav*.

Rabbi Pelcovitz had a tell-it-like-it-is style. I sat with Rabbi Pelcovitz to hear what he had to say on contemporary Jewish society. He felt that we are not emphasizing the role of *Eretz Yisrael* in our *Yiddishkeit* and our need to support it even more. He was very saddened that Torah Jews were not taking a greater role in helping combat the BDS movement, for example. Below are more of his thoughts from his notes and my conversations with him.

### **Bein Adam L'Chaveiro**

*Rabbanim* should do more to address *mitzvos bein adam l'chaveiro*. Who is a *frum* Jew? How do you define such a thing and how does one reach a point where he is entitled to use the title of “religious *frum* pious person?” What are the yardsticks? The current yardsticks are skewed, wrong, or incomplete. What happens when a secular person asks how a religious Jew could be so unethical, so immoral? Is it not important to teach ourselves that the simplest answer to that question is that it is wrong? He is not entitled to the title of *frum* Jew. Keeping *kashrus*, *tzitzis*, and Shabbos does not entitle him to be called a religious Jew if he is dishonest or immoral.

### **Yeshivos and Bais Yaakovs**

Are the yeshivas today teaching *derech eretz* to their students? Can you tell, looking at a young man or woman in public, whether he or she is a student of a seminary or a Bais Yaakov, or could he or

she be a student of any college or secular high school? I have noticed that too many young people, especially the boys, lack the simple, fundamental behavior of *derech erez*.

Young people need to show respect to an older person, to a teacher or a *rav*, and to their companions, their *chaveirim*. Some claim that we live in an affluent society – one of entitlement – in which the average youngsters have never really been confronted with any kind of challenge when it comes to their lifestyle. They have never gone hungry or been denied a new suit or dress. They enjoy many luxuries but do not consider them luxuries.

Has this spoiled them and affected their personalities and character? Are parents aware of this behavior in their children? If so, might it be that they themselves are insensitive in this area? Is the *kavod* that a student once had for a teacher, 50 or 100 years ago in Europe or in this country, still operative today? It would be interesting to ask this of many *rabbanim* and teachers and compare it with what old-timers would say.

### **On the Role of The Jewish People**

The Jewish people have always been a curious people. We never built a wall between ourselves and the world to shut ourselves off from knowing what is going on in the world and selecting things that could be instructive and could broaden our horizons. “*V'gam es ha'olam nasan b'libo*,” the concealed is in the heart of man, but the *ksiv kri* of this *pasuk* is that the inquisitiveness was always there.

Historically, the yeshiva movement was always interested in the world. They wanted to know history, the culture of the world. The abysmal ignorance of the world around us did not exist. Today

in the *yeshivish* community it is almost like a badge of honor that you do not know what is going on in the world.

We have become very insular. I have spoken to hundreds of parents who are appalled by the isolation and ignorance of their own children. If we are living in this place, in this century, in this time, it is extremely important. It is not for us to copy them, but we should understand and have a broad knowledge of the culture and the world around us.

It should not be an honor that you do not know what is happening, and it is not *bittul Torah* that you take time to understand these things. If someone knows the names of philosophers, he is not an *apikores*. Rambam knew of Aristotle.

Rav Pelcovitz, z'l, built Torah in the Far Rockaway/Five Towns community. Under his aegis, the White Shul grew to be one of the largest shuls in New York. He served as a role model for *rabbanim* across the country. He was 97 years old upon his passing.

Rabbi Pelcovitz leaves behind his wife, Mrs. Shirley Pelcovitz; children Ethel Gottlieb, Judy Gribetz, Dr. David Pelcovitz, and Nachum Pelcovitz; and stepchildren Shraga Gross, Oralee Kanner, Carmi Gross, Efrom Gross, and Gila Schwerd. *Yehi zichro baruch*. □

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# THE JEWISH ★ STAR

## Kosher Bookworm

Legacy of White Shul's Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz

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Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz in 2011, on the occasion of his 60th anniversary at the White Shul.

Photo credit: The Jewish Star/Sergey Kadinsky

By Alan Jay Gerber

The Jewish Publication Society, the oldest Jewish publishing company in the United States, recently published *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary*

*History*, by Rabbi Dr. Zev Eleff, chief academic officer of the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago. Within this excellent 500 page anthology is a selection of major texts documenting the Orthodox Jewish experience in America. Also included are informative introductions to these works by Rabbi Eleff with biographical information of the authors of most of these primary historical works.

For the next two weeks I will focus on the career of Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz; last Shabbos, Kneseth Israel, the White Shul, in Far Rockaway, celebrated 65 years of his serving there as a rav. This communal tribute featured as scholar in residence the noted historian Dr. Shnayer Leiman, author of *Rabbinic Responses to Modernity*.

Leiman devoted a large portion of his Shabbos Toldot presentation to the career of Rabbi Pelcovitz, who was ordained by Yeshiva Torah Voda'at in Brooklyn and served several out-of-town synagogues before coming to the White Shul in 1951. He "was part of a long tradition of dedicated rabbis who not only transmitted Torah teaching from one generation to the next, but who also was particularly sensitive to the needs, spiritual and mundane, of his congregants," Leiman said. The professor shared notes of his Shabbos presentation with your columnist.

In his remarks, Leiman adding a personal note:

"I was present in the White Shul 65 years ago, in 1951, when Rabbi Pelcovitz gave his first sermon. He was the first rabbi of the White Shul to speak regularly in the vernacular. The two previous rabbis delivered their sermons in Yiddish.

"Derashos, sermons in English! And, every sermon had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Every sermon had a message based upon the teaching of our sages. He was articulate, and sweetened his presentations with stories and parables and even aphorisms from the wisdom of the nations. He taught us Torah, not with fire and brimstone, but with love, sensitivity, and tolerance.

"He learned from the teachings of the Gedolim of the past, from the likes of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin [d. 1821], and transmitted that teaching to thousands of young men and women here at the White Shul, and to audiences throughout the U.S."

Leiman outlined the *mesorah* that Rabbi Pelcovitz represented as a teacher of the Jewish tradition:

"In one of the presentations, I detailed some of the connecting links between Rabbi Pelcovitz, and the graduates of the Volozhin Yeshiva,

the founding yeshiva, the *eim ha-yeshivos*, of all the yeshivas that exist today.

“Briefly: Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski [d.1940], a graduate of the Volozhin Yeshiva, and the rabbi of Vilna, was *rabban shel kol bnei ha-golah* at that time. In 1935, when the *rosh yeshiva* of Mesivta Torah Voda’at in Brooklyn, Rabbi Dovid Leibowitz, and the yeshiva’s *menahel*, Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, parted ways, a new *rosh yeshiva* had to be appointed. Rav Shraga Feivel consulted Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzenski, who selected the *rosh yeshiva* of the R’Mailles Yeshiva in Vilna, Rabbi Shlomo Heiman, to succeed Rabbi Leibovitz. By sending Rav Heiman and his wife to America in 1935, Rav Chaim Ozer almost certainly saved their lives. Vilna Jewry was decimated during the Holocaust.

“Rav Shlomo Heiman served with distinction as Rosh Yeshiva at Torah Voda’at from 1935 until his passing in 1945. During that period, he produced a cadre of distinguished disciples, among them, Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz, who received his *semicha* from Rav Heiman.

Leiman concludes his narrative with the following heartfelt tribute:

“Just as Rav Heiman brought new life to Mesivta Torah Voda’at, so too Rabbi Pelcovitz would give life to the Far Rockaway Jewish community. Under his watch, Far Rockaway became an “*ir ve-em be-Yisrael*” (a metropolis of the Jews).

Next week, in a second part of this essay, I will focus on one of Rabbi Pelcovitz’s most telling essays as cited by Rabbi Eleff in his valued documentary history referenced above.

*Alan Jay Gerber is a columnist for The Jewish Star.*

# ·Recalling·Ray·Pelcovitz of Far ·Rockaway's White Shul

By Alan Jay Gerber

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and The Five Towns Jewish Times.  
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*Following the recent loss of Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz z"tl, I asked Rabbi Dr. Shnayer Leiman, who knew Rav Pelcovitz for many years, to share his thoughts with us. Rabbi Leiman, author of "Rabbinic Responses to Modernity," teaches at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University and is professor emeritus of Jewish history and literature at Brooklyn College. This obituary was originally published in The Jewish Star.*

It is appropriate that you honor Rabbi Pelcovitz at this sad moment with a tribute to his memory. You already know what I've said about him on previous occasions.

I think it is important to stress Rabbi Pelcovitz's enormous impact not only on the Far Rockaway Jewish community and its many Jewish educational institutions, but on the Five Towns and its many Jewish educational institutions. Jews came first to Arverne, at the turn of the 19th into the 20th centuries. During the summer months, they were escaping from the sweltering heat of their tenements in New York City, seeking respite at the beaches of Arverne in the pre-air conditioner age.

From Arverne, they made their way to permanent residency in Far Rockaway. It is in Far Rockaway that Rabbi Pelcovitz would

leave an indelible imprint on Orthodox Jewish life. Prior to his arrival in Far Rockaway in 1951, Orthodox Jewish life barely existed in the Five Towns. But as members of the Far Rockaway Jewish community began moving into the Five Towns, Rabbi Pelcovitz's teaching, and the ambience of the White Shul, spread throughout the Five Towns as well.

Those who attended the *levayah* saw an incredible tribute paid to Rabbi Pelcovitz. The moving and eloquent eulogies by Rabbis Feiner and Neuburger, and by the members of the Pelcovitz family, and the presence of distinguished *rabbonim* and Jewish educational leaders from all over New York – all on very short notice – will long be remembered.

But nothing impressed me more than the huge crowd of lay Jews, young and old, the *ba'alei batim* of the White Shul, who attended the funeral.

As indicated, Rabbi Pelcovitz assumed the rabbinate of the White Shul in 1951. His funeral took place almost 70 years later. Virtually no one was left of the many tireless *ba'alei batim* who were his closest associates and who helped build the Far Rockaway and the White Shul that one sees today. Yet Rabbi Pelcovitz touched so many lives, that second, third, and fourth generations of White Shul *ba'alei batim* came to pay tribute to their mentor and teacher.

The main sanctuary of the White Shul, large as it is, and even with the opening of additional side rooms, could not contain the massive crowd that came to honor for one last time the Rabbi Pelcovitz they loved and admired. *Yehei zichro baruch!*

—Rabbi Dr. Shnayer Leiman

It was from Dr. Zev Eleff's recent anthology, "Modern Orthodox Judaism" (Jewish Publication Society) that I first learned

of Rabbi Pelcovitz's observations concerning his view of the future of Orthodox Judaism and especially that of the Orthodox shul and its youth.

With the valued assistance of Rabbi Simon Posner of the Orthodox Union, I was able to obtain the full original essay by Rabbi Pelcovitz, titled "The Yeshiva Alumnus and The Synagogue," which is excerpted here:

"A careful study of various communities where a concentration of yeshiva alumni is found will reveal some strange and startling facts. True, a goodly number of yeshiva-trained laymen, among them some former practicing rabbis, are congregants of synagogues and do take an active part in community affairs.

"A sizable group, however, carefully avoid the synagogue and are conspicuous by their absence in many areas of community endeavor. They establish smaller private *minyanim* or patronize a local *shtibel*. They avoid the synagogue, both as congregants and participants, though it should be noted that many are members in name only for reasons best known to themselves and/or the energetic membership chairman of the local synagogue."

Further on, Rabbi Pelcovitz notes that "the hands of the rabbi would certainly be greatly strengthened in guarding the pristine traditional character of the shul if there were but a nucleus of strongly committed and articulate Orthodox laymen in the congregation."

Lastly, consider the situations we currently face with at-rise youth — as well as at-risk adults — in our community:

"What is so often overlooked by yeshiva graduates is the effect of their detachment upon their own children. What attitude

toward the *kehillah*, its rabbi, communal responsibility, and unity is fostered when children are withdrawn from the mainstream of the Jewish community in which they live? Certainly this is an integral part of *chinuch*, on a par with formal academic education."

Rabbi Pelcovitz asks: "What guarantee is there that those of the next generation will be properly trained to take their places in the Jewish community of their choice, once they leave the homes and *shtibelach* in which they have been reared?"

And lastly: "Where shall they turn in their *shtibel*-less suburbia for anchorage, affiliation and identification?"

My dear reader, these are the words of a very wise and scholarly rabbi, reflecting the situation still current in many spiritual venues unto this very day.

And consider that these teachings by Rabbi Pelcovitz were written in October 1960!

## ***Jewish Living***

Fifty Years in the Pulpit: Seven Veteran

Rabbis Tell It Like It Was

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*In January 2008, Jewish Action invited seven prominent veteran rabbis, with a combined 350 years of leadership in the Orthodox community, to reflect on the unpredictable growth and remarkable evolution of American Jewry. The participants were Rabbis Rafael Grossman, Joseph Grunblatt, David Hollander, Dr. Gilbert Klaperman, **Ralph Pelcovitz**, Fabian Schonfeld and Max Schreier. The discussion, which was moderated by Orthodox Union President Stephen J. Savitsky and took place at the Orthodox Union (OU) headquarters in Manhattan, spanned a variety of topics including the frightening pace of intermarriage, outreach to the already frum and the non-frum, the role of the North American rabbi and the decline of the cathedral synagogue. Subsequently, at its 110th National Dinner in April, the OU honored each of these distinguished leaders with the Lifetime Rabbinic Achievement Award for his contribution to Jewish life. The following are excerpts from the wide-ranging discussion. We hope you will be inspired by the timeless wisdom in the pages ahead. To order a DVD of the entire discussion, e-mail [ja@ou.org](mailto:ja@ou.org). Comments and responses to this discussion are welcome on Jewish Action's web site, [www.ou.org/jewish\\_action](http://www.ou.org/jewish_action).*

[Editor's note: Comments by Rabbi Pelcovitz A"H have been highlighted below in **bold font**.]

**Steve Savitsky:** What have been the most significant changes in American Orthodox life you've witnessed since you entered the rabbinate? What have been the most significant changes in the rabbi's functions?

**Rabbi Dr. Gilbert Klaperman:** In 1950, I came to Lawrence [New York] and found a very interesting congregation—patrician, aristocratic people. They were very fine Jews, but they knew very little about the religious requirements of Judaism. They helped build the synagogue. Together, we built the first yeshivah in Nassau County. We [helped] build the first *eruv* in the county. We had a great community. But we did not have *talmidei chachamim*. We have them today in our congregation—I think that's a significant change.

**Rabbi Ralph Pelcovitz:** When we came into our positions, a half-century ago, we found—those of us who were in truly Torah-observant shuls—that the older generation was more frum than the younger generation. Today, the younger generation is more frum than the older generation.

**Rabbi David Hollander:** Among other significant changes is the upsurge of Torah learning for men and women of all ages. Overall, there's a wonderful change in favor of *yahadus haTorah*. And for that change, the OU is entitled to tremendous recognition and credit.

**Rabbi Joseph Grunblatt:** There have been various changes in American Jewish life, for better or for worse. In some communities, the stability of the family has been seriously challenged. We find many more dysfunctional families in the Orthodox community, and more divorces than in the past. On the other hand, we frequently encounter a gap between the older and the younger generations. Many people who are members of this Orthodox organization [the OU] have children who will probably not daven in an OU shul, but

rather in a *shtiebel*. [Many of them will] sit and learn. So certainly, there have been some very radical changes.

**Rabbi Rafael Grossman:** I spent most of my years in *rabbanus* away from New York. There was a time when every community in the United States with at least two- to three-thousand Jews had an Orthodox shul. Those shuls have tragically and painfully disappeared. This is the negative aspect of the last fifty years. . . . [In] town after town, city after city, where there were pulpits for Orthodox rabbanim, Orthodoxy no longer exists. But, on the other hand, more than half of the shuls that were affiliated with the OU fifty years ago, outside of New York, were without mechitzahs, and with other deviations that were seriously problematic. [Today, this is no longer the case.] What brought about this tremendously positive change, and the dawning of a potentially great future for communities in the remote parts of America, or at least remote from New York? Firstly, of course, *chinuch* [education]. Secondly, NCSY. The achievements of NCSY are nothing less than remarkable.

**Rabbi Max Schreier:** [The rabbis of fifty years ago] were respected because they were *gedolei* Torah, but they didn't have a community to work with. I remember when I arrived in Rochester, New York, the story was Reform A, Conservative B, and Orthodoxy a poor third. But the commitment of Orthodox rabbis in general was very great, and these rabbis functioned as they did within limitations of communal influence. The congregants were not very well educated, by and large, with the exception of those who came from religious communities.

**Rabbi Fabian Schonfeld:** Basically, the changes came about with *siyata d'Shamaya* [help from Above]. It's the natural way of Torah to inspire people, to cause them to rethink what life is all about. It was

the drive towards Jewish education—the yeshivah movement, the day school movement—that brought about a very significant change. People call it “the shift to the Right.” I don’t know of a Right, or Left or Center. This is a question of labeling, which is wrong. I’ve always been opposed to the use of [the term] “Centrist Orthodoxy.” . . . It’s Torah Judaism.

A rabbi’s job has also changed tremendously; [he is no longer] somebody who [just] answers occasional questions about *Ya’aleh Veyavo*, *Retzeih* and *Al Hanissim*. Today, the rabbi has to be a qualified psychiatrist, psychologist and, above all, social worker—which is really what Moshe Rabbeinu was. Yisro’s criticism of Moshe Rabbeinu was “You’re too much of everything.” Our role has changed tremendously. We are involved in people’s lives, in their *parnassah* [livelihood]. I don’t think that rabbanim ever had this kind of a challenge. The idea of the rav [spending all of his time] sitting and learning has changed. Rabbi Eliezer Silver said that once, when he was rabbi in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the [shul] president walked in, and found him learning. “Rav Silver, what’s doing?” he asked. “I’m learning,” he answered. “You’re learning?! You’re a rabbi already—you don’t have to learn anymore. If you don’t know how to learn, why did you become a rabbi?” asked the president. [While the rabbi’s need to learn] hasn’t stopped, the rabbi is [now required] to get involved in every aspect of Jewish life.

**Mr. Savitsky:** One of the greatest problems facing Jewry is intermarriage. What do you think can be done to stem the tide of assimilation?

**Rabbi Grunblatt:** Frankly, I don’t think there’s too much that we can do. [Years ago,] there were many Jews who were not observant, but you had a sense they were Yidden. But this [ethnic identification] is

practically gone, and without true Torah commitment there's very little sensitivity about [maintaining a Jewish identity]. The liberal branches have attempted, of course [to deal with assimilation]. They're constantly writing in the media about accepting intermarried couples, and working with them. But essentially, I think it is a losing battle and [there is] very little that we can do for people who have reached the point where being Jewish doesn't matter anymore.

**Rabbi Pelcovitz:** [The Jewish people] always [suffered from] intermarriage. But within the Jewish community, there was never legitimacy granted to this phenomenon—which is what has happened in our country, slowly but surely, over the years. When we began in the rabbinate, we, not only the Orthodox, but also the Reform, the Conservative and the secular agreed that intermarriage was beyond the pale. Over the last half century, there has been an encroachment upon the invisible barrier between us and the non-Jewish world. Intermarriage has slowly been granted legitimacy, and it isn't that far a distance from legitimacy to acceptance. And there's also a connection, an opening from acceptance to approval. And therefore, what we have to do—this is something that the OU and all Jewish organizations have to work on—is to reinstitute total disapproval, and the refusal to accept or to legitimize any kind of intermarriage. Once you give intermarriage legitimacy, there is no argument left for us to be able to convince our young people to reject it.

**Rabbi Klaperman:** There's another aspect of this issue that we're not touching on. And that is, how do we talk to our children about the problem of intermarriage? In other words, to simply say that we will not grant legitimacy is not sufficient. We have to instill in our children a love for Judaism. We have to create a sense of emotional

relationship [to Judaism], of pride and joy. We have to talk to them not only about Jewish tradition, but about great Jews who brought credit to us. We have to talk to them about an Albert Einstein, a Jew who brought great glory to our people. We have to say that there were great Jewish justices in the Supreme Court; there are great Jews in Congress.

**Mr. Savitsky:** We have to have a shift from “guilt to pride.” Guilt doesn’t sell, guilt doesn’t work. You have to have pride.

**Rabbi Schonfeld:** The only thing we can do is what the OU’s doing, the RCA’s doing, the yeshivahs are doing – and that is, get people to not only study Torah, but to also practice Torah. You’re not going to stop intermarriage simply by saying to people, “Don’t do this. It’s wrong. It’s bad for us.” Those arguments have no value. We need to infuse [Jews] with a spirit of loyalty to Torah, not just within the synagogue alone – in every part of Jewish communal life.

**Rabbi Grossman:** The vast majority [of American Jews] have no Jewish identity. And how do we deal with it? First deal with the issue! Sure, if we can get everyone to put on *tefillin*, do *mitzvos* and keep and learn Torah that would be wonderful! But that is not doable. *Ve’al tomar davar she’i efshar lishmoa*. What is doable is to emphasize the most important aspect of our being, and that is Peoplehood. We are disappearing. The vast majority of American Jews have yet to set eyes on Israel. The vast majority have no Jewish connection whatsoever. And that’s not just outside of New York, but in New York as well. What transcends all of our concerns – transcends everything – is the fact that we need to identify as a people. And part of [peoplehood] is the one avenue that the Ribbono Shel Olam gave us: It is called Israel.

**Rabbi Schreier:** I met a young man, who happens to be a former congregant of mine, who's engaged in outreach in a particular community. And he said to me that with tens of thousands of youngsters going to Israel [after high school] each year, the key is to have a presence on college campuses to make sure that when they come back [to the States] and pursue their advanced degrees, they have the ability to do so in a constructive atmosphere. One of the greatest of the OU's activities is its campus program [the Heshe & Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus, or JLIC].\* Because more than 90 percent of American Jewish youngsters attend colleges and universities, the presence of these [frum] couples on campus has made a huge difference. Only last night I heard about a campus that has a tremendous Jewish presence – the University of Florida – but there is no Jewish community within 100 miles. I would urge the OU to redouble its efforts in this area.

**Rabbi Klaperman:** Taking Rabbi Schreier's comments a little further, there is no place on the Jewish scene where Jewish boys can meet Jewish girls. I met my late wife in *Shomer Hadati*. We used to get together every Friday night. The fact is that I met my wife in an organization that sponsored the opportunity for Jewish boys to meet Jewish girls. And we don't have that anymore.

**Mr. Savitsky:** We're very proud of the fact that through NCSY, where we have close to 1,000 advisors, young men and women of college age and beyond, we make hundreds of shidduchim. We think NCSY provides a wonderful place for young men and young women to meet, in an acceptable social setting, while they're doing great work for Klal Yisrael.

**Rabbi Pelcovitz:** There is a certain kind of a romance, a love affair that we have today with *kiruv rechokim* [outreach to the non-

religious]. There's nothing that gives greater *sipuk ruchani* [spiritual thrill] than to be *mekarev* [to engage in outreach]. But let us not overlook *kiruv kerovim* [outreach to the already religious]. Where we may be failing is in making sure that when our own children go off to college, they get the strengthening they need.

**Mr. Savitsky:** The program we have on college campuses was never meant for unaffiliated kids. Our college campus program was meant for our kids. We don't use the term "*kiruv kerovim*" but "*mechazek kerovim*." In other words, the people who are *karov* also need *chizuk*. NCSY is the largest Jewish teenage *kiruv* organization in the United States. We reach 30,000 of the 338,000 Jewish teens in North America, so we're reaching only 11 percent.

**Rabbi Grossman:** You can talk about internal Orthodox concerns and issues, but they are totally irrelevant to Jewish survival. There's a fire burning out there.

Eighty percent of American Jews do not live within the vicinity of New York. West of the Hudson is where the Jews have moved. . . . New York is an entity unto itself. Orthodoxy is profoundly iconoclastic. And, beyond [New York], you have a whole different world out there. You hardly have Orthodoxy. So what are we going to do? In my lifetime, six million Jews perished. And, in my lifetime, the most remarkable gift of Hashem occurred in the emergence of the State of Israel. And [Israel] does evoke a sense of pride among many Jews who would never set foot into an Orthodox shul.

Our problem today is getting Jews to remain Jews by any definition! Because without a people, there is no *kiruv*. Without a people, there is no *chinuch* and there is no Torah.

**Mr. Savitsky:** As someone who visits small Jewish communities in North America almost every other Shabbos, I know that you're absolutely correct. Judaism is not just New York; it's throughout North America and throughout the world.

As I travel around and visit many shuls, I meet rabbis who are young and have been in the rabbinate for ten years or so, and they tell me they're burnt out. Baruch Hashem, all of you served your congregations for many, many decades. What would you tell these rabbis to help them maintain their energy and enthusiasm?

**Rabbi Schreier:** The area of a rabbi's activity has broadened. For example, whether it is on college campuses, or on the subject of challenged youth, there's so much [a rabbi has to do]. I would tell these young rabbis to channel their great abilities. Certainly the later generations of [American] rabbis were recipients of a better education than earlier generations. The flipside is that many rabbis experience difficulties [when] the laity in their congregation is not always receptive to the activity that a rabbi wishes to introduce. In this regard, the OU has a great contribution to make. . . . in sensitizing laity to the opportunities that there are for service.

**Rabbi Schonfeld:** I think a rabbi who feels burnt out shouldn't have been a rabbi in the first place. You have to go into this profession, if you can call it a profession, with a spirit of dedication to Torah, to *chinuch*, to Klal Yisrael. If you do, you don't get burnt out. I've seen rabbis who are burnt out. They get tired of meetings and with fighting with the congregation, with the shul president. But you have to feel the *aish da'as*, the fire of Torah, within you – independent of age, independent of circumstances. If you don't have that, you shouldn't be a rabbi.

**Rabbi Klaperman:** We have to examine why a rabbi's burnt out. Is it because he's working too hard? Or because the challenge is too much for him? Or because he was never meant to be a rabbi? I had a non-Jewish friend [who was] a minister. He used to speak about his colleagues and say, "He was defrocked. He was unsuited." There are young men who went into the rabbinate out of commitment, out of desire, but they're not meant to be rabbis. They get burnt out very quickly, because the rabbinate is a challenging profession. It's hard work. It's demanding work. It's intellectually challenging. The rabbis I see here [around this table] don't look burnt out to me. Why? Because they were suited to be rabbis.

**Rabbi Pelcovitz:** We all get burnt out. . . . Otherwise, we would [all] still be in the active rabbinate.

If a rabbi is really fulfilling his job, in a community and in a shul, he can be a *mechadesh* [innovator]. [Being] *mechadesh* does not always [pertain to] *chiddushei Torah*. You can be a *mechadesh* in the sense that you channel your energies in areas that are needed at that particular time. When I first entered the rabbinate I channeled my energies in an altogether different channel than I would if I were starting over again today. To a great extent, the *ba'alei batim* today are more learned, and there perhaps is a greater desire for Torah than there was when we first started. By the same token, there are [new and different] challenges today – the necessity of *kiruv*, the question of intermarriage. . . . We cannot apply the old, stale formulas that we used decades ago [to] today. There has to be *chiddush*. And if there is *chiddush*, you cannot become burnt out.

**Rabbi Grunblatt:** I once offered a new *peshat* [interpretation] on an important *pasuk* in the Torah: the first theophany of Moshe Rabbeinu and the burning bush. The verse states, "He [Moshe] saw." But what

did he see? “*Vehinai hasneh boeir ba'aish, vehasneh einenu ukal.*” The Seforno says the [verse] refers to the Egyptians, and most learn [that] it refers to the Jewish people. I said that it refers to Moshe Rabbeinu, who was told he will be leading the Jews. Although he had *gehakte tsores*, “*vehasneh einenu ukal,*” don’t ever get burnt out. That was the message for Moshe Rabbeinu.

I don’t want to judge other rabbis. *Keshem shepartzufayhem shonos zu mezu, kach deiosayhem shonos zu mezu* – everybody’s different, and takes things differently. The important thing is care. If you care, you don’t get burnt out. I’ve been in the rabbinate a long time, and every day, there [is] something that occurs, an experience [that comes up] that I haven’t had before. People have certain ambitions in the rabbinate, and [when] the ambitions are unfulfilled, it’s more likely that one will get burnt out.

**Mr. Savitsky:** Some of the rabbis who tell me they get burnt out say it’s because they do care. They tell me, “Well, other rabbis may not care as much, and so therefore they can keep going. I take every situation so personally. I care so much that I’m just burnt out.”

**Rabbi Hollander:** You have to fight fire with fire! If a rabbi is burnt out, that means that his conscience is bothering him. It’s not [a] physical [sensation]. It’s something that he feels that he’s not doing right. For example . . . [a rabbi] might want to say something, and he hesitates to say it because of the possible material consequences, or because [he’s afraid of] making somebody in his congregation angry. These are the things that bother the rabbi’s conscience. That’s what creates the burnout.

Burnout is not possible if you know that you are working for your Father. Who is your Father? *Avinu shebaShamayim*! If you're working for Him, how can you have burnout?

**Mr. Savitsky:** Many people today are claiming that the community rabbi is being replaced by the rosh yeshivah, since more and more *she'eilos*, questions, are being asked to the rosh yeshivah, and not the rabbi. What do you see as the role of the community rabbi in the years ahead?

**Rabbi Grunblatt:** I've never been concerned with this kind of *kavod* [respect]. I feel my strength is in teaching, and I've taught in Touro College for many years. I once compared a rabbi to a decathlon athlete. The rabbi is likely to have to have ten [different] skills, and no decathlon world champion has ever been championed in one of the different sports. And you have to accept that. Of course the roshei yeshivah can learn better; they sit and learn, day and night. But, *baruch Hashem*, I know enough that I can deal with [the roshei yeshivah], and if they know better, I concede.

**Rabbi Pelcovitz:** We have to define very clearly—and this definition, by the way, has to come from the laity more than from the rabbinical powers—what is the role of a rav and what is the role of a rosh yeshivah? And we should point out that historically, we did have an answer to that question. I once asked an elderly Jew who had grown up in Mir [which boasted the Mir Yeshivah]: “When there is a *chassunah* [wedding], who's going to be the *mesader kiddushin* [officiator of the ceremony], the rosh yeshivah of Mir or the rav of Mir?” And he said to me, “*Aza narishe frage*, I never heard such a foolish question. What does a rosh yeshivah have to do with *siddur kiddushin*?” Today, ask any young man, “Who's going to be the *mesader kiddushin*, the rav of the shul or

the rosh yeshivah?" he'll also say, "*Aza narishe kashe*, what are you asking? Of course the rosh yeshivah! Not the rav." Until we clarify the role of the rav and the role of the rosh yeshivah, we're not going to solve this problem.

Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz was the *ruach hachaim* of Yeshiva Torah Vodaas. Do you know what he once did in the month of Nissan? He called all the senior students together and said, "Who's going to be in town Shabbos HaGadol?" A few of us raised our hands. He said, "You and you, go to this shul to listen to the rav's Shabbos HaGadol *derashah*. You go to the other shul. You must attend the Shabbos HaGadol *derashah* of the rav, and you have to be there in the congregation." Which rosh yeshivah today would ever say that? We have to re-institute the mutual *derech erez* [respect] between the rav and the rosh yeshivah.

One last story: I was at a wedding with the Ponevezher Rav [Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman], and one of my colleagues was supposed to be the *mesader kiddushin* and I was supposed to read the *kesubah*. I said to my colleague, "Let's be *mechabed* [honor] the Ponevezher Rav, let's ask him to be the *mesader kiddushin*." So, we go over to him, and the Ponevezher Rav said, "Me? What do I have to do with *siddur kiddushin*? I'm a rosh yeshivah. I'm not a rav." So I said, "Give him the reading of the *kesubah*." "Read the *kesubah*? I don't know how to read the *kesubah*!" the Ponevezher Rav said. "I can give a *shiur* in *Masechta Kesubos*, but I don't know how to read a *kesubah*! You know how to read a *kesubah* better than I do!"

**Rabbi Hollander:** It is also a fact that many rabbis—Orthodox rabbis—are not learning enough. And [to be a rabbi] you have to be a *talmid chacham*. That's an absolute, minimum requirement so that there will be no great gap between the rabbi and the rosh yeshivah. It shouldn't be that the rosh yeshivah is the *talmid chacham*, and the

rabbi's [just] a good preacher. The rabbi himself must be *mekayem* "*Vehagisa bo yomam valaylah*" [Joshua 1:8] and become a *talmid chacham*, and recognized as such.

**Mr. Savitsky:** Friends of mine who are rabbis tell me that their best years for learning were in the *beit midrash*. Once they became rabbis, they got too busy with communal obligations.

**Rabbi Hollander:** All the great rabbanim, like Rav Yitzchok Elchanan, the Kovno Rav, and so on, all had time to [both] learn and to be rabbanim.

**Rabbi Klapperman:** By being successful, we're creating a problem. We have kids studying for a year in Israel and when they come home, they won't eat in their parents' home. They will go to the rosh yeshivah. It's a kind of defeat that comes with success. I have members of my congregation whose children will not daven in my shul because it isn't religious enough. They will go to the rosh yeshivah; they will not come to me. I'm not offended by it. I have a sense of who I am. I have respect for the roshei yeshivah. I hope they have respect for me. I'm not a *talmid chacham*. The rosh yeshivah's a *talmid chacham*. When I was young, I davened in a shtiebel. We had a magnificent rav. "*Er iz gezesn un hot gelernt a gantsn tog.*" All day long, he used to sit and learn. He never knew the outside world. He never knew me. He never knew anybody else. He was a successful rav. But he was not a successful rabbi.

If you would ask me, What would I tell a young rabbi he has to do? I would say, "You have to sit and learn, because you have to at least recognize the language. You have to know what we're talking about. That's number one. Number two: You have to preach Torah. Number three: You have to be prepared to serve the congregation in

every way that's required. Number four: You have to be an ambassador to the rest of the world. If you live in a small community, you have to be involved in the community chest; you have to be involved in Jewish and Christian relations. You have to stand out as a leader. If someone asks a question that you can't solve, you'll channel it to the rosh yeshivah. I've had *she'eilos* that I wouldn't dare respond to.

**Rabbi Schreier:** Questions of *halachah* should be addressed to the community rabbi. They have nothing to do with the rosh yeshivah, as great as he may be. We are the community rabbis—and the community should turn to us for everything. So while [relying on the roshei yeshivah] may be a growing [phenomenon], it's not going to change what ultimately occurs in the community.

**Rabbi Grossman:** I sent many, many young people away to yeshivahs, *baruch Hashem*. Then they would come back, and get engaged. "Would you mind, rebbe," they would ask me, "if my rosh yeshivah is *mesader kiddushin*?" And, I tell you, truthfully, I never mind. Except *ba'alei batim* mind. Because the rosh yeshivah comes, the rosh yeshivah goes. But the statured image of their rav is very important.

But today you have a different kind of rabbi. These are people who . . . the majority of them . . . are not *pasuk puma b'girsas*, they don't stop learning. They far surpass, in most instances, the rabbis I had known in America fifty years ago, in learning, in commitment to *frumkeit* and in *yiras Shamayim*. We've seen a whole new breed, and much credit goes to the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary [RIETS], which has produced rabbis who will go out of town, and function superbly as rabbanim. Their *kavod* is very important.

My father was a rav in Lakewood. And the rosh yeshivah [there], Rav Aharon Kotler, was considered, correctly so, as the *gadol hador*. And there were *chassunahs*, especially when the Kletzke *bochrim*, who were saved [from the Holocaust], came [to the United States]. Many of them lived in our house, so they felt a close attachment to my father. They would want my father to come to their *chassunahs*. But they would want the rosh yeshivah to be *mesader kiddushin*. *Velama lo*, why not? Rav Aharon refused. He insisted that if my father was there, he should be *mesader kiddushin*. And this was true [as well] for the other rav in Lakewood [at the time], who was much younger. That's why Rav Aharon was the *gadol hador*, among other reasons.

**Rabbi Schonfeld:** Rav Joseph Ber Soloveitchik told us thirty years ago that the *tekufah* of the rav is [over and that a new] *tekufah* of the rosh yeshivah was beginning. We didn't quite understand what he was trying to say [at the time], but we can see it today.

The function of a rosh yeshivah is to teach Torah, to be a model to the community, more than the rabbi is. Oftentimes, a rosh yeshivah is brought in from Israel to be a *mesader kiddushin*, at an expense to the [parents]. By the following year, the rosh yeshivah forgets the talmid's name! There are great roshei yeshivah who remain part of the talmid's life, and those are outstanding people. But the rabbi who lives day and night with the family should not be excluded when it comes to times of joy. It's not a question of *kavod*. It's a question of the function of the rabbi as a servant of the community—an *eved Hashem* and an *eved* of *Klal Yisrael*. Very often, [they are] pushed aside.

The function of a rosh yeshivah is not to get involved in *paskening* [rendering a rabbinic decision] the *she'eilah*, unless you ask him. That's the function of the rabbanim, who know *Yoreh Deah*. Not that

the roshei yeshivah don't know [it], but their function is to set the mode of life to the talmid. The rabbi's function is to be involved in the life of the congregation. The daily life; the day-to-day problems. We have to find a *modus vivendi* of not overlapping each other.

**Mr. Savitsky:** We see the major cathedral synagogue of yesteryear vanishing and being replaced by the *shtiebel*. We see that even in larger congregations, there are spinoffs where people daven in homes for *Minchah* and *Maariv*. What are your thoughts about the "shtiebelization" of America? Is it good? Is it terrible? Is it pareve?

**Rabbi Schonfeld:** We have to make a distinction between a Chassidishe *shtiebel* and a *shtiebel* that is a breakaway from a shul. Chassidishe *shtieblach* serve a very important purpose. Gerrer Chassidim, as my family is, or Vishnitz or Satmar or Lubavitch, want to daven with their own people, and take directions from a central authority, the rebbe. It's really a *kehillah*. What the rebbe says is spread to all [of this Chassidic group's] *shtiebels* throughout the world. This kind of *shtiebel* is important to Jewish life. [The other kind of *shtiebel* is created] when people don't like the chazzan or the rabbi. Those *shtiebels* are harmful. They are destructive of the sense of the Jewish *kehillah*.

**Mr. Savitsky:** Are you saying that there's never justification for a breakaway shul? Don't breakaway shuls help a community grow?

**Rabbi Schonfeld:** There are good reasons for starting a new shul, such as [if] the shul in which one davens is not halachically acceptable. But to just come into the community and say, "You and I think alike . . . let's make our own *minyan*" [is not a legitimate reason]. Before you know it, that *minyan* will have breakaways from

itself. The strength of Klal Yisrael is not the *minyán*, it's the *kehillah*, which is concerned about everything that goes on in the community.

**Rabbi Hollander:** *Shtiebel*s have, unfortunately, replaced the biggest congregations. But the synagogues were not innocent. They did not provide the [people with] proper spiritual nourishment. Certain people decided that [that synagogue was] not for them, and they davened elsewhere, or in the same building in a different room. The *beis haknesses* and the *beis hamidrash* each has its own place in the Shulchan Aruch. . . . There are, in fact, halachic differences between the two. In some ways, the *beis haknesses* has superiority – it doesn't need a *mezuzah*, while the *beis midrash* does. The synagogue itself, by not adhering sufficiently to the requirements of the Shulchan Aruch [with regard to the laws pertaining to] *kedushas beis haknesses*, has brought about the situation where today, American Orthodox Jews want what they think is the “real thing,” and not [a substitute].

At the same time, I want you to know that the Chasam Sofer objected to the creation of a new congregation in Pressberg even though it was 100 percent Orthodox. He said it was not needed – there was an existing congregation.

**Rabbi Pelcovitz:** We should ask: Is there a role for the cathedral synagogue in the present Jewish society, as there might have been thirty or forty years ago? The answer is: We always serve the needs of the populace.

Synagogue Jews always associated the synagogue with the big shul in town. And they were the only ones who could afford to have a *rav* . . . and to offer different kinds of activities. [The synagogues] were the address for every Jewish need, be it here or in Eretz Yisrael.

This generation no longer really needs the cathedral synagogue. If your customers no longer need your product, they're going to go elsewhere. That's why, when [new synagogues are built], physically, they ... [are] smaller.

Then, of course, there is always the ego involved. There are people who need to be the *rosh* [head] and not the *zanav* [tail]. You can't have that many heads, you can't have that many *zanavim*. But, in the final analysis, people who need to feel important get lost in the bigger shuls.

[Since] the trend is going to be smaller rather than bigger shuls, the question is: Will there . . . be a rav in the community or not? Many of these smaller shuls have rabbanim, but . . . in order to make *parnassah*, [they] end up teaching part time in an educational institution. As a result, they are not able to fully serve as the rav of a shul or of a community. I suggest that these smaller shuls, which serve a purpose and fulfill the needs of the congregants, should not necessarily all have a rav. There should be a re-institution of the rav of a kehillah.

**Rabbi Grossman:** Someone has buried the Shulchan Aruch, buried the Rambam. What is the *halachah* about a shul? Do you have to have a shul? Do you have to have what people refer to, as a misnomer, the cathedral? That's a Christian term. And why does the *halachah* require a big shul? And why do we ignore it? "*Berov am hadras melech!*" It is part of the whole *hadrachah*. "*Shtiebelization*" began a long time ago. Its purpose and mission was not really for greater *frumkeit*. How we wish it were, but in most cases [the *shtiebel* was created for] the social aspect. My group, my *chevrah*, my friends go to this *shtiebel*, et cetera. And then a whole new dialogue was created: "What time did you get out?" "What time was davening over with?" This is not the vernacular of *bnei Torah*, of people who have a sense

of significance. But, the question is, What do we Orthodox Jews look like in the eyes of the vast majority [of Jews] who are not Orthodox? If we look like the *shtiebel*, then “I [the non-Orthodox Jew] don’t belong, because this is a close-knit social entity.” Do [the non-Orthodox] see this magnificent shul as being Orthodoxy? Then Orthodoxy must be important and authentic. Does it have the positive elements of the *shtiebel*? A sense of warmth. A sense of davening that is real; song and joy. And what about the sermon? Is it pompous? The shul can be a magnificent asset, and do you know what? “*Mesoras avoseinu beyadeinu*.” My father davened in a shul – don’t call it a cathedral, it offends me. My zeide did. My great-great grandfather did, too. *Doros* [generations] did. And I don’t want to change. I want to do what the Jews of the past have done.

**Rabbi Schreier:** There is a place for the [large, cathedral-style] shul, because of all the communal needs. One has to fight strongly, creatively, in order to make the [cathedral] shul more acceptable. Rabbi Grossman’s differentiation between New York and the rest of the country is valid; this particular problem does [not exist] as much in the rest of the country as it does in my particular community. We have a duty to find a way to preserve the “Big Shul,” to make it more relevant to the current climate.

**Mr. Savitsky:** What are the qualities of a good lay leader? As a rav of a shul, what do you look for in lay leadership? Have there been any *ba’alei batim* who’ve crossed your path, who made a mark on you and on your shul?

**Rabbi Schonfeld:** [A good lay leader must have] the desire to serve *Klal Yisrael*, not to serve himself. Not to see his name as president of a shul. He must understand that he has a position of great responsibility. It doesn’t make a difference whether he’s president of

the OU, or president of the RCA or president of Agudath Israel. He has to be able to give up some of his personal life. He has to travel when he may not want to. He has to leave the family [at] home, just like the rabbi [does]. And a good president is one who works hand in hand with the rabbi, as a good rabbi works hand in hand with the president. "*Vayeilchu sheneihem yachdav*" [Genesis 22:8]. The most important thing is to avoid any kind of conflict between the rabbi and the synagogue administration.

**Rabbi Klaperman:** Herbert Tenzer was my mentor and my very dear friend. He taught me something very interesting: How does one become a leader? Everybody wants to do the right thing, but 90 percent of those who want to do the right thing wait for somebody else to do it. He was a man who never waited for somebody else to do anything. One of his dearest friends was Sister Rose Thering, a remarkable nun who, together with him, founded the American-Israel Friendship League. She, through her connections, and he through his, were able to create a situation where Jews and Gentiles worked together for the State of Israel. He became chairman of the Board of Directors of Yeshiva University. He was behind the first fundraising opportunity we undertook in the Five Towns [in New York] for the Albert Einstein College of Medicine [of Yeshiva University]. He was a great doer, and ended up in Washington, DC, as a congressman.

One year, Congress was in session during Rosh Hashanah, and Herbert called me and asked, "What do I do now?" I said, "Look you have to be there. That's your job." He said, "Yes, but my job is to daven on Rosh Hashanah." So he arranged for the use of a room in the Capitol to be used for Rosh Hashanah services. We sent him *machzorim*, a *ba'al tefillah* and a *ba'al tekiah*. That was a remarkable accomplishment. He was a man who gave his life for Yiddishkeit, for

charity, for service and for true kiruv. And he did it without the desire for either credit or respect.

**Rabbi Pelcovitz:** I had the pleasure of having many, many outstanding *ba'alei batim* in my shul. I remember when I became a rav, my father, who had been a rav for many years, gave me two *berachos*. One was that I should never have a president who thinks he's a *talmid chacham*. The second was that I should never have a president with a good memory.

Over the years, I was very fortunate to have people in our shul who were leaders of the American Jewish community, on different levels. That was not thanks to my inspiration. I tried to keep them in line, so that eventually they would rise to the level that they were entitled to in the first place, as water always finds its level. And they become part of the total Jewish community – that's really what a shul is all about.

**Mr. Savitsky:** It's the nurturing ground.

**Rabbi Pelcovitz:** Teach and nurture. And this is something that with all of our understanding of why people are attracted to smaller shuls, will never be duplicated by [them]. We still have a need for synagogues that are from the old form and the old style. And we have to try to convince our *yeshivaleit* that this is what gives strength, health and hope to a community.

**Rabbi Grossman:** The question people always asked is, "How is it that Memphis, of all places, has the largest Orthodox congregation in the United States?" And there are various answers you can give. In the South, less than 1 percent of Jews affiliate with Orthodoxy. And in Memphis, *baruch Hashem*, it's substantially over 30 percent.

Two people are really responsible for it – a lot of us like to take credit, including myself, but it's not so. But Sam Margolin, *alav hashalom*, was in shul every day. There was never a *shiur* I gave that he did not attend. And he was a titan in business. He founded what was the largest independent mortgage company in America – closed Shabbos, closed on *yom tov*. He was an extremely intelligent, wonderful, highly cultured and very articulate person – and a great spokesman for Torah and Jewish education. The other individual was Philip Belz, *alav hashalom*. Philip Belz was considered by many to be the wealthiest Jew, if not the wealthiest person, in Mid America. He was a Jew who loved to do *mitzvos*. He inspired his son, Jack, to do the same. And he put his money where his mouth was. He built our previous shul [Baron Hirsch Congregation] – which was “*zeh Keili v'anveihu*.” It was the largest shul on Earth – and Orthodox. And he wouldn't have it any other way. While all of the other Orthodox shuls in the South, the large ones, went to the non-Orthodox or disappeared, Baron Hirsch continued to grow. We had these extraordinary . . . prototypes [who showed] that you can be respected in business, venerated in the community and a Jew in the fullest sense of the word. Many turned to Yiddishkeit [because of these role models].

**Mr. Savitsky:** Thank you all for participating in this historic discussion. Hopefully, thousands will be inspired by your words and by the great leadership all of you have shown. We, the Jewish community, are indebted to all of you for all you've done to help preserve, defend and grow Jewish life.

*Special thanks to Menacham Ejdelman, program associate at YIVO, for his assistance in preparing this article.*

\*The OU, in partnership with Hillel and with assistance from Torah Mitzion, administers JLIC, a program that helps Orthodox students navigate the college environment and balance their Jewish commitments with their desire to engage the secular world.

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# ***Marking Rabbi Pelcovitz's 65th Anniversary at the White Shul***

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This Shabbos, *Parashas Toldos*, the Far Rockaway/Five Towns community will be celebrating Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz's 65th anniversary as a *rav* at the White Shul.

Rabbi Pelcovitz came to the White Shul and Far Rockaway in 1951. After having received *semichah* from the *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshiva Torah Vodaas, Rav Shlomo Heiman, *zt'l*, and guidance from the legendary *menahel*, Rav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, *zt'l*, Rabbi Pelcovitz served as a *rav* in Saratoga Springs, New York, and in Akron, Ohio.

Rabbi Pelcovitz arrived in our community to become the *rav* of Congregation Kneseth Israel, the White Shul, which was indeed white at the time and was located on the corner of Nameoke and Dinsmore in Far Rockaway. Over the next 65 years, Rabbi Pelcovitz became a key leader who was instrumental in developing *Yiddishkeit* in all areas of the Far Rockaway/Five Towns community, including education, *tzedakah* projects, *chevrah kadishah*, *mikveh*, and *kashrus*.

He continues to play an active role as a rabbi emeritus and as a *marbitz Torah*, giving weekly *shiurim* and contributing to ongoing publications.

To help celebrate this special upcoming Shabbos, Professor Shnayer Leiman will serve as a scholar-in-residence. Professor Leiman will *iy'H* speak before *Mussaf* on Shabbos morning on the topic "The Wisdom of Reb Chaim of Volozhin" and also give a special *shiur* for men and women at 3:00 p.m. on the topic "The Rabbi's Daughter: New Evidence of Jewish Spiritual Resistance in the Holocaust."

Following *Minchah* there will be a *seudah shlishis* at which Professor Leiman will give a third *shiur*, "Reb Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky Leaves His Imprint on the American Rabbi."

To end the celebration, there will be a *melaveh malkah* on *motzaei Shabbos* at 8:00 p.m. At this event there will be a couvert of \$100 per couple. Rabbi Pelcovitz will *iy'H* address the gathering.

Everyone is invited to join this community-wide *simcha* and pay tribute to Rabbi Pelcovitz and to be *makir tov* to him for his efforts over the years in bringing about the beautiful and special community that we all benefit from today. □

## *Growing Up in the White Shul*

*Adapted from the video transcript for the White Shul dinner, June 11, 2018*

I met Rabbi Pelcovitz when I was twelve years old, which was in 1969. That was because I was living in Woodmere and most of my friends lived in Far Rockaway. I was very friendly with Nochi, his son. We had so many Bar Mitzvahs that year and I used to go to his house often. What struck me was that it was such a normal home. I remember my parents saying, telling me, "Please, behave. You're going to the *rav* of the White Shul."

Yet, I was so comfortable in their home as a kid. I remember we sang a little and the Rabbi told a *dvar Torah*, but then we went into the living room and we sat on the floor and we played games. It was just such an enjoyable Shabbos. Actually, there were many *Shabbosos* that we did that. So it was very nice. Then I met my wife-to-be, Cindy. She lived in Lawrence and her parents davened in the White Shul and Rabbi Pelcovitz spoke under our *chuppah* and, as they say, the rest is history.

I raised my children here and my oldest daughter learned *Rus* with Rebbetzin Shirley for her bas mitzvah. My sons had their *brissim* and their Bar Mitzvahs here. When they got married, Rabbi Pelcovitz was present and participated. So *baruch Hashem*, it's been really almost a life of spending time with Rabbi Pelcovitz and both his Rebbetzins; first Rebbetzin Frumi and then Rebbetzin Shirley.

So I knew Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zt"l*, very well. I knew his public persona.

Everybody has talked about his different *middos*, so we know he was the rabbi's rabbi. But if I had to zero in on one *middah*, I would have to say that Torah was everything to him. He loved Torah. He was a master teacher. He felt it was the way to get to people. It was the way for people to grow. He used to give *shiurim* both on Shabbos and during the week. His *shiurim* were very, very well attended.

I remember that his Shabbos *shiur* was attended by all types of congregants; those that had *semichah* and those that, perhaps, didn't even wear a *yarmulke* during the week, but they all grew and they all became better Jews because of the way he taught and the way he conducted himself. His Tuesday night *shiur* was very, very *lomdish* and people came from near and far to hear that *shiur*. Everybody was amazed at the way the Rabbi could teach. But it was more than that. Torah was his way of life.

He didn't go to a scholar-in-residence Shabbos, like so many of the rabbis did in those days and today. He didn't take vacations for long periods of time. As a matter of fact, he would come back in time for the Tuesday *shiur* if he went away for a little time. He didn't go to Bar Mitzvahs that were out of the *shul*, because he wouldn't give up his *shiur* on a Shabbos afternoon. If you wanted to have a Bar Mitzvah, it had to be in the *shul*. That was what Rabbi Pelcovitz stood for and that's the way he lived his life.

I was a very young president for Rabbi Pelcovitz and I would probably like to take a personal privilege at this point and tell everyone, because I've been asked so many times, why did I take the job again for Rabbi Feiner? The answer is because it's such a *zechus* to have access to the *Rav* and as a president you get special access. So I became very close with Rabbi Pelcovitz when I was just thirty-

two years old and I became very close with Rabbi Feiner when I was a little older and I was his president. And it was worth it.

When I was the president for Rabbi Pelcovitz, one of the things that just struck me was, weekly, he would take a walk around the shul and he would look around very, very carefully, with piercing eyes, and he would say, "Look, that light bulb is out. We've got to get that fixed. Look, there's a piece of wood that's falling down." He loved the shul, both spiritually and physically. It was so important to him, every single thing about the shul, whether it was the spiritual growth or the physical maintenance; everything was important to him about his shul.

He led by example. He didn't send a secretary, or an assistant, which he didn't have, or an administrator. He made sure that everything was taken care of himself. Not only was he the rabbi's rabbi, he was the president's rabbi. You worked for him when you were the president. That was very clear.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was special. Maybe there wasn't that friendship type of a relationship, but there was that love between a *rav* and his *talmid*, between a *rav* and his congregant. You knew it was there so you were able to talk to him about anything. It was a relationship that was special. Maybe that's what's needed today, because today you see so many *rabbanim* and so many pulpit rabbis – and this is not to cast aspersions, of course – who are friendly with their *baalei batim*. But sometimes there has to be a separation and Rabbi Pelcovitz knew how to do that and he did it very well.

Rabbi Pelcovitz had opinions about the way a *shul* should be run, but

he always got people involved. He made his point and then he asked people for their stamp of approval. I heard this story from before I was part of the shul; this goes way back. When he wanted to have this shul be just Ashkenaz and one *minyán*, he called in the board, he explained the reason why; he wanted *achdus*. These are the words, from I understand, that he used: he said we welcome everybody; whether they're *nusach Sephard*, whether they are Sephardi, whether they wear a *kippah serugah*, whether they don't cover their head, but they want to come in and put on a *yarmulke*; whether or not they wear a hat. Everyone is welcome here. But our *nusach* is *nusach Ashkenaz*. We will say the *tefillah* for the *Medinah – Eretz Yisrael*, *Medinas Yisrael* is important to us. That is our address. Those were the words he used. Everyone is welcome. If that's not what you want, then this is not the address for you. The board gave him a unanimous approval.

I don't think I was born when he made that statement. I don't know if you can make that statement today, but then, maybe it's only a person with the *emmeskeit* of Rabbi Pelcovitz who could make that statement and get people to go along with it.

My parents, *aleihem hashalom*, they were pioneers in Woodmere. Rabbi Pelcovitz and a group of a few families were pioneers here in Far Rockaway. It's all about the foundation. Rabbi Pelcovitz used to say, "If the foundation is good, the building will stand the test of time." It's very important that the people who are here today remember that the foundation is here and the building stands. They have to look back and find out and remember why there is a foundation like it is. It's because of a Rabbi Pelcovitz that today we have the beautiful shul that we do and we can build on it.

Yes, things have changed and *baruch Hashem* things have changed,

and we've made changes here to take care and to change with the times today and to service a community that we have today. *Baruch Hashem* our shul should continue to grow and *im yirtzeh Hashem*, it will. We're under the leadership of a great *rav*, Rabbi Feiner. *Im yirtzeh Hashem*, we will continue to grow.

On a personal level, Rabbi Pelcovitz was like a second father to me. So there hasn't been a day that I haven't thought about Rabbi Pelcovitz, *zecher tzaddik livrachah*. He was very, very special. He knew my whole family, and I'm talking about the greater family. When I would see him, he would ask about my nephews by name, he would ask about my brothers. He and his Rebbetzin Shirley, *she'yibadel l'chaim*, you know, are just a part of our family. So it's more of a personal loss to me that Rabbi Pelcovitz is not here. The best way that we can remember him is to continue to do the types of things that he would want. That's to learn, to do *chesed*, and to grow.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was *zocheh* to have two wonderful wives. Rebbetzin Frumi, *aleihah hashalom*, who I knew in my youth, was just a wonderful person and was the mother of my friend Nochi. I knew her really in a mother type of role. She was a wonderful mother and I didn't really know her as much as a wife, because I was so young. Unfortunately, she was *niftar* at an early age. Rebbetzin Shirley came along and sort of took over the role of rebbetzin and she was wonderful and continues, *baruch Hashem*, to be wonderful.

You know, she just fit right into the role of rebbetzin in his shul. She had lots of company in her house. She was a live wire. She entertained. She knew everybody in just a short matter of time. She was friendly. She seemed to love everyone in the *shul* and Rabbi Pelcovitz and Rebbetzin Shirley were just a beautiful couple. It

looked to the outsider, like myself, that it was a match made in heaven. So they were both so lucky that they had a second chance at marriage and it lasted for 35 years.

# ·Remembers His Years with The ·Ray

*Adapted from the video transcript for the White Shul dinner, June 11, 2018*

I was *Chazan* in the White Shul for fifteen years and I had the privilege of sitting next to Rabbi Pelcovitz for most of those years. We moved into the community about thirty-one years ago, and a year after that our very smart president, Heshy Lazar, asked me to be *chazan* and it worked out. There I was for the next fifteen years. Rabbi Pelcovitz didn't talk about my responsibilities as *chazan* so much. It wasn't that kind of relationship. I suppose that was a good thing; it meant I was doing ok.

At one point I asked him why there was no Executive Director for the Shul. His answer was, I think, quite telling. Paraphrasing, he gave an example to explain his reasoning: After Friday night davening someone might say, "Rabbi, the news card didn't have my grandson's Bar Mitzvah and I told the office to put it in! I don't understand it and it's embarrassing!" So he told me, "I'd rather not say it must have been someone else's, like the Executive Director's, mistake." He'd rather it be on his plate.

I think that was his perspective and his *achrayis* as a rabbi: Everything was on his plate he didn't shirk the responsibility for the smallest thing, like getting the Bar Mitzvah on the news card. This way, he was acting as the Executive Director, so to speak, to make sure everything was running smoothly, be it *ruchnius* or *gashmius*. I think that was a testament to that era of rabbis who undertook to

make sure everything was on their plate and everything happen the way it should.

Whenever Rabbi Pelcovitz spoke he was always prepared, whether at a bris or, of course, on Shabbos. He had his famous index cards. In retrospect, when I think about it, I would sometimes talk to him when we were up there, asking him a question, and I realize I was disturbing his review for the *drashah*, but hopefully *he* forgave me. Anytime I had to speak I would always ask him for a *vort*. He would either on the spot have a perfect *vort*, or he would say, "Let me think about it for a couple of days," and invariably come back with a perfect *vort*. It was always worth the wait.

I think the most significant aspect of what he instilled in the congregation was a love of learning. Everyone loved going to his *shiurim* and loved his *drashos*. The *baal habatim* remembered what he said, so if he wanted to repeat a point in his *drashah* that he had already said (even two or three years before) he would preface, "I know this was said a few years ago but I think it bears repeating." I think that was his *lashon*. He wanted to say it again because he felt it was a good *vort*, but also wanted to head off the *baal habatim* saying, "Rabbi didn't you say that already a couple of years ago?!"

His overarching theme, rather than "Go out there and do *chesed* today," was of love of *Eretz Yisrael*, Jews, and learning. It was a much more broad and philosophical approach.

If you have interactions with an *adam gadol*, someone with the stature of Rabbi Pelcovitz, it has to shape you in ways you can't necessarily pinpoint. He wasn't someone who gave *mussar*. If it was, it was in a subtle way. I think that having had the privilege of being a *chazzan* in his shul is something I am very proud of and something that will stay with me the rest of my life.

After I became the *chazan* in Beth Shalom, the first night of Yom Tov I would daven in Beth Shalom and walk back. Fairly often I would be *zoche* to catch up to Rav Pelcovitz on Reads Lane, and we would walk home until he would turn off onto Caffrey. I would say, "Rabbi, I hit the jackpot, I get to daven in Beth Shalom, and I get to walk home with you!" and he would give his smile.

He was always greeting people in a very warm way. You felt very special when he would greet you.

Rabbi Pelcovitz was a very, very smart man whose advice was so appreciated by people. I think he also had a near photographic memory, from my impression. That's an unbeatable combination, coupled with someone who is a tremendous *talmid chochom* and someone who lives in this world. Being American born and educated, he understood the American Rabbinate and *baal habatim*; he understood his *baal habatim* very well.

They told a story explaining why he never had a beard. His Rav, Rav Shraga Feivel, had told him in America, if you want to be successful in the Orthodox Rabbinate, don't grow a beard, because you'll be perceived as a throwback; not an impression you want to give. He was a person who obviously respected his *rabbanim*. There were very few people in the Rabbinate like that. He built up this shul *and* the community. The bedrock of the White Shul. You see the way it's thriving now; largely due to him being here and leaving his imprint on the shul. And the best thing is, Rabbi Feiner grew up in the shul. You can't get much more *nachas* as a rabbi than having one of your *baal habatim's* sons become a rabbi and take over.

Noah Fleschner:

## ***“I heard over 2,500 of his Drashos and Shiurim.”***

*Adapted from the video transcript for the White Shul dinner June 11, 2018*

I had the *zechus* of knowing or having an association with Rabbi Pelcovitz for fifty-seven years. During that time, I was a congregant, I was a *talmid*, I was an officer in his shul, and I was an occasional golf partner.

Rabbi Pelcovitz's advice was sought after because he was thorough and he was honest. He had such integrity. And he was so worldly and so knowledgeable. Shakespeare, theater, art, museums – he knew it all. The rabbi was not only a *talmid chacham* – of course he knew *chamishah Chumshei Torah* and seventy-two *m'sechtos*, but he was well-versed in all cultural matters. Not to the exclusion of Shakespeare or sports; he was an avid Yankee fan.

His demeanor in the pulpit, during a *shiur*, in a restaurant, on the golf course was always level, predictable, and fair. I never saw him lose his temper. I never saw him even get close to losing it. When the Rav passed away, it was like a giant who was leading pygmies has left us. He was a person that was always admired. Even the people who disagreed with him respected and admired him.

Over the years, I had the *zechus* of hearing over 2,500 *drashos* and *shiurim*, and they were all great. He felt that *hakaras hatov* was a very strong *middah* and he constantly worked it into his *drashos*. Another *drashah* that sticks in my mind was a Yom Kippur *drashah* he gave

where he suggested that after Yom Kippur we should not wash our *kittels*. Rather we should let the sweat and the tears of Yom Kippur mingle with the *simchah* and the *geulah* of Pesach.

Many years ago, almost forty I believe, the officers always met on Thursday nights in the shul office outside of the rabbi's study. When there were issues to be discussed that the rabbi had an avid interest in, we actually met in the rabbi's study. One Thursday night, we were discussing something. Some of us spoke in favor of it, not knowing the rabbi's feelings. At the end of the meeting, the rabbi told us his feelings and the item was dropped.

We are very privileged that the Rav has left us with one of his protégés as our *rav*, as well as his grandson as our assistant *rav*. We hope and pray that the blessed memory of the rabbi will be a *brachah* to the family, to us in The White Shul and to all of *Klal Yisrael*.

Richard Hagler:

## ***Growing Up with a Gentleman Rav***

*Adapted from the video transcript for the White Shul dinner, June 11, 2018*

The Hagler family moved to Far Rockaway in 1966. We were immediately attracted to the White Shul. We became part of the shul; I was twelve years old. We were incredibly excited to be moving from an apartment on the Lower East Side to the country of Far Rockaway, because Far Rockaway was only a summertime place. Who would live in cold Far Rockaway in the winter?

We were excited to live in Far Rockaway. My father, z"l, got immediately involved in the White Shul. That's when the relationship with the Pelcovitz family, with Rabbi Pelcovitz, started to evolve. Over the years, my father was very involved in the shul. He served as a chairman of the board for many, many years. He was a *ba'al tefillah* here in the shul for many, many years, *Yomim Nora'im* for many, many years.

The relationship naturally evolved. The Rabbi became the *rav* of the family. He became the *posek* for the family, as he was for hundreds and hundreds of families in this neighborhood, and was a spiritual guidance for everybody. As time evolved, the Rabbi was the rabbi for my Bar Mitzvah. He was my *mesader kiddushin*. He was *mesader kiddushin* for two of my children. The only reason he wasn't for the oldest one was because he went to Israel for a great-grandson's Bar

Mitzvah. He never let me forget that I made the wedding when he wasn't here.

My wife's family was also a long-time part of the White Shul, even longer, almost back to 1953. In fact, my father-in-law tells us that he was here as a teenager the day Rabbi Pelcovitz came for his *probeh* in the old shul. I don't know if anybody is still around from then, but he was a teenager back in those days and he had a lifelong relationship with the Rabbi. He served as the president of the shul for eight years, and they had a great relationship. My father-in-law always used to *kibbitz* the Rabbi about finishing on time, and the Rabbi use to always say, "Yes, we always finish on time." My father-in-law would *chep* him a little bit and say, "You know, Rabbi, you're supposed to finish. Here's the schedule." And the Rabbi goes, "I know the schedule. I keep to my schedule."

People didn't care if the schedule ended earlier, because what he had to say was usually right on point, both Torah-wise and world-wise. A lot of our views and feelings on a lot of matters were formed and shaped by Rabbi Pelcovitz.

On a personal level, I served as an officer here for many years under Rabbi Pelcovitz and post-Rabbi Pelcovitz. Throughout his period of time, twenty years or so as the Rabbi Emeritus in the shul, we had many conversations in his house, always going to be *sho'el eitzah*, guiding us through some difficult times, and guiding us also in some difficult situations. But he always had the right answer; he always knew what to say. That is an incredible skill by an incredible man.

The Rabbi had the same physical motions all the time. He would always take off his glasses, talk right from the *bimah*. He would point

with his glasses out there. Nobody knew if he could ever see, if he needed those glasses to see, but he always pointed the glasses in his right hand or in his left hand and two fingers and pointed it out to the crowd. Everybody waited for it because here came the punchline, whether it be the Torah punchline, the article punchline; whatever he was talking about. You knew that he was making the point.

It was quite an incredible time, because growing up the Rabbi was the CEO, the COO, the CFO of the shul. Everything went through Rabbi Pelcovitz. Once you got to know him, he wasn't Rabbi Pelcovitz, he was The Rabbi. In fact, that would be the title. Everybody said, well what did The Rabbi talk about? People would call their friends after Shabbos, talk to their neighbors, I wasn't able to come to the shul today because I had a *simchah*. What did The Rabbi have to say? Or if there was a situation, whether in this country or whether in *Eretz Yisrael*, whatever was there, what did The Rabbi talk about? So that was always an interesting part of our Shabbos table discussion.

Later on, as I got a little older, I went down to Florida once and the Rabbi was there. We invited the Rabbi to come play golf with us. That was an experience. Rabbi Pelcovitz put on his hat, he put on his golf cap, and he put on his golf things, and says, "Here are the rules." He was the perfect gentleman. He always behaved in the way befitting and becoming of a *rav*.

We had generations and generations of kids who grew up here, moved away, and came back; they still considered him the *rav* of the shul. Many people today in their sixties and seventies who haven't been around the White Shul in many, many, many years, we saw

them at Rabbi Pelcovitz's *levaya*, we saw them other times. Whenever they came back to the shul, they said, "That's the Rabbi that I remember."

In later years, when he was the Rabbi Emeritus, he used to speak in the outside *minyanim* on Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur. For many years, I led a *minyan* in the back of the shul. The *minyan*, *baruch Hashem*, had close to 250 people in it. The Rabbi came to speak. He gave what may be, at least in my humble opinion, the best speech ever as the neighborhood started to change. He was talking about the neighborhood and he was talking about external as opposed to internal. He said, "You know, there used to be a time when I could walk in the street in Far Rockaway and I was able to walk with a purple shirt or a pink shirt or a yellow shirt, and it didn't have to be a black suit, didn't have to be a black hat. I was able to walk. I was able to walk with my Rebbetzin. We were able to take a walk. Nowadays, you know, if you're not wearing the uniform, it's not the same thing. You know what? It's not what's external. It's what's inside." The Rabbi spoke for quite a while that day, and nobody minded that we finished late. People who were there – to this day we still talk about it.

It's just been an honor and a privilege to know him, to know his incredible family. It was really an honor to grow up here in the White Shul.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s and into the 1970s, the community was a smaller community. It really centered around the Reads Lane area of Far Rockaway. As far as Lawrence goes, it really didn't go too much past Lord Avenue, if it went that far. There was no

Lawrence Bay Park, there were no people there. Nobody lived on Central Avenue in terms of the apartment buildings.

It was a small, tight-knit community and the White Shul was one of the two large shuls in the neighborhood, always led by Rabbi Pelcovitz. Then all of a sudden, in the middle of the 1970s, late '70s, early '80s, the neighborhood started to explode. People started moving here from Brooklyn. They left Brooklyn. People started moving here from the Upper West, and people started moving here from different neighborhoods. The shuls started to explode, and the neighborhood started to explode.

It was acknowledged throughout the neighborhood that Rabbi Pelcovitz was one of the main reasons that it was growing, because of the growth of Torah. People said, "What kind of Torah? It's not Brooklyn. You can't have real Torah in Far Rockaway." Once they heard him speak, everybody came away saying, "Wow, here's this clean-shaven man who can learn with the best of them." The Rabbi always had a certain regalness about him.

He was an incredible *talmid chacham*. The breadth of his knowledge – an incredible current events person, knew what was going on in the world, knew how to give advice, knew how to work with kids. As I said, he was the *rav* for my Bar Mitzvah. He worked with me on my bar mitzvah speech. I still have a copy of it in my parents' house, in my mother's house, with the album. He really directed each child, *chanoch lana'ar al pi darko* was really correct. He knew what you were, he knew what you were as a child, and he was able to direct himself towards that.

People started to get the idea that there is life out here in Far Rockaway. Because they had a shul to go to, they knew where to go. The yeshiva then started to explode, and then the neighborhood just throughout the 1980s and into the '90s, and look where it is today. It's so large. It goes all the way down from the beach, into the Hewlett area, it's truly the Five Towns. Nobody ever thought Inwood would be anything more than a non-Jewish town, but today Inwood is starting to become Orthodox. That's really due to the people who laid the foundation. The person responsible for laying the foundation from the early 1950s, right through 2015, 2018 is Rabbi Pelcovitz.

So I've been fortunate enough to have been the *ba'al tefillah* here in the White Shul since 1992. For the first sixteen years in the ballroom, and for the last nine years here in the main shul.

I met Rabbi Pelcovitz when I started davening here in the shul. He knew that I understood what the words mean. It's very important that the *ba'al tefillah* not only be somebody, of course, who is *shomer Torah u'mitzvos*, but the *ba'al tefillah* for *Yomim Nora'im* especially be somebody who understands what it means to lead a congregation and keep the congregation involved. People may daven, they may daven beautifully, but sometimes the heart is not engaged. But being part of the participatory people in the shul, he wanted the congregation to be very involved in the davening.

He was very nice; he used to call me after *Yom Tov* every year, especially as recently as this past Yom Kippur, when he was in shul and he fasted a whole day. After *Ne'ilah* was over I went up to wish him a *Gut Yohr* and I said, "Rabbi, you fasted all day. Are you sure you're okay?" He goes, "What else do you do on Yom Kippur?" This

is vintage Rabbi Pelcovitz thinking: understated, to the point, well-taken. What else does one do on Yom Kippur? One davens and one fasts all day. So in his ninety-fifth or ninety-sixth year he was able to fast the whole day. Unfortunately, the last two years it was a little bit difficult for him to speak from the *amud*, it was challenging. But when he spoke on non-*Yomim Nora'im* or Shabbos and was able to use the microphone, the words that came out of his mouth were quite incredible. His different *shiurim* were just incredible.

Chaim Leibtag:

## ***"He Had a Good Word for Everyone"***

*Adapted from the video transcript for the White Shul dinner, June 11, 2018*

I grew up in Akron, Ohio. Rabbi Pelcovitz was the rabbi of the shul there before my father, *alav hashalom*, and my mother, *aleihah hashalom*, were the Rabbi and Rebbetzin. But Akron, Ohio, was a very different community than is Far Rockaway, New York. I always say that in Akron, Ohio, there were fourteen Orthodox Jews; seven were in my family and seven were in the other one.

I came to Far Rockaway after I graduated high school, in 1971. When I was walking down Reads Lane something remarkable happened that I had never experienced: everybody said, "Good *Shabbos*," to me. I subsequently found out that the "Good *Shabbos*," was a move that Rabbi Pelcovitz had instituted, that it made people feel the spirit of *Shabbos*. That was just a part of the kind of way he saw a community and the way he saw the relationship between people.

I actually got to this side of Far Rockaway because of Sh'or Yeshuv. Then, after I got married, the first couple of years, I guess, the family davened in Sh'or Yeshuv, but as my girls got older I needed a place for them to come. This was the shul and it's been home ever since.

Rabbi Pelcovitz had his hand in everything, not only here in this community, but in the way that he encouraged his *baalei batim*. Go

anywhere in the world, go to any yeshiva in Israel, any building, any major organization, and you will see the names of people who were *mispallelim* in this shul. That's because Rabbi Pelcovitz encouraged them to spread their wealth to build the Jewish world as we know it today. I mean, that all came out of Rabbi Pelcovitz. Just everything about him. That same concept of greeting somebody; he wanted to greet people everywhere. That was him.

As I began to get involved with this shul, I guess, on a lay level, the first thing I did was I became the youth chairman. I asked Rabbi Pelcovitz to come to a meeting of all of our youth leaders to give us a little rabbinic inspiration. The line that he said has had a marked effect on me since the moment that I heard it. In the very typical way that Rabbi Pelcovitz would speak, he took off his glasses and he looked at everybody straight in the eye and he said, "You're working with children? Then I want you to look at yourself as an archer. What is an archer?" He would use his hands to mime a bow and arrow, look you in the eye and continue, "The closer you bring that arrow to your heart, the farther it goes." Ever since I heard that it just blew me away. That is how he inspired me, how he inspired the youth department. You ask anybody who is in their forties or fifties today, who knows how to *lein*, who know how to read a *haftarah*, who knows how to *daven*; it's because of the youth department that Rabbi Pelcovitz made sure was in this shul, that inspired. And it was because the youth leaders brought the kids closer to the heart and that's why they went so far.

He was known to interact directly with the children. It's the way he would come over to you and talk to you. If he was in the middle of a conversation – he was just so friendly. There were no airs about him, he was just such a human being.

Wherever I would go and people ask, "Where do you live?" I would say Far Rockaway. They would go, "Oh, the White Shul? Rabbi Pelcovitz?" And I would say yes and, you know, his reputation was so far. It just went everywhere. Everyone knew of the way he spoke. Everyone knew of his brilliance. Everyone knew of the kind of *tzedakah* and *chesed* that came out of here. So he was definitely known everywhere, wherever I went, both on the high level and the low level.

I would tell you also, Akron, Ohio, really never left him. I would bet if we would go to his *shtender* today – because I doubt that they've cleaned it out. But if you'd go to his *shtender* today – he still continued to get this little bulletin from Akron, Ohio and he kept in touch with people from Akron, Ohio. Why would a rabbi from Far Rockaway, in a big, gigantic community, need to speak to people from Akron? But that's the way he was.

Once, when I was asking him about the shul. Because if you look at the shul and you see the way it's built, you wonder. Rabbi Pelcovitz said, "I was a rabbi, I was not an architect, you know." But I asked him, "First of all, how did you end up here?" He said, "One of the reasons that I came here, because I heard that I didn't have to build another shul." Because when he left, in the early 1950s from Akron, they had just completed building a shul.

Rabbi Pelcovitz is the master teacher. If you go to a *shiur* he would force you to learn. He would ask you questions. But more so than just in the *shiur*. One of the things that I'm extremely proud of is that we have now an ongoing Russian *minyán* that has been going on since the Kremlin fell. That idea was born out of a conversation with

Rabbi Pelcovitz who said, "Yes, open up the shul. Let's figure out how to get these new Russian immigrants into our shul."

So we began, with his advice, with English as a Second Language and then we slowly began – it actually was started mostly by Rabbi Hillel Weiner. I was his assistant. But when Rabbi Weiner left I took over the class and we began English as a Second Language and we started to go through Judaism 101. Maybe we got to Judaism 102, but we covered every *pasuk* in the Torah, every *Rashi*, and we opened up Judaism to people who were totally ignorant of anything that had to do with their past. I don't believe there is anywhere else in the world that has a *minyan* like we have, called the Russian *Minyan*, so many years after the end of the fall of communism. That's all because of Rabbi Pelcovitz.

Rabbi Pelcovitz helped grow the main *kehillah* too. You know, it used to be that the Jewish community of Far Rockaway kind of ended at what's now called 878. It used to be more of a traffic circle and a forest. But the community that was built out of Far Rockaway now extends four or five miles into Woodmere. Now, when you see a car drive by on Shabbos, it's either one of two things. It's either Hatzolah or somebody's lost; it's as simple as that. Because this community has exploded as an Orthodox community, very much because of the foundation that Rabbi Pelcovitz laid here. It's no question. You know, there were great leaders in his time – people like Rabbi Pelcovitz and Rabbi Kamenetsky – that really had this vision. And Rabbi Pelcovitz was responsible for the shul side of it. He was very opposed to all these little small breakaway *minyanim*. He wanted to have a shul. He felt the shul was very much a part of what a good Jewish community must have.

I had the great opportunity, especially for the last couple of years, to drive him to shul when he wasn't able to drive anymore. For those of us who remember when he did drive to shul, we had to, kind of, worry about which way he was getting into the driveway, but at one point, I think, his family said, "Rabbi, it's enough." I would get this call; Chaim – put on my imitation of Rabbi Pelcovitz – I'd like to come to shul. So I said, "Rabbi, by all means, please." He would be so profuse with his thank you. So I would say, "Rabbi, please don't thank me. This is nothing. This is my greatest honor."

It was a short little ride from Caffrey Avenue to the *shul*. In later years it was harder for him to get down the stairs, but I will tell you that every little step, every step, from the moment that I walked in the door to pick him up, down the stairs and into the car, he shared another *dvar Torah*. He looked at a leaf, it was a *dvar Torah*; he looked out the window, it was a *dvar Torah*. It just was so much a part of him that it made those couple of minutes so enjoyable.

He was so excited when I could maneuver my car into a smaller area so that he didn't have to walk so far. As people would come up to the car to open the door for Rabbi Pelcovitz, to every person he had something special to say. Every person he knew, inside and out. Every person he was able to say a *dvar Torah*; a little joke with the *dvar Torah*. It was just amazing to see how he had this concept of being able to look you in the eye and know you like that. It was just fantastic.

I was actually at his home the last time we spoke. I brought him *mishloach manos* and he told me – because he hadn't been able to go to shul and he said to me, "You know, I miss you very much." I said, "Rabbi, I miss you so much more, you know." And he just, again,

sat down and told me a little *dvar Torah*. Sometimes I wish I could remember every one of the ones that he said to me.

I would say, as a person who was a former president of the shul, I remember before I took on the responsibility I called him up and I asked, "Rabbi, can you give me a little bit of advice, what should I do?" I mean, we spoke for almost two hours. It was just his understanding of people; his understanding of the dynamics of a shul; of what *baalei batim* are all about; what a shul is all about; what life and death and the cycle of life; all of that. He just had such an incredibly deep understanding, that I don't know if others could have such a deep understanding. Just and incredible, incredible man.

You know, everywhere you go in this shul, he's still here. I think what is not here is his smile. What's not here is the knowledge that probably one of the most unique people in the world is not with us, but everywhere you turn in this place you know that he was here. So he's here. You know, I really don't think he's missing. In every stone and even the carpet, everywhere you go he made his mark. So while physically he's not here, he's definitely here.

**Editor's comment:** The most fitting way to conclude this *Sefer Zikaron* is with Rabbi Pelcovitz's own words, as shared with Naftali Halpern in The Jewish Home in December, 2016. The personal interview, entitled "65 Years and Counting," reveals the mind and heart of an authentically great man. While those years have passed, the counting continues as we collectively preserve and spread the Rav's influence in our community, our shul, our homes, our thoughts, and our choices.

*How fortunate are we to have flourished in the shade of his greatness. –*  
אשרינו שזכינו לשגשג בצל גדלותו.

*Gavriel Aryeh Sanders*

# 65 Years and Counting



*Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz Reflects on his More than Six Decades as Rav in the Five Towns Community*

By Naftali Halpern

In honor of the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of joining the White Shul in Far Rockaway, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz gave us a few minutes of his time. Rather than focus on his entire life experience – which is vast – we chose to focus on his view of the rabbinate and how this community has changed since his arrival in 1951.

***Rabbi Pelcovitz, thank you for meeting with us. How did you become the rav of the White Shul 65 years ago?***

Today people build a shul around a rabbi. In those days there were community synagogues and when they needed a rabbi they would turn to some of the major yeshivos – Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchonon, and some other smaller yeshivos, Torah Vodaas, Ner Yisroel and Chaim Berlin – that had graduates who were in the rabbinate. They would come to these yeshivos and ask them to send someone who would be a candidate for the pulpit.

I was a *musmach* from Torah Vodaas and the rav in the White Shul had been Rabbi Selig Fortman, who was also from Torah Vodaas. So there was a connection.

***When you came to Five Towns***

***how many shuls were there at the time?***

When I came, as far as community shuls there was the following: The largest shul which was a community shul was Shaaray Tefilla, which was located at that time on Central Avenue in Far Rockaway. It was the major shul in the community. However, there was a new shul – relatively speaking – which started in 1921. The initial name was Congregation Talmud Torah Knesset Israel. At the beginning it met in a variety of places. The question is why they felt they needed a shul. At the time the town was relatively small. The answer is that you always have people with certain needs and they are looking for a shul where they can feel comfortable. So they decided to make a *minyán*... At that time, when Rabbi Fortman came to this community, he was also a teacher

of homiletics in Torah Vodaas and everything was in Yiddish, by the way.

***Was Yiddish your first language?***

Yes and no. I was born in this country, but my parents spoke Yiddish in the house. My father, who was a rav, spoke only Yiddish.

***So he taught himself English?***

No, you didn't have to know English. In the 1920s, the language that was the language of the majority of the people in these shuls was Yiddish.

***Did you ever give shiurim in Yiddish?***

I came in 1951 so for the first decade or so I gave my textual *shiurim* – Gemara, Mishnayos, Shulchan Aruch – in Yiddish. However, times

were already changing and you had more and more people who were not conversant in Yiddish.

**How has the rabbinate changed since you started at the White Shul?**

One of the major changes is that when I started at the White Shul, it was a *tekufa* of *rabbanus* when it did not grow around the individual. The individual was no different than any professional. The community had a *shul* and it needed spiritual leadership. So the people went looking and searching for a person who would be fitting for that position.

Today it is almost the opposite. It's almost always the case where a person comes to the community and he has people cluster around him and he becomes the focal point and then they say, "Let's make a *shul* and make you our rabbi."

**Is there a danger to that?**

Of course there is because very often a person who is not fit and doesn't have the talent and doesn't have the organization ability and doesn't even have the basic skills becomes a rabbi of the community and he is not fit to serve in that position. When it works the other way around, he already has chosen to hone any skills he may have. He has worked a smaller position in a smaller town and developed skills and when he comes to a big *shul* he is the consummate professional.

**What is the key character trait that you think is necessary in order for one to be an effective rabbi?**

Rabbi Akiva Eiger was once asked by a young student who planned to enter the rabbinate, "How can I be a success?" Reb Akiva Eiger said to him, "People have been traveling on the high seas for thousands of years, but no one has made a highway yet."

Every rabbi knows how true this response is because ultimately each rabbi must make his own way, his own *derech*. He learns over time that he must choose the areas which to him are most important and then energize the people to fol-



low him and the example he sets. Above all, he must understand that it is far more important to convince people than compel them, to mold rather than manipulate, to motivate rather than manage, and to inspire rather than to impose.

**The world is certainly evolving at a rapid pace. That must pose a challenge for modern day rabbis.**

The only thing that is true of

Briskers in general – it goes back to the Beis Halevi – planted in the minds of his children and grandchildren that besides being the teacher and the preacher, you also have to be concerned for the welfare and wellbeing of your people.

Moshe Rabbeinu is the only one that we call "Rabbeinu" – he was not just the ultimate teacher and classical teacher, but he was also concerned for the welfare of the people. It all comes back to the

*"It is far more important to convince people than compel them, to mold rather than manipulate, to motivate rather than manage, and to inspire rather than to impose."*

change is that it is always going to happen. You have to adapt and adjust to the needs of the people at that particular point. The successful rabbi in today's world is going to be one who can meet the four basic areas that a *rav* has always had to meet: He is there to preach and to teach...and he is there to minister and to administer...

Rav Chaim Brisker and the

welfare. And the welfare of the people is not something that should be looked upon as being beneath any dignity.

There was a time when *rabanim's* primary concern was the welfare of their community – is there a person who is suffering? Is there a person who is sick?

All the stories that you hear from *gedolim*, the stories that came

down the corridors of time without any compromise, were the stories about concern and *chesed*. And the reason is because man is created *b'tzelem Elokim*. Hashem always gives. Therefore, you cannot break the mold of what is in your DNA. That is the DNA of a person, to be a *nosain*...

**It must be tremendously burdensome to be a rabbi.**

My son, David [Dr. David Pelcovitz], and I wrote two books together and it was seamless because what difference does it make whether you are talking to people and helping them as a psychologist or as a rabbi?

**Do you feel that people turn too much to their rabbis to play the role of therapist and perhaps it's over-demanding?**

Absolutely. There is no question that people have found out that the cheapest psychologist is the rabbi.

**How did you unwind from the burden?**

I played golf.

**Good handicap?**

No. You can't take yourself too seriously even in golf.

**What was the hardest part about being a rabbi?**

The hardest part was that it is very hard to have a lot of close friends because when you have too many friends, you are not going to have too many close friends... It helps to have a good sense of humor.

**Does it surprise you how far this community has come?**

This community when I came to it was a different community... How many *sukkahs* were there in 1951 when I came? How many schools? How many *yeshivos ketanos* were there? How many *yeshivos gedolos*? How many *batei medrashos*? How many *batei k'nessios*? The answer is that you have to take everything you see today and reduce it like a good minimalist... This community when I came here had a limited number of people who were

*shomrei mitzvos, shomrei* Shabbos, who were people who knew how to learn or wanted to learn. And one of the major challenges that I found when I came here was to create in the people a desire to want to learn, to want to know more, to want to grow.

**What was your favorite era as a rabbi?**

This is true of every rabbi, he will tell you that the golden period was when he was younger... The nature of the beast changes. It's strange to say, when I gave a *shiur* Shabbos afternoon in the "golden period," the *beis medrash* was filled, and when I gave a *lomdus shiur* on Tuesday night the *beis medrash* was full. Today, because you have a *daf yomi* and people feel that they are fulfilling their *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah* through the *daf yomi*, the scholarship is affected in this sense because the *b'iyun* [in



depth study] part has suffered. The connection and the relationship of the *rav* of the shul as a *maggid shiur* has been affected. So, it's a two-edged sword.

**You seem to be an optimistic person. Is that something that you developed or is it**

**natural to you?**

I am. The character traits of a person are something that you are born with; it's part of your DNA. And I will say to you that it helps tremendously for someone in the rabbinate to be optimistic and positive. The most difficult thing for a person is to be a rabbi in a commu-

nity and to be negative and not to be upbeat and optimistic.

I have young people that I have worked with over the years as developing and growing rabbis. Some of them have it and some of them don't. But in most cases the ones that have it are the ones that have a lot of *menschlichkeit*. They are people who genuinely and authentically like people and they look at the better characteristics of those that they are working with.

**You must know thousands and thousands of people.**

Yes.

**How do you manage remembering everyone?**

Well, if I like you, I remember you.

**You must like a lot of people then.**

Yes... I definitely do. ▲





























































