

Remembering my teacher Rabbi Elazar Mordechai Kenig, zatzal

written by breslov.org
January 8, 2019



Dovid Sears—with the heavenly assistance of Reb Dovid Zeitlin

My friend Rabbi Yossi Katz of BRI asked me to write something about Rav Kenig, zatzal, who was *niftar* on 23 Teves. This is not a *hesped* or an obituary, but just a few memories that come to mind, and some reflections about what Rav Kenig exemplified—which are lessons to all who knew him, and I hope to others as well. Forgive me if this is not well thought-out. I am writing this only a few days after the *petirah*, and thinking things through isn't easy!

The first thing I'd say about Reb Elazar (which is what we called him here in America, while in Tsfat he was always "HaRav") is that he was what the Rebbe calls a "*tzaddik rachaman*" (*Likutey Moharan* II, 7)—a tzaddik of vast compassion. Everyone who spoke with him felt that Reb Elazar was relating to him or her *as a unique individual*; that he was

somehow attuned to each person's inner being, like Yehoshua, whom the Torah called an "*ish asher ru'ach bo* (a man with spirit within him)" –because he could respond to the spirit (*ru'ach*) of everyone he met (Rashi on Bamidbar 27:18).

Rachamim / Compassion

Reb Elazar was completely devoted to helping people. I remember how once my close friend (more like brother than a friend) Reb Dovid Zeitlin zal called me from Monsey to say that Reb Elazar's phone had been ringing continuously, and that Reb Elazar always makes himself available to people and doesn't get enough rest. (Reb Dovid acted as Reb Elazar's *gabbai*, translator, *chavrusa* and would-be protector whenever he visited New York). So I drove up to Monsey, and walked into to the library of the Klein home, where he used to speak with visitors, give *shiurim*, or learn with Reb Dovid.

Surprisingly, just the two of them were there. So I suggested to Reb Elazar that he come see the "*nifla'os haboreh* (wonders of the Creator)" here in America, and not just stay indoors all the time; we should get in my car and go for a ride into the countryside together for awhile. He chuckled and gave me a counter-proposal: that we take a walk together in the woods nearby, where a neighbor had made a path for him to walk when he wanted to make *hisbodedus*. So we went there.

It was a sunny, spring day. Reb Elazar said *divrei Torah* while we slowly walked along. Then we stopped and were about to go off in separate directions for *hisbodedus*, when suddenly we were interrupted – by a ringing telephone! In the middle of the woods!

Reb Elazar took the portable phone out of his pocket and, with his characteristic *ne'imus* (pleasantness and inner peace), greeted the caller, and gave the problem his full and patient attention, just as if he were back in the library.

Many people were totally dependent on Reb Elazar. (I don't know how they will be able to cope with his loss—*Hashem yerachem*.) He felt their pain, and spoke with them out of that deep empathy. Reb Dovid told me that sometimes Reb Elazar would be utterly heartbroken after hearing about people's suffering. He said that recently, Reb Elazar had a phone call from someone in Tsfat, and after giving them *chizuk* (encouragement), he went into the kitchen and cried with a towel over his face for twenty minutes.

Avodah / Divine Service

Reb Elazar was a great “*oved* (servant of Hashem)” in a Chassidus distinguished by many *ovdim*, even today. He slept only two or three hours a night, even when suffering from his lung disease (he underwent a lung transplant in 2006). A day never went by without *hisbodedus*, or a night without Tikkun Chatzos. From then on, he would learn until it was time to go to the *mikveh* and *daven k'vasikin* (although he did not do so by the clock; “*k'vasikin*” meant to *daven* with the first minyan, which in the Tsfat Breslov shul is at 7:00 AM).

Reb Dovid Zeitlin told me that while Reb Elazar was in America after his transplant, the doctors had urged him to sleep as much as possible. Reb Elazar ignored this completely and continued his *seder ha-yom*, as always. In frustration (or desperation), Reb Dovid and Reb Elazar's attendant from Eretz Yisrael decided to give him a sleeping pill with his evening meal for a few days. Yet early every morning he continued to arise after two or three hours' sleep to say Tikkun Chatzos and learn Torah. “I don't know what's the matter with me,” he complained. “I have never felt this tired!” And that was the end of the sleeping pills.

Reb Elazar was fluent in *nigleh* and *nistar*, the “revealed” and “hidden” teachings of the Torah, and knew Likutey Moharan and Likutey Halakhos seemingly by heart. (He was also a tremendous *amkan*, a scholar who can probe what he studies in great

depth—although I never knew him to display that side of himself in a public *shiur*.)

His advice, too, seemed to come straight out of the Rebbe's teachings.

The first time I had a private encounter with Reb Elazar (which was in Reb Dovid Zeitlin's home in 1987), I was learning full-time, and had discovered to my dismay that my memory was no longer doing what I wanted it to do. I asked him for a *brochah* and for advice about this problem. He immediately opened a *Likutey Moharan* and learned Torah 110 with me, which discusses how memories can displace one another in the mind, if one thinks a certain way—by “corporealizing” the Torah one studies and contemplates. Then the Rebbe tells about Rav Yosef, the Talmudic sage who fasted to restore his memory, thus overcoming this corporealizing of thoughts. I asked him if this meant that I should fast. He replied that fasting can be beneficial (if nobody else knows about it, he added) —but that was not the main point he wanted to make. Learning in the right spirit and frame of mind is what was necessary: with *simchah* and *l'shem Shomayim* and not needing to prove anything to anybody, even oneself (at least that's what I understood him to mean).

Achdus / Unity

Ahavas Yisrael and *ahavas habriyos* for Reb Elazar were not abstract concepts, but characterized how he always felt and lived. Once, we were privately discussing some other Breslov figures who had disagreed with him about this or that, and who had spoken critically of him. Reb Elazar said, “These are Breslover Chassidim who get up to say Tikkun Chatzos and who make *hisbodedus* everyday. How can I say anything negative about them? So we disagree... *nu* (so what)!” He always tried to see others in a favorable light, beyond the dark clouds that may envelop us, and to look for the *nekudos tovos* (good points) in everyone, as in Torah 282 (“Azamra”).

Reb Dovid Zeitlin told me of an occasion on which he was discussing a personal problem with Reb Elazar. This took place in Uman during the 1990s. At one point, Reb Elazar told him, "Here we are in Uman, *davening* together in the Rebbe's Kloyz... Let yourself feel the *hiskallelus* (unity of souls)! Forget yourself!"

Dvarim Nifla'im / Wonders

Chabad tradition tells how the Baal HaTanya remarked that when he was part of the inner circle of *talmidim* of the holy Maggid of Mezeritch, "there were miracles piled up to the tops of the *shtenders* (lecterns), but we couldn't be bothered to pick them up!" The same is true of Rav Kenig. I had numerous experiences of such wonders, and have heard many more from other *talmidim* of Rav Kenig. This especially applies to how he would uncannily seem to know what one had been thinking or discussing before coming to visit him. But I'll just pick one story, for the sake of brevity.

In the fall of 1987, Reb Elazar came to America and stayed at Reb Dovid Zeitlin's home in Borough Park. Reb Dovid often acted as interpreter for English-speaking guests who came to ask Reb Elazar for his advice and blessings. One such individual was an American Sefardic man from Queens, whom we'll call Daniel. He was in his late thirties or early forties, wore a trimmed beard and a knitted *kippah*, and appeared visibly upset. After a few words of introduction, Daniel broke down in tears. He had been diagnosed with a terminal illness that had already gone into his bones, and was expected to live no more than two or three months. He had a wife and several young children, and the entire family was despondent. After being given a few more details, Reb Elazar asked to be left alone for five minutes. Daniel and Reb Dovid left the room, closing the door behind them.

After a "Chazon Ish shiur" of five minutes, Reb Dovid knocked and opened the door a few inches. Reb Elazar was standing in

front of the bookcase beside the windows. He was wearing a *gartel*, and a volume of the *Pri Eitz Chaim* (a kabbalistic *sefer*) was open in front of him. He indicated that it was all right for them to enter, and everyone returned to his former seat. Reb Elazar looked at the sick man gently but penetratingly, and said something that took both the suppliant and interpreter by surprise.

“You do not have to die,” he began. “But you and your wife must start to faithfully observe the Shabbat and *taharat ha-mishpachah*, the laws of family purity.”

By all appearances, the man was a religious Jew. However, at these words, he tearfully admitted that his observance had lapsed. Now he was prepared to do whatever Reb Elazar told him. Reb Dovid remembered that Reb Elazar also told the man to recite the *Tikkun ha-Klalli* and certain additional psalms every day. Then he gave him a *brochah* and sent him on his way.

About a year later, Reb Dovid visited “770” in Crown Heights one Sunday, when the Lubavitcher Rebbe was giving dollars to people (to increase *tzedakah* in the world), and noticed Daniel standing in the crowd some distance away. Daniel noticed him, too, and began to jump up and down, making an “OK” sign with his fingers, and smiling broadly. Evidently he had taken Reb Elazar’s advice, and by the grace of the *Rachaman Amiti* had been restored to health.

The Gemara (*Berachos 7b*) describes how the Rabbi Yishmael, the Kohen Gadol, once entered the *Kodesh HaKadoshim* on Yom Kippur and had a vision of Hashem seated on the Divine Throne. He said, “Yishmel, My son, bless Me.” So Rabbi Yishmael replied, “May Your mercy overcome Your wrath, and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes; may You relate to Your children with the attribute of Mercy, and treat them [literally, ‘enter before them’] beyond the letter of the law.” And the Holy One nodded His head and accepted his blessing.

Reb Elazar was following in Rabbi Yishmael's footsteps, constantly beseeching Hashem's mercy on behalf of Klal Yisrael. And he is surely continuing to do so in the World of Truth.

Zekhuso yagein aleinu v'al kol Yisrael, amen!

PS: When I showed what I had written here to a friend who often edits my writings, he asked me to give an example or two of what I meant when I referred to how Reb Elazar "uncannily seemed to know what one had been thinking or discussing before coming to visit him." Here are two such stories:

In 1991, I went to Uman for Rosh Hashanah, while my then nineteen-year-old son Yonah went to Meron with our friends, Reb Dovid Zeitlin and his sons. After Yom Tov, he and the Zeitlin family went to visit Reb Elazar in Tzefat, before returning home to Brooklyn. Yonah had been a bit reluctant to do so, feeling intimidated by Reb Elazar's aura of *kedushah*, but he was persuaded to come along, if only to ask for a *brochah*. The Rav was extremely warm and pleasant to him, as always—but then it happened. My son had thought seriously about five things during the Rosh Hashanah *davening*. The first train of thought was inspired by the holy face of Rabbi Yaakov Melamed, a Breslev elder who for many years had been a *baal tefillah* in Meron on Rosh Hashanah. "What a difference," Yonah had mused, "between an elderly *chassid* who spent his life in *avodas Hashem* and an ordinary old man!" Now Reb Elazar turned to him and said, "Did you see Reb Yankel Melamed on Rosh Hashanah? What a difference between an *elderly chassid* who spent his life in *avodas Hashem* and an ordinary old man!" Then he proceeded to mention the other four things (now forgotten) that my astounded son had contemplated.

When I told this story to Reb Dovid Shaffier, another *talmid* of Rav Kenig (it seems that he had a collection of *talmidim* named "Dovid") now living in Baltimore, he responded with a story of his own:

“I have also personally experienced this phenomenon many times. When I first came to Tsfat, I was very intimidated by the Rav’s presence. I would go in to speak with him and forget everything I wanted to ask. And the Rav would gently bring up each of the topics I came to discuss and answer all my questions without me ever asking them! This was such a regular occurrence that I began writing them down before I went into his room, so I wouldn’t forget my questions. But by then, he would just go straight into answering my questions before I even had a chance to take out the paper!

“On one occasion I came with my wife to ask about a sensitive phone call to America that we were pondering whether or not to make, which would have serious ramifications for the future. It was late, and the Rebbetzin answered and told us that the Rav was sleeping. Then we heard him call out from his room ‘*Mizeh* (who is it)?’ So the Rebbetzin told him ‘It’s the Shaffiers.’ He asked her what we needed, and she asked us this question. (The whole while she seemed a little perturbed that the Rav wasn’t sleeping). So, not wishing to disturb the Rav, we told her vaguely, ‘We were just going to ask him about a phone call that we are not sure if we should make or not.’

Then we heard the Rav call out from his room, ‘Tell them that they should call!’ Even the Rebbetzin looked surprised, and she called back to him, ‘Do you know what they’re talking about?’ And the Rav answered, ‘Yes, tell them to call tonight!’ With that, the Rebbetzin wished us a good night, and we went to find a phone.”