

The Rav at Revel; The Rav at RIETS'

By: ROBERT BLAU

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When I was asked to prepare an article describing my experiences at Revel, I had to confess that I was never registered at the school, but was there by the kindness of the Rav, who allowed me, nevertheless, to audit his lectures.

I was nearing the end of my teens and a newcomer to Yeshiva, motivated by my mother's last wish for me to receive *semikhab* and continue her family's tradition of forty generations of rabbis, which had been tragically curtailed by the Shoah.

Understandably, I lacked proficiency in Talmudic learning, but acquiring knowledge of other aspects of Judaism I felt was important as well. That is how I discovered the Rav and his Judaic classes at Revel.

This was before the tape-recorder era, and taking notes manually was the only way to preserve what one had heard. I soon discovered that I was a reliable note taker, facilitated, of course, by the Rav's unique pedagogical skills that made it easy.

The Rav would read first from his written text, look up, and in typical Rav fashion, elaborate on the text just read. The transition from his written text to his oral elaboration was always introduced by his frequently used expression, "I mean."

Some prime topics he dealt with during my years at Revel were The Relationship between Halakhah, Aggadah and Kabbalah; Maimonides'

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Commentator*.

The Guide for the Perplexed; An Analysis of Genesis; *Tefillah*; *Kriat Shma*² and many others.

In my *Sefer Efnah Ve-Eshneh*, I transcribed into Hebrew the gist of some of these lectures. I had the good fortune of showing the Rav the first of these transcriptions. He read it, smiled, and expressed his satisfaction.

For me, what happened after the lecture was as interesting as the lecture itself. Some attendees would present the Rav with their personal problems, which he, with great ingenuity, would tackle in search of a viable solution. Others would simply come by to greet him. For example, on one occasion, Rabbi Charles B. Chavel—noted rabbi who published the first scholarly edition of Ramban’s Biblical Commentary—approached the Rav, who greeted him warmly and said: “Rabbi Chavel, we all have you to thank for bringing the Ramban back to life.”

On another occasion, a young man, in great distress, told the Rav that he was engaged to be married, but was informed that his was a forbidden union, since he was a *keohen* and she a divorcée.

“That is correct,” said the Rav.

“But Rabbi,” pleaded the young man, “that is not fair.”

The Rav replied sympathetically, “I agree, but much in life is not fair—a fact you already know or will experience during the course of your lifetime.”

I myself once approached the Rav to help me understand a *mishnah* in *Avot* (3:8): “Whoever forgets one word of his study, Scripture accounts as though he had forfeited his life.”

“Rebbe,” I protested, “as humans we are all doomed.”

“No,” countered the Rav. “The *mishnah* is correct,” and resorting to Yiddish said, “What we really want to remember, we will never forget.” A lesson I still remember.

Was there a difference between the Rav at Revel and the Rav at RIETS? The answer is yes. The Rav of Revel was Dr. Soloveitchik, preeminent scholar and lecturer. At RIETS he was the Rav, Rosh Yeshiva and explicator par excellence. Was there also a difference in his image and demeanor? Again, the answer is yes.

At Revel, the Rav would welcome any remark or question related to the lecture. In fact, he seemed to invite these interruptions as an opportunity for further clarification. His manner at these lectures was always cordial and pleasant. By contrast, across the street at RIETS, a very different mood prevailed. There the Rav was strict and demanding. Clarity

² These notes will *iy”b* appear in *Hakirah*.

and credibility were the order of the day. Mediocrity and shallowness were unacceptable; slothfulness in thinking, deplorable. The Rav would not abide impromptu guesswork. The student had to know clearly, what he was trying to say.

The Rav formulated this attitude for clarity in halakhic study in his remarks outlining “The Relationship between Halakhah, Aggadah and Kabbalah.”

“Without Halakhah,” the Rav stressed, “the Aggadah and Kabbalah would be in a vacuum. The study of Halakhah is a science and has its own methodology, and one must be trained mentally and intellectually to understand it. The Existential movement in philosophy tries to have the philosopher free himself from the fetters of the scientific nature and speak about the ambiguous nature. It is easier to do the latter. The same with Jewish thought. It is easy to philosophize about Chassidism by telling a few stories—but not about Halakhah, Aggadah and Kabbalah. That is difficult. All roads lead to Halakhah, but no attempt has ever been made to create a world formula from the Halakhah.”

An added bonus for attending these lectures was the occasional appearance of the Rav’s teacher and mentor, *Ha-Gaon Ha-amiti* Reb Chaim Heller, זצ”ל, who would come to share some of his genius with us. Admittedly, I could not follow all that he said, but being in his presence was sufficiently rewarding.

A final awesome and unforgettable recollection was seeing the Rav seated next to Reb Chaim, endearingly clasping his hand while Reb Chaim was speaking.

Awesome and unforgettable indeed. ❧