

Zichron Yaakov Eliyahu: Fifteen Years Gerald E. Naiman, *a”h*

Irvin Naiman

How did a butcher’s son from Baltimore become the driver of HaGaon HaRav Shraga Feivel Mendelovitch, *z”l*? Read on to find out how our father, Gerald Eli Naiman (Yaakov Eliyahu ben Dovid), *a”h*, born in Baltimore on 19 Kislev, 5668 (December 13, ‘27), did just that.

Our father’s parents, Russian immigrants David and Fanny (nee Chomsky), Dovid and Feiga, arrived in the United States in the early teens of the 1900’s and settled in Baltimore with their parents.



Avraham Abba Naiman



Mayer Chomsky

Our grandfather was a butcher, who, because of the difficulty in working as a *frum* employee in those times, opened his own shop on Oswego Avenue. He was one of the few truly kosher butchers during this time period.

Our father enjoyed playing sports, especially stick ball. But more than playing sports, our father loved to quietly support his friends

and other neighborhood children. The family did not realize the impact he had on people until we heard first-hand accounts after he passed away. One such story came from a neighborhood boy with whom our father grew up. Tony, who was not Jewish, ran a paper route in the neighborhood. He became close to our grandparents and would always take care of their Shabbos needs. He would come into the house just to make sure the lights were taken care of or any other last minute Erev Shabbos need. He did this without be asked or told, simply because it was something he wanted to do.

One more detail before this story concludes: our father would deliver meat orders for his father, the kosher butcher, in order to defray the cost of delivery. It is clear, then, that each boy, Tony and our father, had after-school jobs. And with this fact comes the magnificent support these two boys offered each other, for there were times when Tony and our father would help each other if one could not do his job for whatever reason. Our father would deliver newspapers, while Tony would deliver the orders. When Tony saw our father's obituary in the newspaper, Tony called and told us how our father made him feel accepted. He added that when he would attend meetings where people said how difficult the Jewish people are, he would always stand up and state that this is not true because of his relationship with our father.



And now on to HaRav Shraga Feivel Mendelovitch...

Our father attended the Talmudical Academy until eighth grade. Rabbi Ephraim Shapiro, the family Rabbi, suggested to our grandparents that it would be best for him to continue his Torah studies at Torah VaDaas in New York. This was a

huge undertaking in those times, but all parties involved thought it would be good for our father. So, our father attended the Yeshiva, waking up at 7:00 A.M. and staying in the Yeshiva building until 10:30 at night. It is there that he met HaRav Yaakov Moshe Kulefsky, ז"ל and Rabbi Yitzchak Chinn, ז"ל, of McKeesport¹ and forged life-long relationships with them.

In addition, since our father worked in the kitchen, and since he had a driver's license, he would take the yeshiva's van to pick up supplies. With access to this van, he was also able to help his friend, the future Rav Kulefsky, when he was being held in Long Island during the war. Rav Kulefsky would give him a list of sefarim he needed, and our father would go through the yeshiva's library to bring them to him. Our father told us that Rav Kulefsky used to say that he got his best learning done during that period.²



¹ Rabbi Chinn's sister married our mother's cousin HaRav Yisrael Baer Caplan, *shlita*, Rosh Kollel in Bayit VeGan. His father was the Gabbai at the Adas when we were growing up.

² R' Ephraim Siff told us a sequel to this story. In his later years, Rav Kulefsky was not able to drive, but he still had his habit of smoking. His family, of course, would not buy cigarettes for him, so he had to rely on others for this chore. One time after the Wednesday night shiur at the Adas, he asked our father to pick up a carton for him. Our father obviously didn't want to do this. Rav Kulefsky then told him, "You were

So now we can understand how our father also became the driver of the Rosh HaYeshivah, HaRav Shraga Feivel, among other Gedolim of that time. He was one of the few *bachurim* who had a license, and he had access to the Yeshiva van. This included the summertime, when the yeshivos were at camp. During these summers, he was able to soak in the the *divrei* Torah spoken in the car as he transported these Gedolim to the mountains. And it was in the Yeshiva where he attended the *tishin* of the various Rebbes in Williamsburg, eventually bringing their *zemiros* to our Shabbos table.

At one point, he was discouraged at the Yeshiva and wanted to leave. He went to Rav Shraga Feivel and in a joking manner said that he was handing his tefillin in. Rav Shraga Feivel convinced him to stay on a little longer. When it was finally time to leave, Rav Shraga Feivel told him, “You might never be a Rosh Yeshivah, but you should be the president of a shul.”³



After spending these years in New York, our father came back to Baltimore and began looking for a job. Our father was very outgoing and social, so he thought he would be good at sales. He ran into a lot of difficulty since most employers wanted him to work on Shabbos. He finally found a job in sales with a *Shomer Shabbos* employer, Morris Siegel & Company, a wholesale operation that sold notions, school supplies, etc. to small retail stores throughout Baltimore. Morris Siegel pointed to a heavy box

able to drive all the way to Long Island for me, and now you can't go to Hooks Lane?"

³ As heard from Rabbi Chinn during the *shivah*. R' Ephraim Siff adds to this that our father told him that he was “smart enough” never to be involved in shul politics as president, but he would always help without that official position. See further details below.

and asked him if he could lift it. (Our father was very thin.) He went over and lifted it with ease. Morris Siegel immediately responded, "You're hired."

In this position, our father went out to the retail stores to determine their needs and develop new business relationships. This was very natural for him, and throughout the years he made many life-long friends. They shared the good times and sadly the bad times as well. Of course, he was never seen without his signature cap.

During this time, at the end of each day, our father would drop off the orders at Mr. Siegel's home so that he could go straight out on the road the next day without having to stop at the store first. Every now and then, when he came to the door, Mr. Siegel's daughter, Deborah Siegel, would take the order forms from him. They began dating and became engaged in 1951. However, our father was soon to be drafted, so the wedding was put on hold.

Our father was sent to Korea in 1951 and first placed with a M.A.S.H. unit on the front lines. He was the only Jew there, and out of 280 soldiers only four of them survived. After this assignment, he worked in a front-line M.A.S.H. hospital as a medic.

Hardships were common in the front lines. He lived in a tent and had a difficult time when he needed to daven. A main concern was how he was going to be able to eat. During this time, he contacted Rabbi Yitzchak Chinn, who worked with the Red Cross to ensure that our father would have kosher food. This system worked well for over a year. After eighteen months, he had enough front-line duty points to be taken off the front. He was then stationed at Fort Mead for the remaining six months of service.

Our father returned home at the end of 1952, and he and our mother married on 6 Nissan, 5713, March 22, '53.⁴



They began their married life living near Agudath Achim Shul until they moved uptown in 1958. For most of our father's life, he attended the Chofetz Chaim Adas Bnei Israel Congregation located on West Rogers Avenue. This was the shul that our grandfather, Morris Siegel, helped establish. Although the shul did not *daven* in the Nusach Sefard of our father, he still enjoyed the shul. We remember always attending shul when he felt we were old enough to sit, all of us encircling him. He trained us to come on time by his example and by his shouts of *vayavo!* to chronic latecomers.⁵ All our bar mitzvahs were held at the Adas, the Shul that held special meaning for him.

He always made sure that the needs of the shul were taken care of. Whenever he was asked, he would daven for the *amud*. If a *chashuv talmid chacham*, Rav Abba Liff, *z"l*, needed a ride home to the old neighborhood after Shabbos, our father would take him with us in the car on this roundabout drive to our home. He always

⁴ Our father told Rabbi Eliezer Eisgrau, *menahel* of Torah Institute, that our grandfather, Morris Siegel, *a"h*, did not have music at the wedding because it might lead to mixed dancing by the non-*frum* relatives.

⁵ This was a humorous reference to ויבא המן from *Megillas Esther*.

had a smile, greeting people as they walked into the shul (including the latecomers), and he would invite them over to his home for *kiddush* after davening or just for a break from a long walk back to their homes. When the shul did not have a succah, he would have an annual Succos kiddush in our own succah. He was “the life of the party” on Simchas Torah.

He never wanted to be seen as wanting the *kavod*. Therefore, when he donated the *menorah* for the *amud* in memory of his father over fifty years ago, he had it inscribed as donated “by his grandchildren.” The same was with the cover on the *bimah*.⁶ It was dedicated in memory of David Naiman *a”h*, “by his grandchildren.”

After our youngest brother, Dovid, was born, our parents decided that it was time to move to a larger house a few blocks away. The walk to the shul was now about a mile, but our father would never miss the minyan at the Adas even though there were minyanim closer to his home. He attended the minyan throughout the week and always made everyone feel welcome on Shabbos, especially the children. After a number of years, he became the candy man of the shul. Because he felt it was important that children learn proper courtesy, he would insist on “please” and “thank you” when giving out any candy. The children were all the better for it.

Our Uncle Buddy (Paul - Pinchas Chaim), who never married, enjoyed a unique closeness with his only brother, our father. After their father Dovid passed away in 1968, our grandmother Feiga

⁶ The *amud* and *bimah* in our Bais Medrash were given to us by the Adas. The *menorah* still stands on the *amud*. And we added a plaque in memory of our father when he passed away. The *bimah* witnessed several *Gedolim* having *aliyos* on it, including Rav Moshe Feinstein *z”l* and Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky *z”l*. Some say that Rav Elchanan Wasserman, *Hy”d*, had an *aliyah* on it when he visited Baltimore.

and our uncle would come for dinner every Sunday night, which we all loved. Even after our grandmother passed away in 1978, Uncle Buddy would still come every week.

As the years went by, our father's desire for traveling to Eretz Yisrael increased. Finally, in 1987, our parents booked their flights and rented a place in Yerushalayim. Unfortunately, the day before they were to leave, Uncle Buddy had a massive stroke. They cancelled their trip because family was of the upmost importance to them. Due to the stroke, Uncle Buddy was primarily in a coma for about two years with round-the-clock nurses attending him. Our father had made a commitment to our uncle to never place him in a nursing home. This became a full-time job for our father and mother – making sure nurses were there and basically giving their house over for his care. He passed away on 8 Shevat, 5751, February 1991.

Our parents did eventually travel to Israel four years later and had a wonderful time. My father was specifically moved seeing the *kevarim* of the *Gedolim* and saying Tehillim there. He kept a diary of everything they did, feeling reluctant to leave.



Davening at the Ramchal's *kever*.



In his later years, our father was blessed to have grandchildren who lived in Baltimore and became part of their Zaidy's life. He was *zocheh* to attend a few of the bar and bas mitzvahs of his grandchildren, who were his priceless joy.

During the last nine years of his life, he dealt with a number of medical issues. During this time, he never complained. He went about his business, learning in the mornings, going to shul, doing the shopping, laundry, etc. In 2004, he took a major turn for the worse after fracturing his hip. During the next six months, he was in serious pain. However, he still went through his day as he felt he should. He would still greet people with his smile and was genuinely happy when people would stop by, even up to a couple of days prior to his passing. He would take one day at a time, slowly making his way to the living room, where he would daven, learn his daily *sedarim*, and then have breakfast with the newspaper.

Every year since our uncle's passing our father would host a *siyum* on the *yahrzeit*, with his sons and eventually grandsons taking part. He was very concerned that we remember our uncle's *yahrzeit* when he was no longer here to host the *siyum*. Therefore, in a tremendous struggle with the *malach hamaves*⁷ our father fought to end his life as he began it – by focusing on the needs of others. Our father lingered in the ICU until the seventh of Shevat passed. And only then, when our father's precious only brother would have a yearly kaddish said for him by us, his nephews, did our father leave this world on the eighth of Shevat.

⁷ These were his words. He told us that he kept up waking up at night because the *malach hamaves* was after him. After we asked his good friend, Rav Chaim Wallin, z"l, if he could tell our father not to worry and relax, he told us to tell our father, "Just tell the *malach hamaves* to drop dead!"

And, of course, he had purchased his plot next to his brother's, so that when we visit our father's resting place, we also visit our uncle.



Our Bais Medrash is a living legacy of our father. Our charity fund is called Zichron Yaakov Eliyahu, our weekday morning Kollel is called Kollel Zichron Yaakov Eliyahu, the plaque entering the main Bais Medrash proclaims that it is dedicated in memory of Yaakov Eliyahu ben Dovid, *a"h*, and the Family Center is called the Gerald E. Naiman Family Center. And his oldest son, R' Abba Zvi, is our *Mara D'Asra*. This writeup and information about the shiurim and publications of our Bais Medrash are found on the website mentioned above, www.zichronyaakoveliyahu.org.

Yehi zichro baruch. And may Yaakov Eliyahu ben Dovid, *a"h*, be a *meilitz yosher* for all his descendants and for our entire *kehillah*.