

Mrs. Heller reading to her children at home.

THE REALNESS FACTOR

25TH YAHRTZEIT OF REBBETZIN YEHUDIS HELLER, A"H

LEIBISH HELLER

LONDON, ENGLAND

IT FEELS GOOD when people say complimentary things about a departed parent; one feels proud and honored. One would, however, be naïve to believe that the things we are told are all necessarily true.

This year marks 25 years since the untimely passing of my mother, Rebbetzin Yehudis Heller, *a"h*, at the young age of 42.

She was a mother of 12 rowdy children, a housewife who appeared to be focused exclusively on her home and on her family. Observing her in this role, one wouldn't have guessed that for the 22 years of her married life (1970 – 1992) she

held four concurrent teaching positions in Bais Rivkah seminary, Machon Chana and the Bais Yaakovs of Gur and Pupa, thus impacting hundreds of students across a wide range of communities.

ENDURING IMPACT

A number of these students have said that even all these years later, they are still inspired by the character and the teachings of Morah Heller, but when probed for specifics they often struggled to pinpoint precisely what it was about this particular teacher that continues to inspire them so.

So were these former students merely being polite? Or were they indeed conveying a truth, albeit one they couldn't fully articulate?

For educators this is a particularly intriguing query: can the impact on our pupils continue decades after they have left our classrooms? And if so, what does it take to achieve this?

WHO INSPIRES?

We tend to remember those who stand out, people with a novel persona, whose style is unique and whose charisma is stirring and poignant. My mother was none of the above. She wasn't particularly intense, dramatic or witty in a way which would make her or her lessons uniquely memorable.

Nor was the content of her teachings so unparalleled as to be remembered after half a century. To be sure, her lessons conveyed timeless moral values in a well articulated scholarly context but they were not sensational by any means.

Charisma and style eliminated, one wonders what qualities remained to make her all that memorable and inspirational to her former students all these years later?

THE X FACTOR

Somebody once commented to the Rebbe that he finds *Lubavitcher bachurim* to be naïve. The Rebbe countered that what he was observing was not naiveté but rather the





Above: Yehudis Schiffer in Vienna as a young teen.

absence of a *kerra* (an inner split, or conflict) in their personalities.

Whilst engaged in public speaking or even in a one-to-one conversation, it is not uncommon for people to be acutely mindful of themselves and their image. That's a split: they are speaking about something, and they are concerned with being good at speaking, at the same time.

Even the most dedicated of teachers may simultaneously be immersed in her teachings as well as her image; she cares how she is doing and also how she is being perceived.

It is possible that what these students found so enduringly endearing was that this teacher, my mother Rebbetzin Yehudis Heller, seemed to have left that awareness of the self at the door before she entered the classroom or engaged in conversation.

The truth is that she didn't have to leave anything at the door in the first place; she simply wasn't self-conscious.

DEFINITION OF PNIMIUS

Imagine a teacher who didn't perceive herself as being in any way superior to her students but as someone who just so happened to have been born earlier and was thus duty-bound to pass on her

Rebbetzin Yehudis Heller teaching in Bais Rivkah.



FROM A CHILDHOOD FRIEND:

Rabbi Heller, thank you so much for sending me your warm words in memory of your dear mother *a"h*.

You touched upon a most essential and central component of your mother. Her convictions were so deep and her truthfulness such that it seemed as if subconscious and conscious were one, the former identifying fully with the latter. This totality and depth was contagious and carried a force that touched and impressed all who knew her.

What was more—and you touch upon that too—being a most beautiful, talented, brilliant and winning personality, she was totally unconcerned by the way she was regarded by others, a combination of an awareness and a total unawareness of her own self at the same time...

A point that, among other factors, probably accounted for the impact of her teaching, is the impressive spiritual force that your mother possessed. This force is apparent frequently in the Chabad *shluchim*. ...In my understanding, it is the *koach ruchni* (possibly transmitted by the Rebbe to the *chassidim*) and their deep conviction that transcends all [obstacles]. Your mother had that *koach ruchani* as well. She had exceptional spiritual energies that left a deep impression on those surrounding her.

[Despite] the seeming simplicity of her messages, they were the final expression of deep reflection and thorough investigation by an impressive intellect. Your mother was endowed with an exceptionally powerful, creative and deep mind, and a great memory. She left no question un-investigated and challenged her teachers to resolve contradicting statements and interpretative or theological difficulties. The [sincerity] of her inquiries was so [obvious] that her questions and answers were greatly appreciated by her teachers and her peers alike. The level of understanding thus reached was the fruit of an unrelenting search and a deep inquiry.

As you know, your mother traversed a fairly long road before reaching the level of Yiddishkeit that she did. Once the truth [became clear to] her, she embraced it with the totality of her being, leaving behind past interests and attractions that became valueless to her. This clarity of vision and conviction did not reveal the process that led to it nor the past doubts and tribulations that she did not want to dwell upon any more.

Mrs. Yehudis Heller was one of the unique people concerning whom the superlatives were no exaggeration (take it from someone who is normally a very critical person). Her lack of need to impress others only testifies to her ... total self-effacement in her *avodas Hashem*.

No wonder her students felt these outstanding qualities but could not articulate them.

It was a *zchus* to have been her friend,

Rivka Kneller Rowe

N'shei Chabad Newsletter welcomes readers' memories of Rebbetzin Heller. Please email them to submissions@nsheichabadnewsletter.com. -Ed.



Rebbetzin Yehudis Heller receiving a dollar from the Rebbe. Photo #61952 courtesy of JEM.

knowledge to them.

Imagine being in a class and having the acute feeling that your teacher had one goal: to be of service to you, not to impress, not to be wise, but to facilitate your growth intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

Imagine a teacher who, if observed talking to a student, left the observer unable to detect which was the teacher and which the student, because she treated all people as equals, and didn't act superior because she didn't believe she was.

In a world in which interactions are largely artificial, when someone relates to us with realness, they stand out. We do not often come upon someone like this. In the chassidishe lexicon this type of realness is termed *pnimius* and even amongst *chassidim* a true *pnimi* is a rare specimen.

But when we do encounter somebody who embodies such realness it touches us deeply, more so than all the drama, intensity and wit that the showman can muster. The realness factor has tremendous impact and it is not inconceivable that it would continue to inspire and be fondly remembered generations later.

FROM A FORMER STUDENT:

Mrs. Heller a"h taught me in Bais Rivkah High School in the 1970s and I can still hear her voice with that unusual Austrian accent.
A lot of us loved her because of her quiet dignity and unsplashy beauty. We could look at her for hours, fascinated. Beautiful, classy, elegant women like her aren't usually so humble and un-self-conscious. She was a rare gem.
Besides the subjects she taught, Mrs. Heller would sometimes take a few minutes of class time to talk about other topics. For example, one time she told us that the "new [in 1970s] trend" for young couples to go out to restaurants and hotels and take trips is a dangerous and wrong-headed approach to marriage. She said that Jewish couples who have kept the Torah laws are happy to stay home together, eat supper together, build a home together. She painted a picture of the home life of newlyweds that made us all aspire to be that young wife, hanging curtains with her husband after a home-cooked dinner. Mrs. Heller concluded with a smile, "When you've been married a few years and you have a few children, now that is a good time to go out alone with your husband." - Rishe Deitsch