

| PROFILES |

## PERFECT HARMONY

By [Aharon Kliger](#) and [Aryeh Ehrlich](#) | MAY 26, 2020

## A compelling conversation with Rav Shlomo Yehudah, a gift to the generation

Photos: [Shlomi Treichter](#), [Ezra Trabelsi](#)

**W**e're outside, waiting for the Yanuka.

It's silent in the deserted courtyard of the little shul, for even though coronavirus restrictions have been eased and the streets have again come to life, most people are in bed at this hour. But we're waiting — and then we see him. Soon we're face to face with this bashful young man who's taken the Torah world by storm — self-effacing, unremarkable in appearance, but so remarkable in the impact he's had on the lives of the thousands who flock to him, hanging on his every word.

He's really just a young *avreich*, yet his *shiuirim* are an attraction for the masses, from all ages and stages: elderly chassidim and litvish *talmidei chachamim* and everything in between. When he sits on the dais of packed halls, expounding on all parts of Torah by heart, the brim of his hat is just about covering his eyes, and at the same time that he's electrifying the crowd with his depth and breadth, he seems to be melting into himself, erasing his very *yeishus*. After all, he's just a vessel, a *kli* — it's not about him at all. And then, when the *shiuir* is over, the spellbound audience already knows what to expect: A Roland keyboard is brought out and this shy genius — the Yanuka, as he's been known since his teenage years (a reference in the *Zohar* to souls who already from childhood are exceptional in their Torah knowledge) — will begin to play a medley of stirring songs sure to awaken slumbering souls.

His name is Rav Shlomo Yehudah Beeri (to most people, he's simply known as Rav Shlomo Yehudah), and although he's not really a *yanuka* anymore — he's 32 years old — he's still decades younger than many of his followers. Aside from the fact that he commands such respect despite his young age, his

popularity has skyrocketed even though he doesn't peddle *yeshuos*, *kameios*, or mystical deals. His merchandise is pure Torah — all of it, on the tip of his tongue.

The shul where we meet has just been reopened for the public, but even during weeks of closure, the *ezras nashim* was still his private learning space. This is like his second home, and as he invites us in and flicks on a small light, we take our seats in the shadows.

"There are times when we need to serve HaKadosh Baruch Hu with *mochin dekatnus* (a state of constricted consciousness)," Rav Shlomo Yehudah says, explaining to himself as much as to us why the shul has been empty, bereft of its beloved worshippers. "Sometimes this is decreed on a person, on a family, a city, village, and sometimes it is an entire generation. In our generation, it has apparently been decreed that people must pay attention to the *tachlis*, to the main point. To stop everything and reflect. It's like HaKadosh Baruch Hu is telling the world, 'Enough,' after people started to think that everything is permitted. They had their money, were confident in their way of life. When you live like that, you might consider yourself a *ma'amin*, but how much do you really unconditionally trust in Hashem?"

The problem in our day, says Rav Shlomo Yehudah, is that when we daven, it's not out of desperation, it's not with a sense of absolute dependence on HaKadosh Baruch Hu. "Once, a person would go out to the market and ask Hashem to send him *parnassah* or to bring rain to water his field or to bring fish to come to where he's fishing. Today people have *emunah* because it says you're supposed to have *emunah*, but they don't really live it on an experiential level in their lives."

The Rav doesn't sound upset or bitter though — he's just stating a point, going with the flow of things as they've been decreed to be. In fact, that's how he's always lived his life, from the time he was a poverty-stricken child moving from place to place through Eretz Yisrael, Europe, and back with his parents. "People think they know Who HaKadosh Baruch Hu is and what Torah is, and then, Hashem suddenly does something that no one can process, shaking up the order of Creation," Rav Shlomo Yehudah explains. "Once we understand that we have no grasp of the Creator and really begin to serve Him with *temimus* and with awe, no longer being so sure we have all the answers and instead looking with respect at everyone simply because they have a *tzelem Elokim*, then perhaps the this pandemic will be annulled, *b'ezras Hashem*."

He believes that the violation of the *tzelem Elokim* — through *lashon hara* and *sinas chinam* — is even hinted to in the current lockdown rules. "The isolation period for those who've come in contact with coronavirus is 14 days, like the isolation for the *metzora* who speaks *lashon hara*," the Yanuka clarifies. "The *metzora* had to sit alone outside the camp, the quintessential social distancing. So our work now is to draw closer to the soul of the other, to feel with the other and be aware of his needs. And that," says Rav Shlomo Yehudah, "is the way forward, as it appears to me."

## Your Inner Truth

Rav Shlomo Yehudah was born in Eretz Yisrael in 1988, an only child born after many years. His paternal grandfather, Rav Shlomo, was a scion of the sages of Yemen and learned with the great *mekubalim* of Jerusalem after he arrived in the Holy Land. His maternal grandfather, Rav Yehudah, made aliyah from Aleppo, Syria.

It's said that his pious grandmother Naomi (Rav Shlomo's wife) poured out copious tefillos to merit a grandson. When he was born, she was overjoyed, and, realizing this child was destined for greatness, she would warn, "Guard the child and make sure that his head covering never comes off for a moment." Savta Naomi naturally assumed that this grandson would be named for her husband — after he passed away, she saved all her money and built a shul in his memory. "I prayed for this grandson," she said. "I want his name to be Shlomo." But his mother wanted to name the boy for her own father, Rav Yehudah. In the end, a compromise was reached: Shlomo Yehudah. And to this day, Rav Shlomo Yehudah sees one of the missions of his life as bringing peace between people.

In our conversation, Rav Shlomo Yehudah described the poverty that accompanied him as a child. His father suffered from various ailments related to an injury, which prevented him from working, but the one comfort amid his suffering was seeing his child learning diligently. In fact, little Shlomo Yehudah would cry his eyes out when he'd read about tzaddikim, feeling a strong desire to connect to and understand the depth of their writings. When he's asked where he had acquired such sensitivity, he'll say: "Do you think the Tannaim and Amoraim learned the Torah just to know and remember it? They learned Torah with tears in their eyes, never missing the slightest detail or deviating an iota from the Divine Will."

Shlomo Yehudah grasped this concept when he barely out of diapers. The family moved often during his childhood — to Spain, Switzerland, and Germany, returning intermittently to Israel. But wherever they were — in Jerusalem, Zurich, Berlin, or Barcelona — Shlomo Yehudah sought out the *beis medrash*, its four walls the firm ground in his life.

His unusual childhood, he relates, compelled him to get used to a complicated reality — from the time he was four years old, he lived in foreign countries where he didn't know the language, and his seforim were his only friends. His mother would prepare him a box of cut-up fruit, which would sustain the little boy for the long day he'd spend in the local shul.

But how does such a small child experience such lofty thoughts and practices? "Difficulties in life bring a person to introspection," Rav Shlomo says. "For me it was a result of the distress, the difficulty, the poverty, the troubles. But since I can remember — even at age three or four — I would stare up at the sky, at the stars. Today, I still do that. I make sure I'm always next to a window. When you look down or behind, you can fall, but looking up? That will always bring a person to see that he's living for something higher."

The family returned to Israel shortly before Shlomo Yehudah's bar mitzvah. At the time, there was a memorial event for a relative, and the family was looking for someone to say words of Torah in honor of the deceased. His father asked him to speak before the assembled, and he agreed, out of respect —

but even his father had no idea of the depth of Torah that would pour forth from his young *illui*. As Shlomo Yehudah lowered his head and sought the right words, the thin stream quickly grew into a powerful waterfall. People were astonished.

It was as if they were watching a child possessed. The voice was small and innocent, but the words were those of an accomplished *talmid chacham*— a tapestry of Chumash and Navi, Gemara and Aggadah, every source accurately cited. His father sat in a corner of the shul and covered his face to conceal the tears rolling down his cheeks.

From that point on, he was asked to deliver *divrei Torah* on various occasions. By the age of 14, he was already giving a Gemara *shiur* to adults. The *shiurim* were remarkable, and that was when the term “Yanuka” was bestowed on him, for he was a *gaon* in Torah whose tremendous breadth of knowledge belied his young age.

Another aspect of Rav Shlomo emerged at that time as well: his special connection to the world of music. “One day, he heard through a window the sound of music from someone playing a grand piano,” one of his *talmidim* relate. “The sounds captivated him, and he felt a deep urge to learn how to play — he prayed that he should be *zocheh*. Somehow his parents managed to acquire a cheap keyboard for him, and in just three hours, he figured out how to play a few tunes.”

Rav Shlomo Yehudah even composed a tefillah about music: “*Vezakeinu*, please grant me the merit to feel the holiness of pure music, and may holy niggunim play inside me that should awaken me and Klal Yisrael to You, *yitbarach shimcha*.” To this day, every Torah *shiur* he gives concludes with a short musical interlude. Sometimes it’s just singing, but often someone brings a keyboard to his seat at the front table and the Yanuka begins to play — he plays both his own compositions and classic tunes.

“Music connects a person to his true source,” he says. “When a person doesn’t play or sing, and in general when he’s not connected to music, he’s lacking an important component in *avodas Hashem*. When a person doesn’t dance or isn’t happy or doesn’t like music, he’s hiding from himself. Music can reveal the inner essence of a person and bring him to his truth.”

## Everyone Can Remember

As a bochur, Rav Shlomo learned privately with Chacham Gedalia Chaim, a well-known elderly Yemenite *mori* and *baki* in all of Torah. Although Chacham Gedaliah was 65 years older than Rav Shlomo, he treated the young scholar with utmost respect, referring to him as “*mori verabi*.”

It wasn’t long before Shlomo Yehudah began to gain renown among the *talmidei chachamim* of Jerusalem. Rav Moshe Halberstam *ztz”l*, a venerated *posek* and member of the Eidah Hachareidis beis din, enjoyed speaking with him in learning, and foretold of greatness for him.

But as Shlomo Yehudah’s name began to spread, he reacted, shunning all media and fleeing from photographers. Today, Rav Shlomo Yehuda realizes that it’s unavoidable, yet even though he agreed to let our photographer do his job, he lowered his eyes and hunched into himself, clearly not one to pursue the limelight.

Part of that is because Rav Shlomo Yehudah doesn’t really see himself as special. (“When a person learns Torah to uphold the Will of Hashem, then what is there for him to be boastful about?”) Although he’s known for his phenomenal memory and can source practically *kol haTorah kulah*, he believes it’s within the grasp of anyone who desires to be a *talmid chacham*.

“The solution to retention is actually quite simple once it’s broken down,” the Yanuka explains. “It involves connecting what you learn with the inner part of your soul. If a person experiences something that frightens or distresses him, he’ll remember every detail of it, even after much time has passed. And similarly, when a person does something from a place of *ahavah*, he remembers that thing as well. So when we contemplate the words of Chazal, not just what they’re saying, but who they were, how they were steeped in Torah at all costs, through poverty and fear of persecution and endowed with transmitting Hashem’s Will to the future generations, we can attach ourselves to them, soul to soul, and it brings us to remember things in a way that are etched in all the layers of our mind and soul.”

Still, we want to know, is it really as simple as that? And, we ask, perhaps a bit too brazenly, how did the Rav acquire all his Torah knowledge? Is he a born genius? And how does a person attain such a breadth of knowledge at such a young age?

Rav Shlomo Yehudah appears somewhat abashed — but he doesn’t lose his composure. “If you are asking me what I always think about when I learn, the answer is that I think about my love for HaKadosh Baruch Hu. The years of solitude that I endured brought me to an intense closeness. Davening to Him and a desire to cling to Him are what brought me to toil in Torah.”

Does that necessarily mean that solitude and loneliness are a recipe for growth? And if that’s true, then does it follow that a person who has lots of friends and lots of activities will be distracted, that it will be impossible for him to be really diligent or able to climb spiritual heights?

“Distractions can definitely pull a person away from Hashem — even more than the yetzer hara,” Rav Shlomo Yehudah explains. “The Baal Shem Tov says that if a person looks in the face of someone who is not cleaving to Hashem, someone who doesn’t think about Hashem, it can cause harm to his soul. That’s why we learn in Pirkei Avos, ‘If two sit and there is no *divrei Torah* between them...’ What does ‘*ein beineihem*’ (there isn’t between them) mean? It should have said, ‘And they do not engage in Torah.’ But ‘*ein beineihem*’ means that they do not connect the Torah between them. It’s like, I say a *devar Torah*, you say a *devar Torah*, but we don’t feel together with the Torah. Each one says the Torah that is his and wants others to see what he knows. So we always want to make sure that the Torah is a connector. ”

Yet, as we know, not everyone has the drive, or the wherewithal, to learn. What about a person who feels he “just can’t learn”? Rav Shlomo Yehudah

seems distressed by the question. After all, he says, there is no exemption from some kind of Torah learning every day. “At the same time,” he notes, “everything that a person does or learns — at any level — is precious to Hashem. Every person needs to fulfill this on his level. For example, if a person needs to engage in business, he should deal honestly and learn the relevant halachos of *ribbis* (interest) or of *tzedakah*, and he should do whatever he can based on his level. He needs to check what his abilities and strengths are, and based on that he should find a seder for this level.

“For others the answer might be to daven with more *kavanah*. Make brachos with more *kavanah*. Tell Hashem, ‘Perhaps I’m not the Vilna Gaon and can’t learn around the clock, but I’ll say my brachos and recite my tefillos with *kavanah*. While eating, I will think about You, and I’m doing the best I can.’ Whatever you do with your strengths, that is your uniqueness. HaKadosh Baruch Hu does not want a person to be on a level that’s not his.”

## Fusing All the Parts

When Rav Shlomo Yehudah was 18, he began giving regular *shiurim* in different communities around the country, and it didn’t matter if you were litvish, yeshivish, or chassidish — people from all sectors began to flock to him. He married at age 20 and settled in Rishon L’Tzion, where he lives today, and where for the last ten years he’s been giving a regular *shiur* and trying to avoid publicity. But two years ago, in response to the directive of *gedolei hador* (some of whom come to his *shiurim*), his *shiurim* have gone public, in halls and auditoriums, sometimes drawing over a thousand people at an event. And there are a lot of surprises too. He often asks the crowd to pick a subject they want him to speak about — and he’s off and running, pulling together sources from all over, creating a tapestry of light and wisdom for a spellbound audience.

Rav Shlomo Yehudah’s special-occasion *shiurim* in the big shul in Jerusalem’s Kiryat Sanz neighborhood draw thousands of attendees. Some of the regular participants include Rav Shimon Baadani, Rav Moshe Mordechai Karp, the *mekubal* Rav David Batzri, and others.

And then there’s the music. At the end of this past Chanukah *maamad*, which drew several thousand, the Yanuka began a medley, beginning with old Chabad niggunim, segueing into Carlebach’s “Mimkomcha” and Yossi Green’s “Aderaba,” followed by more *niggunei neshamah* — and accompanied by Chazzan Chaim Eliezer Hershtik and violinist Daniel Ahaviel, a regular at the *shiurim* who often plays together with the Yanuka at the finale.

A *talmid* of the *mekubal* Rav Sroya Deblitzky *ztz”l* said of Rav Shlomo Yehudah: “I found what Rav Sroya was looking for all the years. The Rav wrote, ‘We needed a *gadol* who will unite all the parts of the holy Torah, yet, due to our great sins, we do not have someone like that in our orphaned generation.’ Yet now, we’ve merited this gift — a *talmid chacham* that knows all parts of Torah, and connects it to people of all streams.”

Rav Moshe Mordechai Karp of Modiin-Ilit says the Yanuka is an “*echad umeyuchad*, singular in our generation, *mara dekula Oraisa*. And in his humility, he is a true vessel of *kabbalas haTorah*, as Rav Lavitas Ish Yavneh instructed in the Mishnah, ‘*Me’od me’od hevei shefal ruach*.’”

While Rav Shlomo Yehudah doesn’t peddle mysticism and shies away from giving brachos, Rav Shlomo Busso, a grandson of the Baba Sali and an *admor* in his own right, praised him at the engagement of his daughter, telling how a brachah he gave was instantly fulfilled.

“He’s a *yachid bedoro*, with the entire breadth of Torah — Bavli, Yerushalmi, Rishonim, Acharonim, Zohar, Midrash, everything — on his lips, and all with such a self-effacing demeanor I’ve never encountered in anyone of his stature,” said Rav Busso. And then he went on to describe his personal *yeshuah*: “I had approached the Yanuka several times for a brachah for a shidduch for my daughter, but he was always evasive about when the *yeshuah* would come. Then on Chanukah, a time of supernatural miracles, I went to him again and asked for a brachah, and this time he looked at me and said, ‘No more delays! It will come today!’ Minutes later I got a phone call with the suggestion, and a week later we made a *l’chayim*.”

## All Paths Converge

In addition to his network of *shiurim* and his daily learning quota, Rav Shlomo Yehudah has also published five seforim, on Chumash, on tefillah, and on various topics culled from his *shiurim*. And if there’s an underlying theme to it all, it’s about the unification of the *klal*, of breaking down the artificial barriers that separate us and make us think it’s “us against them.”

He tells of Rav Pinchas of Koritz *zy”a*, who once asked the Baal Shem Tov about a particular young fellow who had strayed: How should one bring back a child who has strayed from the path? In what way? Through *kavanos* in the mikveh? Through *yichudim*? What should be done? “The Baal Shem Tov chuckled and said, ‘Only by loving him will he accept from you and you will be able to bring him back.’ And that’s what happened,” the Yanuka explains. “He displayed great love for that Jew and brought him back. It is a basic rule: Love every Jew and then we can bring all of Am Yisrael closer to our Father in Heaven.”

Perhaps the reason so many, from so many sectors, are drawn to him is that he doesn’t see differences as separating — all paths lead to the same place, like the 12 gates all converging into the Beis Hamikdash. He quotes with equal enthusiasm the Rogatchover Gaon and Rav Shlomo Karliner, the Vilna Gaon to Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. So many *tzaddikim*, such a wide arrange of *shitos* and paths. How is it possible to blend all these paths?

“There is no contradiction,” the Yanuka says emphatically. “Hashem is One. The Torah is One. Anyone who learns Torah with an eye on the truth — will not find a contradiction between the various paths in *avodas Hashem*. When a person learns to be *mepalpel*, he can find all kinds of things — this one said this, that one thinks differently, there is a discrepancy in what they say. But when one learns in order to draw closer to Hashem — then you don’t see any discrepancy. On the contrary, in the end, everything blends together toward the Will of Hashem.

“We need need it all — the wisdom of Chabad, the connection of Breslov, the litvish *derech* of breaking through a *sugya* to reach the root, to connect to the Will of Hashem by delving into the depths of His Torah.”

The Yanuka’s personal learning schedule encompasses it all. He learns sifrei halachah and kabbalah, and completes Shas Bavli and Yerushalmi a few times a year, along with the entire Tanach and commentaries and midrashim. Three times a year, he conducts a big *siyum* — on his birthday (15 Iyar, the day the

holy, spiritually nourishing *man* began to fall from Heaven in the desert), on Shavuot, and on Simchas Torah. Order, seder, is a crucial part of his day, which he believes is integral to any *avodas hadodesh*. He willingly advises *talmidim* when it comes to organizing a daily schedule, with goals and objectives in every area in which a person seeks to carve out a path in *avodas Hashem*.

In fact, we notice that this scion of Yemenite *mekubalim* has in front of him a *kamea* of sorts — a tiny locket — with a picture of the Rogatchover Gaon.

“I always keep the picture of the Rogatchover with me,” Rav Shlomo shares. “I put it on the table while I’m learning. He’s my inspiration as a symbol of true *ahavas Torah*. And although he was very sharp and known to be impatient in the face of ignorance, it actually came from a place of deep humility. He once gave *semichah* to someone who really didn’t know much, and people were shocked. They didn’t understand how the Rogatchover could do such a thing, and he explained: ‘I asked him a question and he replied that he did not know the answer but *b’ezeras Hashem* when a case would be presented he would ask the rav in his city who would surely know....’

“Then the Rogatchover explained: ‘When I ask someone and he says he doesn’t know or he’ll look it up or he needs to think — then I can give him *semichah* because I know he will clarify the halachah. But when I ask a person and he tries to answer from all kinds of places — responses that are neither correct nor precise — how can I trust to give such a person *semichah*?’ Those were the people he spoke against sharply.”

As we ponder these words, there’s a short lull in the conversation before we get up to leave — and that’s when we hear it: All this time, there’s been soft music in the background. Only now did we realize that this soundtrack, a classic chassidic tune of yearning, was playing through our entire conversation. Now we get it: That’s Rav Shlomo Yehudah’s way — to learn Torah while the chords of his soul are playing harmony.

And this song, the song of his life, is just beginning, the rivers just starting to spread outward.

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