

## Touching All the Bases

### *Memories of the Rosh Yeshiva*

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"Larger than life?" Check.

"Lived life to the fullest?" Check.

But glittering generalities can't begin to encapsulate the effect that the Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Nota *zt"l*, had on his students, family members, and *klal Yisroel*. There were so many touch points to grab the attention of anyone fortunate enough to spend time in his orbit. The *talmid chochom's divrei Torah*. The towering intellect. The mastery of public speaking. The dazzling vocabulary. The raconteur's stories. The writer/poet's turn of phrase. The world-class fundraiser. The *m'kareiv par excellence*. The loving husband. The doting father. The true fan's love of baseball.

Baseball? How does that even make the list?

It's there because of the inimitable way that Rav Nota used it as a way to break down barriers, to calm down the spooked parents of his students, and to make his Torah relatable and memorable. He would regale listeners with the story of how he and his

teenaged friends in yeshiva were convinced that *Moshiach* was arriving the year that Cal Abrams was batting over .400 at the mid-season All-Star break.

He would tell *rebbeim* at Ohr Somayach that it was OK to play sports with the students, but only if they (the *rebbeim*) were good at playing that sport. Trip over your feet while trying to catch a pop-up? Who would be impressed by that? But walk past the ball field, accept the invitation of some students, step up to the plate wearing dress shoes, dig in, and start ripping line drives - like Rav Nota did - that would get a student's attention.

He would explain why baseball was the perfect game, using it as a metaphor for a *mussar vort*: in every field, the bases are 90 feet apart and the pitching rubber is 60 feet, 6 inches away from home plate - just like the *daled amos* of *halacha*, which demand strict adherence. But the outfield dimensions vary tremendously between fields, like the beautiful kaleidoscope of *minhagim* of different *Yidden*.

Ninth inning, home team down several runs with only one out left? In other games, there would be no time for a comeback. But in baseball, there is always time. So too, the *Yidden*, and each individual Jew, can always come back. It's never too late.

When we once posed a baseball-related *shaila* (we have a *Kohen* on our team; does he have to bat first?), he answered the way only a combined *talmid chochom*/baseball savant could. He told us that if the *Kohen* was not someone that we would otherwise consider to bat lead-off, then no, we did not have to impair the lineup. But if he was one of the possible choices, then yes, he did have to bat first.

I spent two years at Ohr Somayach while single. The original plan was to spend one year, but with the help of the Rosh Yeshiva's draftsmanship, I was able to convince the Harvard Law School admissions office to delay my matriculation for a second year. After getting married and finishing law school, I returned to Ohr Somayach for another year of learning. Rav Nota enjoyed this fact that I shared with him upon my return (and would often ask me to repeat this to prospective students and donors): that I could not help but notice the drop-off in the academic level when I left Ohr Somayach to attend Harvard.

At Ohr Somayach, the level of teaching ability wasn't scattershot; it was uniformly excellent. People did not get jobs through connections or patronage. Rather, Rav Nota (along with Rav Mendel zt"l) managed to assemble a rabbinic roster that rivaled some of the greatest in the history of the Jewish people.

During my tenure alone, (and at the risk of omitting a name, for which I apologize), it is now hard to fathom nor did I realize at the time how astounding it was that the following rabbis were in the yeshiva, giving shiurim regularly and counseling students: Rav Simcha Wasserman *zt"l*, Rav Moshe Shapiro *zt"l*, Rav Dov Schwartzman *zt"l*, Rav Nachman Bulman *zt"l* and my Rebbe, Rav Uziel Milevsky *zt"l*; and *yebadel l'chaim*, Rav Aharon Feldman, Rabbi Dr. Dovid Gottlieb, Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz, Rabbi Mordechai Becher, and Rabbi Yaakov Homnick, *shlita*.

With Rav Nota at the helm, *gedolim* were drawn to Ohr Somayach and congregated there. Who could say no to his invitation?

He didn't just lecture us regarding the importance of *tocho k'baro* - that our interiors have to match our exteriors. He contrasted that ideal with the apocryphal, famous line from the ethicist Dr. Bertrand Russell while defending himself against scandalous rumors: "And if I were a mathematician, would I have to be a triangle?" Yes, as role models for our children and the outside world, we must practice what we preach.

One Shabbos, I secured a Willy Wonka-esque golden ticket - an invite to join the Rosh Yeshiva at his home for a meal. Toward the end of the meal, after holding the large crowd in thrall, Rav Nota lifted a glass to propose a toast. I watched in awe as he explained that "our purpose in life is to take the *gashmiyus* and raise it to the level of *ruchniyos*. Clearly, my wife has done that with this meal, so I would like to thank her."

And oh, how he loved to lift a glass for a *l'chaim*. If there was ever a person who was more adept at lifting a glass and delivering a toast, I'd like to meet him. He would explain before downing a shot in the morning at a *bris*, a *tikkun*, or a *kiddush*, that when the rest of the world drinks alcohol in the morning, they drink *m'chaim* - from life, i.e., to get away from life. But a *Yid* drinks *l'chaim* (raising his voice for that word, for emphasis) to life; so drinking in the morning poses no problem.

Closing my eyes, it's easy to conjure up an image of Rav Nota, glass of scotch in hand, raising his voice for emphasis while enunciating the word *l'chaim*.

A final thought before bidding *adieu* to the rare giant among us whose mold-breaking, indefatigable globe-hopping on behalf of the *klal* lifted all of us on his broadest of spiritual shoulders: Rav Nota never asked us to be him, for who could be? Instead, he inspired us to be the best version of ourselves - recalling Reb Zusia's famous concern that he would not be held accountable for not being as great as

Avraham Avinu, but rather for not being as great as Reb Zusia could have been. He pushed us to maximize our potential by seeing within us better versions of ourselves that were beyond our own myopic field of vision.

I remember it like it was yesterday, leaving Ohr Somayach in 1994 after my second stint there, to begin my professional career, and going to Rav Nota to say goodbye. He told me that when I returned to the States, I had to make sure to give *shiurim*. Never having given one, I thought I had misheard and that he had told me to attend *shiurim*. But I confirmed that I had heard correctly.

It took time to figure out how to prepare and deliver a *shiur*. He had seen something that I had not. So he gets credit for every *drosha*. Further, as Rashi explains, as long as a *talmid* is alive, his Rav remains alive. With so many of his students still teaching, Rav Nota *zt"l* will no doubt remain alive *b'ruchniyos* for years to come.