A Reflection on Rav Gershon Edelstein zt”l

Rav Shlomo Zuckier

Rav Gershon Edelstein, senior rabbinic leader of the Haredi community, passed away today after a short illness at age 100.

In recent years Rav Edelstein has been considered the Gadol Hador or senior leader of the Lithuanian Haredi community, especially after the passing of R. AYL Steinman in 2017 and Rav Chaim Kanievsky last year. Accordingly, he has served as the leader of multiple Haredi religious organizations, including as head of Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah and the Vaad Hayeshivos. Until the end, he remained lucid and was a significant decisionmaker in Haredi politics and media behind the scenes.

Born near Smolensk in 1923 in Soviet Russia, his family managed to emigrate to the Land of Israel in 1934. Rav Gershon learned with his father, Rav Tzvi Yehuda Edelstein, and then at Yeshivas Lomzhe in Petah Tikva, before attending the new Ponevezh Yeshiva in 1943 and quickly joining its staff as a Ra”m. He married Henya Rachel Diskin (daughter of R. Yehoshua Zelig Diskin) in 1948. In the ‘90s, amid the factious infighting at Ponovezh, Rav Edelstein became a co-head of the Yeshiva and resolving much of the tensions by splitting the yeshiva into two.

Not particularly well-known for his Sefarim or Torah publications (although he did publish multiple Sefarim), Rav Edelstein was primarily renowned for his effective and level-headed educational and communal leadership.

He emphasized an attitude of חנוך לנער על פי דרכו, teaching students Torah in a mode that they appreciate, which includes a faster pace for most students (against the trend towards Iyyun in past decades). He also emphasized that educators should build relationships with their students in order to increase their love of Torah.

Rav Edelstein more generally urged a common-sense approach of relating appropriately to one’s surroundings, rather than adopting an extreme approach of ignoring everything outside Torah, or having one’s immersion in Torah come at the expense of one’s family.

He expressed an attitude of relative appreciation for the broader Jewish world, rather than one of rejecting any value of those outside the Haredi community. He also called on the Haredi community to relate to their children who had left the community with a sense of respect and love, saying “there is no other way.”

Throughout the COVID pandemic, Rav Edelstein consistently asserted the need to take health considerations seriously. Notably, he was among the first to call upon Israel’s Haredi community to shut down their Minyanim and the strongest in insisting that Yeshivos remain closed when public health officials warned of significant dangers. On a personal level, he did not appear publicly for an extended period and took serious precautions afterwards.

He regularly put forward a theodicy (following Yevamos 63a) that אין פורענות באה לעולם אלא בשביל ישראל, “suffering occurs in the world only because of Israel,” using that to avoid blaming calamities on others and instead urging the Torah world to take the message that misfortune is cause for looking inward and improving one’s own ways.

His attitude towards the Chaim Walder scandal, urging that issues of sexual abuse must be dealt with internally, and that there was no place for airing these issues in the media, was criticized by many.

His wife predeceased him in 2001. Rav Edelstein is survived by multiple children and children-in-law, many of whom serve as rabbis and educators, primarily in the Bnei Brak region.

His deep-seated understanding, insight, and leadership will be sorely missed.

תהא נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים