



Photo courtesy of Beth Jacob Congregation

Rabbi David Stavsky, z"l, (1930-2004)

A Gentle Warrior: Rabbi David Stavsky

By Jonathan Rosenberg

Cola & Schmooze, CTA, R.E.W.—to the untrained ear these terms do not resonate in the least. However, for the hundreds who grew up in Columbus, Ohio, during the past half-century, their mere mention elicits the fondest of memories.

Some of these individuals grew up during the turbulent decades of the sixties and seventies when the notion of attending day school, let alone a bona-fide yeshivah, was as remote a possibility as the city boasting a full-time *kollel*. Yet the incipient signs of religious

Rabbi Rosenberg received semichah from Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, Maryland, and Yeshiva V'Kollel Ramach in Miami Beach, Florida. He returned to his native Columbus, Ohio, in 1992 to assume the pulpit of Congregation Ahavas Sholom.

growth were already detectable in those early years. Pockets of teenagers were slowly but steadily making their way to

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Ner Israel in Baltimore, Yeshiva University and Stern College for Women in New York and even to *yeshivot* in Israel. By the eighties and nineties, the momentum did not let up as the new generation capitalized on

the burgeoning *kiruv* movement.

The thread that bound these generations together was the stalwart rabbi of the community who served with distinction for close to fifty years—Rabbi David Stavsky.

When the name Rabbi Stavsky is uttered, those who knew him invariably conjure up the image of the beautiful shul he designed, Beth Jacob, standing strong and proud on College Avenue, just as he stood in his position as *rav*. With its signature stained-glass windows, the shul served as the spiritual pulse of the entire community for many years. It housed the new, modern mikvah when the original one was no longer viable. It was in its comfortable boardroom where the monthly *Va'ad Ha'ir* (Kashrut Council) meetings took place, along with *siddur gittin* (hearings

of Jewish divorce). (Also in the boardroom, adjacent to the rabbi's study, bold, ambitious projects such as a community *eruv* and *kollel* were launched.)

In the wake of the community's great loss, I still find myself driving by the shul expecting to see the rabbi's car parked in its usual spot, and hoping to share one more conversation with the spiritual patriarch of the city. Beth Jacob and its rabbi emeritus will forever be inextricably linked.

To appreciate the lifework of Rabbi Stavsky, one must go back to the beginning. The year is 1957. A fledgling shul—then known as Bais Yaynkev—is struggling to fill the gaping hole left by the loss of its longtime leader, Rabbi Leopold Greenwald, z"l, author of *Kol Bo al Aveilut*. The congregation realizes that its future hinges on finding a young rabbi who would reach out to the new generation that is drifting aimlessly in the sea of assimilation. On a typical Shabbat, only the older European men and women come to shul while their children enjoy the local country club's swimming pool and golf course. The vestiges of *kashrut*, family purity and traditional prayer are quickly slipping away. The only question is how long it will take for the great ship of Orthodox Judaism to sink to the bottom.

Along enters a young army chaplain from Manhattan's Lower East Side via Fort Carson, Colorado, where he met his bride, Ruth (nee Burger).

Rabbi Stavsky would later reminisce that his original plan was to sojourn in the quiet midwestern town for a couple of years, at most. After all, Columbus was no place to raise a Jewish family, absent a day school and all the religious amenities the city now takes for granted. But little did the rabbi realize that he would be the driving force in turning around the spiritual apathy and inertia.

What Beth Jacob and the rest of the community also didn't grasp was that it now possessed an individual who could bridge the generation gap. Rabbi Stavsky had the uncanny ability to repackage our cherished heritage into new, modern

models that would acquaint the younger generation with Torah values. His flair for public relations worked wonders in rousing the interest of an otherwise indifferent community. It didn't hurt that the rabbi had an affinity for photography and a camera always in hand to record the successes.

The first order of business was to anchor the community with a Torah day school. Columbus Torah Academy (CTA) was born in the basement of another Orthodox shul (Agudas Achim), and began blossoming.

The night before Rabbi Stavsky's *levayah*, I received a call from one of CTA's first graduates. The voice on the other end emitted pain. "Rabbi Stavsky saved my life. I was going to public

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school; and who knows where I would have ended up? He snatched me away and convinced my parents to send me to the day school. From there I went on to Ner Israel. I owe my life to him."

Rabbi Stavsky understood that only through savvy adult education would the younger generation come to realize that there is more to Rosh Hashanah than dipping an apple into honey. During the Ten Days of Repentance, the old-fashioned *kinnus teshuvah* (symposium on repentance) was transformed into Religious Emphasis Week (R.E.W.) and featured renowned speakers who could deliver the message of *teshuvah* to the heartland. For the most important week of the year, Columbus became a prominent town on the Jewish map.

But perhaps the rabbi's greatest talent was his ability to intuitively grasp that without reaching out to the broader youth, the perilous statistics and prognostications about Orthodoxy would prove tragically true. On a quiet Chol Hamoed Sukkot evening, Rabbi

Stavsky and his *rebbeztin* invited a handful of teens over to drink cola and schmooze about life and perhaps even Torah and Judaism. This informal get-together spawned the creation of the award-winning BJY (Beth Jacob Youth) NCSY (the National Conference of Synagogue Youth) chapter. This was the dawn of the rabbi's involvement with the NCSY movement and, specifically, the Central East NCSY region. What began as a casual get-together soon became a Yom Tov institution. Home from yeshivah for the Sukkot break, we teens looked forward to exchanging our stories in the Stavsky home on Halleck Place. The sense of closeness and common purpose that we shared resulted from Rabbi Stavsky's magical ability to bring out the grandeur and genuine *simchah* of *Yiddishkeit*. I can still hear his thundering voice, urging us to sing, "*Leibedik, leibedik!* (lively!)"

It would not be an exaggeration to state that Rabbi Stavsky mastered all the areas of the rabbinate. The recipient of many awards, he was a consummate orator, writer, fund-raiser, administrator and warrior. I used to muse that the rabbi undoubtedly descended from the tribe of Judah, just like his namesake, King David. He shared many of the telltale characteristics of that royal tribe. To begin with, he could be as fierce as a lion. Several years ago, the community brought in an "expert" to defend its position against supporting Jonathan Pollard. After listening to why Pollard should be left to rot in prison, Rabbi Stavsky began to excoriate the community for its neglect of the mitzvah of *pidyon shevuyim* (redemption of Jewish prisoners). Harsh words were exchanged. Finally the speaker exclaimed, "I'm appalled at this rhetoric!" The lion roared back, "I'm appalled that you're appalled!"

But perhaps Rabbi Stavsky's most outstanding trait that emulated the tribe of kingship was his spirit of generosity. I was not able to fully appreciate his *chesed* until I returned to Columbus some twelve years ago to join the rabbinate.

Only when I was on the other side of the fence did I truly see his greatness. Rabbi Stavsky was always there to serve. No phone call was rushed, no visitor was turned away. He loved to share the tricks of the trade with his younger “colleagues.” He brought to life for me the likes of his mentors, Rav Moshe Feinstein, z”l, Rav Eliezer Silver, z”l, and Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, z”l. He embraced *rabbanut* in all its facets and taught me what it means to be a real *rav*. Often Rabbi Stavsky would recount the story of his first difficult encounter with asserting his rabbinic authority. Apparently, his instructions regarding caring for the older *matzeivot* (cemetery headstones) were ignored by the local *chevrah kadishah*. He called his *rebbe*, Rav Soloveitchik, for a *halachic* decision concerning the desecration. Rav Soloveitchik answered: “We’ll get to the *halachah*. But that’s not what bothers me. I gave you *semichah* to be a *rav*. Assert yourself!”

There was always a sense that Rabbi Stavsky was taking care of the community. We were all confident that he would never back down from his role as *rav* and that he would always come to save the day. Whenever the community

faced a crisis—whether it concerned the day school, the city’s *kashrut* standards or the local *eruv*—he always followed in the footsteps of Judah and accepted responsibility.

When I receive calls from Columbusites who have since relocated, asking me what it feels like to be in town without Rabbi Stavsky’s presence, I respond with the following: “Imagine driving downtown and reaching Broad and

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Crown Heights or a
secular Jew from afar.*

High Streets. You look for the Lincoln Leveque Tower, and suddenly it’s not there.” The vacuum that now exists will not easily be filled.

Perhaps the best way to capture what Rabbi Stavsky meant to us is to return again to the story of David, king of Israel. “And all of Israel and Judah loved David

because he went and returned before them” (I Samuel 18:16). The definition of a true leader is—as Ramban explains in *parashat Pinchas*—“to exert oneself abundantly on behalf of his people, to fight the battles for God and to escort us out and return us home” (27:19). Similarly, all the tribes of Israel loved Rabbi Stavsky because he was there to fight our battles and return us to safety. He was always ready to guide us with strength and soothe us with compassion. We loved him because he embraced every Jew, whether it was a *Chassid* from Brooklyn, a *kollel* fellow from Lakewood, a Lubavitcher from Crown Heights or a secular Jew from afar.

On the day of his *levayah*, there was an eerie reversal of roles. Over 800 people filled the Beth Jacob sanctuary. But instead of hearing the rabbi speak from the pulpit as he had done for the past forty-six years, the audience listened to tearful eulogies about him as his *aron* (casket) stood at his lectern. Typically, the rabbi would have descended from the *bimah* to escort his congregation out of shul. This time it was the flock escorting their faithful shepherd to his eternal heavenly sanctuary above.

“*Chaval al de’avdin velo mish-tachachin*, (Woe to what is lost and cannot be found).” May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life. 