

Continuing the Legacy of Yehuda Bensalmon A"H

Born December 20, 1987, Yehuda was the middle sibling, number six of Rabbi Moshe and Clarita Bensalmon's eleven children. The lively group consisted of five boys and six girls, but, as the middle child, Yehuda was the quietest of the clan. He generally stayed out of his siblings' way, thereby avoiding all conflicts. Yehuda's non-confrontational persona was evident in all of his relationships throughout his life.

"Yehuda was an example to us all," says Jamie Azoulay, a close childhood friend and cousin who grew up with Yehuda. "There was a serenity and kindheartedness that enveloped his whole being. It was impossible to be around him and not notice it."

"Yehuda would choose his words very carefully," says his oldest brother Moti Bensalmon. Many noted how Yehuda always measured his words judiciously, wisely knowing when to speak and when to keep still. "He could be in a room for hours when someone would inquire of his whereabouts, not realizing that he had been there all along," says Moti.

Although Moti was ten years Yehuda's senior, they developed a close bond one summer when Yehuda, aged 7 or 8 at the time, attended a summer camp in the Catskill Mountains, where Moti was employed as a counselor. "I was his big brother there," recalls Moti. "I took care of him."

Yehuda attended summer camp for years, loving every minute of it. He



made many friends and stoked those relationships. Even at such a young age, Yehuda recognized that the key to maintaining successful relationships is forgiveness and understanding. His parents later learned about an incident at camp involving a boy who had swung a baseball bat that accidentally broke Yehuda's hand. Yehuda never mentioned the incident to the other boy because he knew that it was an accident and that the other child already felt badly enough. Yehuda didn't want him to feel any worse. The two boys remained good friends.

With his amiable nature and earnest good-heartedness, Yehuda's company was sought by many. He was a sincere and genuine person whose friendship was greatly valued and appreciated.

After their shared summer camp experience, Moti looked out for

his brother. When visiting Yehuda's apartment in Israel, where he learned for four years, Moti was surprised by the matchbox-size room, a closet that four boys called home. "But I'm learning all the time," Yehuda told him. "I'm barely here... it's just for sleeping." Indeed, Yehuda loved to learn and spent his days in the beit medrash. He was a top student.

Rabbi Messod Azoulay mentioned the following in one of the eulogies given in Israel: "I remember in yeshiva how Yehuda z"l and one other boy would always shop for the food for Shabbat, since we would eat in yeshiva. Yehuda z"l would prepare the food, help set the table and clean up. During the meal he sat near the food, in a place where he would always be able to serve others, like a mother at the Shabbat table sitting near the kitchen. He loved to sing the zemirot of Shabbat.

I remember Yehuda z"l always being by his father's side, every father's wish; it looks like he was "mekayem kibud av v'em" perfectly. According to his wife, all he wanted to do was to make her happy. Growing up we would have a youth minyan in our shul. Younger bachurim in that minyan told me that they always looked up to him.

Rabbi Lamet unfortunately had to leave early tonight. Before leaving, he told me to say how the name Yehuda is "Malchut", Yehuda z"l had nobility, a "chashivut" to him. He was like Moshe Rabenu in this week's parsha as it says,

“vayar besivlotam.” Moshe Rabbenu saw and understood the suffering of B’nei Yisrael. So too, Yehuda z”l was a person who understood how to relate to people. He probably never had an enemy in his life.”

While Yehuda was shy and quiet, he still had a sharp sense of humor. After he returned to North America from Israel (he continued his learning in Lakewood), his new cell phone connected him directly to his siblings, with whom he enjoyed texting short jokes and funny anecdotes that would brighten everyone’s day.

In April 2011, Yehuda married Rivka Mizrahi of Flatbush, NY. They settled in Lakewood, where they began to build their own home of Torah and mitzvot, paralleling the ones in which they had been raised. Yehuda focused all of his energies on ensuring his wife’s happiness. Their exceptional shalom bayit was noticed and remarked upon by his friends and peers. Rivka was clearly Yehuda’s ezer. She nurtured his self-confidence, helping him open up more and develop even closer relationships with his siblings.

But Yehuda always shone in his relationships with his parents. His kibud av v’em was exemplary. When visiting Toronto, his place was at his father’s side. He was also exceptionally close to his mother. Yehuda called her every single night. On the rare occasion that a wedding or other obligation prevented him from connecting with his mother one evening, she was his first call in the morning, a loving “hello” accompanied by an apology for not having spoken the night before. “He had unbelievable middot in dealing with people,” says Moti. “Everyone can learn from him.” Known for his sincerity, Yehuda was also particular about how he performed mitzvot, focusing not just on the act, but on the hiddur as well, such as taking the utmost care of his tallit and searching fervently for the perfect etrog every Succot.

Last Succot, 2013/5753, Yehuda and Rivka enjoyed the chag in Toronto, spending nearly every minute with family and making the effort to visit siblings in their own homes. They further strengthened their relationships with nieces and nephews this way, who now happily remember the time they spent together and focused on it in the dark December days a few weeks later.

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After being admitted to the hospital that Wednesday and reassuring his family that everything was fine, Yehuda’s condition significantly worsened just one day later. They suspected a mild case of mono, which Yehuda had actually initially contacted a few years prior while learning in Israel.

On Friday, the doctors informed Yehuda’s mother by phone that it was a virus. With Rivka and her parents in the hospital with Yehuda over Shabbat, the Bensalmans recognized that he was in good hands and that there was not much else that they could do.

Yehuda, however, spoke differently. In an Erev Shabbat phone call, his mother tried vainly to reassure him that he’d be fine. But Yehuda seemed to know otherwise. “I don’t think so,” he told his mother. “I don’t think I’m going to be fine.”

Somehow, Yehuda knew.

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At the unfathomable age of 20, Rivka Bensalmon lost her devoted, loving husband. The Bensalmans suffered the agony of sitting shiva for a child. When their phone rings and displays a Lakewood area code, they jump, momentarily forgetting the nightmare they are living. Moti and his cousin packed up the young couple’s apartment and Rivka moved back to her parents’ home in Brooklyn.

Hundreds attended the untimely levaya of Yehuda Bensalmon, a”h, who was niftar on 19 Kislev, 5773, one week shy of his 25th birthday. The door of

the shiva house never closed as the community and all who knew Yehuda came to comfort his family and share with them their beautiful memories and inspiring anecdotes of Yehuda.

It was only after the levaya that Rivka shared her news with the family, news that she herself had only learned mere days before, the first day that Yehuda was in hospital. Rivka was pregnant with their first child. Like any young couple does when they receive such exciting news, Rivka and Yehuda discussed their dreams and hopes of how they would raise their son or daughter. With not much else to do while they waited for medical reports and diagnoses, the young Bensalmans conversed about what type of school they would send their child to, what hashkafot to instill and how to raise the baby in general. So Rivka now knows what Yehuda wanted for their progeny.

Claire Yehudit was born July 27 (20 Av), seven months after her father’s petirah. As per Sefardic minhag, she carries her grandmother’s name, Clarita. Her second name Yehudit, is for her father, Yehuda, a”h.

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The Bensalmon & Mizrahi families are grateful to everyone for their moral support & their yearning to elevate Yehuda’s neshama. They are continuously touched by the warmth & love shown by all. This article pertains to the legacy of Yehuda Bensalmon a”h, aimed to inspire others to do mitzvot in Yehuda’s name to perpetuate his neshama.

May the merit of Yehuda Bensalmon a”h be a source of inspiration and may we all be worthy to continue the legacy of Yehuda Bensalmon a”h by following his inspiring example of selfless devotion to Torah and to his loving family. Amen.

By: Yehuda Azoulay and an Anonymous contributing writer.