

Harav Gedaliah Anemer z"tl

Rabbi Michael Bramson

I sit here on Motzei Shabbat only a day after I had the zechut of being at Har Menuchot for the levaya of Hagaon Harav Gedaliah Anemer z"tl. I decided to write down several thoughts. I am not a man with a flowery vocabulary and I never actually sat in on Rabbi Anemer's shiur but I would like to express some of my thoughts that have passed through my mind the last several days.

My first two years in Silver Spring I really had very little connection to Rabbi Anemer. I was in the Hebrew Academy and had very little to do with Rabbi Anemer other than seeing him in Shul.

My first memorable experience was when I came back from Israel and decided to sit in on a Wednesday night adult shiur that he used to give, I thought to myself "I have just gone through an intensive year of learning in Israel; a Wednesday night class for "baalei baatim" should be quite easy for me". It took me approximately a half hour to realize that this rabbi was not your average rabbi and the level of his shiur was not your average shiur. The way he went back and forth with different ideas using the different meforshim was extraordinary. I quickly found my self humbled by this man.

Rabbi Anemer was a man who connected us to the old world but somehow lived in the modern world. My lasting image of him will be the way he carried himself in public when simply walking around the streets of Kemp Mill. Upright, with a nice suit and a homburg on his head looking very elegant and regal. He was always aware of the fact that he was representing Torah. For Rabbi Anemer it was all about kavod hatorah. Representing Torah as it deserves to be represented and defending Torah and its ideals as it deserves to be defended.

The physical presence combined with the booming voice of this Torah giant always intimidated me (I am not the only one, this I know for a fact). When I was younger I thought of him as hard to approach as he seemed so scary and intimidating. But then there was a bus ride to a wedding in New York. I ended up sitting next to Rabbi Anemer (I was thinking the whole time "where is my mommy"). It was so delightful. He shared some of his Torah based on the Igrot Moshe that I was reading. Then, as he pulled out his Yiddish newspaper he asked me if I understood any Yiddish. I sheepishly told him that "Gut Voch" was pretty much the extent of my knowledge. He then, very patiently started reading and explaining some of the Yiddish words to me. It was the first time I had seen the true side of this man. I was still intimidated by him but I knew that the insecurity came from me and not from the fact that he was aloof or unfriendly.

I really started forming a relationship with Rabbi Anemer when I moved back to Silver Spring as a rebbe at the Hebrew Academy. He would call me as part of the rotation to give Shiurim Shabbat afternoon. I was honored that he considered me worthy enough to be part of the rotation. I remember the time I asked him if he would like me to start making the calls each week to get the speaker. He told me that he would appreciate it very much. I thought that this was a great idea until the first week when I called two or three people and they all told me "no". After being rejected by the third person (It was Rabbi Dov Lipman, a good friend of mine who attended and

taught at the Yeshiva of Greater Washington) I said “I can’t believe Rabbi Anemer has to go through this every week”. Dov immediately replied “No he doesn’t, I would never say no to him.”

In general, one did not say no to Rabbi Anemer. He spent over 50 years of his life developing a Torah community in Silver Spring when there was nothing. He wanted Torah taught as much as possible and whenever possible. How could you tell this man no? (OK, admittedly the booming voice still intimidated me even after I was already older and the father of three.)

I will never forget the time that I was asked to be honored at the shul dinner. I told everyone no. It wasn’t for me. I was not good at calling people to come or to donate money and I would bring in very little money. Besides, I had to get up in front of people every single day, I wanted one night off from speaking. I was strong in my refusal to accept. I told Ari Price that no one was convincing me to say yes. Ari said “I will bet you one penny that as soon as Rabbi Anemer calls you will give in” I said “You got a deal, I am not giving in” It took approximately one minute from the time I heard the familiar words “Michael, This is Rabbi Anemer calling” (as if I did not recognize the voice) for me to say yes. I called Ari back and asked him if he would like cash or check. No anger in his voice no begging or pleading it was simply a kavod HaTorah issue. He told me that it is not just me who is being honored; it is the Torah that I represent in the community. For kavod HaTorah, he insisted, I had to accept.

There was one time I did tell him no. I had been running the youth minyan for several years and while it was very successful it took away from my Shabbat . I remember the fear I had of calling Rabbi Anemer and telling him of my plans. Rebbe, I said, I just want some more of my Shabbat time. He immediately responded to me, “I understand I have wanted that for 40 years”. His quick lines were always insightful. He loved what he accomplished over his very long span of time. But, it was never “over” for him, 40 years wasn’t enough. There was always more to do. There were hundreds of more shiurim to give, a yeshiva gedola to get started and a shul that had members who needed guidance.

On the way back from the levaya, Ezra Starr said a short but very poignant thought. “When Rabbi Anemer was around you knew everything was going to be alright”. His presence was always reassuring and his thoughts were always insightful. He seemed to know what to say, even when just schmoozing with you.

I used to enjoy being involved in different shul activities just so I could ask Rabbi Anemer his thoughts both in halacha and in general guidance. I remember the year that Phil Schwartz and I decided to do Haggalat Keilim before Pesach for the community. What a thrill to sit down with this halachik genius and ask him all the different questions that I had. He was so insightful. As I have always said about Rabbi Anemer he really understood how halacha is supposed to work. He may have been the most right wing of all the greater Washington rabbis in terms of his background but that doesn’t mean his pesak halacha was the strictest. I still cherish the times that I spent with him asking him all the different questions about kashering keilim.

As we all know, Rabbi Anemer would never compromise on halacha. The bakery story of how he declared it not kosher for being opened before pesach ended was told by his son here in Israel. It really described his adherence to halacha. When I was running the youth minyan I could almost always predict his answer when it came to questions about changing certain things in the minyan. He was strict about mesorah. We keep the minyan, youth or adult, a certain way and not give in to new ideas that change or deviate from the mesorah.

I remember the time I actually got to speak in shul with Rabbi Anemer present. Usually if I was speaking in the main shul it meant that he was at another minyan. One time, however, when the youth minyan was upstairs Rabbi Anemer was present. It was very exciting for me (in case you haven't guessed I was still a little nervous. I was 35 years old at the time and had spoken dozens of times but never in front of Rabbi Anemer). I started off my speech by telling everyone how much we need to appreciate Rabbi Anemer's love for learning and how he instills that love into his students. I then went on to tell the congregation the following: "I teach seniors. When April comes along seniors have very little incentive to keep them working or even coming to school. But not the seniors in Rabbi Anemer's shiur. I have a senior living at my house (He was a yeshiva boarder and it was June) The other night I asked where he was going and he told me that in another day or two he had a bechuna from Rabbi Anemer (oral, of course) and he needed to go prepare. This is unheard of. A senior in high school preparing for a day or two for a test in June?" Yes, it was true. They still had the desire to learn Torah because of the role model who they had as their rebbe. (The fact that they still feared him didn't hurt either) The rebbe never stops learning and neither do the students. As an addendum to the story, when shul was over a senior from the Yeshiva came up to me and said "Rabbi Bramson, you got one thing wrong, we don't prepare for just a day for Rabbi Anemer's tests we sometimes prepare for almost a week"

Despite his intimidating appearance he had a very soft spot for his students. One of his students related to me (A long story but I will just tell the end) that when he was very sad about being kicked out of class, Rabbi Anemer saw him, heard the boy's story (through teary eyes) put his arm around him, walked him back to class and asked the rebbe to give the boy another chance. The student said it totally changed his behavior.

I used to love his Shabbat Hagadol and Shabbat Shuva drashot. The first half was very deep lamdus. I was glad. I wanted our shul to see what Rabbi Anemer was really all about. Yes, he could give the most inspirational Shabbat drashot and speak at weddings, and Bar-mitzvahs with the best of them but when it was all said and done he was about deep deep Torah insights. It was important, in my mind, for people to see him in this way.

Then came the mussar. Mussar that brought you back to a different time. Mussar that shook walls and shook my bones. I was not privy to the old traditional way of mussar but listening to this master of mussar I felt that this is what it must have been like in certain yeshivot in Europe.

People thought that we were crazy. A group of us from Beit Shemesh went to Yerushalayim for a burial that did not start until just before 6:00 p.m. (Shabbat was

6:52). We were thinking that Rabbi Anemer may not be happy if we had to use the 18 minutes. But as Dov Lipman said “I have to go” We all had to go. A man who dedicated his whole life to spreading Torah and yiddishkeit to Silver Spring, MD deserved our time (even though it turned out to be only 15 minutes as we had to get back). Despite the rush, there were still 100 people there to say good bye to this Torah giant.

I wish we could have had more time with this man, on a personal level I wish I had started “taking advantage” of his vast Torah knowledge much earlier than I did. As a rebbe who tries to influence students, I can only sit in total awe of a man who influenced a whole city for 50 years.

Rebbe, I know that everyone is asking of you to be a spokesperson for the Jewish people up in shomayim. I have the image of you up in shomayim dressed as a talmid chocham should be dressed, suit and the homburg, looking regal and elegant. For over 50 years you influenced a lot of people to do what was right for klal Yisroel. “When Rabbi Anemer was around you knew everything was going to be alright”. Now Haksodesh Baruch Hu has Rebbe around, please continue to help influence for the good so that “everything will be alright” for klal Yisroel