

# IS MEDIA PUBLICITY BENEFICIAL FOR RABBANIM AND ASKANIM?



## SEEING THE FULL PICTURE

BY EZRA FRIEDLANDER

There's an old Yiddish expression: "*Azoy vi es kriselt zech, es Yiddelt zech.*" Loosely translated, it means that everything that happens among the nations of the world also influences *Klal Yisrael*.

We live in an age where modern technology has allowed us to instantly disseminate photos and information to millions around the world. For better, and often for worse, this enables anyone to put out any kind of information whenever they want. It has also impacted the way our own Rebbes, *Roshei Yeshivah* and even *askanim* are portrayed to the mass *chareidi* population and has affected the way we share information.

As young child growing up, I remember how our *rebbeim* would prohibit us from collecting and sharing baseball cards. Back in those innocent days, this was considered the biggest threat to our learning. Times have certainly changed. But I bring this up to point out that what happens in the world at large often trickles down to our community.

Today, there is an obsession with celebrity photos, of living with the luminaries through the lens of a camera. There's no question that this phenomenon has greatly impacted our community as well. A proliferation of pictorial magazines, websites, and other channels of communication regularly disseminate photos. They cover every move of a Rebbe or a *Rosh Yeshivah* as he attends a *simchah* or goes about his daily business. Often it's a follower of that very Rebbe who wishes to promote his beloved leader.

I, too, engage in this hobby. But to appreciate this, you have to understand my background. I am a scion of the Liska chassidic dynasty, and my father is the current Liska Rebbe, *shlita*. The first Liska Rebbe, Harav Tzvi Hersh, *zy"u*, known as the Ach Pri Tevuah, was a *talmid* of the Yismach Moshe. It is said that he once entered a home and saw a drawing of his Rebbe hanging on the wall. He remarked at the time that if person who hung up the drawing would be able to see (as he did) the *dinin* — evil spirits that surround this picture, they would surely take it down.

His successor, the Tal Chaim of Liska, felt the same way. When he was told that a picture of him existed, it caused him great *agmas nefesh*. As it turns out, that photo was eventually burned in a fire.

As far as I know, there is only one image of my great-grandfather, the Sharei Hayosher of Liska, who perished in Auschwitz. That photo is just of his profile. All this gives you an idea of how very opposed my ancestors were to having their photos taken.

But as a youngster growing up, I felt that the *chareidi* world was not familiar enough with the Liska dynasty. I felt it was my duty to "promote" my father and publicize my *zeides*. Most of all, I felt that this was an affirmation of recognizing the historical contributions to *Chassidus* that Liska played throughout the generations.

When I began recording and photographing my father, he felt that this was not our *derech*. It's not that he's old-fashioned. He grew up in America, is well educated, and speaks a perfect English, and is not an extreme person by any yardstick. On the contrary: he is a moderate person on most issues. He just felt

## HONOR VERSUS PUBLICITY

BY RABBI AVRAHAM Y. HESCHEL

During a trip to Eretz Yisrael a few years ago, I had the occasion to converse with the *Mashgiach Ruchani* of a very prominent yeshivah. Aware that this *Mashgiach*, who is greatly respected in his community and revered by his *talmidim*, became an orphan at a young age, I asked him if he would possibly agree to write an article of *chizuk* for orphans and widows.

"With my name?" he asked me.

I explained that, since he was a well-known figure and a role model to many, his words would be far more effective if his name would be used.

The *Mashgiach* — who is a *talmid* of *Hagaon* Harav Chatzkel Levenstein, *zt"l* — demurred.

"By us, *pirsum* (publicity) is something to avoid," he said simply. I presented what I felt were convincing arguments to the contrary, yet he remained firm. He was eager to help, but not if it bought him any sort of publicity.

My *rebbe*, Harav Nesanel Quinn, *zt"l*, the longtime *Mena-hel* of *Mesivta Torah Vodaath*, was a source of inspiration for thousands of *talmidim* during his seven decades in *chinuch*. A paradigm of *anivus*, he had an incredible, genuine fear of any sort of *kavod* or publicity.

There was a period of time that Harav Quinn would give a *shiur* on *Mesillas Yesharim* every Thursday night after *Maariv*. Wishing to publicize the *shiur*, a *talmid* placed a sign, written in *Lashon Hakodesh*, in the *beis medrash* that read, "Harav Quinn will be giving a *shiur* in *Mesillas Yesharim* after *Maariv* in Room 203."

As soon as Harav Quinn saw the sign, he immediately removed it — week after week. It was only when the sign was replaced with the words "*Mesillas Yesharim Shiur*" — without any mention of who was giving it — did it manage to stay on the wall.

For pious Jews, publicity was always something that they either went to great lengths to avoid, or chose to ignore entirely, but never something to seek.

Over the generations, there were various individuals who considered themselves to be followers of a specific spiritual leader, and unbeknownst to their mentor, erroneously thought that they were paying him honor by seeking to publicize him. In our generation, with the advent of *heimishe* photo-magazines and picture pages in *frum* newspapers, this is far more prevalent than ever before.

When a follower actively tries to publicize a Torah leader, he is insinuating that, somehow, the number of photos or articles that appear about a specific Rebbe or *Rosh Yeshivah* adds to his stature or greatness. This fallacious illusion is an inherent contradiction to what spiritual leadership is all about. A true disciple or Chassid realizes that when a Torah leader is publicized in the media, it may help sell some copies, but brings honor neither to his mentor nor to his followers.

In addition to an aversion to publicity in general, let us also bear in mind that, from the early days of photography and the decades that followed, opposition to being photo-

it was incumbent upon him to emulate the path of his ancestors whose sole concern was spreading Torah, not engaging in public relations, and often tells me, “I know you are in public relations and I support your career, but I am not your client, so why take photos of me?” There are even times that I wish he would conduct himself differently so the visual would be more acceptable, yet I realize that he conducts himself naturally, with total disregard for how his image will be viewed. In other words: He doesn’t play for the cameras.

Still, several years ago, I took the liberty of photographing my father’s Erev Yom Kippur *avodah*. I then disseminated these through modern media channels. When my father learned of what I did, he was upset with me to the point where he admonished me, threatening to refuse entry to photographers. His rebuke was that this is over the line, and he asked me to remove it. But I reminded him that he often said he would give anything to have a recording of his own grandfather’s awe-inspiring *Hallel* and *divrei Torah*. And I explained that his own children and grandchildren will one day wish to be inspired by what he represents, and that the Erev Yom Kippur *avodah* was important to preserve for future generations. He wasn’t convinced, but calmed somewhat after realizing that my intentions were positive. In fact, I asked him what is his general opposition to appearing in the papers and his response was simply: “It cheapens the *chashivus* of Rabbanim when their photos appear in a newspaper.”

It’s ironic that I often wonder what my reaction would be if my father did not give me a hard time regarding the photos — would I be more enthusiastic about disseminating them — most definitely not. On the contrary — because I understand and respect his reasoning, yet I feel my role and actions are valid as well.

It’s difficult to argue with that position but, practically speaking, in the generation we live in, modern technology can and should be used to our advantage by positively recording and transmitting our *mesorah*, although I will concede that it does commercialize *Chassidus*, a topic that is beyond the scope of this article.

Today’s youth are yearning for positive role models. They need to see and feel connected to their holy Jewish leaders, rather than gazing at the many other images that are being sent their way on a regular basis. If we do not allow them to engage in America’s favorite pastime in a kosher way, by looking at and following our revered Rebbes and *Roshei Yeshivah*, we may be giving them yet another reason to move elsewhere. In fact, I argue that it may even enhance *yiras Shamayim* when young people view photos or videos of their Rebbe or *Rosh Yeshivah* at various life cycle events.

The same applies to our *askanim*. Their communal involvement should serve as a positive role model for others, and sometimes this warrants a visible media presence. In an ideal world, *klal* work is done *l’shem Shamayim*. But in the real world, a little recognition goes a long way to motivate *askanim* and others to continue and indeed enhance their good work. I strongly support the *askanim* who feel they should share their accomplishments with the general public. I feel certain that public appreciation will help to expand the community’s *chesed* and outreach, for the benefit of all. This has been our *mesorah* from time immemorial.

Yes, my father still cringes when he is told that a photo of him appeared in the paper and still remarks, “*Es iz shoin genig ...* and how many more do you still need?” And I do realize that a hovering photographer can have a negative impact on his *avodah*. But when I see my own children gazing at the pictures and videos, I understand that this is *kvod avosai*, for the honor of my ancestors. And even my father will sometimes reluctantly smile and agree with me. ■

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graphed was widespread throughout Torah Jewry.

Harav Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, *zy”a*, had at one time a very close relationship with a renowned Rebbe. Later, while he continued to hold him in high regard, Harav Shraga Feivel stopped visiting this Rebbe. When asked why he stopped, he gave two reasons, one of which was the fact that this Rebbe had allowed himself to be photographed!

In his *sefer Yaaros Dvash*, Harav Yonason Eibeschutz, *zy”a*, (Volume 1, *Drush 2*) indicates that various powers of evil and impurity cling to images of people. He writes that “If eyes would be given permission to see [this], we would tremble and we would not know what to do from great fear...”

In a letter to his son, the Alter of Kelm, *zy”a*, wrote, “The photos of your daughters ... that you sent, I do not know what this is. *Admor, z”l*, [Harav Yisrael Salanter] did not desire this custom, I believe that he said that, according to the *Zohar Hakadosh*, one should not look at them. ... I believe without a doubt that to spend [money] on this is *baal tash’chis* and is forbidden according to the Torah.”

Other *Gedolim* were more lenient in the matter, and many — though certainly not all — Torah leaders of our era do allow themselves to be photographed. It can be argued that, for some followers, seeing a photo of their mentor, especially, if he was *niftar* many years earlier, can bring back some inspiring, nostalgic memories.

But when actively seeking to place pictures of living spiritual leaders in media outlets, let alone taking it personally and becoming offended if a photo didn’t appear, is a contradiction to both *mesorah* and common sense.

Some of the leading chassidic Rebbes of our generation have sent messages to publications pleading that they desist from publishing their photos or writing articles about them.

Others have taken the approach similar to the one related to me by one venerated Rav. He told me that a close-up photo of him at a *Siyum HaShas* a few years ago appeared on the front page of *The New York Times*.

“I was on a million breakfast tables in the morning and in a million wastebaskets in the evening,” the Rav told me with a broad smile.

While there are obviously clear distinctions in regard to attempts by followers to publicize their spiritual leaders and friends of *askanim* who think that publicity will help them further their *klal* work, this, too, is an often-misunderstood concept.

While I am sure that some will disagree with me, I have long found that, for the most part, the most effective *askanim* work behind the scenes. The very fact that elected officials know that these activists don’t seek publicity, and mean only the greater good of the community, actually earns them respect and legitimacy.

There are, of course, exceptions to the rule. *Askanim* working overseas, for instance, may find that an article in an American media publication can be very helpful to their cause. Heads of organizations that depend on public contributions often have no choice but to engage in public relations in order to convince potential donors that they are really accomplishing something. But generally speaking, publicity is actually either harmful or wholly unnecessary for *shtadlanus*.

Publicity is akin to a strong medicine. It has a role to play under very specific circumstances, but when misused, it is actually counterproductive.

It is our obligation as parents and educators to ensure that the young generation recognizes that fame was never a barometer of spiritual greatness — there were many *Gedolim* who were virtually unknown in their generation — and that while *heimishe* photo pages may be interesting to look at, they should have no role in how we perceive or relate to our spiritual leaders. ■