

Art *to* Heart

The colors of caring

Rabbi Yisroel Braunstein (L)
with Vince Diomede of
Lowe's in Howell, N.J., who
conducts woodworking
workshops under Rabbi
Braunstein's direction for
Chai Lifeline children in the
store.





BY SURI COHEN

Before meeting him, your mind first has to shed preconceived notions and be able to wrap itself around multiple contradictions. We tend to tabulate myriad impressions and file them away in neat folders. Collate the following: yeshivah, kollel, softer STAM, white beard, up-brim hat, long black coat. You see where your mind is leading you? Then attach to this picture the head and heart of Rabbi Yisroel Tzvi Braunstein, and all clichés are instantly blown out of the water.

Brimming with ebullience, spreading happiness in his wake, this most unorthodox of Orthodox rabbis is a supremely gifted artist, musician, educator, and doctor of the human soul. He is endowed with a rare talent — the ability to look beyond the confines of what is and to envision, in glorious color, what can be.

Because he is determined to inspire those whose belief in themselves has been extinguished, one of his close friends describes him quite simply as a “ben Olam Haba.”

Early Days

When Yisroel Braunstein entered the world in 1944, his family was, in the words of a neighbor, “one of the only yeshivish families in Flatbush.”

Arriving in America in 1895, his grandparents weathered the Depression and raised children who grew to be pillars of the Jewish community, despite their lack of a yeshivah education. His father, Reb Simcha Godol Braunstein, was one of the founders of the Shomkut Beis Medrash in 1954, and he kept a strong connection to its Rav, Rabbi Yechezkel Ruttner, z”l, with whom he studied Torah *b’chavrusa* for thirty years.

“My father was a businessman who became a true *ben Torah*,” notes his son. “He had a real *hashpaah* on Flatbush.”

Upon reaching school age, young Yisroel followed in the footsteps of his

(Below) About 70 *shtenders* created, painted, and stained by Chai Lifeline patients and their siblings under Rabbi Braunstein’s direction.

(Right) Rabbi Braunstein teaches Chai Lifeline boys how to create a *shtender*.





Rabbi Braunstein with
Zusya Brandwein.



older brother, Shlomo, and attended Yeshivah Toras Emes. He has warm memories of his principal, Rabbi Elias Schwartz, who has imbued thousands of *talmidim* with a sincere love for Torah in his decades-long career.

"When my brother, Reb Shlomo, enrolled in ninth grade at Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin, my family began a relationship with the *Rosh Yeshivah*, Harav Yitzchak Hutner, *zt"l*. The *Rosh Yeshivah's* impact on me cannot be calculated."

He recalls a powerful lesson he learned from the *Rosh Yeshivah*, who had a keen appreciation for the unique talents and personality of each of his *talmidim*. "He used to say, 'If you have a talent, it's *assur* to stifle it!'

"Spending Yamim Tovim with Rav

Hutner opened up new vistas for me. The *simchah* that emanated from the *Rosh Yeshivah*, from his lessons and his Yom Tov *mesibos*, remains forever etched in my heart and mind. And that's the way I raised my children and my students — *b'simchah*."

It is this word, "*b'simchah*," that is the background music of Rabbi Braunstein's life.

Discovering and Developing

Young Yisroel discovered his artistic calling at age nine while he was homebound with the measles for a few weeks. "To help keep me busy, my mother bought me an art set, which had everything in it to fire my imagination. I started drawing for the school newspaper and

graduated to drawing banners as a teenager in Camp Munk."

Eager to encourage his gifted son, Mr. Braunstein paid for him to take a calligraphy course given by Sir Donald Jackson, scribe to Queen Elizabeth of England, at New York's School of Visual Arts when Yisroel was eighteen years old.

"I took the course with a few other artistically inclined yeshivah boys. Sir Donald was, shall we say, not a philo-Semite. He was constantly taking nasty little jabs at the Hebrew alphabet, which he derided as archaic. At the end of the course, each student had to produce an invitation



using the techniques he had taught us. It was worth all the *bizyonos* to see his face when he read my invitation, rendered in exquisite calligraphy, embellished with gold leaf, and signed with the queen's insignia.

"'Her Royal Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, and Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh,'" I wrote, "'cordially invite you to attend the bar mitzvah of their son, Prince Charles, which will take place at Buckingham Palace on Saturday morning, the 5th day of Nisan 5721.'" Jackson sputtered and nearly choked — but I got an A in the course!"

His musical career did not get off to such an auspicious start. "I started piano lessons when I was seven. After one lesson, my teacher, Mrs. Schwartz, closed the piano on my hands and declared, 'You'll never make it.' Three years later, I was giving concerts in the Boro Park Y[MHA] — with Mrs. Schwartz sitting in the third row!"

In 1968, after Rabbi Braunstein's marriage to Sarah Neuberg of Philadelphia, he earned a master's degree in education from Fairfield University in Connecticut. It was then

that his creative talents fused harmoniously, when the New York City Board of Education offered him a job as an art and music teacher.

Rabbi Braunstein credits his wife, a teacher who holds a master's degree in special education, for her ideas and unique approach to education, "which have been an invaluable part of my growth." His thirty-two years in the public-school system, interrupted by a short interval in the eighties when the Braunsteins lived in Eretz Yisrael, were studded with rollicking adventures and wildly out-of-the-box creativity.

"In 1975, I began teaching in PS 131 in the Boro Park section of Brooklyn. The principal asked me to get involved with some kids with emotional problems who were not reading at grade level. I created a special club for them, and together we painted a huge mural in the auditorium, eight feet high, depicting Washington crossing the Delaware. It made a huge splash, and *The New York Times* and the *Daily News* wrote it up."

Although he had been painting murals with students since 1973, what really fired the art teacher's imagination



You can see this mural at Essen on Coney Restaurant in Brooklyn.



Happy campers in the art shack ready to embark on a project.

was the impact that the project had on his “club members.” He watched as their self-esteem and sense of accomplishment soared. It was a lesson he would later put to good use working with troubled children in the Jewish community.

Hiatus in the Holy Land

In 1986, the Braunsteins fulfilled a long-held dream by moving to Yerushalayim. In short order, Rabbi Braunstein tells me with a twinkle in his eye, he became known as “the mayor of Mattersdorf.” Encouraged by Rabbi Abish Eisen, with whom he learned *b'chavrusa* for two years and whom he considers a *rebbe*, he continued to develop his artistic talents by seeking out top *sofrim* in Yerushalayim.

“I sat next to them and watched them perfecting their craft. After a year, I took a *bechinah* from the Badatz and received my certification [*kabbalah*] in *safrus*. To date, I’ve written 104 *megillos*, many *mezuzos*, an *Eichah*, and a *Shir Hashirim*.”

Since returning to the States in 1989, he has taught *safrus* basics to a number of teenagers. They learn how to cut their own pens and how to form all the letters. Rabbi Braunstein instructs them in the basic *halachos* as well.

“I warn them, of course, that only after years of studying and a thorough *bechinah* can they even think about writing *STAM* [holy scrolls].”

Master of His Domain

Having set the stage, Rabbi Braunstein now steers our conversation to its focal point, the work into which he pours his heart and soul.

“What makes a kid tick?” he muses. “That’s the eternal question. Get into his brain and into his heart, and you’re almost there. Get him to trust you, and you’re right near the finish line. Get him to smile, laugh, create, and be happy with himself, and you’ve made it. You’re home, and so is he.”

With these powerful lines as his animating spirit, Rabbi Braunstein has

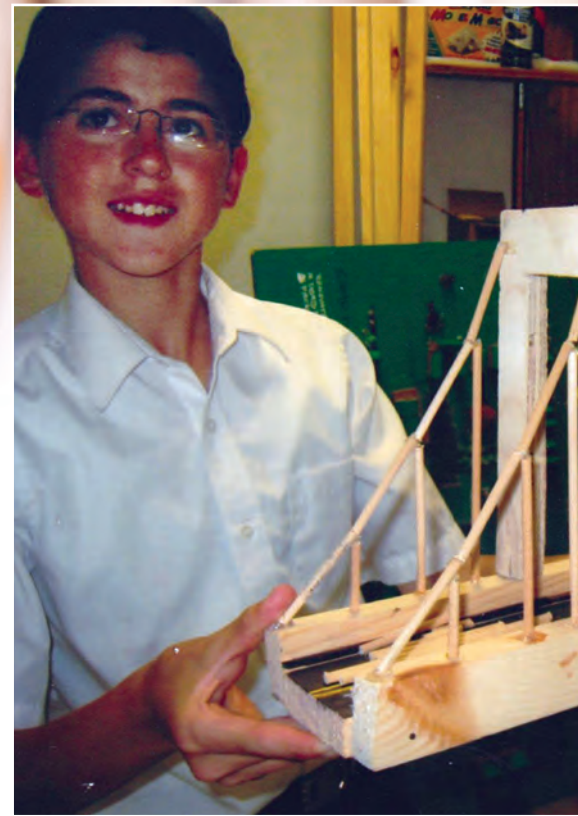
been a force in Jewish camping since 1969, when he was recruited by Rabbi Shlomo Kleinman, *z”l*, as head counselor of Camp Hadar HaTorah. For the past twelve years, he has been art director at Camp Toras Chaim Tashbar, working with Rabbi Allie Dembitzer, whom he lauds for his keen eye in choosing outstanding *rebbeim* and staff members under whose care the campers grow and flourish.

And as he goes on to describe the activities that take place in his personal fiefdom, the art shack, it becomes clear that a large part of his magnetism is intertwined with his ebullient personality and outsize heart.

The art shack at Camp Tashbar is Rabbi Braunstein’s magical kingdom. Fully outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment, the projects that emerge from it range from woodworking and string art to stained glass and anything else the art director’s fertile imagination might dream up. Campers are free to enter in their spare time in order to



A marble race created by Y. Altusky.



express their creativity and explore the pathways of their imagination. Aside from the regularly scheduled projects, the art shack is a magnet for those who are troubled and have issues to work out.

Rabbi Braunstein describes one such encounter. “A kid wandered in one day, lethargic, unmotivated, not really in the mood to do anything. He looked around and started to walk out. I asked him where he was going, and he said, ‘Back to my bunk.’ I invited him in to look at the equipment and all the projects. As we talked, I detected a note of sadness in his voice.

“‘Did you ever use a scroll saw?’ I asked him. A scroll saw is a machine with a very thin, fine blade that can make either straight or fancy cuts in wood. It’s easy to handle, and with a little practice the results can be amazing. ‘No,’ he replied. ‘That’s dangerous, and I’m no good at any of that stuff.’

“‘True,’ I said, ‘if you don’t know how to use it. Come, I’ll show you.’ I took out some nosh and gave him a pair of goggles. I began to see the glimmerings

of a smile. He was a bit apprehensive, but he put on the goggles and approached the machine. I had a piece of wood waiting for him on the machine platform with a thick black line drawn down the middle. ‘Okay, chief’ — they love it when I call them that — ‘do it!’ I said with a broad smile.

“‘Are you sure you trust me, Rabbi B.?’ he said nervously.

“‘Kid, just looking at you, I know you can handle any machine in this shack!’ So we turned on the machine. ‘Hold the wood steady and feed that black line right into the saw.’ And he did one piece, and another. And then he cut a curve, and then his initials. And so was born Shmuly G., master craftsman, happy camper.

“By the end of the summer, he had made his own *shtender* and a miniature shul, complete with *aron kodesh*. His crowning glory was a four-foot model of the Empire State Building. And his parents? They were overjoyed. A quiet, self-contained young boy blossomed into an outgoing, social child, happy with

life, happy with himself and his friends. I even managed to get him into some major plays in camp, which is the dream of every camper.

“Some time after the summer, I was happy to receive an invitation to his bar mitzvah. I drove to his home right before the dinner and walked in with a big box. He was delighted to see me. I told him, smiling as if he already got the joke, that there was a *Shas* in the box. I saw his face fall ever so slightly as he said, ‘Rabbi B., I got two of them already.’

“‘Okay, chief,’ I replied, ‘just open the box!’ He pulled off the fancy wrapping, uncovering a box from Lowe’s, and his face lit up. He shouted, ‘I can’t believe it. Wow!’ Can you guess what it was? A scroll saw, purchased that afternoon!

“Shmuly is a special young man today, learning well, feeling good about life and about himself — and still sawing away!”

Far from unique, this story is woven into the warp and woof of the art shack experience. Aside from his regular roster of campers, Rabbi Braunstein has what



Sruli Kahan displays a model of a bridge he built in the art shack.



Moishy Perlowitz proudly holds the mini *beis medrash* he created.

he calls his “assistants.” They are kids who need a little extra TLC and encouragement. They emerge from the art shack, irrevocably touched by the infectious joy exuded by the master craftsman under whose loving guidance they have tasted the joy of creativity made real.

“There’s no secret to this accomplishment. You’ve got to go above and beyond and make each child feel that he is special, that there’s nothing in the world you won’t do for him.”

Reinventing Retirement

After a long and fruitful career in education, Rabbi Braunstein retired from the public-school system and moved with his wife to Lakewood, where their children live. Predictably, it wasn’t long before the erstwhile “mayor of Mattersdorf” was making waves in his new hometown.

“About four months after we moved to Lakewood, I had the special privilege of meeting with the *mashgiach*, Harav Matisyahu Salomon, *shlita*. We had

mutual acquaintances with whom I was meeting on a weekly basis, using the arts as a means of bringing happiness into their lives. The art was just a portion of the job. Building a relationship of trust was the most crucial part of the task.

“Although I’ve been involved in this work for over four decades, the *Mashgiach* and the Rebbetzin, *sheyichyu*, have played a major role in guiding me along sometimes difficult paths. Their home is always open to me. More than once, I’ve called Rav Salomon with a unique request of some sort — a special-needs child who wanted a *brachah*, a *shalom bayis* problem, a *bachur* who needed help getting into a yeshivah. Whatever it was, the *Mashgiach* was always there for me.

“When I would occasionally tell Rav Salomon that I’d reached a dead end in a certain case, he would tell me that we create our own dead ends. ‘Don’t give up,’ he’d encourage me. ‘Persevere, go the extra mile, and *b’siyatta diShmaya*, things will work out.’ And you know what? In most cases, that’s exactly what’s been happening!”

Soon after moving to Lakewood, Rabbi Braunstein began volunteering as a driver for Chai Lifeline, taking patients and families to Sloan-Kettering in Manhattan and to Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia, among other destinations. He has strong words of praise for Rabbi Sruli Fried, under whose direction Chai Lifeline has grown into a *chesed* colossus, helping children, teens, and adults cope with the most serious illnesses, loss of loved ones, and emotional challenges.

Rabbi Braunstein has become Chai Lifeline’s unofficial director of woodworking and creative workshops. Always seeking to create new opportunities, he recently parlayed a trip to Lowe’s in Howell, New Jersey, into a full-scale woodworking workshop for Chai Lifeline children.

“I was in Lowe’s two years ago to repair a piece of equipment,” he relates, “and made the acquaintance of Vince Diomedes, director of commercial sales. I found myself telling him about what I do. In short order, Vince agreed to conduct workshops for my kids in the store. He



even makes time to host separate sessions for boys and girls. Not only does Lowe's provide the space, they also donate the materials, even for projects created elsewhere."

There are five or six homes that Rabbi Braunstein visits on a weekly basis, using the arts to elicit smiles and make people laugh. In addition, he's painted murals with the help of several talented teenagers in need of motivation, trust, and caring. "We've created murals in Essen on Coney [Island] in Brooklyn, Dougie's restaurant in Woodbourne, New York, and Yitz Auto Body in Howell, New Jersey, to name a few." His breathtaking murals and stained-glass windows also adorn many homes and *sukkos* in the tristate area.

Endlessly creative, always looking for new modes of expression, Rabbi Braunstein has recently branched into origami, the art of Japanese paper-folding. Before sitting down for our interview, he pulled several sheets of origami paper out of his portfolio, and

(Top) Stained glass in a private *sukkah* in Lakewood.

(Left) *Sukkah* art in Alpine Estates in Kiamesha, New York.

(Below) Custom-designed stained-glass windows in a *sukkah* in Ferndale, New York.



within nanoseconds had my children enthralled as they created candy dishes and picture frames under his patient direction.

Rabbi Braunstein told me, "I was recently invited to give an art lesson to the sixth grade in Yeshivas Toras Aron in Lakewood. I decided to teach the boys origami, which is an exercise in concentration. The boys were captivated. They paid careful attention to the instructions, folded precisely, and turned out simply stunning projects."

This was the second time Rabbi Braunstein had visited them. The first session was a lesson in the basics of *safrus*, and he still relishes the memory of the joy and satisfaction on their faces as they concentrated and created letters under his direction.

Based on four decades of unqualified success in engaging the hearts and minds of children and teens through art and creative expression, Rabbi Braunstein is a passionate advocate of school programs that aim to spark the creative process, whether through art, music, woodworking, or other mediums. Everyone in *chinuch* is grappling with the ever-tightening standards that are coming to define excellence in our school system, standards that often prove toxic to those students who are unable to live up to them. Rabbi Braunstein's decades of experience clearly indicate that there is a better way.

"I would love to see art and woodworking periods in yeshivos two or three times a week, supervised by individuals who know how to teach, motivate, praise, and go that extra mile."

Special Siyatta DiShmaya

Rabbi Braunstein ends our conversation with a touching tale.

"Comes the last day of camp and tears are flowing freely. Campers never want the summer to end. Their memories of songs, friends, and the shack will last deep into the winter months. Of course, everyone's bringing

home their awards for learning, sports, improvement, and their projects from the shack.

"As the campers pass through the shack to say goodbye, I give out most of the samples lying on the shelves. Two summers ago, the only thing left was a sample *shtender* that was decorated with a boy's name written in *safrus* letters, and an acrylic painting of Yerushalayim. The *shtenders* are among the most coveted projects.

"I was ready to close the shack when a *bachur* from our very special camp *mesivta* came in and asked if there was anything available to take home for his brother, who is seriously ill. I pointed to the *shtender* on the shelf. 'It's yours if you want it,' I told him. 'But it has my grandson's name on it — Avrohom Yitzchok.'

"Tears welled up in his eyes. 'That's my brother's name,' he whispered.

"As he gently removed the *shtender*

from the shelf, he wished me *ah gut yahr*, and I have to admit, I shed a tear or two myself."

As Rabbi Braunstein prepares to leave my house, his cellphone rings. He scans the caller ID and answers the call with a wide smile. "Yitzchak Dovid!" he exclaims. "How are you?"

I hear the voice coming through the phone, and then my guest says, "Hold on a minute." Turning to my family, he calls out, "Anyone here have a thousand dollars to spare?" He grins into the phone and says to the caller, "I'm so glad to hear from you. I'll call you back as soon as I can talk."

Pied Piper-like, my children follow his trail as he packs up and walks to his car. They are loathe to let Rabbi Braunstein leave, begging for just one more sketch, one more project. But the light is waning, and he must go — leaving a paper trail behind him, and miles of smiles in his wake. ■



Rabbi Braunstein was commissioned by chassidim in Eretz Yisrael to create this portrait of the Beis Yisrael.