Harav Yehuda Amital was born Yehuda Klein in Transylvania in 1924. His education was almost exclusively religious; he studied Torah in the local cheder and yeshiva. When the Nazis invaded Hungary in early 1944, he was deported to a labor camp while his parents and siblings were sent to their deaths at Auschwitz. After his liberation eight months later, he emigrated to Eretz Yisrael, arriving on Chanuka 5705.

When he arrived in Israel, Yehuda Klein changed his last name to Amital to symbolize the revival of the Jewish people after the Holocaust, based upon the verse, "And the remnant of Yaakov shall be ... as dew (tal) from the Lord" (Mikha 5:6). He resumed his Torah studies at the Hevron Yeshiva in Jerusalem and received semikha from Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer zt”l. He continued his studies in Yeshivat Kletsk and then married Rav Meltzer’s granddaughter, Miriam. HaRav Amital volunteered to serve in the Haganah and fought in Israel’s War of Independence. After the war, HaRav Amital worked as a court clerk in Rehovot’s beit din and then as a Ram (instructor) in Yeshivat HaDarom, Rehovot.

HaRav Amital strongly believed that yeshiva students had to be an integrated part of the new State, and that the Religious Zionist community needed to have its own institutions of high level Torah study. He therefore helped formulate the idea of Yeshivot Hesder and took an active role in developing the first hesder group at Yeshivat HaDarom.

After the Six Day War, HaRav Amital was called upon by Moshe Moskovic – a survivor of the 1948 battle for Gush Etzion – to found a hesder yeshiva in Gush Etzion. In 1968, the Yeshiva opened with 30 students in Kfar Etzion (near its present-day location in Alon Shevut). It has since grown into an institution with hundreds of students from Israel and abroad, a Women’s Beit Midrash in Migdal Oz, and the renowned Herzog College for educators. For many years, HaRav Amital also officially represented the Yeshivot Hesder network within the army and held the rank of Captain in the Armored Corps.

At the yeshiva’s inception, HaRav Amital invited HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein to serve as Rosh Yeshiva and in 1971 HaRav Lichtenstein agreed, on condition that HaRav Amital remain as co-Rosh Yeshiva. Their joint leadership resulted in the unique development of the yeshiva and its profound spiritual influence in Israel and abroad. The yeshiva is especially distinguished by its high caliber of Torah scholarship, its commitment to intellectual and ethical integrity, its openness to diverse opinions and its ongoing involvement with Israeli society.

HaRav Amital founded the Meimad movement in the 1980’s as a political alternative to the Religious Zionist establishment of the
time. In 1995, following the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin, HaRav Amital served as a Minister in the Israeli government, in an attempt to bridge the growing divide between religious and secular Jews in Israel.

HaRav Amital returned to the yeshiva full-time in 1996 and, upon reaching the age of 80 in 2004, requested that the yeshiva select his successors before his retirement, so as to avoid conflict or confusion. HaRav Yaakov Medan and HaRav Baruch Gigi were appointed Roshei Yeshiva in 2006 and HaRav Amital formally retired in October 2008. Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein was inaugurated as a fourth Rosh Yeshiva that same year.

Four books of HaRav Amital’s philosophy and drashot have been published – they include chidushei Torah and his approach to dealing with modernity, secularism, faith and adversity. In addition, a book on his spiritual confrontation with the Holocaust was published in 2002, and his biography was published in 2008.

HaRav Amital passed away at the age of 85 on the 27th of Tamuz, 5770 (2010), and was mourned by thousands of students and admirers. He is survived by his wife of over 60 years, Rabbanit Miriam Amital, as well as their five children (all of whom are involved in Torah education in Israel), and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Yeshivat Har Etzion, the institution he founded and guided for over four decades, will always remain his great legacy to Am Yisrael.

HaRav Amital zt”l Remembered

Mere words are insufficient to convey the wisdom, compassion, humor and deep humanity that HaRav Amital zt”l embodied. Below, a small selection of remembrances. These and many more full-length hespedim can be seen, read and heard at www.haretzion.org

HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein shlita

Following the horrors he experienced during the Holocaust, Rav Yehuda devoted all his energies to one end: to glorify and sanctify God’s great name. This was expressed in two ways. First, the slightest trace of desecration of God’s name terribly agitated him. He harnessed all his talents and strengths, his facility of expression, his leadership ability, to this one purpose: to ensure that the name of Heaven not be profaned, but on the contrary, that God’s great name be glorified and sanctified, that it be strengthened and more firmly established.

Second, his was a Torah of life. In the depths of his soul, Rav Amital continuously felt the impact of the Holocaust, and this prodded him to make sure that here in Eretz Yisrael he would serve God in an atmosphere of life, rather than in a climate of death...The combination of intensive study and a life of building and action was so characteristic of him. What a rare combination of vision and practical action!

Na’amta li me’od. Tzär li alekha achi. You have been very dear to me. I am very pained over you, my brother (II Samuel 1:26).

Rav Amnon Bazak ‘84H

Thank you, my revered teacher. Thank you for fashioning my spiritual world, for the legitimization that you gave me to be myself, for calming me down at difficult moments, for teaching me not to become alarmed by human weaknesses. You taught me to view my routine, daily learning as being of chief importance. You explained to me that the most sublime experiences find expression in the routine. You moved me with your prayers and talks, you gladdened me with your stories, and you gave me the tools to deal with different situations in life. Your image will continue to accompany me every moment of my life, and I will never cease to hear your voice echoing in my head.

Rav Reuven Ziegler ‘86

You could not listen to Rav Amital pray on Yamim Noraim without realizing that he wasn’t praying for himself; he was pleading with God to have mercy on Am Yisrael. His prayers swelled up from the depths of his heart, and found their way into the hearts of his talmidim.

The word that most often comes to mind when I think of Rav Amital is wisdom. I don’t mean that he was smart (though he was very, very smart); I mean that he was wise. He understood life, he understood people, he saw several steps ahead, he considered consequences, and he saw the big picture.

Alan Yaniger ‘78

HaRav Amital never ceased to be amazed at the rise of the State of Israel, a massive act of kiddush Hashem after the chilul Hashem of the Holocaust. He instilled in us the sense that we were in a pivotal moment in history, and that we have to live up to the challenge and participate in the revival of the Jewish nation. The power of his message would send shivers down my spine.

Rav Jonathan Snowbell ’99

Rav Amital dedicated his life to empowering his students. Students had to learn how to think critically, to analyze their situation and their life and make mature decisions on their own, decisions that were rooted in the Torah of the beit midrash...To this end, Rav Amital has educated a generation of leaders – many of them with differing opinions from their teacher. This was not to his chagrin – but a story of his success.

Ted Gross ‘71

Rav Amital sought not only what was best for the State of Israel, but best for all Jews, no matter where they lived, be it in the Diaspora or in Israel...The magnitude of his personality was not limited to his vision and foresight. Rav Amital’s greatness emanated from his true love for even the most simple Jew. It is time for someone to say with respect, total devotion and great sorrow the simple words: “We loved you, Rav Amital.”