

in Rec

THE DEDICATION OF THE

MAX SERN
AUDITORIUM

OF THE JEWISH CENTER

on Saturday, October 25, 1987

שבת, פרשת נח

Remarks by

DR. NORMAN LAMM

I am honored to have been invited to participate in this dedication of the Max Stern Auditorium at The Jewish Center. It would seem so simple to delineate the virtues of this remarkable personality who walked in our midst and who left so profound an impression upon all of us. Yet I find the challenge of doing so quite daunting. It is difficult to speak about Max Stern, paradoxically, because there is so much to say about him. Where does one begin?

Consider how much there was to admire in him: his piety and his perspicuity; his Jewishness and his generosity; his loves and his loyalties; his faith and his philanthropy; and, as well, his handsomeness and his humor. Indeed, while he would undoubtedly have enjoyed this great tribute to him, I doubt if he would have wanted it to take on too somber and funereal a character. He would have preferred a dash of humor, even a funny story about him -- because he was a man who was fully alive and he knew how to laugh.

But there is none feature of his life that, in the perspective of the last five years without him, stands out most boldly: the element of coherence and cohesiveness, of continuity and consistency. He was not just a bundle of unrelated qualities. All the attributes of his complex personality were ultimately bent to one purpose, one overarching theme that was dominant in his life.

Permit me to explain by referring to this morning's Sidra. When Noah, after the tragic incident with Ham, offers a blessing to his son Shem, he says ברוך ה' אלקי שם, "blessed is the Lord the God of Shem." But how does this help and reward Shem? Why not say simply and directly, ברוך שם, "blessed is Shem"? After all, it was Shem who showed profound respect and who demonstrated the proper filial sensitivity?

This implicit question lies at the root of a number of varied explanations of this verse, offered by our greatest commentators. The comments of Rashi, Ramban, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor -- all are fundamentally answers to this same question.

I suggest a response that is, perhaps, hinted at it by that astute exegete, R. Moshe Alshikh of 16th century Safed.

But first, a general comment. It is possible to have two people before you, each having identical virtues. Both are decent, good people: thoughtful spouses, caring parents, compassionate to strangers, charitable, sharing community burdens, pious, observant, studying and supporting Torah -- and yet there is a vast difference between them. The first has good qualities -- but they are disparate, unconnected, incoherent. They are a jumble of admirable attributes but there is no coherent context in which they are located. The

second, however, has an underlying theme to his life and his values, so that his various character properties are somehow related to each other because they are all, in one way or another, derivative of this fundamental concept that is the central theme and focus of his life. This superior personality finds that in addition to **having** goodness, he is good. His character coherence gives his whole life cohesiveness and, above all, meaning. The first person may do many good things, but they are not necessarily the products of a philosophy of life; they may well be indications of good parental upbringing, of fortuitously benevolent secretions of his adrenal glands, or just happenstance. When such a person fails to abide by his own standards, he may never recover his previous status of decency. The second type, however, may fail as often as the first, but the fact that he has an organizing principle to his life means that his characteristics not only orient themselves like iron filings about a magnet, but that if he should go astray, that magnetic center of his values will surely bring him back.

Now, Shem was that second kind of individual. Tradition identifies שמ with מלכיצדק, and refers to him as a High Priest, a כהן גדול. Shem was one of the earliest monotheists, one who dedicated his life to God. That religious commitment, that spiritual focus, was the goal and ambition that gave meaning to all else in his life. Hence, the greatest compliment one could offer to Shem was to confirm that he was indeed an instrument of the Higher Power in which he believed and to which he dedicated his whole life. In the view of Shem, there was no greater blessing or flattery one could bestow upon him than to offer a blessing to his God. For him, this constituted what in our tradition is called a קדוש, the sanctification of the divine Name. To say of him ברוך שם, was infinitely more important to him than saying merely שמ, because it implied as well an affirmation of his most cherished values.

Max Stern was that kind of man. His life had a center of meaning, and his virtues were interrelated by the focus of his greatest ambition: to be a vehicle, an instrument whereby Torah and Israel and Judaism are exalted and enhanced: ברוך שם.
אלקי חסד.

In the home that he and Ghitty built, there was warmth and love, and in it they cherished every Jewish tradition. All who knew them and their life together were moved to say: ברוך שם.
אלקי חסד וגיוט.

In the magnificent, indeed historic, work that he did over decades for Yeshiva University, he added glory to Torah and Yiddishkeit; there is not a day that goes by that I do not in some way remember and cherish Max Stern. In all that he did during his lifetime, in the legacy that he left us, in all that his family has done for us both on their own and in his memory, I bless not only him but the transcendent principles and commitments he stood for: ברוך שם אלקי חסד.

In all that he did -- whether to advance medical education as he did for our Albert Einstein College of Medicine, or to enhance the delivery of medical service in Israel, as he did for Shaarei Zedek Hospital, or in his generous and ongoing help to Israel as he did for UJA and Israel Bonds, or any other of the many and varied philanthropies in which he was so deeply involved -- he was cognizant of the ultimate goal of all his aspirations. They were all, in one manner or another, expressions of his profoundly religious outlook. They reflected credit on his Jewish soul. ב"ה אלקי מקס.

And surely one of his greatest and dearest loves was The Jewish Center. I can still see him standing at the side of this שולחן, sitting in his usual seat, and presiding with the almost austere dignity of his handsome visage and erect bearing -- only to discover in him, outside the shul proper, a man of great warmth, a powerful handshake, an encouraging slap on the back, a funny story, and a gleeful smile. The Jewish Center was his second home, his shul, the place where קדושה and מענטליכקייט synthesized, where faith and dignity were manifestly compatible, where Orthodoxy and decorousness were reconciled. ב"ה אלקי מקס.

I began my official connection with The Jewish Center exactly 29 years ago this Shabbat, פרשת נח. For close to a quarter of a century, the last twenty five years of his life, both ion my role as Rabbi of this congregation and later as President of Yeshiva University, I was privileged to enjoy his friendship, his guidance, his inspiration, his support. All of us are in his debt, and all of us are pleased at the honor the Jewish Center today pays to his memory.

We therefore dedicate this auditorium to the cherished memory of our unforgettable Max Stern with a nostalgia born of both love and sadness, and with admiration undiminished by the years we proclaim: ברוך ה' אלקי מקס שטרן.