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Eulogies

Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein
Memorial Volume

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Eulogy for Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein

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I feel woefully inadequate to the task of speaking the eulogy for my teacher, my colleague, and my friend, Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein. In truth, there is only one person who could do justice to this occasion in honor of Rabbi Joseph Lookstein, and that is—Rabbi Joseph Lookstein. Who else but that master orator could compose the proper farewell for so distinguished a man?

Yet, I feel that I must try, both because I want to and because it was his wish that I do so.

My own relationship with Rabbi Lookstein began thirty-two years ago, when I took his course in Jewish Sociology at Yeshiva College. I remember how impressed I was by this vital, jovial, articulate, and knowledgeable man. He read my papers carefully, commented upon them incisively with his beautiful penmanship, and encouraged me to further work. A few years later, I was his student in the Homiletics and Practical Rabbinics courses that he gave for many decades at Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. What a gifted teacher he was, what a scintillating lecturer! I felt enormously flattered when, towards the end of these courses, he invited me to be his rabbinic assistant at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and, during the course of that year, to teach at Ramaz School as well. This was an apprenticeship in which he taught me the fundamentals of the art of the rabbinate and that profoundly influenced my following twenty-four years in that profession.

During this period, I had the opportunity to spend time in the home of Rabbi and Mrs. Lookstein. There I experienced the dignity, the warmth, the mutual respect, the love and care and concern of Rabbi and Mrs. Lookstein, of their two children Natalie and Haskel, and their two young grandchildren.

Subsequently, I became Rabbi Lookstein's colleague in the Manhattan rabbinate and on the Yeshiva University faculty. During this time, our relationship continued to develop and, if some times our relations were a bit complex, they were always for me a source of enlightenment and learning. Hence, it was for me a special pleasure when, shortly after I assumed the presidency of Yeshiva University, I appointed him as University Professor of Homiletics.

For me—as for so many others like me, both older and younger—he was genuinely unforgettable. He was a giant in stature, and tall in our esteem. He was probably the greatest orator of his generation of rabbis, certainly of the Orthodox rabbinate. He was a master of rhetoric, and blessed with a sense of the dramatic, with epigrammatic brilliance, with an intuitive gift for timing, and with a marvelous and redeeming sense of humor. He was a *darshan be'hesed 'elyon*—a creative homiletician of the first rank. As a raconteur, he captivated his audiences. To be in his company was to become alive. In the infinite variety of situations in which he found himself, there was always a twinkle in his eyes—sometimes funny, often delightfully mischievous, always benevolent. His undulating, arched eyebrows asked provocative questions, and his twinkling eyes punctured any pretense in a disingenuous or foolish answer.

Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein was acclaimed by thousands, esteemed by colleagues and disciples, adored by his congregants, loved by his family. But it would be incorrect to portray him as a consensus-seeker who played to the galleries in a quest for popularity and unanimous approbation. He was tough-minded, controversial, often combative in pursuing what he perceived as principle.

The tributes to Rabbi Lookstein will continue to pour in. Yet, I believe that the Jewish world owes him more than it will acknowledge, precisely because his communal philosophy and policy were complex, subtle, sophisticated, and devoid of over-simplification.

He was born in an era when worlds were in collision. An immigrant Jewish generation had come to these shores, all too ready to cast overboard its sacred traditions, its *tallit* and *tefilin*, along with its painful memories of poverty and persecution in Europe. Others, aghast at this

mindless cultural-religious vandalism, advocated an equal and opposite reaction: isolation, ghettoization, pulling out of the broader streams of history and society.

Rabbi Lookstein accepted neither counsel, but opted instead for living in two cultures. In the course of this integration, the tensions and controversies and polemics were unnerving. But they engaged him fully, for he accepted them as a challenge. He never shirked his duty. He never fled from before a *maḥloket le'shem shamayim*.

Rabbi Lookstein was fully heir to the complete rabbinic tradition. It seemed that he was all but born in the pulpit, the modern rabbinic analogue of the prophet Jeremiah who was told, "before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee, and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee" (Jeremiah 1:5). Yet, it is instructive to compare him with the generation of his revered predecessor and grandfather-in-law, Ramaz Margolies. They were saintly men, wise, great scholars all, steeped in Talmud and the sacred tradition. Between them and Rabbi Lookstein there was an identity of fundamental values and of ultimate principles, but a most significant divergence in personal style and communal policy. Such a shift in strategy was necessary in order to implement and preserve those self-same principles and sacred goals in a new generation which was American, more affluent, socially mobile, and often arrogantly obsessed with its new-found modernity. It was easier to appreciate those less complicated Orthodox rabbis of Ramaz's generation, than it was to understand sympathetically the complex and sometimes arcane policies devised by a Joseph H. Lookstein.

When the Patriarch Jacob died, we read that, "the Egyptians wept for him three score and ten days" (Gen. 50:3), "and there they wailed with a very great and sore wailing; and he made a mourning for his father seven days" (Gen. 50:10). Yet, a few verses later when we read of the death of Joseph, the Torah is surprisingly sparse. It is the last verse of the book of Genesis: "so Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old. And they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt." Even later, in the Book of Joshua, when we read of his burial in Canaan, there is no mention made of any mourning period.

How strange! No mourning, no wailing, no eulogy? No grief and no bereavement for Joseph who saved his father and brothers from famine, who reacted to his brothers' treachery with grace and love?

The answer is that of course he must have been mourned, but it was not on the same scale as the mourning for his father. The grief could not

come as easy or be as open as it was with Jacob the Patriarch, the old *Rav*, the *Rosh Yeshivah*, who carried over intact into Egypt the wisdom which he had acquired in the "tents of Shem and Eber," and who refused to confront the new social and psychological and cultural threats that loomed in the Egyptian environment. He had had enough problems and vicissitudes and turmoil in his life, and he simply was not ready for the difficult challenges of the Egyptian experience. So, despite the fact that Jacob even had difficulty recognizing his Egyptian-born grandchildren, he was universally loved, venerated, and mourned. The very fact of his cultural distance and social detachment made it possible for him to become an easily perceived and cherished symbol for all that was beautiful, sacred, deathless, and enduring in the Abrahamic tradition. But Joseph had thrust upon him a historic task infinitely more difficult, demanding, complex—and thankless. He had to be simultaneously two personalities—the *Yosef Ha-zaddik* of his Hebrew tradition and the *zaphenat-paneiah*, the name Pharaoh gave to him. He had to learn an alien language and culture, and master it until he became second to Pharaoh alone. He had to impress upon his own mind, as the Rabbis put it, the *demut deyokno shel abba*, the appearance or gestalt of his father, and yet travel in the highest political and economic and social circles of ancient Egypt. He was much too complicated and many-faceted, and too close to his contemporaries in style and social involvement, to serve as a widely popular symbol, despite his total commitment to all that his father Jacob had stood for. But—he saved the House of Israel!

Joseph H. Lookstein had before him a task reminiscent of the biblical Joseph. Like his ancient namesake, he was an *'ish mazliah*, a successful man. And like him too, his true value was not, or is not yet, fully appreciated.

He was one of the pioneers in creating the modern Orthodox synagogue here at Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun which, while totally conforming with the *Halakah*, was yet decorous and attractive and appealing to men and women of our generation. It was not an easy and not a simple task, and one which required constant vigilance.

He was an education trail-blazer in establishing the Ramaz School, famed the world over.

Rabbi Lookstein was a staunch member of Mizrachi, when Zionism was often berated and bitterly attacked by fellow Orthodox rabbis and leaders.

He had to overcome opposition of both the left and the right in

Israel as he joined the late Dr. Pinchas Churgin and others in founding Bar-Ilan University, where he remained Chancellor until his death.

He joined the earliest group of pioneers who directed the affairs of Yeshiva University in the days of my two sainted and revered predecessors, Dr. Bernard Revel and Dr. Samuel Belkin, and in the tense and difficult interregnum that separated their administrations.

He was involved with Yeshiva University for over half a century as student, faculty member, trustee, and confidant of its three presidents. As a "rabbi's rabbi," he trained over a thousand American rabbis at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. He was to me, in these first years of my presidency, a source of encouragement, inspiration, and valued assistance.

The biblical Joseph was placed in the coffin, and no official mourning was announced. But no less a personage than Moses carried the remains of Joseph through the forty years of Israel's sojourn in the vast desert. While the rest of the people were occupied in the *bizat mizrayim*, with business-as-usual, Moses understood full well the unique value and enduring significance of the cherished Joseph. And so he carried, as the Sages tell us, the 'aron or coffin of Joseph side by side with the 'aron or Ark of the Covenant. Only occasionally did people recognize the marvelous congruity and appropriateness of these two boxes, these two 'aronot, the coffin and the Ark, and they exclaimed, as the Talmud teaches, *kiyyem zeh mah she'katub ba-zeh*, "this one [Joseph] observed—and made it possible for others to observe—what is written in this one [the Ark of the Covenant]."

He taught us—his disciples, colleagues, congregants, contemporaries—the value of *hinnuk*, of Jewish education, on all levels from pre-kindergarten to post-doctoral graduate work; the centrality of the State of Israel to Jewish life; the possibilities of living both as fully Jewish and as creative members of society at large; the imperatives of 'ahavat Israel (the love of Israel) and 'ahavat ha-beriyot (the love of humankind).

To Mrs. Lookstein, to Natalie and Israel and their children, to Rabbi Haskel and Audrey and their children, to his brother and his sisters—to all of you go our deepest sympathy. While no one can miss him as much as you do, we know what you have lost, because we share your grief.

Rabbi Haskel, your father introduced you into Jewish rabbinic leadership, for he was both your father and your master. He had the privilege of seeing you flourish in this, his own pulpit. He placed upon

your shoulders the mantle of spiritual leadership which was his, and his pride was enhanced by his and our confidence that you will grow and develop in ways yet unperceived and unforeseen. It was a special blessing from heaven that he was present at the commencement exercises at Yeshiva University but a month ago to see you receive your Doctor of Philosophy degree.

Rabbi Lookstein, how would you have concluded this eulogy?

I think you would have wanted me to follow your style: so shall I do.

Farewell, revered teacher, worthy colleague, dear friend and, above all, esteemed rabbi! Where you are going, before the celestial court, the *bet din shel ma'alah*, they will ask you many questions.

Do not just answer them. Rise to the occasion—as you always did here on earth.

Deliver your greatest *derashah*, preach your most magnificent sermon!

Let them know, up Above, of our worries and cares and concerns. Remind them that all is not well with the Jewish people here below. Inspire them, as only you can, to pay more loving attention to those Jews the world over whom you led and loved; to the State of Israel caught in a web of tension and perplexity and jeopardy; to a humanity struggling to retain a modicum of dignity and security; to your beloved congregation whom you nurtured and raised for over half a century, ministering to three and sometimes four generations; and, above all, to your wonderful, loving, and grieving family.

Lek be'shalom—go in peace.

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