

GESHER 1976

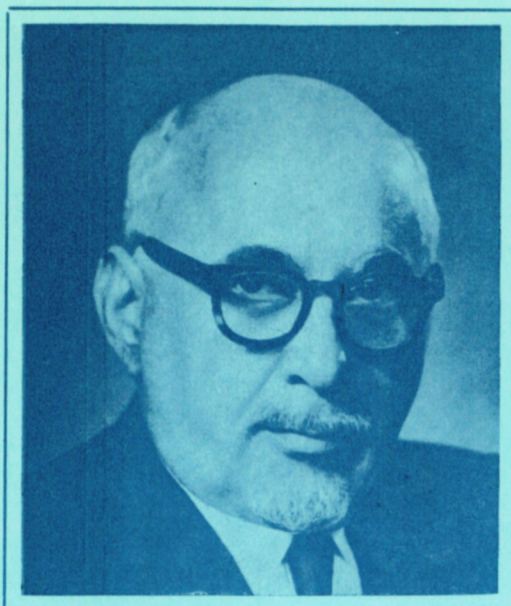
GESHER

BRIDGING THE SPECTRUM OF
ORTHODOX JEWISH SCHOLARSHIP

VOLUME 5, No. 1

A PUBLICATION OF THE STUDENT ORGANIZATION OF YESHIVA
RABBI ISAAC ELCHANAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY





IN MEMORIAM
HARAV DR. SAMUEL BELKIN
1911 - 1976 **5671 - 5736**

. . . A restless Lithuanian yeshiva *talmid*, student, who was my friend, Dr. Belkin. He also dreamt. He also became a visionary . . . Let me tell you, Dr. Belkin's standards of *lamdus*, of *halachik* scholarship were very high. He dreamt of a generation of young American Jews who would combine both an excellent Torah education with the capability of participating in the scientifically oriented and technologically minded complex American economy.

However, Dr. Belkin had another dream. And this second dream was bolder, more daring than the first dream. This was his original dream. No one shared his opinion, not even people who were very close to him . . . He wanted to show the Jewish, as well as the non-Jewish community that the Orthodox Jew is as capable of establishing scientific, educational institutions as the non-Jew or the secular Jew is . . .

The above are excerpts of the eulogy delivered by Harav Joseph B. Soloveitchik at Dr. Belkin's funeral, April 20, 1976.

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, former spiritual leader of the Jewish Center of New York and Erna and Jakob Michael professor of Jewish philosophy at Yeshiva University was recently invested as Yeshiva's third President following the passing of Dr. Belkin. We are deeply honored to print Dr. Lamm's essay and we feel it is a fitting addition to this journal dedicated in memory of Dr. Belkin.

"BY WORD, ON PARCHMENT, IN STONE"

An Appreciation of Dr. Samuel Belkin, Z. L.

Torah is taught by word, on parchment, and in stone.

The divine revelation is transmitted in three different ways: by means of the Oral Law; by means of the Written Law; and by means of engraving, such as that on the Tablets. *

Even as this is true for divine teaching, so is it true for human education as well. The teacher is one who, by profession, emulates God, he realizes the principle of *imitatio Dei*. Just as God is a Teacher, so is the human educator.

I wish to follow the rubric of these three ways — by, word, on parchment, in stone — to offer a brief appreciation of one of the greatest educators of our times, my late, revered, and beloved teacher, Dr. Samuel Belkin, of blessed memory, whose giant mantle has now been placed on my own narrow shoulders.

His "oral law" consisted not only of his *sheurim* — they were all models of clarity and organization as well as profundity — but of his personality as well: those human qualities that have to be experienced in order to be appreciated.

As a teacher, he was a paragon of sweetness and generosity as well as lucidity. I regard it as a great privilege that

* This theme is a modification of the interpretation by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi. *Likkutei Torah* to *Be'hukotai*.

I was able to be his student for one year, the last year that he taught a class. His interest extended to every aspect of our lives, not only the intellectual and the spiritual, but the physical and material as well.

There were certain paradoxes that seemed to be inherent in his complex character and produced a tension of opposites. Thus, he had a great deal of toughness in his exercise of leadership, but he was extremely tender. He was a man who could be forceful if need be, yet he was fundamentally very shy. As much as he was outgoing in public, he was a reserved and a very private individual. He had a public posture, but a rich inner life of which few people knew.

Through it all, he had enormous charm, endless courage, what he referred to as "divine optimism," and a capacity for growth. He was a thoroughly loyal man, who never betrayed a colleague, a student, or a friend.

Finally, his "oral law," included a capacity for accelerated living. I suspect that those who so often wished him, "may you live to 120 years," had their prayers vindicated, in a manner of speaking: he crammed 120 years into barely 65! Ordained at 17, the youngest president of a college in this country when he was in his early thirty's, he worked for his beloved institution until the very last minute. On his very deathbed he worried about Yeshiva. For the great majority of his life, he was a fully functioning adult — he matured early, and he kept young and active and vital to the very end. His prematurely white hair and the deep lines etched into his pleasant face by the crushing burdens of his office and his private agonies were deceptive if they gave the impression that his visionary passion had begun to dim.

His "engraving on the tablets" symbolized his great public and practical achievements. The difference between the written law and the engraving on the tablets is this, that the former consists of ink on parchment, whereas the latter means the words are engraved in the stone itself. Ink may adhere very well to parchment, but ultimately the ink and the parchment remain two separate substances, whereas the letters engraved

into stone are organically united with it; there is only one substance, not two.

Like Moses cutting God's word into stone, Dr. Belkin placed stone upon stone and brick upon brick to provide a place for God's word, Torah.

He suffered for Yeshiva University, sacrificed for it, supported it, led it, built it. He was vitally concerned with every facet and aspect of this great school. His ideas and values and insights are carved into the university itself, in every brick and every stone — and in the many minds and hearts of those who passed through its portals.

The name of Dr. Samuel Belkin is indelibly and organically united with that of Yeshiva University — forever.

His "written law" are his books and articles and monographs, the repository of his masterful scholarly insights. He was an expert in many field — in Halakhah, as a teacher of Talmud; as an authority in Hellenistic literature, in Midrash, and in Philo.

His scholarly works included *Philo and the Oral Law*, which was his doctoral thesis; a number of articles on Philo and Midrash and Zohar; *In His Image* — a splendid popular book on the philosophy of Halakhah which is required reading for all who would be informed on the *Weltanschauung* of the Sages and the Halakhah.

It would be fatuous of me to essay a summary of his intellectual contributions in a brief memorial tribute, especially in view of the wealth of material that remains in as yet unpublished manuscript form. Yet one example of his mode of thought may be illuminating to Yeshiva students particularly.

Dr. Belkin disagreed with many scholars of the historical school who see in the controversies between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, as well as in the controversies amongst the Tannaim, social, economic and political causes. While these may have played a role, Dr. Belkin is profoundly convinced that the major differences lie in differing religious perceptions and divergent philosophical attitudes.

For instance, the Sadducees held that a master must pay for damages incurred by his slaves. The reason they gave is this: if a man is responsible for damages incurred by his animals, such as an ox, though he is not responsible for the moral tone of the animal's life, then certainly he is responsible for his slave's torts, because he is responsible for the observance of the *mitzvot* by the slaves. The Pharisees answer to this was: No! There is a fundamental difference between the two categories. Animals have no minds of their own, whereas slaves do.

Objectively viewed, it would seem that the Sadducees have compelling logic on their side. Given the system of slavery, if a slave is my real property, then I should be responsible for the damage he inflicts.

Here is an example where economic determinism makes no sense. The Pharisees were poorer than the Sadducees. It was amongst the Sadducees that most slave-holders were found. Yet in this law, it would seem that the Pharisees rather than the Sadducees sided with the slave-owner, since they did not require him to pay the bills for the damages inflicted by his slaves.

However, Dr. Belkin points out that this Halakhic controversy issues from different philosophical orientations. The Pharisees advocated the sacredness of the human personality. A slave has a mind of his own, and therefore a responsibility of his own. "No human being can so completely become the property of another so as to lose all his individuality." The absolute ownership of a human being is alien to the Pharisees' philosophy, to the Rabbis' concept of the dignity of man. Therefore too, the slave is responsible himself for his own observance of the commandments; and one who kills even a pagan slave is guilty of a capital crime.

Dr. Belkin was possessed of a creative and fecund intellect. How much more he could have done for the world of scholarship were it not for all the onerous burden he bore in providing schooling for the entire community!

The Talmud (in *Kiddushin*) tells us that during the

"By Word, on Parchment, in Stone"

Hadrianic persecutions, the Rabbis gathered in Lydda were of two minds concerning which is more important, study or practice. Whatever may be the nuances of this controversy, Dr. Belkin's words about the differences in opinion are so very much applicable to his own career and life.

Living in a society in which scholarship was a prerequisite for practical contributions to the well-being of the community, many a scholar in ancient times must have faced this problem. Should he isolate himself in an ivory tower and dedicate his entire life to the study of the Torah or should he apply his knowledge to public service?

This same dilemma aggravated his restlessness. His nostalgia for the world of Torah and scholarship was filled with pathos. No matter how much recognition he received for his historic practical achievements, he always yearned for his own participation in the life of the mind. There was a poignant quality — both disturbing and pleasing — to this aching longing. I remember one of my very last conversations with him, when he told me that he was looking forward to retirement so that he could get back to "this" — pointing to a large number of books and papers piled up on the floor — and make a contribution to scholarship that he thought only he could. Alas, that joy was not to be his, and the benefit of the fruit of his research was not to be ours!

The only adequate substitute I can think of for this unrequited love and this unfulfilled dream is an act of compensatory communal *limmud ha-Torah*. His students, and students' students, must dedicate more time than they normally would to their scholarly endeavors in Halakhah and Jewish thought. His friends and his countless admirers must redouble their efforts to assure the survival and continued improvement of the institution whose history so organically embraces his biography. Only by means of this collective supererogatory undertaking can we hope to complete what he was not privileged to do in his own lifetime.

The Mishnah's Tractate *Avot* concludes with the words,

liphum t'zarah aggra, "according to the pain is the reward." That is so if we read the last word as *aggra*, which means "reward." But the word can also be read *iggra*, "high places."

God alone will grant my revered *Rebbe* his reward, his *aggra*, for all the pain he endured in this life on behalf of Torah and Israel. But for us, we must acknowledge that he reached the *iggra*, the very zenith of Jewish life. He attained genuine greatness, and placed all of us in his debt. It caused him much pain to attain this *iggra*, high place. And it causes us much pain to know that we have lost him from the top of the mountain. There is a void, an emptiness at the summit of our lives. I know it, I think, better than most others. Sitting alone in the President's office on the fifth floor of Furst Hall, I experience the brooding presence of my mentor, my teacher, my predecessor. I think of his towering achievements, and I feel dwarfed: his ghost haunts me. But then I feel him gently beckoning me onward and upward: his memory inspires me.

What he achieved and taught and was, will remain an inspiration not only for me and not only for us, but for generations; not only by word, on parchment, and in stone, but also in the hearts and souls and minds of countless students and friends and ordinary Jews whose Jewish posterity and the Jewish posterity of their children and grandchildren will now be more assured, thanks to him.

May his memory be a blessing.