

NORMAN LAMM

EULOGY FOR
BENJAMIN GOTTESMAN

25 Tammuz 5739

July 20, 1979

I shall never forget the first time I met Benjamin Gottesman. It was 33 years and one month ago. I was at the end of my freshman year at Yeshiva College, and had just been appointed a "Gottesman Scholar." At that occasion, I met Ben and the late Herman, and possibly a few other members of the family. Thereafter, for many years, I participated in or presided at the study of *Mishnayot* with the Gottesman family at the occasion of the *yahrzeit* of their father, the late Mendel Gottesman.

My first impression of Ben Gottesman left me a bit overawed. He first struck me as a man who was rather forbidding: tall, erect, deep-set and penetrating eyes, and firm. Yet, as our relationship developed, I learned that his strength had a tender underside, his dignity was mellowed with charm, his distinguished mien was softened by a crinkly smile. He could be persistent, even stubborn, I learned — but never unreasonable. Above all, he was remarkably human.

What most inspired me about him was the depth of his filial devotion. He revered his father in a way that is, unfortunately, not very common nowadays. He had a sense of family and family tradition that provided for him the context for his own moral and psychological life. Ben hallowed the name "Gottesman" in his many benefactions at Yeshiva University, in his support of the family's favorite *kollel* in Jerusalem, in the Sarah Gottesman Synagogue at the Hadassah Hospital on Mount Scopus, and in the various charities distributed through the Tree of Life Foundation founded by Mendel Gottesman.

It is hard to believe that we are now saying farewell to Ben, the last of the four Gottesman brothers. Unlike some people who leave impressions that are somewhat dim and uncertain, he cut a clear figure. The contours of his personality were well-defined and well marked. And we shall therefore miss him all the more.

Ben Gottesman reminded me of one Biblical personality above all others — that of Ezra. Ezra was the one who led the Jews back to their homeland in the historic Return to Zion. The Rabbis consider him second to Moses alone in his success in the dissemination of Torah. In Jewish history, Ezra is known by two titles: the *Sofer* or scribe, and the *Kohen* or priest. The names are symbolic of the two sides of Ezra's personality, and they apply with remarkable relevance to Ben Gottesman as well.

For Ben Gottesman was, in more ways than one, a scribe or man of the book. Together with his father and brothers, he was devoted to the world of books, libraries, culture, education. He was deeply concerned about the progress of the Mendel Gottesman Library at Yeshiva — one of the crown jewels of the University. He expressed his concern for it with the same exacting care and devoted attention that was characteristic of all his activities. He was enormously pleased when recently, in honor of his eightieth birthday, his family established at Yeshiva University the Benjamin Gottesman Chair in Library Science. He carefully followed the progress of the annual Benjamin Gottesman Lectures at Yeshiva University. I derived great personal satisfaction from the knowledge that he was especially pleased by the success of the series of lectures this year. He attended each one, and took a personal interest in all aspects of the project.

Mr. Gottesman expressed his quality of *Sofer* with regard to writing as well. He was an inveterate letterwriter. He wrote to everyone: The New York Times, government officials, friends, University officials, business associates. It was his way of defying the anomie of our contemporary society. He felt that individual human beings *can* affect the tide of events, and if they could not do so in a major way they at least had to make their feelings known. I have my own bulky file of correspondence with Ben Gottesman. Just last week I received a letter from him — characteristically, it was accompanied by a clipping from the New York Times — which he wrote to me from Edgarton, Mass. I was about to answer it earlier this week, when I received the dreadful news of his demise. It is interesting that the first sentence of the letter quotes a Biblical verse, from the *Shema*. Mr. Gottesman wrote to me: "Dear Dr. Lamm: 'And when thou goest by the way'" . . . And now, of course, we sadly accompany Mr. Gottesman as he goes on his way.

He was a lover of books; and a student of their contents. He was cultured and articulate. He was especially au courant with current events. He did not only read the newspapers; he studied them. For his this was not a matter of national or international gossip, but the latest step in the unfolding of history. It gave him a sense of history, especially of American history — for he was an American patriot, though not uncritical. He loved his country, but did not hesitate to take issue with its government when he thought that it was being untrue to its ideals. He had a sense of where history is going. It is

for this reason that he was able to predict World War II and even the Holocaust, when others thought that his jeremiads were highly unrealistic.

Like Ezra, Ben Gottesman had another side to his character, symbolized by his status as a *Kohen*. He was a *Kohen* not only genealogically, but temperamentally and morally as well. He was a disciple as well as a descendent of the first High Priest, Aaron, of whom the tradition says that he was an *ohev shalom ve'rodef shalom*, he loved peace and pursued peace. Ben Gottesman was a man of peace and devoted friendship. He despised unnecessary controversy and conflict.

What we are told about Aaron, in the Biblical portion of this week, applies with remarkable relevance to Ben Gottesman as well. *Va'yaaal Aharon ha-Kohen el hor ha-har al pi Hashem va-yamat sham*. "And Aaron the priest went up into Mount Hor at the commandment of the Lord, and died there" (Numbers: 33:38). The Sages add, in explanation of the idiom *al pi Hashem* (literally, "by the mouth of the Lord"), that *melamed she'met bi-neshikah*, that Aaron died with a kiss: God, as it were, kissed Aaron on the lips and gently withdrew his soul and his breath from him.

Ben Gottesman too died an easy death. He was keen and sharp to the very end. He was never depressed by his growing weakness, and retained his full measure of good humor. But more important: not only did he die with a kiss, but he also lived a life of charm and pleasantness.

The leitmotif of *Kehunah* or priesthood is: service. Service was a fundamental characteristic of Ben Gottesman's life.

He excelled in service to God. He was, quite literally a *Gottes-man*, a "man of God." He was genuinely religious, and observant of the Jewish tradition. He was devout — intelligently so, with understanding. He was deeply concerned about the future of Jews and Judaism in this country. He was passionately devoted to the State of Israel, and felt that one could not overstate its importance to the future of the Jewish people.

He served his people with distinction. He was a Trustee of this congregation, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun. He was Bar Mitzvah at

this very pulpit. The congregants used to be inspired as, on holidays, he used to lead the procession of the *Kohanim* from the entrance of the synagogue to ascend to the *bimah* and raise his hands in benediction for the congregation.

He had a big heart, open even to strangers of all peoples and all faiths.

His name will be remembered forever at Yeshiva University, which meant so very much to him, where he served for well over a half a century, and where he was the oldest Trustee in terms of service.

He also served and loved life itself. The Rabbis told us: *Kohanim zerizim hem*, that a *Kohen* is nimble or industrious, committed, passionate. Indeed, Ben Gottesman the *Kohen* was intense in everything he did. He threw himself into every project: from sports in his youth to vacationing to *davening* to politics to philanthropy to business. He had a strict work ethic and he followed it joyfully.

Above all, he served and loved his family. There was in that family a feeling of love and loyalty and mutual respect. He was enormously proud of the achievements of his gracious, energetic and beloved wife, in her work at Hadassah and for Jewish education in the UJA.

Both were enormously devoted to their late daughter Alice, whose premature passing away cast an immovable shadow over their lives.

Ben was close to his late brothers, and to his sister Helen, may she live and be well.

He was proud of his son's families, of their academic and professional distinctions. He deeply loved his wonderful grandchildren, and was especially close to his oldest grandson Robert. There was no generation gap between them, because he treated them and spoke to them as adults.

Milton and David, your father talked to me often about you, though he may not have told you about it. He always spoke of you proudly, longingly, hopefully, and lovingly. A few months ago, with his voice dropping almost to a whisper, he confided in me his confi-

dence that when the time comes and he moved on, you would carry on from him even as he carried on from his father, continuing to support and enhance the values and principles and causes that he cherished.

Your mourning coincides with the period of grief for the entire Jewish people. We are now in the midst of what is known as "the Three Weeks," the 21 days between the fast of the 17th of Tammuz and the fast of the 9th day of Av. Tisha B'Av is the black day of the Jewish calendar. It commemorates the destruction of the first two Temples as well as other historic disasters that befell our people.

There is an Agadah or Jewish legend which tells us that at the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians, the *Pirhei Kehunah*, the young priests, stood in tears and watched the conflagration which consumed the Holy Temple. They held in their hand the key to the Temple. At one point, what appeared to be a hand came down from Heaven, and the young priests took the key and threw it upwards and said, "Here, God, You hold it against some future date when a Temple will rise here again." Whereupon, *Kaftzu ve'naflu le'tokh ha-ur*, they jumped into the flames.

Allow me to paraphrase that legend for you.

The old *Kohen*, whose body had been ravaged and whose temple of earthly existence had ceased to function, has yielded up his soul which soars heavenward. As he does so, he throws to you the key to his life — what he stood for, believed in, loved, valued, cherished.

It is now up to you to open your hands and receive the key.

May you and your children after you use and cherish that key. Continue the great Gottesman tradition: the love of books, the service of love, the love of life, and family cohesiveness.

May his soul be bound up in the bond of immortal life.

Benjamin Gottesman — Born December 1, 1897.
Died July 18, 1979
23 Tammuz 5739

"How do we fix these traits into our character? By repeatedly doing them, returning to them until they become second nature."

Maimonides
12th Century