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The Rav: Public Giant, Private Mensch
Norman Lamm

I do not recall exactly when it happened - whether it was an extra-curricular gathering, or in the course of a sheur, or slightly afterwards when he was unwinding - but this is the gist of his brief remark, which was not only wistful but also revealing of a larger pathos than any of us had ever expected. The Rav said: "why is it that my talmidim never think of sending me Rosh Hashanah greetings?"

I was crushed- not at his felt need for friendship rather than admiration alone, but at our sheer indifference to his inner feelings. Why, in our boundless esteem, did we not ever realize that he had a heart, that he was a sensitive human being, that he was oh so very human, that he experienced the need for approbation not as the intellectual giant he was but as a real flesh-and-blood person?

His greatness created a natural distance between him and his disciples, and that gulf was probably the cause of his loneliness. But it was inexcusable for us to be so unconcerned for him as a person, to allow our near apotheosis of him to lead us to refrain from extending to him private courtesies, to imagine him as a perpetual motion machine of great ideas, of exciting sheurim, of finely balanced distinctions, of profound intellectual creativity - without recognizing him as well as a person, as a sensitive human whose emotional needs were not that different from our own. Perhaps that is the price one pays for fame and genius - but that is not an excuse for the rest of us.

The following year and ever since, until he passed away, I never failed to send him a greeting card for Rosh Hashanah. He always answered - always! - with a handwritten letter of blessings for the New Year. I confess - in shame - that I merely sent him a printed card, with added remarks penned in, while he wrote a whole letter by hand, personally.

I failed to learn the lesson. I shall always feel guilty.

I came to Yeshiva University from Torah Vodaath for two reasons. First, I wanted an academic education in the same place I would be learning Torah (I had not yet heard the term "Torah Umadda," but effectively I was already committed to it.) Second, the Rav had just begun to achieve great fame. As

a Torah Vodaath boy, any praise for YU was muted, at best. But my grandfather, zt"l, who was a Galizianer Gaon, encouraged me to enroll in YU because he wanted me to learn under "that young Gaon Soloveitchik."

Most High School graduates were placed in the lower grades, and I was fortunate to be accepted by Dr. Belkin zt"l in his own sheur - the last one he was to give before the burdens of his ever growing responsibility of the Presidency forced him to withdraw from giving a sheur. (I tried co-teaching a sheur during my second year in office, but I quickly albeit regretfully had to give it up for the same reason that Dr. Belkin did.) My next Rebbe was the Lomzher Rav, Rav Shatzkes zt"l - a greatly erudite and endearing (and, as well, a most handsome) man. Only then was I permitted to attend the sheur of the Rav zt"l.

What an experience that was! The language of discourse then was Yiddish which, in and of itself, didn't frighten me. But the Rav's Yiddish was pure Lithuanian and, while I could get used to his accent, certain idiomatic expressions eluded me. What, for instance, did "anugnblik" mean? I finally found someone who explained that it was *ein oigen blick* - "one blink of the eye" - which meant, as any Litvak would know, "Wait a minute" or "Hold off for a while" or something of the sort.

But language was the least of my problems. Thorough preparation was an absolute requirement. The Rav was totally intolerant of sloppy preparation - or sloppy thinking. He could not and would not tolerate superficial answers; he had no patience whatever for fools. I have written elsewhere of my experiences with the Rav which are engraved in my memory. Even when, years later, I became President of Yeshiva, my enormous reverence for him, bordering on fear, was not in the least diminished. I have always been proud of the fact that I received both semikhah and my PhD from him.

Psychologists and educators will tell you that you can't get students to think and understand and achieve in a climate of fear. Not true! Or, that may hold true for little children - but not for advanced students. The Rav forced us to think the way he thinks. We had to learn quickly his analytic method - the "Brisker Derech" - and to be original if need be. His greatest passion, as a scholar and a teacher, was Truth. No "brilliant" solutions were permitted in class if they did not truthfully represent what the text intended.

He insisted that each of us think for himself, not just give him back his own interpretations, an activity he considered parrot-like, the sign of a sub-human intellect.

Once, after a public lecture, a rather bold member of the audience challenged him and said, "But Rabbi Soloveitchik, what is your source?" The Rav immediately replied: "a clear and logical mind." Indeed, his mind was uncluttered and profoundly logical.

Some of his students who sat at his feet admiringly imbibing his Torah interpretations were reluctant to accept his ideology. He often said - once to me personally - "some of my most attentive students who would willingly get up in the middle of the night to hear a sheur from me - secretly suspect that I'm an *apikores*..." I clearly remember the Rav using the sobriquet "Torah Umadda" as part of a homily - and it was said approvingly. He didn't have to preach it loudly and often - he just lived it.

Example: I was elected President in August of 1976. The following September when school began and the Rav returned to New York to deliver his sheurim, I went to his apartment to consult him, because I was just beginning to realize the enormity of the burden that had been placed on my shoulders. I asked the Rav, "Rebbe, what do you think should be the first goal I must set for myself?" He answered at once - rather surprisingly - "Improve the college! "

That should put to rest all the doubts that were occasionally raised as to his commitment to Torah

Umadda...including the startling comment by a former talmid that the Rav could not possibly be a supporter of Torah Umadda, nor did he in any way relate to secular wisdom, because he often accompanied the Rav to his apartment after the sheur - and he never saw the Rav reading or holding such a volume in his hands. Apparently, even scholars of moderate competence can sometimes evince a Lilliputian outlook by making inane statements.

The Rav was remarkable for his intellectual honesty. He never pretended to know what he did not know. He was always - always! - ready to admit that he was wrong. When I was involved in setting up the Manhattan eruv in the 1960's and I asked him for his opinion, his answer was, "I don't know. I never learned *Eruvin*." (He later did learn *Eruvin* - and did not come to the conclusion that I did.)

Interestingly, I had a similar experience with the late Gaon, Rabbi Aharon Kotler zt"l. He attempted to place an *issur*, on behalf of the Agudas Harabonim on those who were preparing to announce the *eruv*. He was obviously convinced that an eruv in Manhattan was prohibited, and he asked that I come down to the Agudas Harabonim office to hear his *pesak*. Still young and politically naive, I accepted at once ("like a Lamm to the slaughter," as one of their members later told me.) Rav Kotler presided over a crowded and unsympathetic (to me) room. He must have been troubled by the arguments I gave in defense of the *eruv*, because he called me early the next morning. The content of that discussion I shall leave for another occasion. For the present, it is in place to record a brief snippet at the end of our dialogue. He said he wanted to rethink his position and asked that both sides postpone any public announcement (in print). I was bold enough to ask him, "Kletzker Rosh Yeshiva, why is it necessary to wait? Our people are ready to proceed with an announcement, and you are fully aware of the issues and of your objections."

"I'll tell you," he said, "I really never learned *Eruvin*..."

So, here were two *gedolim* who manifested remarkable intellectual honesty. No wonder that, despite differences of opinion and approach, they regarded each other so highly! One cannot help but admire such gallant and courageous rabbinic giants.

Intellectually, the Rav operated in the Brisker Talmudic tradition, founded by his eminent grandfather, R. Hayyim Soloveitchik zt"l. He made remarkably creative contributions to it, enlarging its scope and ennobling it. This was his mode of Talmudic analysis, his intellectual signature. Of course, I admired the Brisker methodology, and especially the elegant and creative way the Rav used it. But I confess that - subconsciously - I had my doubts. There was something too easy, too "popular" and facile, and almost mechanical about the manner in which some acolytes of the Rav and other rebbeim and their talmidim spouted "Brisker Torah" and solved all problems by declaring that there were really "tzvei dinnim," that every legal precept can be broken down into two other fundamental ideas or categories.

I was therefore genuinely pleased when the Rav, in the course of a sheur, casually proposed that there was a method for differentiating between authentic and illegitimate "Brisker Torah." His method: try translating your *chiddush* into English - without resorting to any of the terminology of Brisk. If your idea makes sense in English - it is valuable. If not - it means you were playing with words, and scrap it no matter how attractive you may find it. The pseudo-Brisk manipulation of a wise, honored, and exacting Talmudic method is an instance of intellectual abuse.

I still remain with a tiny dose of skepticism about the Brisker methodology as practiced by some members of that school. Example: a theory is proposed by the Rishonim or Acharonim. The questioner then presents contradictory evidence. Here the proud Brisker replies, in Yiddish: "Ut, dos iz doss,

takeh!" - "that's the point"-- as if the original and the counter-proposition, question and answer, thesis and antithesis, merely by being set up in opposition to each other, are both equally expressive of the one idea in two different modes; hence no *kasheh*, all problems solved. DDE... Maybe that is occasionally appropriate, but when inappropriate it is no more than a semantic hoax unwittingly perpetrated by an innocent and unsophisticated novice drifting carelessly and irresponsibly in the great Brisker tradition.

As the years go by and the number of those fortunate enough to have studied under him begins to dwindle, every effort must be made to transmit to the next generation of talmidim an honest appraisal of the complex and dialectical character of this giant, without unconsciously but arrogantly "cutting him down to size" - or by excessive hero worship, because that too is as form of distortion.

As a student of the Rav, I congratulate the editors of The Commentator in undertaking this series. If not all contributors to this important collection agree or give the same impression, that is at least partly because he was indeed such a complex and dialectical personality. That is hard for students - but wonderful grist for the mills of biographers.

I am fortunate that I had the *zekhut* to study under him in my youth, and to communicate often with him in my mature years. I know I shall never meet another like him - certainly not in my lifetime. Once is enough, and for that privilege I will always be thankful to the Almighty.

Yehi zikhro barukh.