

## A Death in Jerusalem: The Real World

It was probably the single largest assemblage of Jews in Jerusalem since the destruction of the Second Temple nineteen centuries ago.

Even in a city accustomed to extraordinary events it was remarkable: over three hundred thousand people gathered for a funeral—not of a head of state or a famous public figure. They had come to honor the life of Rav Shelomo Zalman Auerbach, who was universally recognized as one of the premier *poskim* of this generation, and who had just died at the age of eighty-five.

For almost two hours they stood silently in the streets and lanes around his home, weeping as they listened over loudspeakers to the eulogies, after which they followed the bier on foot in a three-hour funeral procession to the cemetery. The sight was staggering. Every inch of every street and byway in central Jerusalem was tightly packed with men, women, and children: broad-brimmed black hats and long black coats; white shirts and *kipot serugot*; Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Hasidim, and what seemed like every single student of every single yeshiva in Israel—and even many who had apparently never worn a *kipah* on their heads. Balconies were crammed; young boys gazed down from rooftops; traffic was at a standstill for hours; helicopters hovered overhead; police stood at attention at every intersection.

One could not help wondering: when a Supreme Court Justice dies, venerated as he may be, do hundreds of thousands of ordinary people flock to his funeral? When a renowned and popular university teacher dies, do throngs of students weep? Even the state funerals of David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, and Menachem Begin did not bring forth nearly such multitudes.

Here was a man who shunned all publicity, had no official titles, never granted media interviews, had no PR office, issued no bulletins or journals, assiduously discouraged any view of himself that might tend to ascribe anything but ordinary human abilities to him, was not even mentioned in Jewish encyclopedias, and had never left the borders of the Holy Land—and yet the myriads of religious Jews around the world felt so intimately connected to him that hundreds of thousands spontaneously flocked to pay him a last tribute on just a few hours' notice.

Clearly, it was more than prodigious scholarship that was being honored here; it was what lay beyond that learning. The people were responding to qualities which have grown increasingly rare; genuineness, wholeness, straightforwardness, impeccable integrity—what our tradition calls an *ish emet*. What touched them was the awareness that not only were his halakhic rulings avidly sought out and followed by believing Jews, but that this quiet, self-effacing man was the embodiment of this *emet*.

That the multitudes identified with an *ish emet* was a tribute not only to the man; it was a tribute to the people themselves who, in an age of non-*emet*, demonstrated that the instinctive yearning for this ideal is still inextinguished. And for those who know that one can determine the character of a nation by determining who are the heroes of that nation, and who felt a certain foreboding when fifty thousand young Israelis recently packed a Tel-Aviv park in adulation of Madonna, the fact that more than five times that many paid homage to a rabbinic sage was a healthful restorative.

Born and living all his life in Jerusalem's old and evocative Shaarei Hesed quarter, he took seriously his studies and his responsibilities—but not himself. In an era of faceless bureaucracies, swollen staffs, and self-important officials in chauffeured limousines (one of whom, on trial a few blocks away for inflating his travel and living expenses, claimed as part of his defense that as head of a government agency he was entitled to treatment like a head of state), he, like all great Torah personalities, shunned the pomp and ceremony that adheres to famous men.

It was incongruous—and delicious—to contemplate that this unpretentious man and this aging structure with its unheated and sparsely furnished rooms constituted the veritable nerve-center of halakhah in the modern world.

In him there existed a remarkable fusion of the rigorous intellectual discipline of the *talmid hakham* and the fatherly love for his people. The emotional outpouring of respect and affection for him was an echo of his respect and affection for each of them.

For it was not only halakha that occupied his days. It was the people to whom it applied. They were instinctively drawn to a man whose primary goal was to understand God's will as reflected in the Torah, whose life was free from the dross of politics, power, and material ambition, who had no personal agenda, who was open and accepting of various points of view within the halakhic framework,

and who gave them warmth and attention while asking nothing in return. He was wise and witty, possessed of an incisive mind and an unerring insight into people. Both world-class scholars and ordinary *amkha* felt that few if any were better equipped to guide them both on arcane halakhic matters and on the mundane issues which beset every human being. Inundated with inquiries from everywhere, he was nevertheless accessible to anyone who knocked at his door and needed face-to-face counsel or comfort.

He was, in a word, the embodiment of Torah: majestic yet simple, transcendent yet worldly, old yet profoundly new, rigorous yet compassionate, multi-faceted yet natural and artless. Whatever advice he would offer was inevitably refined through the purifying filter of his learning, piety, love, and halakhic discipline.

They saw in him the ideal of the true *gadol*—one who looms large not only in his learning and his scholarship, but also in his relationship to God, to others, and to the history and destiny of the Jewish people. Perhaps through him they heard resonating the echo of the echo, the *bat kol*, of the will of the Torah and of God Himself. Therefore they sought him out in his life, and therefore they mourned him in their masses in his death.

For this is the definition of a *gadol* and a *posek*—those over-taxed terms—in Judaism. A *gadol* is not elected or appointed; he *becomes*. By virtue of his transcending knowledge, understanding, and sensitivity to God, Torah, and the Jewish people, *klal Yisrael* instinctively responds to this resonating echo within him. He is not a prophet, does not possess *ruah hakodesh*, and is not an other-worldly figure; but he must possess the mind and the heart to carry within his being the Torah of God, and through its teachings to guide the present generation into the future. In every generation such individuals rise to the top, not by virtue of popular acclaim, but because of the sum of all of these qualities. The process is subtle and unstructured, but somehow uncannily accurate. There is no lobbying for specific candidates, no balloting, no headlines, and, *lehavdil*, no white smoke wafting up from chimneys. Gradually, through a natural process of winnowing and sifting over many years, certain men vault to halakhic and spiritual greatness because their lives are a metaphor for Torah.

Rav Auerbach lived a plain and spartan life, and this is how he wanted his funeral to be conducted. There were no parades of dignitaries, no polished eulogies. The funeral took place not in a syna-

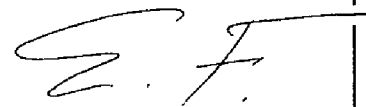
gogue or a mortuary, but out on the front porch of the same apartment in which he had lived for over sixty years.

The most moving aspect of the funeral was the public reading of his last will. In it, Rav Shelomo Zalman requested that, if any words were spoken at his funeral, they be delivered by two of his seven sons (he also had three daughters), that they be brief "in order not to burden those who may be present," and that the speakers endeavor to awaken the religious and spiritual impulses of those in attendance. He emphatically requested that they refrain from words of praise. "I have been greatly pained by such exaggerations during my lifetime, and I request that I be spared them at my departure," he wrote. He added: "I hereby forgive anyone for any offenses committed against me, and I ask anyone who feels that I have deliberately or inadvertently offended him to do *hesed* with me and to forgive me. . . ." And he requested that his tombstone should say nothing more than that he taught Torah at Yeshivat Kol Torah in Jerusalem.

"He lived in the real world," sobbed one of his sons during his eulogy. "The real world is not what we see before us. The real world is the world of holy living, of dedication to God and fellow human beings. The real world, the only world, is the world of Torah."

It was too glorious a February day for a funeral. Birds were chirping, the skies were vintage Jerusalem blue, the air was crisp, the winds gentle and sweet, the winding, hilly streets and their buildings of Jerusalem stone shimmered in the noonday sun, the trees lining the lovely old neighborhood were beginning to show their pale green buds. A more appropriate setting would have been the howling winds and drenching rains not uncommon to Jerusalem winters.

But when one considered that hundreds of thousands of Jews had this day caught a glimpse of eternity—in which time itself came to a stop, and terrorists and negotiations and realpolitik ceased to exist—perhaps the glistening skies and the flowering buds were a suitable backdrop for what was, when all is said and done, a fleeting glimpse of the real world.



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