

## A *Mentsch* for All Seasons

There once was a fourteen-year old boy in Baltimore whose major interests in life were tennis and the Baltimore Orioles. Those were the days before there were *yeshivot* beyond elementary school, so after graduating day school he attended a public high school. For his Torah studies, he participated in a special evening study program run by the local day school, and his father—a European *talmid hakham* who was a *rav* in Baltimore—learned with him regularly. Although he gave grudging attention to his Torah studies, his teenage interests dominated his life.

His father, *z"l*, was concerned about him, especially with the long, hot Baltimore summer looming ahead. Since he was a good friend of the *Rosh haYeshiva* of Ner Israel, HaRav Yaakov Yitzhak haLevi Ruderman, *z"l*, the father called Rav Ruderman and asked him to recommend a student who might study with his son during the summer months. Without hesitation, Rav Ruderman recommended a twenty-year old who was spending the summer in the yeshiva.

The young boy was reluctant to devote even part of his gloriously free summer days to anything but the baseball diamond, but when he finally met face to face with his putative teacher, there was an immediate rapport between the two. The older boy was very *frum*, but also very friendly, understanding, open, non-judgmental, enthusiastic—and he knew a lot about baseball. The younger boy enjoyed just being with him and with his infectious smile. They learned *mishna* and *gemara* all summer long, and gradually the young boy discovered that Torah learning was not just for old men, but could be stimulating and challenging for youngsters as well. The Jewishness of that boy was invigorated, and he ultimately enrolled in Ner Israel. More: the fourteen-year old and the twenty-year old remained lifelong friends.

The fourteen-year old was the writer of this column. The twenty-year old was the late and very lamented Rabbi Moshe Sherer, *z"l*.

Although most readers of this journal are not part of the organization that was headed by Moshe Sherer, it is an accepted

fact of Jewish life that his impact was felt far beyond the offices of Agudath Israel of America. His orbit transcended the ideological boundaries between the *yeshivishe* Orthodox, the *hasidische* Orthodox, the Centrist Orthodox, Sephardim and Ashkenazim. It extended into the non-Orthodox religious and secular groupings in Jewish life, into the offices of presidents, secretaries of state, prime ministers, Congresses, Knessets, and even into the inner chambers of the Catholic Church.

How did it come about that this quiet and unassuming twenty-year old became a man of such major influence, trusted and respected by the variety of individuals and interests with whom he came in contact? And how was it that he was such a key figure in this century's startling transformation and revitalization of Orthodoxy?

One answer is that even as he dealt with the major players on the world stage, he always managed to retain those qualities that endeared him to everyone when he was young: understanding, patience, openness—plus two qualities not uncommon in boys of twenty, but less common as one matures into adulthood and prominence: unpretentiousness and integrity. In Moshe Sherer's case these qualities only intensified with age and renown. Of him can be paraphrased what the Sages said of Sarah *imenu*: as his character was at twenty, so was it in his later years.

A leading member of the Carter administration who had just dealt with Rabbi Sherer once confided in me: "This man is very special. There aren't many like him these days." In a time when the mantle of "Jewish leadership" is often granted to the highest bidder, Moshe Sherer's kind of leadership stood head and shoulders above the rest. He was Jewishly learned, but he had the common touch; he was principled, yet broadminded; he was genuinely religious, but open; he knew politics, but could not be bought; he was a brilliant administrator, but he had vision; he was a man who knew bigness and power, but never made anyone feel small; he was serene in his faith and did not have to resort to vitriol in order to make his point; he sat at the seat of authority and influence, hobnobbing with *posekim* and *rashei yeshiva*, kings and presidents, cardinals and bishops, but he never lost sight of the purpose for which he was called.

George Orwell said that "to see what is in front of one's nose requires a constant struggle." Because he was not handicapped by the blinders of ego and personal agendas that are part

of ordinary leadership, he was able to keep his eye on the distant star and at the same time see clearly what had to be done now.

What had to be done was to lift and enhance the position of Torah and to attend to the interests of *kelal Yisrael*. He never pontificated, and he was never sanctimonious about it, but that was his mission in life. As a major *rosh yeshiva* once said about him, "Moshe Sherer can always be relied upon to fulfill his mission."

Everyone knew that he was a tough battler for Torah, but they also knew that he was a *mentsch*, and that he could be relied upon. When a certain prime minister of Israel needed to relay a very delicate personal message directly to Jimmy Carter, Moshe Sherer—and not the official channel—was the conduit. He vigorously represented the ideology of Agudath Israel, but he could be trusted in mutual consultations with the Rabbinical Council of America when the needs of the *kelal* called for it.

He did not pursue the position of leadership; it came seeking him. Such is the case with all true leaders. Those who pursue leadership avidly because of the attendant *kavod* are soon undone by it; those who flee from it are the ones whom the community follows.

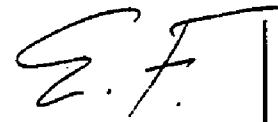
This is in keeping with the laws of the *shaliach tsibbur*: individuals who are asked to lead the *davening* are advised to refuse the invitation several times. This is the paradigm for Jewish leadership. The true Jewish leader refuses the invitation to lead until there is so much insistence that he has no choice but to mount the podium—and then reluctantly.

This reluctance to lead is why all elements in American Jewish life say in one voice that Rabbi Sherer was the quintessential Jewish public servant. It is no coincidence that under his watch a weak and floundering Torah community reached new strength and consequence.

He will be particularly missed by all the "worlds" of Orthodoxy; in truth, even the non-Orthodox will miss him, and the non-Jews as well. At a time of division and isolation, he was the voice of reconciliation and outreach. Others spoke and pronounced and declared, but he listened. At a time when self-righteousness and condemnation were in vogue, he was able to understand. The warm smile of his youth never left him. Nor did his enthusiasm. Nor did his *mentschlichkeit*.

The once-fourteen-year old salutes the once-twenty-year

old. *Na'ar hayiti gam zakanti*: none of us will ever be young again, but there are some who maintain the unspoiled idealism of youth forever.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of stylized initials 'E.F.' followed by a long horizontal flourish.

EMANUEL FELDMAN