

A TRIBUTE TO THE REBBITZEN OF TALNE*

The *hesped* (funeral oration), an ancient Biblical institution, pursues a two-fold objective. It seeks, first of all, to make people weep. "*Agra de-hespeda daluye* — the merit of a funeral oration is in raising the voice." The Halakhah did not like to see the dead interred in silent indifference. It wanted to hear the shriek of despair and to see the hot tear washing away human cruelty and toughness. "And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her." To mourn, to feel a great sorrow, to be of a distressed mind when confronted with death is, according to the Halakhah, a cathartic experience. It reminds proud, vain and egotistical man of a frightening reality which we all like to forget — namely, the reality of death. It is true, of course, that Judaism has never been death-centered, that it never tried to motivate the religious activity of man by having him encounter death. In fact, the reverse is the case. Our religious consciousness has always been life-oriented and in-life rooted. Nevertheless, to have man recall what he has been trying hard to forget is redeeming and cleansing; the whole halakhic structure of *avelut* rests upon this assumption.

Betorato shel R. Meir katuv: tov me'od zeh ha-mavet. A marginal note in the Scroll of R. Meir said that with regards to the assertion of the Bible that "God saw everything that He had made and behold it was very good, "*tov me'od*," the phrase "very good" includes also death.

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The second objective is a different one. At this level the *hesped*

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turns into *kilus*, eulogy, informative and instructional. Instead of addressing ourselves, as we do at the first level, to the heart, we try now to contact the mind. We no longer try to arouse emotions. We seek to stimulate thoughts by telling a story. What kind of story? Of course, there is only one story to be told — the life-story of the deceased. This time the oration becomes a portrayal of the person whom we bid farewell forever.

Of course, this description of the function of the *hesped* is quite paradoxical. The person lived many years in a town, made friends, was active in public affairs, meeting people, talking to them, living, praying and doing things together. Disaster struck and the person died suddenly. Acquaintances and friends assembled to mourn, to pay the last tribute to the person whom they knew very well. So why is it necessary to start *de novo* and re-introduce a person to old friends?

Yes, it is strange. However, strangeness does not alter a tragic, perhaps a tragi-comical reality, that man or woman until his or her last day on earth remains a sealed book even to his or her closest friends who supposedly knew him or her well. Anonymity is an integral part of the human existential destiny. *Sof davar, hakol nishma* — the end of the matter, all is heard (Ecclesiastes 12:13; see Midrash Rabbah). Only at the conclusion of the *davar*, the human career, only at the end of the life story of the man or woman, do people become inquisitive. Only then do they begin to inquire about him or her. Who was he or she? Only then *hakol nishma* — all kinds of questions are asked.

A while ago people simply did not care. *Now* they are concerned; *now* they do care. Yesterday the question could have been easily answered. It could have been addressed directly to him or her. Today we know not of whom to inquire, we know not who is in a position to answer this question. Nevertheless, the Halakhah insisted that the question be raised.

II

With your permission I wish to ask the strange question which a *maspid* (funeral orator) must address to the grieving congregation: who was the Rebbitzin of Talne, this noble woman who

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was snatched away from us so quickly? It is, as I said before, a paradoxical, almost absurd question. We all met her on many different occasions. We always were under the impression that we knew her well. Apparently, this assumption on our part was just an illusion, a mirage. In the course of the past thirty days, the *sheloshim* period of mourning, the truth began to dawn on us that actually we did not know her at all, that the woman we met and greeted every morning — “gut morgen, rebbitzen” — was a cryptic figure, kind of a mystery. It is self evident that *now* we are curious to find out who she was. Now we ask ourselves who was the woman who never omitted *tefillah be-tsibbur*, who never could catch up with the congregation, and who continued to recite her prayers long after the worshippers had left the synagogue?

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If you should address this embarrassing question to me, I would answer: she was an *unusual woman*. If you should continue to cross-examine me and insist that I clarify my use of the term “unusual,” I would say that she was unusual because she belonged to an unusual community. Not many women today are qualified for admission to that strange society. The Rebbitzen *was* qualified and did belong to that mysterious society. What is the name of that mysterious society? It is the *massorah* society which was founded by Moses at the dawn of our history and which at the point of eschatological fulfillment of our history will be joined by the king messiah.

What characterizes that society? An unqualified dedication to learning and teaching. Its motto is — teach and let yourself be taught. It demands that every Jew be simultaneously teacher and pupil, that every member of the society hold on with one hand to an old teacher while the other hand rest upon the frail shoulders of a young pupil. This society which represents the very essence of Judaism cuts across the ages and millenia and holds the key to our miraculous survival.

On the long Sabbath afternoons in the summer, we preface the recital of *Pirke Avot* with a declaration concerning our total involvement in the massorah community: “Moses received the

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Torah from Sinai, and handed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets handed it on to the men of the Great Assembly." In other words, Judaism expresses itself through the *shalsholet ha-kabbalah*, the chain of tradition. Hands are linked; generations are united. One society encompasses past, present and future. As I mentioned before, admission to that society is a difficult and complex affair. Fortunate is the person who met the requirements of admission and was accepted. Fortunate was the Rebbitzen who did meet the requirements and was admitted to that exclusive, strange society.

III

People are mistaken in thinking that there is only one Massorah and one Massorah community; the community of the fathers. It is not true. We have two massorot, two traditions, two communities, two *shalshalot ha-kabbalah* — the massorah community of the fathers and that of the mothers. "Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob (= the women) and tell the children of Israel (= the men)" (Exodus 19:3), "Hear my son the instruction of thy father (*mussar avikha*) and forsake not the teaching of thy mother (*torat imekha*)" (Proverbs 1:8), counseled the old king. What is the difference between those two *massorot*, traditions? What is the distinction between *mussar avikha* and *torat imekha*? Let us explore what one learns from the father and what one learns from the mother.

One learns much from father: how to read a text — the Bible or the Talmud — how to comprehend, how to analyze, how to conceptualize, how to classify, how to infer, how to apply, etc. . . . One also learns from father what to do and what not to do, what is morally right and what is morally wrong. Father teaches the son the discipline of thought as well as the discipline of action. Father's tradition is an intellectual-moral one. That is why it is identified with *mussar*, which is the Biblical term for discipline.

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What is *torat imekha*? What kind of a Torah does the mother

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pass on? I admit that I am not able to define precisely the massoretic role of the Jewish mother. Only by circumscription I hope to be able to explain it. Permit me to draw upon my own experiences. I used to have long conversations with my mother. In fact, it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She talked and I "happened" to overhear. What did she talk about? I must use an halakhic term in order to answer this question: she talked *me-inyana de-yoma*. I used to watch her arranging the house in honor of a holiday. I used to see her recite prayers; I used to watch her recite the sidra every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much.

Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. I learned from her the most important thing in life — to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive.

The laws of Shabbat, for instance, were passed on to me by my father; they are a part of *mussar avikha*. The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother; it is a part of *torat imekha*. The fathers *knew* much about the Shabbat; the mothers *lived* the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor.

The fathers taught generations how to observe the Shabbat; mothers taught generations how to greet the Shabbat and how to enjoy her twenty-four hour presence.

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The Rebbitzen, as I mentioned before, was one of the few women to whom the maternal massorah, *torat imekha*, was entrusted. She represented the Massorah community with great loyalty and dedication. She was a devoted, good keeper of the treasure which was put in escrow with her and she knew how to guard it and how to transmit it to another generation. She was an outstanding teacher, even though she was a woman of few

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words. She taught, like my mother, how to feel the presence of God. She taught to appreciate *mitzvot* and spiritual values, to enjoy the warmth of a dedicated life. In a word, she taught everything which is included in the *torat imekha*.

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Permit me to say a few words about her background. She was the daughter of a small town rabbi in Bessarabia at the turn of the century. He was a saintly man; she was his beloved daughter. From my conversations with her, I inferred that her father somehow resembled my maternal grandfather who also was a rabbi in a small town in Lithuania. Their lives were dedicated unre-servedly to two objectives: to the study of the Torah and charity (helping people). The sociological reality then was quite unique: the whole community was one family and the teacher of the community was the patriarch of the family. She told me — something which I also used to do — that she used to sit in her father's room for hours, listening to the humming of the traditional tune of Talmud study. Sometimes when he was en-grossed in the analysis of a difficult halakhic theme (*sugya*), he used to address himself to her, to Rivka'le, trying to convince her that he, not his opponent, was right. She absorbed Torah by os-mosis. She inhaled it together with the oxygen of the room. The very weave of the tender personality of that little girl became saturated with Torah.

Only such a woman is worthy to be admitted to the Massorah community and to be trusted with the great treasure of *torat imekha*.

IV

The Rebbitzen, the true representative of *torat imekha*, displayed three basic qualities.

First, she was a wise woman (*ishah hakhamah*) — a phrase of Biblical origin. We come across the sentence in II Samuel (20: 16): "Then cried a wise woman out of the city . . ." *Hokhmah* in Hebrew has a three-fold connotation: (1) innate intelligence; (2) erudition or accumulation of knowledge; (3) intellectual

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curiosity. A guardian of *torat imekha* must be *ishah hakhamah*. Regardless of the fact that the maternal massorah is charged with the transmission of living experiences, it cannot succeed in discharging its task if the experiences are not nurtured by wisdom. The Rebbitzen did possess *hokhmah* at all three levels.

(1) She had a wonderful mind, sharp like a razor. She was sensitive to ideas and to abstract problems. Her remarks about theoretical matters were always weighty and to the point.

(2) Besides her innate talents and intelligence, she actually accumulated much knowledge. She knew the Bible. She used to quote from the Bible with the natural ease of the expert. She knew *Ein Jacob*. Again, she quoted aggadah the way she did quote the Bible. She was an expert on *minhagei yisrael*, Jewish customs and observances. She knew more about them than I do.

(3) She was inquisitive. She was curious to know about every aspect in Judaism. One could find on her desk the newest books about aggadah or Jewish thought. She was a sharp critic and discriminated well between chaff and the kernels.

The old rabbi in the small town of Bessarabia was apparently an excellent pedagogue. Directly and indirectly, he taught so much to his star pupil, Rivka'le.

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Second, she was a great woman (*ishah gedolah*). Little woman would not have been entrusted with the treasure of *torat imekha*. The phrase *ishah gedolah* — like the phrase *ishah hakhamah* — is also of Biblical origin. We come across the sentence in II Kings (4:8): “And it fell on a day when Elisha passed Shunem where there was a great woman . . .” What does it mean to be a great woman? To be a great woman means to resemble spiritually the Biblical woman, who was a dialectical personality. She combined two mutually exclusive characteristics. The Biblical woman was humble and shy, and yet she possessed an indomitable will and an unshakeable determination. She was both simple and tenacious, meek and fearless. The Biblical woman was never at the center, always in the wings. She was never loud, always quiet.

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At the same time, the Biblical woman was the leader and the head of the household. In times of crisis, the Biblical woman assumed unlimited responsibilities and made the gravest decisions. God reveals Himself to man through infinite humility as well as infinite exaltedness. Man was created in the image of God and commanded to walk in the ways of God. Hence, great man or woman manifests both humility and an awareness of strength; greatness reveals itself in the dialectical moral human behavior.

Sarah was a humble woman, always in the tent, always shy and modest. Abraham sat in front of the tent; she was inside. She was always ready to comply with Abraham's requests and yet, in critical times, when she was concerned over the destiny of her son, the humble Sarah displayed unlimited strength of will and made Abraham listen to her. She instructed Abraham: "Cast out that slave woman and her son," and God instructed Abraham to listen to Sarah.

The Talner Rebbitzin united in her personality the same two mutually exclusive virtues: simplicity, on the one hand, and strength of conviction, on the other. She was modest. She was the real *tzenuah* in every respect. She was self-effacing and self-negating. She sacrificed her life for others and demanded nothing in return. Yet, this humble, selfless woman was spiritually a strong woman. She lived a heroic life and was capable of heroic deeds.

Let me tell you a story about the heroic performance of that woman which I witnessed. The Rebbe was critically ill. He had to spend the first two days of Passover in the hospital. The Rebbitzin insisted that she stay with him. She rejected all offers from people who were ready to substitute. Erev Pesach, late in the afternoon, she came to the hospital dressed up in honor of the holiday and instructed me and her son to leave. Of course, she prepared everything at home. She also brought along to the hospital the ritual articles for the *seder* and began to set the table. A stranger could not have suspected that the husband of this woman who was setting a festive table was dying. I had tears in my eyes. She did not. She said to us: gut yom tov, go home for the hour is late.

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Quite often watching her, I used to wonder what kind of a person this woman was. I could find no other answer but that she was a great woman in the heroic Biblical tradition.

She was great also in another area: that of kindness. She was a kind and charitable person. Her kindness and charity bordered quite often on the absurd. She had so much patience for strangers, for the poor, for the needy. Again, the model is a Biblical figure. She, like Sarah of old, was ready to interrupt her work, no matter how much engrossed she was, in order to receive strangers. "Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said: 'Quick, three measures of choice flour! Knead, and make cakes!'" Why was Sarah supposed to do all that? Sarah was not an idler. She was involved, doing her own work. Why should Sarah interrupt her activity and bake cakes for three bedouins whom Abraham had invited? Was it not paradoxical to expect Sarah to comply with such a request? And yet Sarah did not resent it at all. She interrupted her work and got busy baking cakes.

Ve-Torat hesed al leshonah; "and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue." Kindness is not always identical with greatness. As long as kindness is rational, logically warranted and justified by normal considerations, it does not have to be equated with greatness. When does kindness turn into greatness? When kindness reaches the dimension of the absurd and becomes *hesed* which, according to Maimonides, connotes exaggeration, too much, unwarranted and unnecessary. For example, if you respond to the request of a stranger who asks to spend the holidays with you, you perform a *good* deed, but not a *great* deed. However if the stranger who came for the holidays stays on indefinitely and you care for him as if he were a member of your household, then you are performing not only a charitable deed but a great deed. The more absurd, the greater the deed.

So, indeed, acted the Rebbitzen. This example is an incident from her life. Only such a woman is entrusted with the mission of carrying on the massorah.

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Third, she was a dignified woman (*ishah hashuvah*). A per-

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son without dignity could not have been entrusted with the transmission of *torat imekha*. The phrase *ishah hashuvah* is of Talmudic, not Biblical, origin. What does this phrase imply? *Ishah hashuvah* means a woman of dignity. What is dignity? Dignity means to be a spiritual aristocrat, not to be petty, to experience a sense of inner pride which is the opposite of vanity, to be able to tolerate suffering and pain, to ignore the coarse and forget the vulgar, to exert a magnetic pull upon people and to fascinate them, to command respect and, as a result, to lead without having the intention to do so.

The Rebbitzin was the personification of *hashivut*, dignity. She was a proud woman. She made you do what she considered to be the right thing. She was a born leader and one had to follow her. I never heard her raise her voice or engage in gossip. When she disapproved, she just frowned. She never used the imperative. Her request was always formulated in the form of a suggestion.

When she came to Boston in the middle twenties, the local Jewish community was not ready to receive a representative of the great Tchernobiler hasidic dynasty or to welcome the daughter of a small town rabbi from Bessarabia. Jewish Boston was unfriendly and inhospitable to newcomers, particularly if the newcomers brought a message which appeared to be so un-American. People wondered: *hasidut* and America — how can you combine both? Under such circumstances, the dignity of the *bat ha-rav* and her saintly husband could have been easily crushed and destroyed. Only the ability of the *bat ha-rav* to suffer quietly without complaint, her great tact, her absolute dedication to the maternal Massorah community which she represented, made it possible for her and her saintly husband to carry on and pass on both the *mussar avikha* and the *torat imekha*.

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Quite often when I extended “gut shabbos” greetings to her, I used to think of the great women through the ages who represented with wisdom, greatness and dignity the *torat imekha*. Consciously or unconsciously, I greeted not only her, but her mother and mother’s mother, the entire community of mothers who kept

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our tradition alive. I felt as if all of them had been assembled in the dining room of the Rebbitzen, as if Shabbat ha-Malka herself had been present there. The room looked the way I imagined Sarah's tent must have looked. It was enveloped in a cloud, and there was the burning candle; there was the *shekhinah*.

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The Talmud tells us, "They sent a message from Eretz Israel, 'Who is destined for the world to come (*eyzehu ben olam haba*)? He who is meek and humble, enters quietly and leaves quietly (self-effacingly), studies the Torah constantly, and does not claim credit for himself."

If we made a slight emendation and used the feminine gender instead of the masculine — who is a *bat alom haba* — the message sent from Eretz Israel would be the true portrait of the Rebbitzen.