

THE WORDS OF THE MASTER AND THE LIFE OF THE STUDENT

A sage's complaints may tell you a lot about his hopes. In his much-quoted essay, "On the Study of Torah and the Redemption of the Generation's Soul," R. Soloveitchik laments the shortcomings of contemporary religious life. Eschewing panaceas, he assigns blame to three negative factors:

Much is due to the religious atmosphere, suffused with superficial utilitarianism. Much is caused by the inclination towards ceremonialism, which is at times vulgarization of religion. And much is brought about by the lack of serious capacity for introspection and examination of world and self.

From the Rav's displeasure at what was wrong, we can infer what he deemed right and needed: a piety dedicated to truth and not tarnished by utilitarian calculations, a commitment to Halakha free of extraneous ceremonial pomp and vulgarity, and a community of self-examination and self-criticism.

It may be instructive to view R. Walter Wurzburger in the light of the Rav's judgment of his generation.

The Rav satirized those who argued for religion on the grounds that it improved family life, aided the digestion, or enhanced Jewish ethnicity. In the introduction to his second book, *God is Proof Enough*, R. Wurzburger observed that the *Emet ve-yatsiv* benediction following the morning reading of *Shema* begins with the truth of God's word and only later passes on to commend it as "goodly and beautiful." He writes—and I chose these words as the motto for the necrology by which *Tradition* mourned his death:

We do not begin with extolling the beauty, goodness or utility of what we have proclaimed. Our first and foremost concern is its truth. All other considerations are secondary. We cannot place our faith in fictions, no matter how useful, appealing, or attractive they may be.

TRADITION

In this vein, R. Wurzburger was bemused and saddened by a Modern Orthodoxy that measured the advance of Orthodoxy in America by the number of chocolates graced with Kosher certification, or that counted as a triumph for the integration of piety and Western culture the installation of a fax machine that could convey prayers to the Kotel.

Often, when we befriend people far from Orthodox belief or practice, whom we like or with whom we wish to ingratiate ourselves, we are tempted to lubricate the wheels of good feeling by saying things we do not mean. We dread the moment when such an individual puts us to the test by asking, innocently or slyly: “Rabbi, am I a good Jew?” R. Wurzburger was criticized, and even vilified, for being too tolerant—that is, for speaking to certain groups. He often represented Orthodoxy in meetings with Christians. On occasion he spoke at conferences of Conservative and Reform Jews. His job, as he saw it, was to speak for Torah, wherever this took him. In fact, his presentations to differing audiences, often prepared in consultation with the Rav, were models of concise, civilized and uncompromising communication of the word of God.

R. Wurzburger refused to be drawn into public argument about these activities. He did not believe that public argument settled anything. Nor did he care to score points with his Orthodox confreres by returning from these conferences armed with a robust supply of derisive anecdotes about his partners in dialogue. At the same time he was exceedingly careful not to say what they wanted to hear. It was his honesty and not only his intellectual acuity and civility that made him a trustworthy spokesman for Orthodoxy.

By way of illustration: Rabbi Wurzburger enjoyed a long friendship with the University of Toronto philosopher and liberal theologian Emil Fackenheim. It is natural that he would be invited to Fackenheim’s milestone birthday in Jerusalem, where he had retired. I came across R. Wurzburger’s congratulations among his computer files. His brief letter calls attention to one particular essay by the honoree on the religious implications of verificationism, a philosophical doctrine popular in the English-speaking world throughout the third quarter of the 20th century. R. Wurzburger reported to Fackenheim that he had recommended this essay, with happy results, to a young woman troubled by doubts regarding the truth of religion. He trusted that knowing this would bring solace to the author. Rather than flatter the ailing octogenarian by celebrating his brilliant books on the history of German philosophy, or recognizing his very influential writings on Holocaust theology, as many of us might, he focused on a contribution that enhanced *yir’at Shamayim*.

R. Wurzburger once told me that the only reason he majored in philosophy at Yeshiva College is that the classes fit his schedule. In his student years, he said, his life was filled with two preoccupations: the Rav—on the days he was in New York—and, the rest of the week, the struggle against the “grinding poverty” afflicting his refugee family that had escaped Germany at the last minute. The only reason he took a Ph.D. at Harvard, he said, was that the Rav instructed him to do so. One wonders how much these remarks can be put down to his famous self-deprecating humor. If the Rav hoped that studying philosophy would strengthen his prize pupil’s devotion to the primacy of religious truth, his guidance was richly rewarded.

II

The Rav expressed dismay at ceremonialism in religion in the aforementioned essay. A few years before, in a Yiddish newspaper article about prayer (*Morgen Journal* 12/13/1954), he had listed three objectionable aspects of ceremonialism. First, ceremonialism emphasizes the external over inner meaning; second, ceremonialism extracts human beings from reality and inducts them into a realm of illusion; third, the ceremony must have a master of ceremonies at its center, relegating others to spectator status.

In a way it is easier, and more satisfying, to teach the quantifiable external elements in halakhic behavior than it is to evoke the inner feeling that ought to accompany prayer or the *yamim tovim*. Unable to understand how any Jew could fritter away even a moment of Yom Kippur in idle conversation, R. Wurzburger insisted on inserting a *shiur* between Musaf and Minha. It is easier for a rabbi to measure the progress his congregation has made in terms of external practice. Surely R. Wurzburger fought successfully to raise the height of the *mehitsa* in two of the congregations he served, and otherwise sought to improve the level of halakhic compliance. Yet this was not enough for him. Often quoting the Rav, he would say that halakha, in the narrow sense of the term, provides a ground floor for ethical growth, not a ceiling. The aspiration for a holy and wholesome life entails going beyond legalism, and requires the student be attached to those who have internalized Torah, and that he emulate them. It is telling that his most seminal contribution to Jewish thought is probably the idea of “covenantal imperative,” the core of which is the conviction that religious ethics are learned through contact with authentic teachers of Torah. This is why

TRADITION

R. Wurzburger learned so much from the Rav, and learned it so faithfully. He never lost sight of inwardness.

Halakha, for R. Wurzburger, meant ethics. His family will tell you how fastidiously he shunned the pecuniary “extras” often regarded as natural byproducts of a rabbinical position. He spoke about ethics from the pulpit, at the risk of causing unease among some of his congregants who held, as he put it, that “rabbis should stick to Judaism.” It is not accidental that almost all of his philosophical publications focused on ethics and the meta-ethics of Halakha. His conception of religion was the opposite of ceremonialism because he drove his congregants to reflect on their real obligations in this world, instead of viewing the synagogue as an otherworldly spiritual refuge from those demands.

Like his mentor, R. Wurzburger regarded with distaste all pastoral tactics that lacked halakhic warrant and shone a spotlight on the dramatic performance of the officiating clergyman. Over fifty years in the rabbinate, he published one sermon, delivered at his first *Kol Nidre* in the pulpit. (The Rav made a jest about publishing sermons, and R. Wurzburger never repeated the experiment.) To the students who unearthed it, what stood out in this speech was the maturity of the thought and the precise elegance of the English—in the mouth of a speaker who had arrived on these shores only three years previously. More surprising in this sermon is R. Wurzburger’s utter avoidance of personal display. In 1942, a war was raging. Here was a man who had walked the streets of Berlin the morning after Kristallnacht, whose family had received visits from the Gestapo. How easy it would have been for the young rabbi to hold his flock spellbound with tales of his experience! For R. Wurzburger, however, this was not the theme of Yom Kippur, nor was it the purpose of the rabbinate. And so he spoke of contrition and sin, of wasted opportunity and ethical challenge, and of the promise and glory of repentance. As far as one could tell, he never lectured on his personal experiences in Nazi Germany and rarely reminisced about the past in private.

Of course, this strict curtailment of the personal, characteristic of R. Wurzburger’s practice as a spiritual leader, is not absolutely necessary in order to avoid the circus of ceremonialism. It can be argued that imprinting a personal quality on religious communication is sometimes valuable. Surely the Rav, despite his reservations about self-revelation, did not shy away from confessional statements in public. Yet the consistency with which R. Wurzburger avoided such tendencies in the pulpit testifies to his integrity.

III

The Rav observed that smugness is a besetting quality of the upper middle classes. Self-celebration is characteristic of our community. Our rabbis are paid to extol the virtues and echo the judgments of those who hire them. It is easier for academics than for pulpit rabbis to criticize the communities they serve.

In the late 1960's, upon his return to New York from Toronto, R. Wurzburger was critical of some aspects of American involvement in the Vietnam War. More than anything, he was suspicious of American policymakers' complacency and overconfidence in their ability to impose a solution to their liking. Like Ramban, he was concerned about the way even a justified war corrupts those who wage it. Many of his congregants resented him for disturbing them with these thoughts. Children accosted him in the street, telling him that their parents wondered why the rabbi did not support their president. In later years he was excoriated for suggesting that a peace based on territorial compromise in *Eretz Yisrael*, if only it were feasible, was preferable to perpetual warfare allied to maximalism.

R. Wurzburger understood that wise men and women of good will could disagree with him and that his own political preferences had not been handed down irrevocably at Sinai. On Vietnam he parted ways from the Rav, aligning himself with R. Ahron Soloveichik. Regarding the situation of Israel, he was loyal to the Rav's pronouncements on the permissibility of compromise. It is no secret that my views of American politics are more conservative than his, though I pride myself in being his student. His conclusions were not religiously authoritative to me, but his honesty in subjecting to moral and religious judgment positions vociferously held by the many and the mighty is an abiding inspiration.

Professors, I said a moment ago, have much leeway to criticize those in power. Neither academics nor rabbis relish being criticized. How one responds to attack is often a harder test of intellectual honesty than how one attacks others. A congregant, not particularly wealthy or pugnacious, but enamored for the moment with the political theology of Meir Kahane, once became so upset with R. Wurzburger's sermon that he stormed the pulpit. The rabbi's reaction was not to demand an abject apology to be followed by a suitable penalty, as was his right (and some would say, his duty). Instead, he invited the man to explain his objections at *seuda shelishit*.

TRADITION

Philosophy, at its best, is about self-criticism. It is the ability to stand back and criticize one's own arguments and inferences that is the mark of the philosopher and the lover of wisdom, even more than the doctrines championed or the methods propounded. It is sometimes useful to ask of a philosopher what error, in the work of reasoning, he is most afraid of. For R. Wurzburger, it was the danger of an incautious inference that claims too much for an argument. Such fallacies are endemic to the professional literature and even more rife when one is writing for a relatively uncritical lay audience. Therefore we find so often in his writing phrases like "when I say X, I should not be taken to assert Y."

IV

When he wrote "On the Study of Torah and the Redemption of the Generation's Soul," the Rav had been in the United States for almost three decades and had been teaching at Yeshiva University for almost twenty years. We look back at those years from the perspective of today, when the extensive careers of so many eminent *talmidim* testify to his impact. In 1960, the number was much smaller, and of these few had actually been in the field long enough to make a substantial record. One of the first and most prominent of these men was R. Walter Wurzburger. It is almost as if the Rav, in diagnosing the religious malaise that dispirited him, could see in R. Wurzburger a reason to hope for something more wholesome.

R. Wurzburger's working life extended another four decades. He would teach at Yeshiva for over thirty years and preside over *Tradition* for better than a quarter of a century. Lacking pretensions of grandeur or self-importance, he nurtured generations of rabbis and thinkers thirty, forty and in the end sixty years his junior. The unprecedented number and quality of the contributions to this memorial issue of *Tradition* is a commentary on the love and reverence with which he is regarded by his colleagues over the generations. We all owe a debt of gratitude to R. Reuven Bulka for his hard and patient work as guest editor.

Like his mentor, R. Wurzburger taught and worked as long as there was strength in his body. Six years before he passed away, he suffered a massive heart attack. He had published *Ethics of Responsibility: Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics* and dozens of articles. Yet he continued to maintain a substantial teaching and speaking schedule and even published another book called *God is Proof Enough*. In his later years, hun-

Shalom Carmy

dreds of students got to know him; the rest of us continued to learn from him. That he refused to retire, even when he could not walk from the parking lot to the classroom, defines his standard of vocation. He was fortunate that his family, and particularly his wife, Naomi, made it possible for him to end his career in the manner in which he was accustomed. In honoring him and perpetuating his legacy we also honor her. We hope that the work they did together will continue to comfort and inspire their sons and grandchildren for long to come.¹

NOTES

1. My remarks here are based on three eulogies: the first, delivered for the *sheloshim* at Yeshiva University, was published as “Where the Tree Falls: Remembering Rabbi Walter Wurzburger” (*Jewish Action*, Spring 5763, 2003); the others were delivered for the first *yahrzeit*, one at Yeshiva University and the other at Congregation Shaarei Tefilla in Lawrence, NY.