

On the Occasion of 25th Yahrzeit of Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz, tz"l

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My wife Ellen and I visited Spain a few years ago. We made a special trip to the town of Girona, which was once a center of Jewish learning. The great Rabbi known as Nachmanides once lived there and his commentaries are read and studied today. Girona was once a center of the kabbalistic thinking, the Jewish mystical tradition. Today, all that is left is a recently restored synagogue. On its walls are plaques bearing Hebrew inscriptions from the Tanach that attempt to preserve the memory of particular individuals from those many years ago. It is our natural tendency and an intrinsic part of our tradition to remember our ancestors, their achievements, and provide them with respect. The plaques say something, but they can never say everything that needs to be said.

At Keshet Israel congregation, at 2801 N Street, Northwest, Washington, District of Columbia, we have a 78 year old building that is each day filled with prayer and the sounds of a vibrant Jewish community. We too have a plaque and it is not very old. It is on the wall facing towards Jerusalem, just a few feet away from the Aron Kodesh, the Ark containing our scrolls of Torah. The plaque is almost within touching distance of the chair where the Rabbi sits. It bears an inscription in Hebrew and English.

The English says: Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz, tz"l " He exemplified devotion to Torah with acts of loving kindness for all whose lives he touched." "Our Rabbi for 34 years. 1950-1984." The plaque does not say use words such as "the Rabbi of this congregation or the Rabbi of the Georgetown Synagogue". It says, "Our Rabbi." Why so personal and possessive a statement.

I first came to Keshet Israel during the 1960's , and we were a lonely place. The Shabbat minyan sometimes had as few as 15 men. The congregation that had started in Georgetown near the beginning of the 20th century but the members and their children had moved to the suburbs.

The shul did not change to the fashions of the day. It remained basic because of Rabbi Rabinowitz. A place for the observance of traditional Judaism. Rabbi Rabinowitz devoted extraordinary amounts of energy to make certain that the shul maintained its integrity. He expended much energy to obtain a minyan for shachrit and mincha/maariv every day of the week. This was an astounding accomplishment with so few active members.

In the 1970's the shul began to attract the young persons who were moving to Washington. Many of those who came to Keshet Israel will credit the qualities of Rabbi Rabinowitz that brought them into the doors of Keshet Israel with the decision to live in

the neighborhood. These qualities set the tone for the shul then, and are transmitted, dor l'dor, from generation to generation within Keshet Israel.

Rabbi Rabinowitz believed that everyone who came to Keshet Israel was entitled to the full measure of respect. Rabbi Rabinowitz did not check their observance level or by what path a person came to Keshet Israel. He worked hard to bring many to Judaism who were Jewish but had only a vague idea about its content.

Rabbi Rabinowitz made everyone feel important. It was easy to provide respect to the Israeli delegation headed by Moshe Dayan and Ezer Weizman that came to our shul on Yom Kippur, on the eve of Blair House Peace Talks with Egypt. Possibly, Rabbi Rabinowitz inflated the dignity of some. For those of us who are attorneys, Rabbi Rabinowitz would invariably make the introduction, that this is a "prominent Washington attorney." He used the phrase so often that I began to think that it was one word, "ProminentWashingtonAttorney."

Rabbi Rabinowitz believed that each person had something worth hearing. At Shabbat Kiddush at the shul, anyone who returned from a trip was invited to share observations. Rabbi Rabinowitz was interested in Jewish life everywhere and what you had to say about it. I could understand this if someone had returned from Israel or the isolated communities of the Soviet Union, but Rabbi Rabinowitz would invite travellers to give reports on Jewish life in such exotic locations as Chicago and Boston.

Rabbi Rabinowitz recognized the qualities of a person. Rabbi Rabinowitz participated in the conversion into Judaism of someone whose skin color would have been a basis for legal discrimination in the Texas of my childhood. From what I have heard, there were some Rabbinic colleagues who were dragging their feet about participating in a bet din for this person. Rabbi Rabinowitz insisted that skin color was not a measure for a Jew. Rabbi Rabinowitz believed that the individual met every requirement for a full life as an observant Jew and arranged for a bet din. By this act of thirty years ago, Rabbi Rabinowitz brought someone into the Jewish community who has established a family that is a foundation of traditional Jewish life within their community.

The hospitality extended by Rabbi Rabinowitz was a reason for joining the shul. Many at Keshet Israel credit the hospitality extended by Rabbi and his beloved wife, Selma Rabinowitz as the reasons for becoming part of this community. And of the Rebbetzen Selma, she was always with him. I can recall a few occasions when they spoke to me on the telephone about some matter where I might have some knowledge or advice. I do not know if they had two telephones at home, but my recollection is that I was somehow engaged in a conversation with both of them at the same time. This is how they were in life.

I do not want to paint a picture of Keshet Israel as a congregation in perfect harmony. No congregation is nor is likely ever to be. One member, Harry Meyers, always felt the divrei Torah were too long. For Harry, a dvar Torah that mentioned more than the name of the Torah portion would probably have been too long. Harry Meyers was gabbai for

life , the chief fund raiser, and the decision maker at the shul for many years. When he got impatient, he would pick up his clear plastic cane, and make his impatience known by tapping his big ring on the handle of the cane or any piece of wood that was nearby. Rabbi Rabinowitz bore this impatience quietly.

Rabbi Rabinowitz had a beautifully, modest personality that allowed him to invite other members of the congregation to provide words of Torah. One person with great insight and talent was Irving Wilner, who had, like Rabbi Rabinowitz studied at the Lomzo Yeshiva.

Rabbi Rabinowitz had, on occasion, a style of presentation that was somewhat digressive. It was somewhat like the occasional page of Talmud where the subject matter abruptly changes because the Gemara is making reference to what appear to be unrelated topics. I recall with fondness one Succoth. Rabbi Rabinowitz began a discussion about Succoth. He noted that Succoth was a harvest festival. He then observed that the Soviet Union used the symbols of harvest in its flag, the hammer and the sickle. From the Soviet Union, the topic moved to a discussion of the People's Republic of China. Rabbi Rabinowitz was exactly correct in heaping blame on the communists, but how he had travelled from Succoth to that topic was dazzling.

The life of Rabbi and Rebbetzen Rabinowitz has also left Keshet Israel with the legacy about the imponderables of life. What I am about to discuss will bring back painful memories, especially to their children Asher Don and Miriam, and for that I apologize, but no understanding of the legacy of Rabbi Rabinowitz is possible without thinking about those awful times.

There is an element in this of a chassidic tale, simple in the telling, but filled with moral meaning. It is a tale that took place, not in Girona, Spain or in some distant time and place in Eastern Europe, but here in Washington and within the memory of some who are here. Its meaning we will never quite know.

In the summer of 1978, Rabbi and Mrs. Rabinowitz lives were filled with exuberant joy. First, they celebrated the wedding of their beloved son Asher Don in New York. Later that summer, their beloved daughter Miriam was to have a wedding in Washington. The entire community was invited to what was to be the height of celebration.

A reception preceded the huppah, the wedding ceremony. The guests were lined up to greet the kallah, the bride, and the Rabinowitz family. One by one, the guests came to speak to Rebbetzen Selma. Suddenly, Rebbetzen Selma collapsed. The rescue squad came and she was taken to the hospital. The huppah was delayed about an hour. Then, Rabbi Rabinowitz alone brought his daughter Miriam to the chuppah. The celebration and dancing followed. Nothing was said about the condition of the Rebbetzen. The Rabbi remained throughout the celebratory dinner following the chuppah.

None of the guests knew anything about the condition of the Rebbetzen. Rabbi Rabinowitz said nothing. I was later told that Miriam had asked her father about the condition of her mother, and Rabbi Rabinowitz' answer was " Mommy is in God's hands." That was true, but it was a fearful truth.

My wife Ellen and I were to leave the next day for the beach with our children. We awkwardly informed Harry Meyers, who said only, "I would delay your trip."

What followed was searing. After the funeral, Rabbi Rabinowitz decided that he would not accompany his beloved wife Selma to her resting place in Israel. With his heart broken, he decided that considerations for his daughter would outweigh his personal emotional needs and the desire to go to Israel to bury his wife. The Rabbi reasoned that if he sat shiva at his home in Washington, then Miriam could proceed through the days of her sheva brachas following her wedding, and, at the end of that period, she could join her father in his home for just one day of shiva. If the Rabbi went and did his shiva in Israel, then Miriam would then complete her own period of sheva brachas and then have to undertake the full period of shiva in her own home. I was stunned by the exquisite sensitivity of the Rabbi's choice. He weighed the halachic imperatives, his own emotional needs and those of his concerns for his daughter, and, characteristically, the needs of another was foremost.

For the next five years, the Rabbi did not permit his personal pain to affect his intrinsic qualities. He was sad and lonely, but he was committed to the life of our community.

A granddaughter who was given the name of the Rebbetzen was born to Miriam in 1984. A few weeks later, we were stunned one morning to learn that Rabbi Rabinowitz was no longer with us. An act of violence in the sanctity of the Rabbi Rabinowitz' own home had taken him from us. Only the assailant knows his own identity.

The police theory was that the harm done to Rabbi Rabinowitz was caused by someone the Rabbi had known and invited into his home because there was no evidence of forced entry or stolen possessions. So the very hospitality that was so characteristic of Philip Rabinowitz was abused to do him fatal harm.

At the sheloshim, I remember that Asher Don spoke about the gentleness of his father, how Rabbi Rabinowitz would not even swat a fly, but would cup his hand to catch the fly inside the home and then place it out of doors. The comparison was heartbreaking.

The funeral was held at Keshet Israel. The shul was filled with a grief stricken community, members of the congregation, students and teachers from the Hebrew Academy, and many Rabbis. The streets were overflowing. One Rabbi, a Kohen, spoke on a microphone from the street and his voice filled the shul as a disembodied presence in a vast emotional void. At the end, the streets were filled in respectful silence and for several blocks a procession followed the vehicle bearing Rabbi Rabinowitz on the first part of his trip to Israel that would end as he rejoined the Rebbetzen.

That same awful year, 1984, two other key members of Keshet Israel also died. Harry Meyers, with his own forceful personality, had maintained the synagogue's financial and physical existence. Irving Wilner who had shared his learning with Keshet Israel died while hiking alone through the hills of Jerusalem.

Keshet Israel is a vibrant congregation today. We have some members who were there during the days of Rabbi Rabinowitz but most were not. Our congregation attracts young members, many of whom meet and marry at Keshet Israel, establish families, and then move to Jewish communities with more spacious homes within this Washington area. Indeed, our reputation for shidduch making is so well known that a few years ago, I was confronted by a father in New York who said that his daughter had come to Keshet Israel for two shabbats and she had not met anyone. I responded that we could not give guarantees and that two shabbats seemed like a short period to achieve so important an assignment.

Every person who has come through Keshet Israel is affected by the acts of loving-kindness of Rabbi Rabinowitz. When the congregation was faced with the choice of selecting a successor, we spent much time defining the nature of the congregation. The traits that were Rabbi Rabinowitz and Rebbetsen Selma Rabinowitz are part of our self-image: hospitality, Torah learning, a welcoming environment to all who come through the doors, and concern for each other.

We have many ways of referring to our community. Rabbi Rabinowitz would often refer to Keshet Israel as the Georgetown Synagogue. This correctly describes our political and geographic location. During a long period of time, if you mentioned to anyone the shul in Georgetown, they would usually call it "Herman Wouk's synagogue." Herman Wouk is a world-famous author and devoted Jew, who lived in Georgetown and for many years attended the shul regularly.

I think what we learned only after Rabbi Rabinowitz left us, was that the shul properly should have been called, "Rabbi Rabinowitz' synagogue." That is his legacy.