Remembering and Appreciating Some Special Teachers

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I joined the debating society of Franklin High School in Seattle during my junior year. I joined because I was relatively shy and not a very good speaker. By rights, the debate coach—Mrs. Eva Doupe (pronounced Du-pay) shouldn't have accepted me. But she did. And that literally changed my life.

Mrs. Doupe had faith in her students. She encouraged us, challenged us, criticized us, honed our talents, forgave our shortcomings. She had high expectations, and she expected us to work hard. She was rightly regarded as one of the best high school debate coaches in the State of Washington, and her students did well in the various debate tournaments in which they participated.

Aside from improving our oratorical skills, she taught us the importance of preparing thoroughly. Each year, the National Forensic League issued a topic that all schools would debate for that school year. We had to research the topic and be able to make a strong case both for and against the resolution at hand.

I asked Mrs. Doupe, "If we feel strongly about the affirmative or negative cases, why can't we just debate on the side that we believe in?" She answered: The goal of debate is to make us think carefully about opposite ways of looking at the same question. If we must argue both the affirmative and negative positions, we learn how to value both sides. There are compelling arguments pro and con, and

we need to open our minds to seeing things from opposing angles.

She also taught us the art of “impromptu” speaking. She would prepare topics on slips of paper and put them in a basket. She then called on each of us to draw a topic, think about it for 30 seconds, and then deliver a five-minute talk on it. She gave us rules: Start with a catchy opening statement; formulate an outline of what you want to say; conclude with a strong line. Don’t bluff. Don’t pretend to know something when you don’t know it. Don’t speak longer than five minutes, but not too much less either. No er’s or um’s. Speak with clarity and confidence. Have eye contact with your listeners.

In order to succeed at impromptu speaking, she emphasized the importance of reading widely, thinking about issues in the news, drawing on personal experience, relating to the interests and concerns of the audience. Don’t speak at people, but engage with them.

As a Junior in Mrs. Doupe’s class at Franklin High School, little did I imagine that I would spend the bulk of my lifetime as a rabbi, public speaker, and communicator of ideas.

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When I was a senior at Franklin High School in Seattle, my teacher for Language Arts was Mr. James Britain. Even after these many years, I remember him and his class quite vividly.

I invariably got A grades on all my papers. But once, Mr. Britain marked my paper with a D. I think I learned more from that D than from all my A papers. What was the paper about, and what did I learn?

Mr. Britain often presented the class with challenging assignments. Once, he asked us to walk around the outside of the school building and to observe its architectural details. Another assignment was to study a painting and analyze it as carefully as possible—its colors, perspective, lighting, etc. His goal was to teach us to “see,” to focus on detail, to look for the usual and the unusual.

One day, he played a recording of atonal electronic music for the class and asked us to write our impressions. I was outraged by this “music” and wrote a scathing essay condemning it. This was not music at all! It was a cacophony of senseless

screeching, painful to the ear. Mr. Britain gave me a D on this paper. He wrote me a one line comment: “In order to learn, you must open your mind to new ideas.”

When I spoke to him afterward about my “unfair” grade, he calmly explained that I had entirely missed the point of the assignment. He indicated that I should have listened carefully, with an open mind; I should have tried to understand the intentions of the composer; I should have put aside my preconceived notions so as to experience the music on its terms—not on mine. Only after I had processed the experience with an open mind was I entitled to offer my judgments about it. Think carefully, don’t rant.

That was one of the most valuable lessons I’ve ever learned—and one of the most difficult to apply.

We all have fixed ideas on a great many topics. It is often painful to hear opinions that conflict with our sure understanding of life. New ideas, unusual approaches, unconventional artistic expressions—these are difficult to absorb. It is tempting—and usual—to shut off ideas that challenge our own views and tastes. It is very common for those who have different views to talk at each other, or to talk against each other; it is far less common for people actually to listen to each other, to try sincerely to understand the ideas and approaches of others. To open our minds to new ideas demands tremendous self-control and humility.

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September 1963 was the first time I got on an airplane. My friend Morrie Butnick and I flew to New York to begin our freshman year at Yeshiva College.

In those days, Seattle was a relatively small city with a tiny Jewish population. Coming to New York was an amazing change of venue—a bustling city of millions, and a large and diverse Jewish community. It was an exciting time, and eye-opening in so many ways.

One of the most powerful eye-openers for me was Professor Irving (Yitz) Greenberg, who taught Western Civilization. For me, and probably for many other out-of-towners, this was the first experience with a teacher who was an Orthodox rabbi with a Ph.D from Harvard. Dr. Greenberg was young, tall, somewhat gangly, with an engaging smile. To me and many others, he was a model of the synthesis

between traditional Torah learning and general secular education. One could simultaneously be a learned rabbi and a world-class historian.

Dr. Greenberg was a phenomenal teacher. His lectures were riveting. He engaged us in conversation, invited questions, and spoke with genuine enthusiasm. He assigned many and diverse readings, including readings from the New Testament. Some students objected to being assigned to read texts from another religion. Dr. Greenberg then announced that the readings in the New Testament were optional, and no one had to read them who felt uncomfortable doing so. But he reminded us that the New Testament/Christianity were basic components of Western Civilization and that it would be valuable for us to have some basic knowledge of them.

Dr. Greenberg was (and still is!) a unique figure in the Orthodox Jewish world. While deeply committed to tradition, he is something of a revolutionary. As a historian aware of historical process, he sees Judaism as a living organism that naturally evolves with time. He, and his wife Blu, were pioneers of Orthodox Jewish feminism. He was—and is—an articulate and often lonely voice for interfaith dialogue—not merely friendly conversation, but deep discussion of the basic elements of faith and spirituality that unite and separate us. His writings and lectures on the Holocaust are classics for those seeking to understand the spiritual and intellectual framework of that nightmare of human history.

Because he was a creative and original thinker, he was often marginalized by the arch-traditionalists who feared and resented his teachings. That made him an intellectual and religious martyr of sorts—and this very notoriety contributed to his great popularity among his students!

Rabbi Dr. Irving Greenberg taught us so much in his courses on Western Civilization. But perhaps the greatest thing we learned from him was to candidly face the challenges of being traditional Orthodox Jews while being true to the demands of modernity. To be an Orthodox Jew, even a rabbi, did not entail turning off our minds. Quite the contrary. The grandeur of Judaism is best approached with a searching mind and a yearning heart.

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Rabbi Dr. Maurice Wohlgelernter, known popularly among his students as "The Reb," passed away on Saturday night June 22, 2013.

I first met The Reb in September 1963, as a freshman in his English 101 class at Yeshiva College. He was an astonishing teacher. He demanded clarity in our writing, marking each of our papers with an overly active red pen. He crushed our egos with his harsh grades—but he taught us, and taught us very well. To get an A from The Reb made it all worthwhile!

His career was multi-faceted. He served for many years as Rabbi of a synagogue in uptown Manhattan. He taught English writing and literature at Yeshiva College, Baruch College, and later at Touro College and NYU. No one who took The Reb for a course can ever forget him.

He was devoted to the study of Torah and Talmud. He was in the first class of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and he was the one who coined the title "the Rav" for Rabbi Soloveitchik. The Reb studied Talmud all through his lifetime, and always saw himself as a yeshiva bochur.

He earned his Ph.D. in English literature at Columbia University, and went on to author books and articles on literary topics. He was a master stylist who valued the power of words. Well into his 80s, he was writing and publishing significant articles, including several in our Institute's journal, Conversations.

The first wedding the Reb performed as a young rabbi was for one of his classmates, Paul Schuchalter and his wife Dorothy. Rabbi and Mrs. Schuchalter are my wife's parents—my in-laws. When Gilda and I were married in 1967, The Reb recited one of the Sheva Berakhot. We retained our friendship over the years, meeting regularly for a cup of coffee, some literary discussion, analysis of issues in the Jewish world, and more. It was a singular honor and privilege to have enjoyed this friendship for just about 50 years.

I always thought that "The Reb" had another significance: the Rebel. And that is what he was. He rebelled against nonsense and hypocrisy. He had no patience for superficial glitz and inflated egos of overly comfortable establishment figures. He was a source of agitation to those who feared his sharp tongue, his utter unpredictability, his energy, his intellectual restlessness. Perhaps he was such an amazingly popular teacher precisely because he was a rebel who brooked no nonsense, who was committed to truth at all costs. He had a phenomenal sense of humor, but he took life and ideas very seriously.

I am grateful for having had the privilege of being part of his world. He was one of a kind, unforgettable. He will always remain—for all of us who knew him—a source of blessing, strength and wisdom, and he will always be prodding us to follow his inspiration in being devoted to truth, in being a rebel against shallowness, mediocrity, and hypocrisy.

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The Kotzker Rebbe (1787–1859) was an insightful Hassidic master whose wisdom continues to impact on thinking Jews of our times. He made an important observation based on the fact that the Torah was originally given and taught in Midbar Sinai, the wilderness of Sinai.

He taught as follows: The Divine Presence only rests on one who sees him/herself as being in the wilderness. No matter how much one has learned, he/she still remains in a place that is vast and untouched—i.e., there is so much more to know. And just as a wilderness remains empty and unproductive unless it is seriously cultivated, so a person remains empty and unproductive unless that person expends tremendous energy and effort to attain wisdom. Only such a person can merit genuine knowledge of Torah and the blessing of being touched by the Divine Presence.

The Kotzker Rebbe had little patience for pseudo-scholars and pseudo-intellectuals. He was repelled by the phenomenon of self-contented, self-righteous and arrogant individuals whose vanity made them think they were great and important. He despised sham piety, pretentiousness, and inflated egotism.

I was recently reminiscing with a friend about our years at Yeshiva College during the 1960s. One of the teachers who made a lasting impact on me (and on so many others) was Professor Alexander Litman. Dr. Litman taught philosophy in a unique way. He took a topic from Plato and suddenly—he WAS Socrates. He asked us questions, probed all aspects of the issue, he challenged our assumptions. He made us think! Other professors of philosophy may have given academic discussions about philosophers: Dr. Litman was a philosopher.

I remember Dr. Litman’s slow and deliberate way of speaking, his cryptic smile, the sparkle in his eye when he made a particularly clever remark. He would end class with an announcement: “We will meet again on Thursday…if there is a

Thursday.”

Dr. Litman knew a tremendous amount. But like Socrates, he saw himself as a searcher for truth. He understood that in spite of all that he had read and learned, he was still in a wilderness, far from achieving ultimate truth. He might well have identified with the words of Socrates: “And I am called wise, for my hearers always imagine that I myself possess the wisdom which I find wanting in others: but the truth is, O men of Athens, that God only is wise;…he is only using my name by way of illustration as if he said: He, O men, is the wisest, who like Socrates, knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing.”

The Kotzker Rebbe probably never read Plato, and Dr. Litman may not have been familiar with the teachings of the Kotzker. But both of these men, like all genuine teachers, understood the essential qualities required of those who strive for wisdom: humility, critical thinking, hard work. Both of these men, like all genuine teachers, taught their students to think, to reject glib and superficial people who pretend to be learned or wise.

Students are those whose minds are active, interested, searching. Non-students are those who are intellectually stagnant, vacuous, self-contented. Students always feel they are in a wilderness, with so much more to learn and so much territory that needs to be cultivated. Non-students feel they know a lot, that they have truth in their pocket, that they are smarter and cleverer than most everyone else.

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When I think back on my years at Yeshiva College (1963–1967), I am forever grateful for having studied with a number of truly remarkable professors. One of the best was Dr. Louis H. Feldman (October 29, 1926–March 25, 2017).

Dr. Feldman taught classical languages. He had very few students—there were four of us in my Latin class. When I registered for Latin, one of the upperclassmen warned me: Feldman is a very tough teacher; you should avoid him if you can. But instead of discouraging me, that warning whetted my curiosity.

Aside from teaching us Latin, Dr. Feldman taught us how to think critically. While I have forgotten most of my Latin, I have not forgotten his intellectual guidance.

In his lectures, he gave us the following notice. “Everything I tell you might be true or might be false. But if you ask me a question, I’ll always give you the correct answer.” We had to listen carefully when he spoke; and we had to use our critical faculties to assess whether the information he was giving us was true or false. If something sounded wrong, we had to ask him for clarification. His basic point was: Don’t rely on authorities, not even your own professor. Think for yourself; think carefully and analytically.

Sure enough, on one of his exams we all answered a question “correctly,” and we all were marked wrong. When we objected, since we only wrote down what he himself taught us, he replied with a wry smile: “Yes, but I wasn’t telling the truth then! You should have been more perceptive, you should have challenged me.” So we all received poor grades on that exam; but we learned a lesson that transcended Latin: We learned to be attentive, critical, self-reliant.

Dr. Feldman assigned us to write a paper that we would present to the class orally. Since I was taking a class in Chaucer at the time, I decided to write a paper on Virgil’s influence on Chaucer. When it was time for me to present my paper, Dr. Feldman sat in the back of the room. No sooner had I made my first point, Dr. Feldman raised his hand. “How do you know that Chaucer drew that phrase from Virgil? Maybe he came up with it himself?” I was a bit flustered, but replied with some confidence: “Professor Thompson, who is a foremost authority on Chaucer, wrote specifically that this passage was drawn from Virgil.” Dr. Feldman said: “I don’t care what Professor Thompson or anyone else thought. You have to demonstrate that in fact Chaucer was drawing on this passage from Virgil. Quoting this professor or that professor does not make something true.” “But he’s an authority,” I replied. “Don’t rely on authorities,” said Dr. Feldman. “Analyze things for yourself. Citing an authority doesn’t prove your point.”

That was a powerful lesson that has stayed with me over the years. Whereas it is very common in religious life to rely on “authorities,” Dr. Feldman taught us to think for ourselves. Yes, we certainly can and should learn from scholars, but ultimately we need to make evaluations of our own. Because rabbi X or authority Y said something does not in itself make something true.

Dr. Feldman had strict rules when it came to submitting our papers. He would deduct one third of a grade for every five typos/misspelled words/grammatical errors. We had to proofread our papers very carefully before handing them in; we knew that he graded strictly. The first paper I ever published was a term paper I wrote for Dr. Feldman comparing five English translations of the Aeneid. Dr. Feldman submitted the paper on my behalf to the Classical Journal—and it was

published during my senior year at Yeshiva College.

Aside from his brilliance as a teacher, he was a singular role model. He was not only a world-class scholar of Greek and Latin; he was a Torah scholar who could often be seen in the Bet Midrash well into the night as he studied Talmud. He was serious, but very witty; he had a ubiquitous smile and dry sense of humor. He was strict but not austere. He was demanding but not pedantic.

It is one of the unique joys of life to have studied with great teachers. It is one of the unique qualities of great teachers to expand the intellectual horizons of their students. Dr. Louis H. Feldman was that kind of teacher and that kind of human being.

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When I had been in the rabbinate for only a few years, I asked myself a painful question: What could I possibly do in order to succeed? I was working with as much energy and self-sacrifice as I could muster, and yet nothing seemed to be changing. Was I prepared to spend a lifetime spinning wheels or treading water?

I discussed my dilemma with Rabbi Meyer Simcha Feldblum, my Talmud teacher at Yeshiva University. Rabbi Feldblum reminded me of a talmudic lesson. When the priest in the Temple in ancient Jerusalem was grinding the spices for the incense offering, someone was required to stand by him and say: “Grind them fine, grind them fine.” The reason is that “The voice is beneficial for spices.” Yet what benefit could a voice have in this process?

Rabbi Feldblum answered: The priest would inevitably reach the point where he thought that his grinding made no difference and that nothing was happening. He would want to stop. So he needed someone to encourage him: You may think that you are not accomplishing anything, but you are perfecting the spices. Keep at it. Ultimately your grinding does make a difference.

This lesson applies to all who wish to transmit the teachings of Torah to their children, grandchildren, students, and members of the larger community. The work will often seem to be in vain, yielding no visible results. But we must continue our task with selfless devotion. Something is happening. We may not see the results now, and we may never live long enough to see the results—but

something is happening. The words and teachings of Torah are being planted. They will eventually take root. They will blossom.

Maimonides has taught that the religious person must be a model of human excellence: gentle, honest, friendly, and courteous. People should look at that person and wish to follow the example, recognizing that Torah has the power to create such ideal individuals.

Those who wish to transmit Judaism must strive to be exemplars of Judaism at its best. Being a religious Jew means living with failure, personal and communal. It means falling short, feeling lonely and misunderstood. But if we ourselves can strive to reach our ideals, and if we can convey our ideals to others with sincere devotion, we can lead lives imbued with genuine meaning. And that is success.

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Haham Solomon Gaon passed away on 19 Tevet 5755 (December 22, 1994). During the course of his lifetime, he impacted on many thousands of people. He served for many years as the Haham of the Spanish and Portuguese community in London; and was the founder and director of the Sephardic Studies Program at Yeshiva University in New York.

As one of Haham Gaon’s first students at Yeshiva University in 1963, I want to share a few thoughts about a man who was not merely a teacher, but a mentor and friend. Had I not studied with Haham Gaon, I almost surely would not have become a rabbi; had he not been a constant guide and friend, I almost surely would not have had a rabbinic career spanning five decades.

Solomon Gaon was born in Travnik, Yugoslavia in 1912 and studied at the yeshiva in Sarajevo. Both his parents died in the Holocaust. He received his rabbinic ordination from Jews' College in London. In 1949 he became Haham (Chief Rabbi) of the Sephardic congregations of the British Commonwealth. With Alan Mocatta, he is credited with revivifying a declining community. Beginning in 1963, he became involved (initially on a part-time basis) with Yeshiva University in New York, and was integral in the founding of its Sephardic Studies Program. While in New York, Haham Gaon was closely identified with Congregation Shearith Israel where he attended services regularly.

Haham Gaon had an uncanny understanding of human nature. He seemed to know what was on your mind without your ever having to tell him. He was one of those rare rabbis and teachers who actually cared about others with a fullness of concern. He held impressive titles and received many honors; but he was among the humblest people I have ever known. Whatever he achieved was not directed at self-glory, but was for the glory of God. He spoke to all people with respect and kindness. He was as non-judgmental a rabbi as I have ever met. His motivating emotion was love; his compassion and empathy seemed to know no bounds.

Haham Gaon seemed to have boundless energy. He traveled extensively; he visited many Sephardic communities around the world. He spoke at many conferences and scholarly gatherings. As busy as he was, he always seemed to have time for family, friends, and students. He and Mrs. Gaon were gracious hosts; they enjoyed being with people, sharing happy times.

Haham Gaon had a lively sense of humor. He also had gravitas. He knew how to carry himself with great dignity while still not becoming aloof.

Haham Gaon, like the classic rabbis of Sephardic tradition, placed great emphasis on prayer. He seemed to have a remarkable spiritual intimacy with the Almighty. When Haham Gaon prayed, all of us in his presence felt an extra spiritual energy in the room.

In an article I wrote on Sephardic models of rabbinic leadership, I referred to Haham Gaon:

As a young rabbi, I learned much from my teacher Haham Solomon Gaon, with whom I studied at Yeshiva University, and to whom I turned for guidance for many years thereafter. I once complained to Haham Gaon that I was called upon by various organizations and committees to attend their events and meetings. I felt I should be exempt from these communal responsibilities, so that I could devote more time to my studies. I thought the Haham would support my request. Instead, he gently rebuked me. He said: The people who devote their time and effort on behalf of the community need to know that the rabbi is with them. They need to see the rabbi, to hear the rabbi’s suggestions, to know that the rabbi appreciates and participates in their work. Yes, you need time to study; but you also need to devote time to working with members of the community. Haham Gaon was a Haver haIr, a friend of the community.

I went on to write that the classic Sephardic rabbinic model personified by Haham Gaon has been on the decline. “For a variety of sociological and psychological reasons, there has been a sea change in Orthodox rabbinic leadership in general—and an even more profound change in Sephardic rabbinic leadership. The upsurge in the influence of extreme Hareidi religious authorities has dragged much of Orthodoxy to the right.”

Haham Gaon represented a balanced religiosity, deeply faithful to tradition while deeply sensitive to the needs and feelings of modern men and women. Haham Gaon was a model of dignity, compassion, and total commitment to the People of Israel and the State of Israel. He did not attempt to validate his religiosity by adopting “Hareidi” style rabbinic garb; on the contrary, as a proud Sephardic rabbi, he refused to compromise his own traditions in order to curry favor among others. He respected Ashkenazic rabbis who were faithful to their traditions, and he expected them to be respectful of his traditions.

The broadness of vision, tolerance, spirituality and humanism of the Sephardic rabbinic tradition is on the brink of extinction. At the very moment when the Jewish world needs exactly this kind of spiritual leadership, we miss Haham more than ever.