

*Sacred Texts in Sacred  
Context:  
Images of My Grandfather*

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THE OCCASION OF A *FESTSCHRIFT* IN MY grandfather's honor evokes a host of complicated emotions. Foremost among them, of course, are an abiding pride in his life's accomplishments coupled with deep gratitude for having been the beneficiary of his learning and love for more than three decades. But, along with these feelings, arises an abiding sadness about his illness, which has robbed him of the ability to engage in those intellectual and spiritual enterprises which he has always loved to pursue and to share.

I know that, if he could choose, my grandfather would have told me to submit, if anything, a standard academic paper for this *Festschrift*, without discussing him or his accomplishments. But other admirers and colleagues have contributed such papers; I have chosen to utilize this opportunity to share some perceptions of my grandfather which may give some sense of the singular role that he has played in my life.

Because he had always (prior to his illness) insisted on beginning our conversations, however brief or lengthy, with the study of some text, it seems most appropriate to weave these thoughts around a well known passage to which he introduced me in my early teens.

The context of that introduction was a discussion of the "cosmic" significance of simple human honesty. My grandfather quoted for me Rava's celebrated statement (at the bottom of *Shabbat* 31a) that when we are called to account for our use of our lives, the first question we shall be asked is whether we dealt honestly with others. With time, of course, I understood that the passage is infinitely more complex; it is, in essence, a statement of the ideals of a Jewish life well spent. Of late, I have come to see it as an apt description of the life that my grandfather has led.

The text itself is misleadingly simple:

Rava said: "When one is brought in judgment [before the heavenly court], they say to him: 'Have you dealt honestly, have you fixed regular times for [the study of] Torah, have you engaged in [the commandment to] 'be fruitful and multiply,' have you awaited redemption, have you searched after wisdom, have you learned one thing from another?'"

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*Emunah: Honesty and Faith*

Although I was first introduced to Rava's catalog of questions in a conversation about honesty, a narrow focus on what might be called "business ethics" misses one of the phrase's subtle suggestions. *Emunah*, the Hebrew word employed here for honesty, can also mean faith. One of my most abiding senses of my grandfather and his interactions with others is captured by this phrase; but it is faith, not just honesty, that makes him unique. To say that a person acts honestly sounds today almost trite; but to find someone who approaches each interaction with a belief in the essential goodness of the other person is rare, indeed.

Part of what has long motivated my grandfather's profound liberal inclination, a world view of which he is proud and in which he has never wavered, has been his essential belief in the intrinsic decency of others. Indeed, I cannot recall a single instance in which he seemed angry at another person. When letters assailing his positions were sent to his home, he asked me to read them to see if I agreed. Once, when a particularly nasty and unprovoked *ad hominem* missive arrived, he showed it to me in a combination of disbelief and amazement, but certainly not anger. Because his own feelings are so deeply rooted in kindness, he has always assumed that that same is true of others. Honest? Obviously. But more important to me has been his passionate commitment to the notion that, simply by virtue of being, each of us has worth and deserves to be heard.

*Torah in the Broadest Sense*

Three of Rava's questions ask about study. First he asks us to recognize the importance of regular study; he then reminds us to search for wisdom; and, finally, he tells us to derive one thing from another. No one else in my life has modeled regular and consistent study more than my grandfather. In college and rabbinical school, when I was living in Manhattan, even a five minute visit on the way to some other appointment inevitably began with a "Come, look at this quickly." His favorite text for these brief interludes has always been Epstein's *Torah Temimah*. In retrospect, I suspect that it served the purpose of accommodating his love for Biblical texts and my interests in rabbinic works at the same time.

But anything longer than a five minute visit always involved more than the *Torah Temimah*. Eating at his apartment meant participating in an additional ritual before beginning a meal. Books, journals, articles, notes and the like all had to be piled up and removed from the dining room table before it could be set. I cannot recall a meal which did not require this preliminary ceremony.

Even when I was in rabbinical school, a period in which one could not avoid study even if one were so inclined, my grandfather suspected

that I did not study enough. In a graduate school version of "What did you learn in school today?" he took an active and suspicious interest in what it was I thought I was learning. If he concluded that I wasn't actually absorbing the material, there was no avoiding the lesson that would inevitably follow. Books would be pulled off shelves, I would be made to read aloud, and he would begin to teach. I cannot say that I looked forward to each such impromptu lesson, but, even then, I was astounded not only by his perseverance and intensity, but by his ability to add something significant and thoughtful to any subject that was raised.

Despite the widely acknowledged depth of his scholarship, my grandfather has always been more concerned with the relevance of his work. Perhaps it does not require taking too much liberty with Rava's remarks to suggest that, as my grandfather has "sought after wisdom," he has understood wisdom to be learning that made a difference in the way people saw the world. Countless times he told me, "There is nothing wrong with scholarly articles. But if the issues that you're exploring don't mean anything to real people, the work is useless." Those were "fighting words," to be sure, but he meant them.

To him, his popular works on Ecclesiastes, Job and Jewish theology, among others, were not diversions from his scholarly career. They were his ultimate *raison d'être*. If his books did not ultimately make classical texts more meaningful to thoughtful lay people, Jewish and non-Jewish, he felt that his scholarly advancements were devoid of meaning. JUDAISM magazine itself is a product of his sense of the crucial relationship between "wisdom" and "relevance."

I recall once showing him an article before submitting it for review and publication. When we discussed it a few days later, he made a number of suggestions, most of which I probably incorporated, but have since forgotten. One I will remember always. He said, "It has too many footnotes. Large numbers of footnotes don't mean anything. Think of something important to say, and say it. People won't remember the article because it has dozens of notes." I ended up submitting the article with all the footnotes intact, but, in the ensuing years, I've found it virtually impossible to hit the footnote key on the word processor without at least fleetingly remembering, and smiling, at his exhortation.

Rashi, on *Shabbat* 31a, explains Rava's "Did you derive one thing from another" as referring to the use of human reason. That the use of reason has been a central tenet of my grandfather's life goes without saying. But a conscious misinterpretation of Rava will permit mention of yet another characteristic of my grandfather's intellectual life, namely, the seamlessness of his application of all aspects of secular and Jewish learning to each other.

I have never met anyone with his general breadth of knowledge. His shelves are filled not only with Jewish works, classic and modern,

but with general literature, works on music, art and politics. And, in his incomparable mind, each of these disciplines speaks to the other. While discussing a description of the natural world, in Job, for example, my grandfather would almost inevitably refer to some work of music that evoked for him a similar image. During my college years, our visits to Manhattan museums left me astounded not only by the sheer breadth of his knowledge and interest, but also by the way in which he could synthesize issues of Jewish theology and Renaissance painting in the same breath and thought.

While it is possible that Rava had only Jewish learning in mind when urging us to “understand one thing from another,” my grandfather would simply respond that if appreciation of the Godly in our world is a central tenet of Jewish life, then literature, art, music and other acts of the intellect are no less relevant than more immediately obvious subjects. Good teachers transmit an appreciation of a discipline, and sometimes even teach us how to think. Great teachers, I’ve long felt, help us re-define what it is that we ought to know. In that respect, my grandfather ranks among my greatest teachers.

#### *Commitment to the Future*

Though Rava’s comments about the importance of raising children and awaiting redemption are, on a literal level, unrelated, they share a concern with the future. One involves contributing to another generation which can build and witness that future, while the second pertains to belief in what that future holds.

For my grandfather, the Talmud’s claim (*Yevamot* 62b) that “the sons of sons are considered sons” carries more weight than many such aphorisms. His seven grandchildren are as different from one another as one could imagine. Some of our decisions have brought him joy; others prompted strong disagreement, maybe even disappointment. But while he experienced the trials and tribulations of watching his grandchildren grow into adulthood, I believe that each of us has had the luxury of knowing that his love for us, like the love which the tradition attributes to David and Jonathan (cf. *Avot* 5:16), was wholly unconditional.

Love, for him, has never meant automatic approval. My brothers and I know that, in some significant fashions, he is among our harshest critics. But his criticism stems from his high standards, and has always been softened by our knowledge that, regardless of how we responded, his continued love was guaranteed. In that sense, his role has taken on some of the qualities of a parent, beyond those commonly associated with grandparents. Now that his interactions with us have become so constrained, we have just begun to appreciate fully the blessing of that parental interest.

But among all of his traits, the one that I most admire is my grandfather's heart-felt belief that the world is an ever-improving place. He has never been naive or pollyanna-ish; he simply manages to see the potential good in virtually all changes, and has always stuck to his faith that human beings, in concert with God, could redeem our world. I suspect, in fact, that he believes not only that we can, but that we will.

In recall that in college, as I read his books and articles that dealt with theodicy ("evil in God's world," as he referred to it), the positions he assumed seemed to me incomplete, unsatisfactory. They didn't seem to express the rage that I could not help but feel as I looked around the world. At first, I assumed some careless thinking on his part, though I surely should have known better. As the years have gone by, I've come to appreciate that he and I simply see the world through different eyes. Where I tend to see cause for outrage, he sees opportunity for repair; where I sense a God who fails to answer, he speaks of a God waiting to be sought. Whether or not I shall ever achieve his degree of faith in the possibility of a redeemed world, I do not know. That the power of his confidence in human beings and God has forever changed the way I see the world, I have no doubt.

One of the great ironies of my grandfather's persona is that, while most of the world has tended to see him, partly because of his physical stature and partly due to his unparalleled oratorical skills, as a powerful personality, I have tended to see in him someone who needed protection. I never got beyond the feeling that someone with such faith in other people, and in the intrinsic goodness of the world, could intentionally or inadvertently be hurt at any turn.

Part of the sadness, for those of us who love him, is that the last few years of his life have seen that fear realized. He has always been a man who loved to participate in everything around him; now, that pleasure has been taken from him. The full nature of his tragic circumstances struck me once again just a few months ago, as I was describing to him my work on a doctoral dissertation. He absorbed every word and then, in a halting speech that belied his erstwhile oratorical skills, simply said, "How I wish I could read." I, too, wish for that. I find myself, periodically, stuck in a difficult text or mired in a thought that refuses to crystallize, and instinctively I almost reach for the phone to call him. And I am struck, in those awkward seconds, by both the magnitude of our collective loss as a result of his illness, and by the blessing that it has been to grow up "sitting in the dust of his feet" (*Avot* 1:4).

May God grant him the comfort and peace of mind that he so richly deserves.