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THE ROV

A profile of the Rov *zekher tsaddik livrokha* should include comments on his persona, his teaching and his influence. This would have been the appropriate way to introduce him, with love and reverence, during his lifetime and remains appropriate for a retrospective presentation. What follows is such a three-tiered introduction; ואם אשגה. ה' הטוב יכפר בעדי

1.

To understand fully who this great man was and what he represented, it is necessary to recall that he was, first of all, a worthy heir of the *beit ha-Rav* (בית הרב), that most remarkable institution of modern Jewish life—vibrant, fascinating, invigorating, ennobling. The *beit ha-Rav*, sometimes referred to as *beit ha-malkhut*, (בית המלכות) was a focus of Jewish creativity and rabbinic leadership in Lithuania, and eventually in all Eastern Europe. *Beit ha-Rav* became synonymous with intensive, trail-blazing Torah scholarship, exemplary piety, and dedicated leadership. We know of many uninterrupted spiritually-aristocratic traditions in the last two or three centuries of Jewish history; it is fair to say that the *beit ha-Rav* in Lithuania is in many respects probably *sui generis*, really in a class by itself, the cradle of so much of Jewish life and learning in modern times. Rabbis of the *beit ha-Rav* were trusted mentors to countless members of the Jewish communities in Europe. People, learned and unlearned, rabbis and laymen, would refer to *beit ha-Rav* “*mit a tzit-ter*”, with deep reverence and great affection.

He was, I must add, *not only* a worthy, luminous heir of the illustrious *beit ha-Rav*, to which he frequently referred in his lectures and shiurim, for to this should be added the special individuating characteristics of Brisk, a simple place name that has been transformed into a complex of values, associations and ideals, a network of great achievements and lofty aspirations. Brisk became a code-word for conceptual precision and

rigor in Torah study, laser-type analysis of and commentary on baffling passages or difficult themes, economy of expression and clarity of exposition, intellectual honesty together with intellectual boldness, strenuous discipline and disciplined sensitivity—all this as well as a pervasive tradition of *hesed*. *Rav hesed ve-emet*, abundant in goodness and truth, was an uplifting, enticing ideal and a remarkable, irresistible reality. Reb Hayyim's acts of *hesed* are legendary; the Rov's *hesed* was bountiful.

2.

The Rov was all this and more, because his glorious heritage was filtered through his unique personality, through the original constructs of his mind and heart, through that new entity formed by his majestic Torah learning together with his all-encompassing philosophic, scientific and humanistic education. We need to be precise: even his sovereign mastery of the traditional sources of halakah together with his creative control of aggadah, kabbalah, Jewish philosophy, Biblical exegesis, and the literature of hasidism would make his learning unique—how much more so with the catalytic addition of the other ingredients. To be sure, comprehensiveness, impressively wide-ranging learning, was always the lodestar of *gedole Yisrael*—it was assumed that rabbinic authorities had mastered the vast corpus of Torah teachings; however, his knowledge and range of associations in the universe of Torah and *hokhmah*, his erudition and creativity, his powers of analysis and interpretation, his insight and intuition represent a *special* kind of comprehensiveness. This needs to be recognized and underscored, for even apparently devoted students are not able to acknowledge the true dimensions of his uniqueness. As we shall note, it is easier—yet unpardonable—to reduce the extraordinary to the ordinary; this is the case even if the ordinary refers to recognized standards of intellectual-piritual greatness. There are differences even among the great and we need to free ourselves from routinized thinking in order to perceive and appreciate these differences. The Rambam already taught us that among the “causes of disagreement” is the fact that “man has in his nature a love of, and an inclination for, that to which he is habituated. For this reason also man is blind to the apprehension of the true realities. . . .”¹ It takes special effort and honest concentration to transcend conventions of perception and expression, to recognize something new and beautiful and authentic—something beautiful in its original mode and authentic force.

upon every scholar to teach all the disciples even though they are not his children. In sum, *ve-shinnantam*, interpreted also as *ve-shilasham*, underscores the lesson that the ideal fulfillment of the mitzvah of Talmud Torah (to study and to teach) hinges on lucid, systematic knowledge which is all-inclusive. Seen from this perspective, it is clear why Talmud Torah is a special, open-ended mitzvah which is fulfilled with different degrees of intensity and creativity by different people.²

The Rov's virtuosic-versatile teaching is a vigorous, persuasive illustration of the truth of this interpretation. His Torah is comprehensive and therefore sharp; it is systematic and therefore effusive; his fulfillment of the mitzvah reflects his individuality. He occupies a position in Torah teaching which is his and his alone.

3.

What needs to be emphasized repeatedly, and unequivocally, is his uniqueness. His extraordinary Torah erudition together with his wide-ranging general knowledge, his dazzling brilliance, lucid, compelling analysis, phenomenal originality (which did not tolerate the shallow or the commonplace), astonishing intuition, almost legendary preoccupation with Torah (even when drinking a cup of tea or crossing the street—as was pointed out by my son Reb Mosheh), uncompromising honesty, unfailing eloquence, deep-seated sensitivity and lyricism, carefully-crafted philosophy (or *hashkafah*), and overpowering charisma—all combined to shape a remarkable Torah personality, unlike others whom we knew. This is the concept and reality of “לא כן עבדי משה” Not so my servant Moshe” (Numbers 12:7). It is a cardinal principle that Mosaic prophecy is not only of a higher order but is intrinsically different, unique, generically and qualitatively incomparable. Failure to recognize that Moses was not just another prophet was, in the opinion of Rambam, the error and sin of Miriam; she did not malign or slander her brother Moses but she, who was “older than he and had nurtured him on her knees and had put herself in jeopardy to save him,” did not acknowledge his unique status and stature. She thought that he was like the other prophets. והיא לא דברה בגנותו. Failure to discern precisely and acknowledge properly the true greatness of a person is part of “raillery and slander” (ליצנות ולשון הרע) according to Rambam.³

Many years ago, the Rov mentioned to me with words of high praise an article on Rav Hayyim Brisker by Rav Meir Berlin in which the

latter used the expressive, repercussive phrase לא כן עבדי משה to characterize Reb Hayyim vis a vis his contemporaries—indeed truly preeminent *gedole Yisrael*, whose light never dims. The point was that Reb Hayyim was unquestionably different even in this galaxy of great sages; routine praise, even if sincere, misses the mark.

The Rov subsequently used this same highly-charged phrase to portray his uncle the Brisker Rov and we may properly, with a full measure of intellectual rigor and accountability, honesty and discipline, apply it to the Rov. Let us listen to his words and learn from them:

ובכל זאת, לא כן עבדי משה . . . הרב מבריסק הלא היה מופרד ומופרש מהם; שונה בדרכיו וארחותיו. החואר גדול הדור אינו הולמו ואינו מבטא את האופייני לו. היחיד שבדור או בחיר הדור היה. עולמו המחשבתי, השקפתו, חסידותו, מידותיו ופעולותיו אינם נתפסים במטבעות שטבעו הספרנים. ההספרים שנאמרו אחרי מיטתו והמאמרים שנכתבו עליו קיצצו כמיטת סדום את מקוריותו וייחודו של האיש הזה. במקום להביע את אשר היה האיש, נהיה הוא את אשר רצו הספרנים לומר עליו בכליהם הלשוניים שכבר העלו חלודה.

What could be more appropriate for us as we continue to think about the Rov and confront the challenging and daunting task of portraying him as he was and not as stereotyped phraseology or conventional plaudits would depict him, not as he would appear as the result of self-mirroring. We all know that language, imperfect to begin with, is debased; we find everywhere inflated rhetoric, meaningless hyperbole, sweeping generalization, unbalanced comparison, insipid stereotype, perfunctory praise. The leveling process casts its net even on truly great *bakhme Yisroel*; they are presented as if they were all alike—same youthful precocity, same Torah expertise, same piety, same kind of communal leadership. In this scheme there is no room for individuating characteristics. As for us, there is no fear of contradiction in saying simply and forthrightly—without any trace of posthumous flattery or eulogistic license—that the Rov was different: different in his teaching, different in his outlook, different in his style, different in his behavior, different in his charisma. Indeed, לא כן עבדי משה.⁴

The truth is that it is not really possible for anyone to say, without proper qualification, that the Rov was identical with his father and grandfather—great tribute that it is, this would be an example of a kind of oversimplification which impoverishes our spiritual-religious history. Of course, there were basic similarities and common features but equally evident is the fact that there were essential differences and individuating features. Juxtaposing the semikah given him by the Kovner Rav,

Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, and the letter written about him by his father in 1935 is a good way of balancing and integrating judicious comparison to his ancestors with candid recognition of his own persona. The Kovner Rav underscored with passionate elegance the intellectual similarities between grandfather and grandson:

נחה עליז רוח זקנו הארי החי הגדול שבחבורה . . . כמוהו מושל בים התלמוד עד עמקי תהומותיו,
וכל רז לא אניס ליי. מעלה נסתרות ומפענח נעלמות ובוקע נתיב אורה בהלכות העמומות.

His father readily and emphatically acknowledged the unique endowment of his son—his unique talents together with his unique training, his erudition coupled with his analytical skills, his mastery of halakhah and of Jewish thought, his great creativity in the study of Torah and philosophy. The father introduces the son, whom he describes as having been a youthful prodigy and a distinguished philosophy student, in a way that allows his radiant persona to shine forth; he focuses on the fact that the diverse resources converge to emphasize the Rov's preeminence in knowledge and understanding of Torah.

After emphasizing his son's fame (לפניו והכריזה עליי) and highlighting the fact that he is really *sui generis* (הוא מין בפני עצמו) (התכונות מיוחדות), he writes as follows concerning the Rov's unique achievement:

בדורות הקודמים דימו שאי אפשר במציאות להיות תורה ושאר חכמות משולבים יחד. אמנם
בדור זה כבר פוגשים תורה וחכמה מחוברים. אבל באופן הזה גדול הדור בתורה באופן מבהיל,
כאחד מגדולי הדור בדורות הקודמים, ואם בשאר חכמות באופן גדול הנו היחיד ומיוחד, אין
ספק, כי הוא כעת יחיד הדור בהבנת התורה. הבנתו היא משקולת ודעתו היא המכרעת בכל
דיני התורה, קלות וחומרות.

In a subsequent paragraph he refers explicitly to his son's general education and distinguished achievement in philosophy:

היי עילוי וגאון בילדותו ועתה כבר כל התורה חקוקה על לבו . . . והלא אינו בעל מלאכה אחת
רכש במידה מרובה גם הפרפראות לחכמה, המעטירים אותו ונתנים לו לזית חן ויופי. השיג את
תאר ד"ר פילוסופי באופן הכי מצוין בהאוניברסיטה דברלין, והפרופסורים דשם היו בהתפעלות
מגדל כשרונותיו ורוחב הבנתו העמוקה שלא ראו כזאת. ומחדש גם בחכמה זו כגאון הדור.

The conclusion is powerful and succinct:

ואך הוא הגברא דכולי ביי, גדול התורה בתורה, אב וגאון בשאר חכמות, אחד המיוחדים
בכשרונות בין עם ישראל.⁵

4.

This uniqueness also underlies the abundance, the bountifulness, what almost seems to be the ubiquitousness of his teaching—a fulfillment and manifestation of (ולהורות נתן בלבו), (He has put in his heart that he may teach” (*Exodus* 35:34)⁶; the extraordinary ability to communicate ideas and insights is a special gift, a special dimension of genius, for not every person, even one possessed of great learning, is blessed with ולהורות נתן בלבו. The Rov had it and his inspired, disciplined teaching was like a spring flowing with undiminished, ever-increasing strength.

This extraordinary ability was felicitously coupled with his unflinching readiness to teach. I am inclined to suggest that his real greatness lay not in the majesty of his erudition, the force of his originality or the brilliance of his intuition. (People always admired the sheer pageantry of his learning and were enchanted by the elegance of its various manifestations and formulations). His greatness—intellectual and moral—lay in his extraordinary ability and amazing readiness to teach and converse effectively, vigorously and intelligibly *on all* levels; moreover, he did so sympathetically and graciously in a way that simultaneously satisfied and stimulated the listener. In order for the Rov to give a shiur, a derashah or a lecture, he had to engage in an act of צמצום, contraction; he had to restrict and restrain a mighty intellect and channel it, to select prudently from an awesome erudition and a vast reservoir of original insights in a carefully controlled way. The profundities of his learning and the subtleties of his thinking had to be unfolded slowly and methodically. Otherwise, students and listeners would have been overwhelmed, would have drowned in the sea of his Torah. His teaching would not have been intelligible—it would rather become a source of frustration and restlessness. He knew that teaching, no matter how profound, must be pleasant and palatable.

דבש וחלב תחת לשונך. כל שאומר דברי חורה ברבים ואינם ערבים לשומעיהם כדבש וחלב המערבים זה בזה, נוח לו שלא אמרן. (שיר השירים רבה ד:כב).

Every shiur, every speech, was crafted with consummate artistry. This is not only an expression of his literary-conceptual perfectionism but of his realization that if he was to teach effectively, he had to contain his immense learning and unbounded creativity. Style and exposition required sustained attention; hasty writing like shabby thinking was intolerable.⁷ He had to find the best way to combine felicitous generalization and lucid, compelling interpretation of detail, while interjecting

a sprightly parenthetical remark, an anecdotal reference or a lyrical note. Otherwise we would not have been able to learn from him. He, therefore, happily fused apparently limitless erudition with enthralling elegance and immense pedagogic skills. When he repeated an idea or interpretation—and the repetition was always eloquent—his intention must have been to guarantee that the presentation was properly textured and fully-nuanced, that one theme had been adequately developed and the transition to the next one was crystal clear. Ever mindful of his audience and the goals of his presentation, he used as much learning—*lomdus*, midrash, philosophy, history, literature—as was necessary and no more.

When I think of and see him, before my eyes, preparing and delivering a shiur, I am reminded of the following: The Gemara (*Sukkah*, 28a) says, in referring to the fact that Hillel had eighty disciples, that “the greatest of them was Jonathan ben Uzziel and the smallest was Rabban Johanan ben Zakhai.” The text then continues to depict graphically the greatness of the smallest, least distinguished disciple: he is described as knowing everything.

אמרו עליו על רבן יוחנן בן זכאי שלא הניח מקרא ומשנה גמרא הלכות ואגדות דקדוקי תורה
ודקדוקי סופרים קלים וחמורים . . . דבר גדול ודבר קטן דבר גדול מעשה מרכבה. דבר קטן
הוויות דאביי ורבא.

The stage is set for the Gemara to ask a crucial question: “וכי מאחר שקטן . . . שבכולם כך. גדול שבכולן על אחת כמה וכמה. If the smallest of them was so great, how much more so the greatest.” However, we are eager to know what remains to be said in laudatory characterization of the greatest; what is the extra dimension that may be identified and attributed to the most distinguished of the disciples. This is the answer: They said of Jonathan ben Uzziel that when he used to sit and occupy himself with the study of Torah, every bird that flew overhead was immediately burnt, *כל עוף שפורה עליו מיד נשרף*.⁸

In studying this remarkable passage and pondering its significance, the yeshiva student focuses on a legal issue to be decided in accord with the *Hoshen Mishpat* or *Hilkhot Hovel u-Mazik*: who has to pay, who is liable for the damage and the loss. The Kotzker hasid, conscious of and questing for ecstasy, marvels: if this is how the student is portrayed and celebrated, what is left to describe the teacher? *וואס איז שוין ביים רבין?* What unusual resourcefulness does he possess?

To paraphrase the Talmudic sentence, *וכי מאחר שהתלמיד כך הרב על אחת כמה וכמה*. We seem to have exhausted everything; every factual assessment, every metaphor, every category of praise has been used. Our

