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“UNDERSTAND THE YEARS OF EACH GENERATION”: A EULOGY FOR *MORIVE-RABBI HA-RAV YEHUDA AMITAL ZT”L*

About ten years ago, R. Yehuda Amital¹ was handed a draft of a book someone had written about his thought. I asked a person in the know what R. Amital thought of it. He said, “He didn’t like it, because it presented him as having changed his mind.” He paused and added, “But then he changed his mind.”

Another story: In 1995, I was present when R. Amital told a gathering of the *kollel* that he did not feel women needed to study Talmud; his grandmother and mother had been very pious Jews without it. A year or two later, he addressed a women’s learning program with the words, “You know, I used to think that Talmud study for women was unnecessary, but now I think it is absolutely essential!” Soon afterwards, Yeshivat Har Etzion decided to open a women’s division in Migdal Oz, where Talmud study is a major part of the curriculum.

With R. Amital, you never knew what he was going to say next. Even into his 70’s and 80’s, he maintained his dynamism, continuing to consider matters afresh and never losing the capacity to surprise. When the State of Israel turned 51 (and R. Amital was 74), he told us that it was time to reconsider the meaning of *malkhut Yisrael* (Jewish sovereignty):

Note: R. Yehuda Amital *zt”l*, founder and *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion, passed away on 27 Tamuz 5770 (July 9, 2010) at the age of 85. This eulogy was written during his *shiva*.

¹ For a short biography and bibliography of R. Amital, see <http://www.vbm-torah.org/rya.htm>. A full-length biography was written by Elyashiv Reichner, *Be-Emunato: Sippuro shel ha-R. Yehuda Amital* (Tel Aviv, 2008). Many of R. Amital’s discourses are available in English at Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/rya-articles.htm>. Most of the articles cited below can be found on this webpage.

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we should stop thinking about it in terms of security and nation-building, and start thinking about it in terms of establishing a dominion of justice and truth.² When he was 75, he was among the first to note and analyze the phenomenon of “new *Hasidut*” in the Religious Zionist community,³ and to formulate a detailed response.⁴ When he turned 80, he said it was time for a different understanding of “*reishit tsemihat ge’ulatenu*.”⁵

Why was R. Amital often so unpredictable? I believe it was because he was so grounded in reality, in life as lived. Abstractions don’t change; reality does. If someone lives in the realm of abstractions, he need never change his positions. But if a person has a feel for reality, for the shifting needs of individuals and society, he will sometimes need – if he is honest with himself and sufficiently courageous – to adjust his stand in light of changing circumstances and emerging trends.

This characteristic accounts for R. Amital’s special love and mastery of the responsa literature, a literature not so much of concepts or generalizations but of halakha as applied in real circumstances at specific times and places. This also explains why all his talks were peppered with stories, many of them regarding his own experiences – he viewed life through the prism of experience and not abstractions, and he valued his interactions with people.

His grounding in reality made him acutely sensitive to all forms of self-deception, such as escapist mysticism or the taking on of *humrot* that are not appropriate to one’s spiritual level. He also objected to forms of religiosity that removed one from reality, constricting life and closing one to the world and to broader society.

R. Amital’s grounding in reality and his sensitivity to shifting societal and historical trends often enabled him to foresee future developments and attempt timely action. Probably his major historical contribution is formulating the idea of *yeshivot besder*; he foresaw the need to strengthen the Religious Zionist community with a broad cadre of *talmidei hakhamim* and simultaneously to prevent alienation between yeshiva students and the state. His sensitivity to emerging trends – the rising threat of Iran, the looming conflict over the Jewish character of Israel, the growing

² “The Kingdom of Justice and Truth,” <http://www.vbm-torah.org/yyerush/ryakingdom.htm>.

³ “Commitment vs. Connecting: The Current Crisis of our Youth,” <http://www.haretzion.org/alei/11-02rya1.rtf>.

⁴ “From Commitment to Responsibility,” <http://www.haretzion.org/alei/12-01rya-resp.doc>.

⁵ “*Reishit Tzemichat Ge’ulatenu*”: What Kind of Redemption Does Israel Represent?”, <http://www.vbm-torah.org/yyerush/yeru65-rya.htm>; Tradition 39:3 (Fall 2006), pp. 7-14.

identification of Religious Zionism with militarism and the use of force, and the increasing alienation between different sectors in Israeli society and between Israel and the Diaspora – also led him (as far back as the 1980's) to take unpopular stands on political issues and even to change his position when necessary.

Beyond his grounding in reality and his sensitivity to the present and the future, R. Amital tried to give us, his *talmidim*, something invaluable, something that we could not have gained on our own: a sense of historical perspective. He lived Jewish history; he embodied Jewish history. He allowed us to see the miracle of the founding of the State of Israel through the eyes of someone who had gone from the depths of the Holocaust to fighting in the War of Independence, from the ingathering of the exiles to the tragedy of the Yom Kippur War. Who can forget his electrifying reading of the verses from *Zekharia* (8:4-6)?⁶

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall yet again dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand because of his old age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. Thus says the Lord of hosts: If it will be wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this nation in those days, it will also be wondrous in My eyes, says the Lord of hosts.

What is so wondrous about old people sitting on benches and young children playing? Yet not only is it “wondrous in the eyes of the remnant of this nation,” it is even “wondrous in My eyes, says the Lord of hosts”! Only someone with historical perspective, someone who was a “remnant of this nation,” someone whose whole family – “old men and old women,” “boys and girls” – perished in Auschwitz, someone who had prepared himself numerous times to die *al kiddush Hashem*, could convey the enormity and wonder of seeing old people and children living a normal life in the streets of Jerusalem.

R. Amital's historical perspective also gave his students a sense of proportion. On the one hand, seeing old people in Jerusalem is wondrous; on the other hand, no matter how bad things are now, they have been much worse, and therefore one must try to see the broader picture. And once one gains some of R. Amital's sense of history, one cannot help but share his opposition to “*ahshavism*” – the desire to have everything now, whether “Peace Now” or “Mashiah Now” or one big military operation

⁶ “This Day God Has Made – Let Us Rejoice and Be Glad in It”, <http://www.vbm-torah.org/yyerush/atz56.htm>.

that will supposedly solve all of Israel's problems.⁷ Nothing is that simple: change is a process; issues are multifaceted; and reality can be recalcitrant. In all areas of life – religious, social, educational, etc. – he had nothing but disdain for quick, easy, black-and-white solutions to complex problems.

R. Amital's ability to maintain a proper perspective, a sense of proportion, and a grounding in reality fused with a deep faith in his teachings on prayer.⁸ He taught us that prayer should be natural, like a conversation (“*Va-yetse Yitshak lasuah ba-sadeh*”); that it defines man (who is called a “*mav'eh*” in the mishna in *Bava Kama*); that it is a necessity for man; that it is a sublime pleasure. He was realistic about prayer: he taught that there is value even to rote prayer, and that *kavvana* is elusive. He liked to recount that when the students of the Baal Shem Tov asked him how they could know whether a certain person was a true *tsaddik* or a charlatan, the Besht answered: “Ask him whether he has a *segula* against foreign thoughts intruding on prayer. If he says yes, you can be sure he is a charlatan.”

Yet even though R. Amital was opposed to all kinds of *segulot*, shortcuts and magic solutions, he advocated the Hasidic technique of “raising” foreign thoughts: “You must translate the problem which occupies your thoughts into the language of prayer. Whether you are thinking about business or family or anything else, God is certainly able to help you in solving the problem. Don't banish this ‘foreign thought’ from your mind; on the contrary – keep it with you, and turn that very thought into a prayer.”

What we learned most of all from R. Amital was the *power* of prayer – not merely when he talked about it, but especially when he served as *sheliah tsibbur* for *Selipot* and *Yamim Noraim*. You could not listen to him without realizing that he wasn't praying for himself; he was pleading with God to have mercy on *Am Yisrael*. It wasn't the tunes or his pleasant voice that swept up the *tsibbur*; it was his genuineness, sincerity and authenticity. His prayers swelled up from the depths of his heart, and found their way into the hearts of his *talmidim*.

R. Amital's love of prayer and song, his frequent recourse to Hasidic tales and teachings, his humility and directness, his love for “simple Jews,” his warm and outgoing nature – all these led people to characterize him as a Hasid.⁹ If so, what kind of Hasid was he? Even if he emulated the *ahavat Yisrael* of R. Levi Yitshak of Berditchev, the psychological

⁷ “The Social Challenges Facing the State of Israel,” <http://www.haretzion.org/alei/10-2social-rya.rtf>.

⁸ “I am Prayer,” <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/values/10values.htm>.

⁹ R. Mordechai Breuer, “*Kiddush Hashem ke-Tokhen shel Hayyim*,” <http://www.etzion.org.il/dk/1to899/738daf.htm>.

sensitivity of R. Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apta,¹⁰ the intellectualism of Habad, and the depth of R. Tsadok Hacoheh of Lublin, I think that his *Hasidut* was closest to Kotzk.

Like the Kotzker Rebbe, R. Amital cherished truth above all and had a visceral, almost allergic, reaction against pretense and hypocrisy. (It is no coincidence that the song *talmidim* associate with him most closely is “*Ve-taher libenu le-ovdekha be-emet*,” Purify our hearts to serve You in truth.) Like the Kotzker Hasidim, about whom it was said that they performed *mitsvot* in private but not in public, he disdained external displays of piety. He felt such forms of “*hitsoniyut*” were tainted with the desire for public acclaim but lacked inner authenticity; they were like writing checks without sufficient funds to cover them.

The Kotzker Rebbe, furthermore, provided a cornerstone of R. Amital’s educational philosophy.¹¹ Commenting on the verse, “And you shall be to Me a holy people” (Shemot 22:6), the Kotzker explained: “God, as it were, is saying here: Angels I have in sufficient quantity; I am looking for *human beings* who will be holy *people*.”

Like the Kotzker, R. Amital was always pithy and could also be sharp at times. When his daughter asked him why throngs of people came for advice to a certain rabbi and not to him, he answered, “*Ka-nireh she-ani lo zakuk le-zeh*” (Apparently, I don’t need it). This also reveals another similarity: like the Kotzker, he did not want to be a *rebbe*. Even though he was overflowing with charisma, he did not want students to be dependent on him or to imitate him; he wanted them to think for themselves; he wanted them to *be* themselves. (This, I believe, is one of the reasons he lived in Jerusalem and not in Alon Shevut: had he lived near the yeshiva, available to his students at all hours, they would have tried to make him into a *rebbe*.)

Although R. Amital taught *Hasidut* long before it was popular in the Religious Zionist world, and although he had certain Hasidic tendencies, he had mixed feelings, as mentioned above, regarding the recent “neo-Hasidic” trend in Religious Zionist circles in Israel. Although he acknowledged that it expressed a legitimate critique of contemporary religiosity, and that it was driven by a desire for authenticity, he also felt that it often devolved into a form of spiritual thrill-seeking that ignored the needs of society and lacked a firm commitment to *mitsvot*. R. Amital frequently quoted a lost midrash cited in the introduction to *Ein Yaakov*: the most

¹⁰ “My Cow, My Cow,” <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/sichot/shemot/17-59ytro.doc>.

¹¹ “Lecture #17: Humanity,” <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/values/17values.htm>.

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encompassing principle of the Torah, the cornerstone of Judaism, is not “*Shema Yisrael*” nor “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” but rather “You shall bring one lamb in the morning and one lamb in the evening.” The daily sacrifice, the routine of commandments, normal life and not peak experiences – these are the foundations of religious existence.

This emphasis on daily sacrifice leads us to one of his most central teachings: “*Ein patentim*.” There are no shortcuts, no tricks, no magic solutions in religious existence, in education, or in any other area of life. There is just hard work and commitment to slow, gradual improvement. Yet even though he emphasized the importance of routine and of incremental change, he often found the poetry within the prose within the prose of religious existence, and one could sense the sweetness, beauty, freshness and newness that suffused his Torah and his mitsva observance.

The word that most often comes to mind when I think of R. Amital is wisdom. I don’t mean that he was *smart* (though he was very, very smart); I mean that he was *wise*. He understood life, he understood people, he saw several steps ahead, he considered consequences, and he saw the big picture. For example, he advised a couple who wanted to start keeping *mitsvot* to follow the model of the three *mitsvot* given to the Jews at Mara, before they reached Mt. Sinai (see Rashi, *Shemot* 15:25):

- 1) Shabbat: If it is too hard to be a Jew seven days a week, then try at least one day a week.
- 2) Honoring parents: Pick any *mitsva bein adam le-havero* and observe it scrupulously. It is important to stress that halakha does not relate only to matters between man and God, but also legislates interpersonal ethics.
- 3) *Para aduma*: Choose a mitsva you don’t understand and observe it as well. One must realize that despite all the rationales behind the *mitsvot*, ultimately we cannot understand everything and we do not base our observance only on our rational appreciation of the *mitsvot*.¹²

Of course, his wisdom is clearly manifested in two of his most startling and far-sighted decisions: inviting R. Aharon Lichtenstein to serve as *rosh yeshiva*¹³ and appointing his successors several years before his

¹² “*Chok u-Mishpat*,” <http://vbm-torah.org/archive/sichot/shemot/16-57beshal.doc>.

¹³ Shortly after R. Amital founded Yeshivat Har Etzion, he invited R. Aharon Lichtenstein to serve *instead* of him as *rosh yeshiva*. R. Lichtenstein agreed to serve as *rosh yeshiva*, but only *alongside* R. Amital. Thus was born their astonishing partnership of nearly four decades.

retirement. The first made his yeshiva into what it is; the second ensured its continuity. By bringing in a *rosh yeshiva* so different from himself, R. Amital ensured that his students would learn to see the merits of differing positions, to think broadly and with complexity. This is also the reason he declared that although the writings of Habad, R. Nahman of Breslov, and R. Kook would be taught in his yeshiva, they would not be taught by “*hasidim*” of these approaches, since the latter tended to believe that their way is the exclusive truth and all other approaches are less legitimate.

When I sat down to make a list of the characteristics, ideas and *divrei Torah* of R. Amital I wanted to mention in this essay, my list grew within minutes to an unmanageable length. (I gave up after I reached 56 points.) R. Amital was such a broad and multifaceted person that I cannot hope to paint a comprehensive portrait. I have barely touched on his qualities as a *lamdan*, *posek*, leader, or master communicator; nor on his commitment to morality, *menschlichkeit*, *kiddush Hashem*, and common sense; nor on his *ahavat ha-Torah*, *yirat Shamayim*, and yearning for *devekut*; nor on his harmonious integration of openness and conservatism, vision and pragmatism, simplicity and greatness. The composite portrait painted by his students, colleagues, family members and admirers in their eulogies will round out the picture.¹⁴

Since R. Amital generally conveyed his thought in discourses on holidays and *parashat ha-shavua*, I would like to conclude by citing a *siha* on *parashat Devarim* (the *parasha* read at the conclusion of his *shiva*). R. Amital asked why Moshe’s speech is prefaced by such a lengthy description of its exact place (“in the desert, facing Suf, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hatserot and Di-Zahav”), time (“in the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first day of the month”), and historical circumstances (“after he had slain Sihon, king of the Emorites, who dwelled in Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan, who dwelled in Ashtarot in Edre’i”). He answered that the Torah wishes to teach us that “When a person involves himself in Torah and *mitsvot*, he must never allow himself to be cut off from the place and time in which he exists. He must look around and think how best to apply his Torah learning to the circumstances around him.”

R. Amital was animated by the sense that the Torah is relevant to each generation. The poles for carrying the Ark of the Covenant were never to be removed, he explained, in order to symbolize the Torah’s portability, its relevance under all circumstances. In this context (as in many others),

¹⁴ A collection of eulogies can be found at Yeshivat Har Etzion’s website: <http://www.haretzion.org/component/content/article/73-hespedim>.

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he quoted the *Hiddushei ha-Rim*'s comment on the verse "Understand the years of each generation" (*Devarim* 32:7): Every generation is granted a new understanding of the Torah, one that is appropriate to the generation and necessary to address its challenges. It is the function of the *tsaddik* in each generation to uncover this understanding and teach it to his generation.

Nothing could better summarize R. Amital's mission and accomplishment.