

# Eulogy for Rabbi Nison Alpert

Iyar 17, 5746-May 26, 1986

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"V'asher yagorti yavo li, that which I feared is come upon me" (Job 3:25). Despite the absence of the element of surprise, the demise of Rabbi Nison Alpert has shocked all of us, leaving us devastated and bereft.

Only a short while ago, from this very platform, Rabbi Alpert eulogized his mentor, teacher, and *rebbe*, the late much lamented Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, of blessed memory. There is one sentence in that tribute which I shall never forget: "Reb Moshe was the most normal of all the *gedolim*." That very statement tells us as much about the *talmid* as about the *rebbe*. Reb Nison was brilliantly, extraordinarily normal. Like an artist, or perhaps an alchemist, he pulled together a wide range of unusual talents and superlative characteristics, and balanced them exquisitely, so that the result was a masterpiece of normalcy and human decency.

Reb Nison was, of course, an unusually capable *talmid hakham*. His scholarship had both breadth and depth. What a pity that he passed away just as he was poised at the threshold of his most creative and productive years! More important: his learning penetrated his very being.

The *baal ha-Tanya* adds to the classical distinction between the Written Law and Oral Law, that there are two kinds of Written Law or *Torah shebe'ktav*. One is the usual writing, ink upon parchment (*d'yo al gabei kelaph*), such as our usual *Sifrei Torah*. The second is represented by the two tablets or *lukhot* which Moses brought down from Sinai. Here the words were not written, but engraved—*chakikah*. The difference between these two forms of the Written Law is that the first consists of two separate substances, ink and parchment, brought together, whereas the second involves only one substance or *chephtzah* (*Lekutei Torah, Bechukotei*).

The Torah that Reb Nison learned and taught was not that of writing, but of engraving: He and his Torah were one *chephtzah*, they merged into one substance. Torah became part and parcel of his personality. When my late and much lamented predecessor, Dr. Samuel Belkin, of blessed memory, invited Reb Nison to our Yeshiva and gave him immediately a high *shiu*, it was because Reb Nison Alpert was a man who not only possessed Torah, but became identified with it. Torah was not *written* on the tablets of his heart, but *engraved* upon them. It is this special quality of a fully integrated Torah personality that he radiated as Rosh Yeshiva, as Head of the Kollel *Le'Horaah*, and as co-

editor of the Jubilee Volume of Halakhah recently published in honor of our 100th anniversary.

Rabbi Alpert was not only a *talmid chacham*, a wise scholar, but also a *talmid hechakam*, the disciple of a great sage. His discipleship to Reb Moshe Feinstein was an extremely important part of his life. His devotion to Reb Moshe was not only intellectual and scholarly, but emotional and spiritual as well.

It is worth, in this connection, quoting a passage from the Zohar (III, 287) which has special relevance as well for Lag Ba'Omer which we welcome tonight:

*On the day that R. Shimon bar Yohai was to depart from the world, the Sages came to visit him, and the house was filled. Whereupon, R. Shimon began to weep, and said: "Once before I was on my death bed, and only my student R. Pinchas b. Yair came to see me all by himself. He was surrounded by a flame before me. Now I see that the fire has ceased and the house is full . . ."*

R. Shimon taught by his distress that greatness does not always follow numbers; that the passion of holiness often characterizes single individuals rather than the crowds.

Reb Moshe had many fine students, amongst them many brilliant *talmidei hakhamim*. But Reb Nison was the R. Pinchas b. Yair to Reb Moshe's R. Shimon bar Yohai. When he served Reb Moshe as his greatest disciple, he shown, he radiated—he was enveloped in a blaze of Torah.

However, fire comes in two kinds: one is the fire that is characteristic of the *mizbeach*, the altar; it is a fire that consumes the sacrifice that is laid upon it. The second is the fire of the *menorah*, the candelabrum. This fire does not consume; it illuminates and enlightens.

Rabbi Alpert's flame was that of the *menorah*. It was not the fire of zealotry, but that of love which, as King Solomon taught us, *Mayim rabim lo yochlu lechabot et ha-ahavah*—many waters cannot extinguish such love. His flame was not raging, but soft. He sought not to overwhelm, but to persuade, not to frighten but to inspire. An ordinary *lamdan* can sometimes rise to the level of being enveloped in the flame of the *mizbeach*. But one who accepts the responsibility of rendering decisions, of being a *posek*, requires the more deliberate, subtle, softer, glowing light of the *menorah*. The *posek* must bank the flames of his intellectual passion, and learn halakhic moderation in order to be able

to render a decision which accords with the truth of Torah: *havo metunim b'din*, this too Reb Nison learned from his Rebbe, Reb Moshe. And so he had not only depth but also breadth.

This little *licht'l* of personal warmth will always remain with us who cherished him as the unforgettable impression he made upon us. He was a man of exquisite sweetness to colleagues and students alike. What a great father and husband he must have been! His warmth was more than a personal disposition or temperament, but a divine gift. Otherwise, I wonder if he could have succeeded in keeping it so constant. Clearly, he had to fight in order to maintain such a balanced generosity, kindness, warmth. He led a difficult life—years of administering to a sick father, the loss of a young son which broke his heart as well as that of his wife and children. Oh, how many *nisyonot* did Reb Nison have to endure! And yet, he never became bitter; he succeeded brilliantly in character as well as in intellect.

A few months ago Reb Nison shared with me an insight—I do not know if he quoted it in the name of someone else or it was his original interpretation—which is eminently worthy of repetition here. The *Talmud* (*Hag. 14b*) tells of the four giants amongst the *tannaim* who were privileged to enter the *Pardes*, the "orchard" which is the symbol for esoteric learning. One glanced—and died. Another glanced—and lost his mind. A third entered—and lost his faith, becoming a heretic. Only the fourth, R. Akiva, entered and departed in peace: *nichnas b'shalom v'yatzah b'shalom* (such is the variant reading in Midrash R. Shir ha-Shirim). Why, asks Reb Nison, did R. Akiva deserve to be the only one to "leave in peace?" Because, he answered, he was also the one who "entered in peace." Only if you come with peaceful intentions will the result be peaceful and whole.

Reb Nison did not realize it at the time, but all of us who were privileged to hear him now understood it quite well. He was speaking about himself as much as about anyone else. He was a *nichnas b'shalom*. He came into the world, to his Yeshiva, to every relationship that he established—with a gift of gentleness, kindness, good will, peacefulness. And now, at the end of his all too brief sojourn on this tormented planet, he is also a *yatzah b'shalom*: he departs in utter peace, leaving his admiring, respecting, loving, cherishing family, colleagues, and students bereaved and filled with grief.

*V'yanuach b'shalom al mishkavo, amen.*