

MAX STERN

An Appreciation

by

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I always felt that
Max Stern
would never die;
he was not the type.

Of course, intellectually I knew that no one lives forever, but emotionally I felt that this powerful man, so much in command, would be immortal and remain a permanent part of the landscape of my life. Does one expect to get up in the morning and find the Empire State Building gone, or the Statue of Liberty, or Mount Everest?

For me—who knew him intimately for 24 years this week as his rabbi, co-worker, and friend, and to whom he was a father figure and supporter and symbol of security—his death is unthinkable.

Yet, he has indeed left us and his death is a terrible blow for his family, for whom this is the second severe bereavement in less than a month.

In death, as in life, he was quite remarkable. His demise had about it the quality of the death of a Biblical patriarch. He said goodbye to many of his family and his friends. Just a week

ago today I was in his home to see him. Rabbi Morris Talansky of Shaare Zedek Hospital happened to be there at the same time. He sat up in his bed and said to Rabbi Talansky, "Keep up your good work and you will be a happy and healthy Jew." To me he said, "Continue on your way with Yeshiva University. We've been dear friends for many years. Make Yeshiva into something all of us can be proud of." And we shook hands, and we embraced, and we kissed goodbye. . .

Who was this extraordinary man, this strange bundle of contrasts that somehow made of him much more than the sum of his parts? What manner of man was this powerful, sometimes autocratic lion who could be gentle as a lamb, sentimental, a soft touch; this mighty patriarch who loved children and played with them; this tycoon who felt humble and reverent to scholars; this hardheaded businessman with the big heart who dreamed fantastic dreams of education and knowledge and Torah?

Much has been said of his philanthropy, and a great deal is known of his communal leadership. But charity was only one aspect, although the most prominent element, of this singular, complex, creative, and vibrant personality.

Let me tell you a story. In 1964, Max Stern was in Philadelphia for extremely serious abdominal surgery. He returned to New York with strict instructions from his physicians to have long bed-rest. The day he came back to this city,

my wife called the home intending to ask Mrs. Stern how her husband was feeling. Instead, he answered the phone himself. My wife was shocked and reproached him for answering the phone. His apology was direct: "I answer the phone myself because if someone is calling who needs help for himself or on behalf of some organization, he should not feel that I am avoiding him or that he has to go through a whole bunch of people in order to reach me. . . ."

That was Max Stern—a man of great loyalties, especially to institutions he respected, but also a man of human simplicity and simple humaneness, a Mensch who had the human touch, the element of *hesed*, of grace.

Max Stern was a builder and mover in the world of industry. His middle-class parents were prominent in the communal leadership of his native Fulda in Germany. Against the advice of his family, he emigrated to the United States—and he came to this country penniless and friendless. He struggled hard, and with foresight and vision and determination and sheer willpower he succeeded. But even before he became the great Max Stern, even as a lad of 18 or 19, he was already a communal leader who gave of his own meager resources. He brought the same vision and resolve and stubbornness that built his mighty empire to his many philanthropic endeavors.

It is an achievement for a man if, during the course of a lifetime, he can become identified with a great cause and be a standard-bearer for something worthy. We shall read tomorrow of how the Tribes of Israel were divided into four groups, each marching under a separate *degel* or banner: *Ish al diglo be'otot le'veit avotam*—"Each man shall march under his banner according to the sign of his father's house." Many people marched under each flag. But Max Stern reversed that: he was one man who raised many flags, who marched under many banners, who saluted many standards! He was simultaneously active in and a leader of a variety of causes—and to each he gave his full attention and love, as if that were the only cause in the world.

He used a different metaphor about himself. He used to say, "I'm a salesman"—and, indeed, he was a super-salesman!—"and a salesman has a satchel that contains many different samples . . ." He had many samples, he raised many flags—those of UJA and Israel Bonds, of Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Yeshivat Rabbi Amiel, Yeshiva Kol Torah, and many, many others.

But the four *degalim* that were nearest and dearest to his heart were: Yeshiva University, The Jewish Center, Shaare Zedek Hospital, and Manhattan Day School. Most conversations I had with him referred to one or some or all four of these institutions.

His loyalty to Shaare Zedek Hospital was begun before he came to America, for he had known of and worked for Shaare Zedek when he was yet in his native Germany.

Manhattan Day School is an institution that he built and helped develop so that his own children and children of hundreds of others would receive an adequate elementary Jewish education.

He led The Jewish Center as its president, and lately as honorary president, for many decades. He guided its financial affairs, guarded its dignity, and presided over its affairs. It is hard to believe that he never again will be sitting in his accustomed seat, adorning this congregation with his handsome dignity.

At Yeshiva University he was a power-house of strength for many decades. His achievements for Yeshiva are incredible. He founded Stern College for Women and named it in memory of his parents. He was one of the handful of people to visit Prof. Albert Einstein in Princeton and secure his permission to name the fledgling medical school Albert Einstein College of Medicine, and he was one of the first to make a major contribution to it so that it could get on its feet. There is not a single aspect of Yeshiva, in its multifaceted work, that did not benefit heavily from the largesse and wisdom of Max Stern.

For these institutions he was not only a supporter and leader and fundraiser—he also doted upon them. For instance, whenever he came back from a trip

overseas he would tell me about the Stern graduates whom he met, how they were faring in community leadership, in their families, and in their careers. And he never failed to refer to them as "my girls!"

For all these beneficiaries of his munificence, he was well nigh indispensable, as irreplaceable as any man can be. For Max Stern was more than a philanthropist; he was a statesman of the community. In the realm of charity, Max Stern was the *gedol ha-dor*, the giant of this generation. There was *gadlut* or genius in his giving. Especially in his early years, the amounts that he gave were monumental in proportion to his net worth and his ability to give. He would very often borrow from banks to pay his charity bills. He would pledge far beyond his ability to give—and he always paid on time. How and why did he do it? By nature he was generous, optimistic, self-confident, and endowed with deep religious faith in the rightness of the cause. And he didn't give just dollars; he gave heart and soul. Indeed, he didn't just give; he also cared and worried and brooded.

His optimism was one of the distinguishing marks of his complex character. He had a great, sanguine outlook on life—"Everything will be all right, you'll see"—based upon genuine *bitahon* or faith, and based as well upon his self-confidence.

Max Stern was a powerful man. He had little patience for pettiness or fools, and

he could not abide nonsense. Yet he was exceedingly gracious. The graciousness of his manner is all the more noteworthy *because* of his power. It is easy enough for a weak and soft man to be respectful and sensitive. But it is a great achievement of character for a tough, wily, competitive man to exhibit such fineness, such *derekh eretz* or respectfulness. This achievement was a reflection of his genuine humility. He possessed sensitivity and *kevod ha-torah*—he truly honored Torah and its scholars, and thus was a *mokir rabanan*, a man who loved and revered rabbis. He never succumbed to the fallacy of transferred authority, assuming that because he knew how to make money, he knew everything else as well. He always mentioned to me that he was not a *talmid hakham* (rabbinic scholar) but revered those who were.

He had an orderly mind, and insisted upon orderliness in his communal work as well. His famous slogan was *Hersht Ordnung!*—“Order must prevail!” And this insistence upon neatness and order had, for him, an ethical dimension too: Max Stern was a man of enormous integrity and honor. He despised charlatans, especially if they ever succeeded in duping him—and that may have occurred once, but never twice.

His character was forged in the crucible of difficulty and struggle. Life was not at all consistently easy for him. There were times when lesser men would have been crushed by self-doubt and despair. But he met and overcame challenges,

and learned faith and optimism and compassion. In the course of building a great career, he had to fight and struggle and resist; success required assertiveness. But he learned the secret of the growth of character: he modified his aggressive qualities; he sublimated them; he used them creatively and constructively—and we, the community, are all the beneficiaries.

But there is another kind of strength or power that Max Stern practiced that is even more deserving of our admiration and emulation. Let me explain by referring to Mount Sinai—the Mount Sinai on which the Torah was given on Shavuot, and about which we read this past Shabbat. *Be'har*, on the mountain of Sinai, the Children of Israel received the laws of the *shemittah*: the land may be worked for six years, but must lie fallow in the seventh year. The Rabbis ask a famous question: *Mah inyan shemittah etzel har sinai?*—“How does the law of the sabbatical year come to Mount Sinai?” Why is this law specifically mentioned as having originated at Mount Sinai, when all other laws were also given at Sinai?

Permit me to propose a novel answer suggested by the life of Max Stern. The sabbatical year is a symbol of letting go. Six years we work, but on the seventh we pull back. And in order to do that, man must ascend to the peak of character! Man reaches the heights, the summit, *be'har*, when he learns the secret of *shemittah*—how to withdraw, to pull back, to retreat. To be a

powerful man of affairs and exercise control and dominion and yet know when to let go and give responsibility to others, and not do so resentfully; to know when and how to give the torch to the next generation, to hand over the reins to younger people—that is when man is tested. Of course it is not easy to do so. Of course one must struggle with oneself until one makes such a decision—even as one must struggle to climb a mountain. But that is the only way you can reach the top!

And in these last fatal weeks, he even taught us the same principle with regard to life itself: how to let go. He faced death squarely, without flinching. He was realistic, he knew that life had come to an end, and so he died serenely and, despite the pain, in peace. He had tried his best, he had left his mark on his times, and now it was time to leave. He knew how to let go. And he will forever remain, for us, on the summit.

There was an element of delightful playfulness to Mr. Stern's personality. He had a splendid sense of humor and a ready laugh. These qualities made him wonderful company. He was fun to be with, and this endeared him especially to children.

One young lady, a student at Stern College for Women who grew up in this congregation, was moved to write her own eulogy of Max Stern when she heard, yesterday, of his demise. I have her permission to read some excerpts:

I belong to an exclusive group who had a very special relationship with Max Stern. I speak for the children of The Jewish Center.

There is a custom in the Jewish tradition of placing on the coffin an item that is a symbol of the person's life. The children of The Jewish Center would unanimously place on

Max Stern's coffin one small sweet n' sour sucking candy.

Permit me to explain: When I was a child growing up in The Jewish Center, Max Stern was the president. He was a distinguished, honored, and revered man who was as serious and businesslike in his capacity as shul president as he was as head of a multi-million dollar corporation—except when it came to the children.

I remember that every single Shabbat I would come over to Max Stern and poke him in the arm to get his attention. No matter what shul business he was attending to, he would turn around, look surprised, and then break into a big wide grin. Then he'd grab both your ears and shake your head back and forth and start to laugh. He'd take your pudgy cheeks in his hands and pinch them so hard you were afraid he'd squeeze them right off. After you screamed for mercy—and especially after Mrs. Stern would say, "Max, stop, you're killing her!"—he'd stop, and we'd collapse into a fit of giggles and give each other a big hug and a kiss on both cheeks.

But the best part was when he would ceremoniously put out his hand for you to shake: like magic, there was a sucking candy in your hand! For years I could not figure out how the candy

got into my hand just by shaking Max Stern's hand. It took me quite a while before I realized that before he shook my hand, he would reach into his pocket and take out a candy from his inexhaustible supply.

This game continued over the years until now. A pinch on the cheek seems like a very small price to pay for the affection that grew between us as a result. I think I would give just about anything for one more funny face made between us in shul, for one more pinch, for one more laugh—for one more sweet n' sour sucking candy.

Max Stern, you loved us children. And we loved you very, very much. We, the children of The Jewish Center, will miss you. Our candy man is gone and can never be replaced. Goodbye.

This farewell was written by my daughter Sara.

With all that his passing will mean to the community, adults and children alike, the ones who will feel it most keenly are his family. And this large, combined, exciting, active, and dynamic family was an important locus of his concern, his love, his worry, his pride.

Mrs. Stern, in your 32 years of marriage you gave Max a sense of stability and serenity, and he gave you strength and security—and you gave each other love and respect. You kept him alive and happy and lengthened his years and filled them with joy. Naomi, in the Book of Ruth, lost her husband and two children; life was bitter for her. And you, who lost a dearly beloved son

so recently and now such a wonderful husband, might say with her: *Al tikrena li Naomi, krena li Mara*—"Do not call me Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara (bitter)." Your love for your husband was such that you had to sacrifice for him the opportunity to weep adequately over your own beloved son Henry. All of us join in admiration for your emotional heroism as well as your physical stamina and spiritual faith, and hope that just as Naomi kept her name and had pleasantness restored to her life, so may you be privileged to shed tears of joy in return for the tears of bereavement that you suppressed out of love and loyalty.

To you, his children and grandchildren, he left an immortal legacy as a giant of his times. His model will continue to inspire your family for generations. He spoke to me often and deeply about you—all of you. He would share with me his concerns about you and especially his *nachas* at your triumphs, and most especially your involvement with Yeshiva University—whether of his sons, all of them, or daughters, both of them, or his children-in-law—whom he loved very much. And who can fail to mention, at this occasion, the special relationship between Max and his beloved daughter-in-law, the late and much lamented Marsha?

We of the Jewish community look to you to help fill the yawning gap left by the death of this giant. We need you. We know that you have within yourselves that same potential for

greatness. And there is no more beautiful or meaningful sign of respect and love that you can give to his memory than by doing what he would have wanted—by gathering about your mother in respect and love, by keeping together in affection and mutual esteem, and by continuing and enhancing the work he began, as you have already begun to do in a manner and scope that elicited his admiration and the gratitude of the community.

Let me conclude with this. One normally gives a blessing to a living person, not to one who has passed away. But there is one exception, and I recite this *berakhah* in the presence of you, his children and grandchildren, because whether or not—and to what extent—this blessing comes true will depend upon you and upon no one else.

It is a verse that we recite every day, and it comes from the Book of Isaiah (59:21): "This is My covenant with you, says God: that My spirit which is upon you, and My word which I have put into your mouth, will never depart out of your mouth or the mouth of your children or the mouth of your children's children, saith the Lord, from now and forevermore."

