

## Eulogy in Honor of Rabbi Louis Bernstein

March 13, 1995/11 Adar II, 5755

Everybody, it seems, knew Louis Bernstein. Everybody who was anybody in the Jewish community recognized this bundle of endless energy. But most people knew only his public persona--as a (president, rabbi, teacher,) and many of the other roles he played so effectively. But there was far more to him than that. Permit me to explain.

The prophet Isaiah (chapter 6) envisions the Seraphim or fiery angels in the Temple reciting the *kadosh kadosh kadosh*, which has since become a standard part of our daily prayers. His description of the angels is almost as important as the content of their proclamations:

”שרפים עומדים ממעל לו שש כנפים שש כנפים לאחד  
בשתים יכסה פניו ובשתים יכסה רגליו ובשתים יעופף”

Above (the Lord) stood the seraphim; each  
one had six wings: with two he covered his  
face, and with two he covered his feet, and  
with two did he fly

Now, that picture is somewhat problematic. One can understand that wings are necessary for flight, but why two wings for covering the face and two for covering the feet? Moreover, why do these two categories *precede* that of the two wings for flight?

Perhaps what Isaiah means to teach us is that the description of the angels is not meant to be esoteric, a piece of secret divine information revealed to man in order to satisfy his theosophical curiosity. It *is* meant to *instruct* man, to teach

him how to live a life that transcends his ordinary, pedestrian existence--by trying to imitate the angels; it is an indirect form of *imitatio Dei*.

The angels cover their faces as a symbol to us that, like the divine beings, man too is unfathomable. His life, his mind, his feelings are so complex, so subtle, so infinitely varied and complicated, that one can never really plumb the depths of his fellow's being, his inner life, by looking only at his "face," symbol for his superficial record. Therefore the angels' faces are covered by their wings, a sign to us to respect the mystery of our fellow man, his hiddenness, because there is more to him than his mere "face" or outer life. As the Almighty told the prophet Samuel, **ה' יראֵה לִלְבָב** --"God looks to the heart," not the face; and so must we, for there is far more to a man than what appears on the surface.

That is completely true of Rabbi Louis Bernstein. We all saw him in action--and what an activist he was!--but few were privileged to glimpse his *true* being, beneath and beyond his "face," the Louis Bernstein who was the private person, whose essence was concealed in the inner, intimate folds of his *neshamah*.

The face the world saw was good enough: a powerful communal leader, a dynamic and colorful organizational personality who was three times President of the Rabbinical Council of America (a record!), twice President of the Religious Zionists of America, who was a spokesman for Orthodoxy in many of the so-called "mixed" groups, and an advocate of Torah Umadda and Modern Orthodoxy when facing its rightist critics. We knew him as a man of dauntless courage, a scrappy fighter who bravely advocated the principles he cherished against all adversaries and--as I said of him when I had the privilege of giving him an honorary degree last Hanukkah--one who "upheld his vision of decency against camp and cant, hype and hypocrisy." He was, as he said of himself, a political infighter who was not going to let others trample over all that he held sacred, one who never ran from a confrontation when he felt called upon to defend Torah, Orthodoxy, Modern Orthodoxy, Religious Zionism, the State of Israel, Yeshiva University, the Jewish people--all that was near and dear to him. That was the "face" of Rabbi Louis Bernstein--and a good face it was.

But what many or most did not know about this man was that he was far from being merely a political animal, a partisan polemicist, an institutional activist--even more than an editor, pulpit rabbi, and teacher. He was all these--plus...

Louis Bernstein's real identity was quite different from that popular picture. When his face was covered, you discovered that he was a man of inwardness, even of inner purity, gentle and sensitive and, despite his frequent show of emotion and occasional combativeness, a man of clear rationality who was able to hear and accept criticism when he recognized it as true. I consider myself fortunate in that I was given the privilege of knowing the Louis Bernstein who, unlike his outer "face," was quiet, serene, and thoughtful even as he spent his days in frenetic activity all over the globe--a marvelous example of the inscrutable riddle of the human personality! Indeed, we first met as ideological antagonists debating on the pages of Yeshiva College's student newspaper, the *Commentator*, almost fifty years ago. We held fast to our positions, and learned to respect and like each other. I admired his pluck--and his integrity. I recognized early on what I would so cherish about him later in life--that if he was a *baal milchamot*, he was no less a *zoreia tzedakot*. So I knew Louis the activist and polemicist, and in the course of time came to learn the real nature of this wonderful friend--for we soon became good friends (without necessarily agreeing with each other on all issues) and then, especially these last 19 years, very close friends. Moreover, Louis was a man of sweetness who knew and reciprocated the love of family and of friends, of faith and of folk.

The Talmud (*Hullin* 139b) asks a rather strange question: מרדכי מן התורה מנין, "how do we know of Mordecai from the Torah (Pentateuch) itself?" The Talmud answers--even more surprisingly--that the source is a verse concerning one of the ingredients of the *ketoret*, incense: the מר דרור (*mar deror*) for which the Aramaic translation by Onkelos is מֵיִרָא דְרָחִיָּא (*meira dakhya*), pure myrrh. But is there<sup>85</sup> no relation of this pure form of incense to Mordecai of Megilah fame other than the coincidence of alliteration? My grandfather זצ"ל answered: the Ramban (to Ex. 30:23) interprets the word *deror* in its Biblical sense of freedom: שִׁיְהִיָּה נְקִי מִן הַזְּיוּף --that the myrrh is *free--pure, clean--of anything that is phoney or false*.

*That* was Louis Bernstein: pure incense, unfettered by fraudulence or fakery. He was pure and sweet--and that was not the face the public knew as well as it should have. His integrity was pure; he really and truly believed in what he propounded. And it was the Louis Bernstein his family knew--his unfailing love for his wife and children and all his family, his pride in them, his tenderness and warmth. *That* was his לִבָּב, his real, inner identity, not his פְּנִיָּם, his "face."

Further, in Isaiah's vision, the angels' feet are covered, symbolizing the truth that we never can really know or appreciate how far a man's influence can reach, how great is the distance over which his life can make a difference--often many miles away, often many generations away. No human being is so simple, so plain, that we can correctly assess how wide is the net that he casts, how far is the influence he exercises -- even as we can never really plumb the depths of his true being. Always consider a person's feet as covered, for there is no telling--until much later--how far his influence reaches.

I am heart-sick at the thought that Louis Bernstein's vigorous voice will be stilled, his fertile pen laid down, his hand stayed, his courage not to be found when and where so desperately needed. Who now will raise his voice in defense of Orthodoxy when it is unfairly attacked, as it so often was in the councils of the Jewish Agency or WZO? Who will speak up for Yeshiva and what it stands for when it is maligned by its detractors? Who will protect us against the hostile rhetoric of the enemies of Torah and Zion as effectively as did Louis Bernstein?

But we must be consoled that somewhere, somehow, someone who learned from him either directly or indirectly will rise to continue his work. Maybe a former student of his--one of hundreds such--will find inspiration in Rabbi Bernstein's life sufficient to motivate him to do likewise. Maybe one of us, his close friends and colleagues, will emerge to grasp the torch that he proudly held aloft before it falls from his hand forever. Then, retrospectively, will his feet be visible from beneath their covering wings, and will we better be able to assess the lasting impact of this man on his times.

And that is why the Prophet's description of the Seraphim puts the wings for flight last: only if one understands the unfathomable quality of another's "face," and does not underestimate the other's "feet," can we see him take flight--**בשמים יעופף**--like an angel...

As he takes flight from us to an **עולם שכולו טוב**, "the world that is completely good," I must pay him tribute as a great and loyal friend. I was fortunate enough to tell him personally and publicly how grateful I am and always will be to for his loyalty, his friendship, his understanding, his pure and unadulterated good will--both to Yeshiva and to me as an individual. I repeat that expression of indebtedness now that we bid him a last farewell.

William Butler Yeats once wrote,

Think where a man's glory most begins and ends,  
And say my glory was I had such friends.

Farewell, dear, beloved, and glorious friend. In the words that our Father Abraham said to the first Eliezer,

הוא ישלח מלאכו לפניך, "He will send His angel before you."

May the Almighty send His angel, preferably a *saraph*, His fiery angel--just like you--before you...

ותהא נשמתך צרורה בצרור החיים