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EULOGY FOR RABBI MORRIS BESDIN

April 11, 1982

The death of Rabbi Moshe Besdin is an occasion of deep bereavement not only for his loving family, many friends, and former congregants, but especially for Yeshiva University -- of which he was a proud and loyal son, and which he served with great distinction, love, and dedication. This funeral takes place almost six years to the day that the late Dr. Samuel Belkin, of blessed memory, passed away. And it is my sad duty to speak the eulogy over a distinguished member of Yeshiva's faculties for the third time in two months.

Rabbi Besdin, the greatest of all our educators, was in almost every way unique. He was a humble man who bore his humility naturally. His modesty was genuine, not in the least contrived. He possessed remarkable self-knowledge: he completely appreciated his own strengths, especially his superior pedagogic talents, without a trace of false humility and without a scintilla of superciliousness or arrogance. His intellectual integrity and love of truth were so powerful that he was able to view himself with astounding objectivity.

Thus, when Moshe Besdin referred to himself as a melamed, it was more than mere playfulness and was certainly not an affectation. It was, rather, an accurate professional description -- and a self-identification that lent glory to the entire teaching profession and shed lustre on all who strive to be marbitzei Torah. If ever the term "melamed" had a degree of opprobrium to it, Rabbi Besdin changed all that and made of it an honorific title.

He often spoke of having learned how to teach from his late father whom, he

revered deeply. But the ability to teach was for Moshe Besdin not an acquired gift, not even a vocation or profession or mission; teaching and teaching ability were part and parcel of his personality. He was a teacher when he taught, when he talked, when he joked, when he preached, when he learned.

He was, indeed, the melamed par excellence. In educational philosophy he was essentially a traditionalist. He was an educational conservative in the best sense of the word: he wanted to conserve the wisest elements of the past, the most functional and effective teachings of traditional pedagogic methodology, without rejecting anything just because it was new. But at the same time he was deeply skeptical, with a sardonic sense of humor, of new educational policies or techniques whose only recommendation was that they were new and "modern." He often pointed to the intellectual wreckage that followed in the wake of some of these new techniques and the abandonment of tried and tested methods of the past.

Of the Biblical Moses the Sages said, Mosheh safra rabba -- Moses was a great scribe. He labored over every letter, over every dot of the text of the Torah. Our Moshe too was deeply devoted to the text. He believed in strict adherence to the text, and passionately advocated teaching students the elementary techniques of how to master a text before proceeding to more abstract conceptualization. He coined a simple but meaningful dichotomy that has proven to be the guiding slogan of the James Striar School, an institution which is really the elongated shadow

of Moshe Besdin. That is, that we must concentrate on "it" and not "about." The concern of teacher and student must be that text itself -- Chumash or Rashi or Gemara or whatever -- and not merely discussions about the text, whether of historical or biographical or literary nature. When one studies "it," one at least has grasped the essential teaching: from there on, the student's own mind is free to interpret it according to his talent and inclination. When one reduces the "it," and emphasizes the "about," he can often mistake the periphery for the core, and pontification for authentic study.

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And yet we err if we think that Moshe Besdin's greatness as an educator, as a mehanekeh, lay only in his emphasis on texts instead of history or discussion. There is something more basic, more elementary, more fundamental for which Moshe Besdin strived in his grand educational vision. The real "it" which was the focus of his concern was not the text of the Torah or the commentaries or the Talmud and its expositors, but the individual student's soul, his neshamah, his spiritual gestalt, his intellectual capacity. This was so because Rabbi Besdin was far more than an educational technician; he was a religious personality. He saw his function as not merely that of filling the head of the student, but reaching his soul as well. He tried to touch the mind of a student via his heart, and his heart via his mind.

In the Haftorah of the first day of Passover, which we read but two days ago, we learn of Joshua on the eve of the conquest of Jericho. In the quiet before the storm, there takes place a strange and mysterious inter-

lude on the ancient plains of the Gilgal. Joshua is accosted by a stranger and cannot make out if he is friend or foe. The stranger identifies himself as an angel of the lord. When Joshua hears this, "and he said unto him: what does my lord say to his servant?" And then the angel of the Lord said to Joshua, "remove your shoes from your feet, because the ground on which you are standing is holy. And Joshua did so."

But the question which Joshua asked seems to remain unanswered, and we may well repeat it: What indeed does 'my Lord speak to his servant?' What, after all, is the message the angel has come to deliver? Surely, angels do not make appearances merely to entertain; they have some urgent divine message to deliver to the prophet or the judge. What, then, is that divine message for which the removal of Joshua's shoes is only the introduction or the prelude?

The answer is: no, for "remove your shoes" is the message. The angel is teaching Joshua that he is standing on hallowed ground. He is telling him: if you want to penetrate Jericho, which seems hermetically sealed, so impossible to breach — then you must first know that you stand on holy land, that you and your men have the capacity to be mekadesh, to sanctify and transform an ordinary parcel of real estate into hallowed ground. Only when you and your troops have the self-awareness of your potential for sanctity will you develop the self-esteem and self-confidence that will allow you

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to conquer Jericho. You will breach and conquer the city not merely by a battering ram and not merely by a shofar -- for these are only the instruments of war -- but by the sacred dedication of your people.

When Moshe Besdin took over the James Striar School, he faced an overwhelming educational challenge in the Jewish training of young adults. Here he was accepting students seventeen and eighteen and nineteen years old, whose previous Jewish education was miniscule, who barely could read a passage of Hebrew ^{ענין} without understanding it, but in whom there stirred inchoate yearnings, an indefinable thirst, a vague but palpable hunger for something transcendent, something exalted, for the transcendent word of God. The problem was that, like Jericho, these minds were sogeret u-mesugeret, they were hemmed in by walls of ignorance, encrusted by social convention which idealizes mediocrity and looks askance at Jewish learning. How could he penetrate these walls? How would he pull down the Jericho-walls that imprisoned these young spirits and minds? He did it by concentrating his magisterial forces on the primary "it" -- the student himself; by inducing in the student an exciting and sacred self-awareness: where_{ever} you are standing, that is kodesh, hallowed ground. You have the capacity to transform yourself and your environment from drab profaneness to exalting spirituality.

Thus did Rabbi Besdin come to fill an historic role in American Jewry by leading the James Striar School for well over a quarter of a century. He put the indelible stamp of his unique personality on this, the first 'Baal Teshuvah Yeshiva, ' emphasizing real learning and religious fulfillment, all with a sense of moderation and adherence to the "Golden

Mean" of the Jewish tradition. He knew every student without having to check his comprehensive files. He loved them — and they returned his love in full measure. They all but worshiped him.

Thus, Moshe Besdin was the teacher of all of us at Yeshiva. He was truly Mosheh Rabbenu, our teacher Moses, because he taught us how to teach others.

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Moshe also had a special charm, a very distinctive chen, about him that won for him the affection of students and colleagues, young and old, congregants and co-professionals. It was more than the charm that comes merely from a handsome mien and a pleasant disposition, both of which he possessed in great abundance. His chen was an amazing combination of the ethical and the esthetic. There was a lilt and a touch of grace to his moral character.

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Let me share with you an example that I learned of just as I was walking into the synagogue where he served as a Rabbi before he came to Yeshiva. The young doctor who was with him during his last lucid moments, before the medication which was administered to save his heart contributed to mental confusion, he asked that Dr. Lamm not be informed of his hospitalization until after the holiday was over, because he was away from home for Passover and needed his rest badly...What special divine grace, what incredible chen, he possessed to make him so thoughtful, so considerate, so sensitive even as he was suffering a fatal heart attack!

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A special chen not only enhanced his interpersonal relationships, but it also constituted an esthetic dimension to his scholarship and his homiletics. Whether it was in his exegetical creativity or in his spinning out a "gut vort," there was something about what he said that was not just a rehash of the old and not the meretricious novelty of the new. It was an amalgam that was totally individual, completely his own. He was our Rabbi Moshe ha-darshan...

17/20/07

From three or four years ago, when he reached the mandatory retirement age of 65, we decided that I would renew his tenure as Director of the James Striar School annually. I did so gladly. Just about a month or two ago, I invited him to my office and asked him to stay on indefinitely, as long as his health and will would hold out -- and I added that I hoped that that would be the case for a hundred and twenty years. I didn't merely invite him; I actually begged him to stay on. I knew then and know now quite well that the combination of his experience and talents and personality and learning was such that we shall never have quite another Moshe Besdin again. But he begged off, and he said, "one more year and that's it." How sad that this should have taken place even before the year is over. How tragic that "that's it"...

There was a well-rounded, complete quality to his life as well as to his personality. The Seder of his life was whole. It began on the note of Kadesh, of dedication and sanctification, and continued through-out. As a teacher, he had the great gift of Maggid, of teaching and narrating. He gave to his family far more than the traditional Four Cups

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of wine, the symbols of his special joy and warmth and guidance and fun and love. His death leaves each of us with a double portion of Marror, of bitterness. But this is most important: that now that he has left us, all of us can loudly proclaim and proudly affirm, without a shadow of a doubt, that Nirtzah, "accepted!" Moshe Besdin's life constituted an offering, pure and whole, which is acceptable and beautiful in the eyes of God and man, an offering of love and grace which blessed all those who were privileged to join in the Seder of his life.

May his soul be bound up in the bond of immortal life.