

"BY WORD, ON PARCHMENT, IN STONE"
(An Appreciation of Dr. Samuel Belkin Z.L.)

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of HaBaD Hasidism, in his great work *Likkutei Torah* (to this week's Sidra), tells us that the divine revelation is transmitted in three different ways: by means of the Oral Law, **תורה שבעל פה**; by means of the Written Law, **תורה שבכתב**; and by means of **חקיקה** or engraving, such as the engraving on the **לוחות** or Tablets. From the latter form we derive the word which gives its name to this Sidra, **בחוקות**, because the **חוקה** or law was that which was engraved on the Tablets.

Hence, Torah is taught by word, on parchment, and in stone.

But if this is true for divine teaching, it is true as well for human education or teaching. For the teacher is one who, by profession, emulates God, he realizes the principle of **והלכת בדרכיו** or *imitatio Dei*. Just as God is a Teacher -- **המלמד תורה נעמו ישראל** -- so is the human educator. Thus too, God tells us **מה אני בחינם אף אתם בחינם**, "even as I teach Torah without accepting any remuneration, so must you." And the Rabbis taught us **יהא מורא רבך** **כמורא שמיים**, you must fear or reverence your teacher even as you fear or reverence Heaven itself.

This morning I wish to follow the rubric of these three ways -- by word, on parchment, in stone -- to describe briefly one of the greatest educators of our times, my late, revered, and beloved teacher, Dr. Samuel Belkin, of blessed memory. His students have decided to dedicate this Shabbat, the first one after the thirty-day period of mourning has ended, to his memory.

His **תורה שבעל פה**, his oral law, consisted not only of his *sheurim* or lectures -- and they were all models of clarity and systematism as well as brilliant -- but of his personality as well: those personal, human qualities that have to be experienced in order to be appreciated.

As a teacher, he was a paragon of sweetness and generosity. I regard it as a great privilege that I was able to be his student for one year, the last year that he taught a class. His interest extended to every aspect of our lives, not only the intellectual and the spiritual, but the physical and material as well.

There were certain paradoxes that seemed to be inherent in his complex character and produced a tension of opposites. Thus, he had a great deal of toughness in his exercise of leadership, but he was extremely tender. He was a man that could be forceful if need be, yet he was fundamentally very shy. As much as he was outgoing in public, he was a reserved and a very private individual. He had a public posture, but a rich inner life that very few people knew of.

Through it all, he had enormous charm, endless courage, what he referred to as "divine optimism," and a capacity for growth. He was a very loyal man, who never betrayed a colleague, a student, or a friend.

Finally, his **תורה שבעל פה** included a capacity for accelerated living. I suspect that those who so often wished him, "may you live to 120 years," had their prayers vindicated in a manner of speaking: he crammed 120 years into barely 65! Ordained at 17, the youngest president of a college in this country when he was in his early thirty's, he worked for his beloved institution until the very last minute -- on his very death-bed he worried about Yeshiva. For the great majority of his life, he was a fully functioning adult -- he matured early, and he kept young and active and vital to the very end.

His חִקְיָה, his "engraving on the tablets," symbolized his great public and practical achievements. R. Shneur Zalman says that the difference between the written law and the engraving on the tablets is this, that the former is דְּיוֹ עַל קַמָּר, ink on parchment, whereas the latter means the words are engraved in the stone itself. Ink may adhere very well to the parchment, but ultimately the ink and the parchment remain two separate substances, whereas the letters engraved into stone are organically united in it; there is only one substance, not two.

Like Moses cutting God's word into stone, Dr. Belkin placed stone upon stone and brick upon brick to provide a place for God's word, Torah.

He suffered for Yeshiva University, sacrificed for it, supported it, led it, built it. He was vitally concerned with every facet and aspect of this great school. His ideas and values and insights are carved into the university itself, in every brick and every stone -- and in the many minds and hearts of those who passed through its portals.

The name of Samuel Belkin is indelibly and organically united with that of Yeshiva University -- forever.

His תּוֹרָה שְׂבִיבָה, his written law, are his books and articles and monographs, the repository of his masterful scholarly insights. He was an expert in many fields -- in Halakhah, as a teacher of Talmud; as an authority in Hellenistic literature, in Midrash, and in Philo.

His scholarly works included *Philo and the Oral Law*, which was his doctoral thesis; a number of articles on Philo and Midrash and Zohar; *In His Image* -- a splendid popular book on the philosophy of Halakhah which all of us should read; and popular articles on Jewish education and general education as well.

I would like to offer briefly some of the highlights and insights from his תּוֹרָה שְׂבִיבָה, his written law, so that those of us who know his "tablets," i.e., Yeshiva University, and knew him personally -- his "oral law" -- should have some taste as well of his "written law."

In a short work published about 20 years ago, entitled, *The Philosophy of Purpose*, he made a very important distinction between "purpose" and "reason." There is a great literature about טַעְמֵי הַמִּצְוֹת, the "reasons for the commandments." It is a term we usually use when we want to invoke some authority for trying to explain the *mitzvot* in order to attract people into Judaism. Dr. Belkin, however, taught that what is important is the *purpose* of the commandments, not the *reasons*. The reasons why God commanded something or forbade something -- reasons that usually refer to conditions which were current at the time of the commandment or shortly before that -- are primarily of interest to antiquarians, anthropologists, or ancient historians. Reasons can become obsolescent, yet the *mitzvot* continue. Therefore, what is important is the *purpose* of the commandments. Every commandment has as its purpose some ennoblement of the individual Jew, of the Jewish community, of the world. The reasons for commandments may tickle our curiosity, but they have little to do with our existential situations. The *purposes* of the commandments, however, are crucial to our lives. If we know the purpose, and fulfill it -- we have lived; otherwise, our lives are wasted.

Dr. Belkin offered an interesting description of the Jewish conception of the State as, "a Democratic Theocracy." By "Theocracy," he meant not what the term indicates in its modern sense, i.e., a government ruled by priests or a hierarchy, but in the sense first used by Josephus -- that the ultimate authority of the people is not the state or the community, or even the people themselves, but the sovereignty of God. In this sense, Judaism is a Theocracy. It is "Democratic," because Judaism

teaches the infinite worth of the human being. In Judaism, the value of *Demos* derives from *Theos*.

Dr. Belkin disagreed with many scholars of the historical school who see in the controversies between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, as well as in the controversies amongst the Tannaim, social and economic and political causes. While these may have played a role, Dr. Belkin is profoundly convinced that the major differences lie in differing religious perceptions and fundamental philosophical attitudes.

Permit me to cite one example. The Sadducees held that a master is responsible for damages incurred by his slaves. The reason they gave is this: if a man is responsible for damages incurred by his animals, such as an ox, though he is not responsible for the moral tone of the animal's life, then certainly he is responsible for his slave's torts, because he is responsible for the observance of the *mitzvot* by the slaves. The Pharisees answer to this was: No! There is a fundamental difference between the two categories. Animals have no minds of their own, whereas slaves do.

Objectively viewed, it would seem that the Sadducees have compelling logic on their side. Given the system of slavery, if a slave is my real property, then I should be responsible for the damages he inflicts.

Here is an example where economic determinism makes no sense. The Pharisees were poorer than the Sadducees. If there were slave-holders, it was amongst the Sadducees that most of them would be found. Yet in this law, it would seem that the Pharisees rather than the Sadducees sided with the slave-owner, since they did not require him to pay the bill for the damages inflicted by the slaves.

However, Dr. Belkin points out that this Halakhah issues from different philosophical orientations. The Pharisees advocated the sacredness of the human personality. A slave has a mind of his own, and therefore a responsibility of his own. "No human being can so completely become the property of another so as to lose all his individuality." The absolute ownership of a human being is alien to the Pharisees' philosophy, to the Rabbis' concept of the dignity of man. Therefore too, the slave is responsible himself for his own observance of the commandments; and one who kills even a pagan slave, an *עבד כנעני*, is guilty of a capital crime.

These are only two or three minor points from his rather extensive writings.

What a creative mind Dr. Belkin had! How much more he could have done were it not for all the onerous burdens he bore for the entire community, for his self-sacrifice in teaching thousands of others.

The Talmud (in *Kiddushin*) tells us that during the Hadrianic persecutions, the Rabbis gathered in Lydda were of two minds concerning *תלמוד ומעשה איזהו עדיף*, which is more important, study or practice. Whatever may be the nuances of this controversy, Dr. Belkin's words about the differences in opinion are so very much applicable to his own career and life:

Living in a society in which scholarship was a prerequisite for practical contributions to the well-being of the community, many a scholar in ancient times must have faced this problem. Should he isolate himself in an ivory tower and dedicate his entire life to the study of the Torah or should he apply his knowledge to public service?"

This dilemma never gave him any rest. I remember one of my very last conversations with him, when he told me that he was looking forward to retirement, so

that he could get back to "this" -- pointing to a large number of books and papers piled up on the floor -- and make a contribution to scholarship that he thought only he could do. Alas, that joy was not to be his, and the benefit of the fruit of his research was not to be ours!

This afternoon, we shall read in the fifth chapter of *Avot*, the concluding words, **לְנוֹם צַעַר אֲגָרָא**, "according to the pain is the reward." That is so if we read the last word as **אֲגָרָא**, which means "reward." But the word can also be read **אֲגָרָא**, "high places."

God alone will grant him his reward, his **אֲגָרָא**, for all the pain he endured in this life on behalf of Torah and Israel. But for us, we must acknowledge that he reached the **אֲגָרָא**, the very heights of Jewish life. He attained genuine greatness, and placed all of us in his debt. It caused him much **צַעַר**, pain, to attain this **אֲגָרָא**, high place. And it causes us much pain to know that we have lost him from the top of the mountain; there is a void, an emptiness at the summit of our lives.

What he achieved and taught and was, will remain an inspiration for generations -- not only by word, on parchment, and in stone -- but in the hearts and souls and minds of countless students and friends and ordinary Jews whose Jewish posterity and the Jewish posterity of their children and grandchildren will now be more assured thanks to him

יֵהָא זְכָרוֹ בְּרִיךְ, may his memory be a blessing.