

Eulogy

For

Dr. Yosef Burg

At the occasion of a

Gathering in his Memory

On the **שלושים** of his Demise

At Stern College for Women,

Yeshiva University

By

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November 14, 1999

ה' כסלו תש"ס

וימת יוסף בן מאה ועשר שנים ויחנטו אתו ויישם בארון במצרים

"So Joseph died, being a hundred and ten years old, and they embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt"

So ends the Book of בראשית, with the death and the burial of Joseph. The Zohar, commenting on this verse, is intrigued by the spelling of the word ויישם, "and he was put," which occurs only this one time in the Torah. תרי יודיין אמאי? Why two *yods*? אלא יוסף נטר ליה ברית לתתא ונטיר ליה ברית דלעילא, אסתלק מעלמא אתשוי בתרי ארוני (אתר), "[The two letters signify] that Joseph observed two covenants, a Higher Covenant and a Lower Covenant. When he passed on from this world, he was placed in two receptacles; one was a casket for [his body which kept the] Lower Covenant, and one was [the Holy Ark] for his fealty to the Higher Covenant." The two covenants refer to Joseph's obedience to God, the Higher Covenant, and to his rectitude towards his fellow men, the Lower Covenant

Our Joseph, Dr. Yosef Burg, lived to the age of 90-91, not 110; he was not embalmed; and he was buried in Israel and not in Egypt. But the rest of the Zohar's commentary holds for him as it did for the Biblical Joseph. His was a double covenant, תרי יודיין. He was true to both of them--לייט צו גאט און צו לייט. Our words of tribute to his memory are meant to cover both his covenants, his ברית לתתא and his ברית דלעילא.

Dr. Burg dedicated his life to his people--an aspect of his Lower Covenant--and this dedication did not stem from a mere nationalist perspective, but from a profoundly religious one. It was a *spiritual* perception that motivated him throughout his illustrious career. His Religious Zionism was not a synthesis in which Zionism was somehow superadded to his religion; rather, the nationalism grew organically out of his religious convictions. Thus, he was superbly qualified to lead World Mizrachi as its President and foremost ideologue.

As a leading statesman of Israel and a Minister in various posts and under various governments in the course of more than 35 years, he distinguished himself by sheer competence and scrupulous loyalty. He did his best, at all times, to extend his full help to institutions dedicated to the teaching of Torah. He was a man of probity and decency, and he was never afraid to admit that he had made a mistake. As a result, he earned the confidence of Israeli leaders both to the right and to the left of him. So, for instance, when Prime Minister Begin looked for someone reliable to conduct the autonomy talks with the Palestinians, he did not choose Gen. Moshe Dayan--who very much coveted that task--but to Dr. Burg. And it was Dr. Burg who, at that occasion, reminded his Arab interlocutors that Jerusalem was mentioned in the Torah 625 times--and not once in the Koran!

A student of the renowned *Gaon*, R. Yaakov Yechiel Weinberg זצ"ל, he began his career as a teacher--and, in a sense, remained a teacher, but in a larger and far more influential classroom: the entire country, the entire nation. A combination of circumstances and personal inclinations and interests led him into progressively more involvement in politics, in government, and in Hapoel Hamizrachi. Yet he remained throughout a highly learned, erudite man. Even in the ranks of the Zionist movement of his day, when the movement proudly counted scientists and poets, scholars and

writers and Talmudists in its ranks, during and after the establishment of the State, he was acknowledged as a תלמיד חכם. But the great majority of his time and efforts went into the struggle for the State and his unrelenting efforts to carve out a religious--a Jewish!--complexion for the State of Israel. We are all the poorer for the further scholarship he never achieved, even as we are so much richer for the political and social accomplishments that will remain to his eternal credit. Throughout, he remained one of the finest representatives of religious Jewry. People who met him were impressed with his combination of faith and culture, the sacred and the worldly. No one could point to him and say--as unfortunately happens--that this man is primitive in his scope and demeanor and therefore all other observant Jews must be like him. He added dignity to religious Jewry, and thus constituted a walking קידוש השם.

Dr. Burg was always accessible, possessed of a common touch, usually irreverent and charming. Like the Biblical Joseph, a high minister in Egypt, our Joseph, a high minister in Israel, had about him a streak of beguiling boyishness--a kind of benevolent tendency to mischief, a friendly playfulness-- that kept him and those about him in a constant state of happy alert.

I refer, of course, to his well known penchant for the right pun, his brilliant wit, his irrepressible humor. It was too much of a part of his personality for us to ignore it because of the need to appear solemn at a memorial meeting. And I believe it touched the core of his character.

Since the publication of Freud's *Wit and the Unconscious* over 100 years ago, we know that humor has profound and complex psychological roots, and one of them is the use of humor as a weapon. But this kind of unfunny malice was totally alien to him. His wit was leavened with a graciousness that was remarkable for its lack of ego by a man of his prominence and achievements.

Let me share with you an interesting story. A number of years ago, shortly before the Great Synagogue opened its doors in Jerusalem, services were held in the gallery of Hechal Shlomo. I was there for שבת וירא. Dr. Burg came over to me and, with that ubiquitous twinkle in his eye, asked me, ואיזה השה לעולה--ווען קומט דער לאם אויף עלייה, It was a great pun. My immediate answer was, בהר ה' ייראה--ווען דער בורג וועט זיך ויין, מער געטליך.

I tell you this not to illustrate either his wit or my repartee, but because thereafter, at some three or four different occasions over the years, when Dr. Burg saw me amongst a group of his friends, he would repeat to them his appreciation of *my* quick response. I learned much from him about graciousness in the appreciation of others .

His humor had two functions: First, to entertain--not an unusual motive for humor, but one that can be a means for true חסד, for one thereby helps lighten the normal load of living. Life, for almost everyone, has its rough edges, often depressing and painful; a light word, an invitation to laugh, a funny story can make us able to bear the burdens of life just a bit more effectively. Second, humor has the capacity to highlight the absurdity of life. Humans are often amusing when they think they are being terribly serious. Life is a most serious enterprise, yet people often act like clowns. Step back and view the average man or woman: most of what is said or done is neither vicious nor constructive, only pretentious, silly, even comical-- sometimes

tragically so. This is tantamount to a philosophy of Man as Clown, and it is worth pondering; it should make us respond to the foibles of others with a smile instead of smirk, a chuckle instead of a frown.

Yosef Burg's renowned wit was incisive, engaging, and charming, but it also had negative consequences--for him. For one thing, it tended to overshadow the very serious side of this man of intellectual and communal-political achievements. It became easy, too easy, to dismiss him with a wave of the hand and, conceding his brilliant humor, thereby deprecate his intellectual-spiritual talents. He was by no means the first eminence to suffer such an imbalance in his reputation. The first example that comes to mind is that of the late Rabbi Avigdor Amiel זצ"ל; he was so well known as a *darshan*, that people failed to appreciate that he was a giant of Halakha as well. So it was with Dr. Burg: there were people who put him down as not serious. They treated everything he said as a "wise crack." They were blind to the authentic *gravitas* of the man. There were, consequently, those אשר לא ידע את הסיפור--who did not know or want to know or understand and recognize his invaluable insights, masterful leadership, and deep commitment.

But most of all, we shall miss him for his essential, overarching public philosophy -- that of moderation. Believe me when I tell you from personal experience: it is difficult to be a moderate. Extremists from both sides are often relentless and indiscriminate in their attacks; and there are even more rational people who sneer and repeat the usual platitudes as if they were revelations of new critique: moderation lacks passion, compromise is undignified, it manifests a lack of principle. There is a grain of truth in these criticisms--but when offered as blanket, indiscriminate condemnations of moderation, when the attacks are immoderate, they are wrong-headed and cannot and should not be taken seriously. It is true that עס איז שווער צו זיין א איד, but it is נאך שווערער צו זיין א מענטש!

Such shallow assaults on the Burg policy of moderation--his most characteristic ambition in politics-- did not deter him. He was a moderate both by disposition and by conviction, applying it in all phases of his activity--in religion, in politics, in government, and in society.

Yet, truth to tell, in the end he did not prevail. Moderation took back seat to more radical and extremist views that began to dominate both his Religious-Zionist political camp and our Orthodox community generally.

Was he really a failure--this unusual man possessed of a fabulous memory; this polyglot; this Joseph of our day who sported a metaphoric כתונת פסים, a "coat of many colors," many hues and talents and subtleties, a wide variety of talents, interests, a colorful personality; this honorable gentleman of whom the Psalmist must have had had in mind when he described the נקי כפים ובר לבב--clean of hand and pure of heart; this sophisticated, scholarly מוסמך and Ph.D.; this nimble, intelligent mind: was he really a failure in this important quest in his career? If the answer is that it was, does that diminish his stature as he recedes from the contemporary scene and folds into the long stream of Jewish history? How will history judge him?

I suggest that we search for an answer in the early history of our people, the lives of the founders of Judaism and the people of Israel. Let us consider how they succeeded

and perhaps failed in their most cherished ambitions, whether collective or private. Let me emphasize that I am not looking for records of moral perfection and asking whether or not the person ever committed a sin; that is irrelevant and, besides, we know the answer. Nor, when I inquire as to their success or failure, am I looking for perfect, unbroken records of success in all aspects of life. Every life has at least its minor disappointments and stretches of unhappiness. I am asking, rather, whether or not there is a consistent pattern, in the Torah, of full success or a spotty record of light and dark, success and failure, in those aspects of one's life which one considers significant to his life's goal and which, therefore, one cherishes as part of his career or ministry or life's contributions.

Consider our Teacher, Moses. His influence was exceedingly great for all the history of our people and, indeed, at least half the civilized world. Yet his dream of liberating his people from idolatry was not entirely successful, and his cherished ambition to lead them to the Promised Land was an abysmal failure.

David was the greatest of our kings, one who solidified the monarchy. Yet his ambition of building the בית המקדש was denied to him; it was left to his son to erect the Temple.

Judah became the leader of the family, progenitor of King David and the ancestor of leaders. But he leaves the stage of Biblical history with a stain attached to his dealings with the woman he did not recognize as his daughter-in-law.

Joseph was the beloved of his father, the favorite of his twelve sons, who realized his ambition to rise to enormous eminence. However, his status was recognized only among the Egyptians; the gift of מלכות, of sovereignty over his brothers, was denied to him by his doting father and transferred to Judah. Indeed, the late Zionist publicist and author, Maurice Samuels, refers to Joseph (in his volume, *Certain People of the Book*) as "The Brilliant Failure."

Jacob was involved, from his birth, in an antagonistic relationship with his twin brother Esau. In the famous encounter with a mysterious stranger, whom tradition identifies as שרו של עשו, the guardian angel or symbol of Esau and his descendants, prefiguring the millennial battle with Rome and its heirs, Jacob emerges safe--but not sound. Despite his survival of this fateful wrestling match, his victory is incomplete, it leaves him scarred --והוא צולע על ירכו--he retains a limp and we, for generations after, are bidden to refrain from eating the sinew of an animal, the גיד הנשה, as a symbol of that failure to complete the battle against Esau. Jacob's failure is thus memorialized for all posterity.

Isaac's greatest achievement is his pliant consent to be sacrificed to God by Abraham, not to protest. It is a testament to his courage, expressed in his eyes. It was his eyes that looked up from the מזבח into the eyes of his father Abraham whose outstretched hand held the knife with which to cut his throat. Yet Isaac didn't flinch, he didn't recoil, he didn't dodge or duck his father's raised blade. His eyes continued to stare into the eyes, no doubt utterly horrified, of his father. Yet those brave eyes were dimmed, as the Midrash tells us, by the tears the weeping angels dropped into his eyes, and so he ultimately became blind: ויהי כי זקן יצחק ותכהין עיניו מראת. And this

blindness was more than optical; it also affected his ability to distinguish between worthy and unworthy children.

Abraham's greatest love was for his son Isaac. When God commanded him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice, he identified him as *קח נא את בנך את יחידך אשר אהבת את*--the son he loves; and even though he protested that he loves both his sons, there is no doubt that Abraham cherished Isaac the most. Yet when the angel orders him at the last crucial moment to desist, and again soon thereafter when God reveals to Abraham His approval of his devotion, we read the same phrase: *את בנך את יחידך*--your son, your only son--but no mention of *אשר אהבת*, whom you love. Thus: *ולא חשכת את בנך את יחידך ממני*. Why so? Because although Abraham continued to love Isaac, it was no longer the same intense emotion, no longer the powerful original love he felt for him. It is not that he loved him less, but that this paternal love had been transcended by his *אהבת ה'*; the love for God swallowed up the love for his child, and hence Isaac became his *בן יחיד* but no longer *אשר אהבת*...Perforce, therefore, Abraham succeeded as the "Knight of Faith," as Kierkegaard dubbed him, but no longer as the loving father of Isaac. Here he failed, no doubt to his deep regret. Abraham would remain the *אב המון גויים*, the progenitor of many nations, but not as the wholly loving father, the *אברהם אבינו* of the son whose biological *אב* he was. This was not a personal defeat, separate from his fundamental spiritual orientation; it was part and parcel of his divine mission which was so tied up with his fatherhood, a mission which held out as his reward the granting of the Holy Land to Abraham's "seed." It was a failure which, although necessary, remained a failure.

So, all the above giants of our *mesorah* were successes in some ways, failures in others. Each attained great triumphs, yet tasted as well the bitterness of failure! They emerged scarred, blind, emotionally wounded, frustrated, rejected. Why so? What is the Torah teaching us? The lesson, I submit, is that perfection has not been granted to *בשר ודם*, to merely mortal man. And this is so for two related reasons.

First, just as the experience of divine revelation is fraught with danger--*כי לא יראני*--so every encounter with greatness, whether of *גילוי שכינה* or other highly charged experiences, is filled with mortal peril and leaves its painful mark. The prophet is singed by proximity to God whose Presence appears as a consuming fire--*כי אש אוכלת הוא*. Genius often warps one's personality and afflicts various quirks upon one so gifted. Superior talent is often acquired at the expense of an outsized ego. Wisdom, that precious gift, sometimes results in a deficit of personal happiness and fulfillment: *יוסף דעת יוסף מכאוב*. Excessive wealth often conjures up the illusion of wisdom and also masks the dark fears of defeat. Every high excellence exacts a high price. Only God is perfect and without blemish: *להגיך כי ישר ה' צורי ולא עולתה בו*. This is a law of the spirit, inscribed in our very existence as humans.

Second, man must not falsely convince himself of his omnipotence, of being capable of the perfect fulfillment of his every ambition, lest he accelerate his own disastrous end. He must know that every success breeds its own home-grown failure. Such scars are the sacrifice that success offers up on the altar of humility, and such defeats are the tributes that excellence pays to our very humanity. As the Midrash (*קהלת רבה פ"א*) taught us, *אין אדם יוצא מן העולם וחצי תאוותו בידו*--a man does leave this world having achieved even half of his ambitions. If one is truly an *אדם*, a *mensch*, then his ambitions exceed his ability to realize them. Know in advance: there is no perfect

success in life. Failure is programmed, as we would say today, in the very structure of human existence.

So how will history judge Dr. Yosef Burg? It will, I believe, grant him admiration for his espousal of moderation, the דרך ה' as the Rambam termed it, and count his failure to achieve it in our bewildering and contradictory age as inevitable, as a sign that his dreams surpassed the ability of himself as well as his peers to realize them; that, as Robert Browning wrote,

*Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for?*

Dr. Burg is one who reached for the heavens. His goal was a polity that conducted itself peacefully and rationally and eschewed all manifestations of extremism, and for a religious community that is appealing because it is reasonable in its invitation to חיי קדושה--for a *Yiddishkeit* that attracted by its *menshlichkeit*. But, in the grand tradition of אבות האומה --what he wanted and valued most was denied to him. Politically, his party went to self-defeating extremes, and his/our community to this day shows signs of transforming unreasonableness, exclusiveness, and ignorance of all worldly culture into veritable virtues.

So we here gathered to say our last farewells to him declare that his frustrated ambitions for us should not be forgot. They should be revived and allowed to inspire another generation all over again. Dr. Burg was honorable in his successes and brilliant in his failure. Learn from him: Quick successes are doomed to vanish; noble failures ultimately prevail, and in the fullness of time may yet prove to be successes.

Our friend and leader Dr. Burg kept his faith with both covenants, the Upper and the Lower. He was a ירא שמים ותלמיד חכם and a man of honor, probity, integrity, and sociability.

One ארון or enclosure, the casket, carried his earthly remains to interment in Israel. The second is carried in the hearts of all Jews, especially those of us who cherished the spiritual-intellectual dimensions of this extraordinary Jew whose life was dedicated to the people of Israel, the State of Israel, and the Torah of Israel--in a word, to us.

His loss is grievous, and the cause he served so nobly remains bereft of his leadership. But his voice will never be stilled, and will continue to inspire and encourage us, because ultimately his שיטה must prevail.

Dr. Burg's biography should be taught in our schools, to show that idealism and pragmatism can dwell together, that *Yiddishkeit* and *menshlichkeit* are not incompatible; that Religion and Zionism are not antonyms; that Torah and *Madda* or *Derekh Eretz*, and Torah and *avodah* (honest labor) reenforce each other; that passion and moderation are excellent partners; that tolerance is not a sign of weakness; that seriousness of purpose and humor can go hand in hand; that men and women of politics can and ought be men and women of honor; and that failure to attain all your ambitions is no disgrace if the goals are noble.

It is in this spirit that we take leave of Yosef Burg, bidding him farewell and confident that his Creator will receive him and recompense him for all he has done and achieved in his journey on earth.

בהר ה' ייראה... יהא זכרו ברוך..עד לבנים מישני אדמת עפר יקיצו לחיי עולם