

Rabbi Ezra Labaton ר"צ זל

Keeping His Legacy

This past Monday marked the fifth Yahrzeit of my dear friend and mentor, Rabbi Ezra Labaton ר"צ זל. His passing away was a devastating loss for his loving family and loyal friends and disciples, and also left a tremendous void in the Jewish world and particularly in the Syrian community. My friendship with the rabbi started in 1999 when I first visited his congregation, Magen David of West Deal, New Jersey. We bonded over his love for Tanakh and the moral teachings of the prophets, his dedication to his congregants, and his love for all human beings. Hearing him speaking was inspiring and uplifting. He would contemplate the beauty of creation and the secrets of the cosmos with the pure enthusiasm and fascination of a boy who just got his first telescope, and with the same excitement he would explore the meaning of the first revolutionary idea of Judaism – the Image of God. As much as he loved his academic work, it took second and even third place after his love for his family and fellow human beings, yet there is no doubt that they were all intertwined. Rabbi Labaton PhD's thesis was on the biblical commentary of Rabbenu Abraham ben HaRambam, whose other famous work is Kafayat al-Abidin. That title can be translated as The Sufficient for the Servants of God and could also serve as the title for the Rabbi's biography. He was a man at the service of God, never seeking too much for himself, and always willing to put his life and soul on the line to help all who were created in the Image of God.

When he counseled people, they had his full attention and dedication, and he would not rest until he was able to solve their problems. He ached and suffered with his congregants, as well as with the whole nation, but he also knew how to rejoice. On Simhat Torah his exuberance and joy were contagious, as he was singing at the top of his lungs "zoom gali gali, the Torah for the sake of man and man for the sake of Torah". When officiating a wedding, you couldn't talk to him because he was consumed with preparing the speech for the bride and groom. The bride and groom would often be his students and he would address them with such love and affection that one would have thought he is the father of the bride. That is not to say that he

embellished things unnecessarily, as he was honest and straightforward. His speeches were engaging, inspiring, and thought-provoking. He would leave no stone unturned and would often turn the stone around several times with insightful and piercing question.

Often, as we would sit side by side on the Bima on Shabbat, he would throw a question at me: why do stones appear in every stage of Yaakov's story? Why isn't the Place where you serve God mentioned by name in Deuteronomy? How are we to understand the Midrash that the angel Michael sacrifices the souls of the righteous ones? His questions prompted thinking. He did not necessarily want an answer and would probably argue that there is no one right answer in most cases, but he was able, through his questions, speeches, and brilliant classes to get people to think and bring out the best in them.

When the rabbi passed away, I was devastated. Beyond the personal loss, I felt that we are at risk of losing his legacy. Now, five years later, there are still many pages in the photo album of the Jewish world and the Syrian community which are ripped in half and of which his shining smile and indefatigable energy are missing, but new pages are written daily by his family and his many disciples, whose influence reaches far beyond the physical boundaries of the little summer resort town in New Jersey.

I want to share with the readers a poem I wrote during the Shiva and the text I wrote for his headstone, both in Hebrew, with translation and some explanations. As Rabbi Labaton was not a proponent of pilgrimage to the burial sites of the righteous, reading those lines might serve for us all as a virtual visit and as an invitation to continue his legacy.

הגיד לך אדם¹

יום חמישי, גר שמיני

שמים קרים בהירים וקשים

על צג סלולרי קר מנוכר מרצדות אותיות שאומרות שהלכת אצל

ברדיו האיש שיודע כל מה שקורה בעולם לא אומר כלום

והשמים עודם בהירים כאילו גם הם לא יודעים

וחנכה היום והלל צריך לומר

אָבֵל הַמֵּלִים מִסְרְבוֹת לַצֹּאֵת מֵהַפָּה אֵיךְ אֲשִׁיר אֶת שִׁיר²

זֶה הַיּוֹם עָשָׂה הָאֱמָנָם

וּבִלְשָׁכָה, לִשְׁכַּת חֲשָׁאִים³

פְּתוּחִים הַסְּפָרִים מִמִּתִּינִים הַדְּפִים פְּזוּרִים⁴

אֶךְ יֶדְךָ הָאוֹהֶבֶת אֵינָהּ

מִשְׁתָּאִים נְחִילִי אוֹתִיּוֹת מִתְרַגְּשׁוֹת וּבָאוֹת מֵעֵטֶךְ

שׁוֹאֲלוֹת אֵיכָה? אֵיכָה? עַל מִי נְטָשְׁתָּ מַעַט הַצֹּאן⁵

וְהַסִּידוֹר שׁוֹפֵךְ צֶקוֹן לַחֹשׁ מַלִּים שֶׁל שְׁנֵי חֲמִישֵׁי אֲנָשִׁי

אָמוּנָה אֶבְדּוּ בָּאִים בְּכֹחַ מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם, בְּכֹחַ לֹא

בְּכֹחַ כִּי אִם בְּרוּחַ

חֲכָמָה וּבִינָה רוּחַ עֲצָה וּגְבוּרָה

וְהַבִּינָה אֵי מְקוֹמָהּ וְהַחֲכָמָה תִּמְצָא מֵאֵין

וְעֲצָמָךְ שְׁמֶתָ כָּאֵין

מִמֶּנּוּ אֵלָיו בּוֹרַח⁶ וְרֹץ וְשֹׁב וְחוֹזֵר וּמוֹלִיךְ וּמַבִּיא וּמַעֲלָה

וּמוֹרִיד⁷

וּבִנְפֹשֶׁךְ הַגְּדוֹלָה עֹשֶׂה סְפִירוֹת

בְּלִימָה

נְעוּץ סוֹפֵן בְּתַחֲלִיתוֹ⁸

וְסוֹפֶךְ תַּחֲלִיתוֹךְ

כִּי בַעֲדוֹן גֵּן אֱלֹקִים הִיִּיתָ⁹

בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹקִים בְּרֵאשִׁית חַיִּיתָ

וְאַהֲבָתָ וְטַפְחָתָ וְרִיבִיתָ

אֶת הַנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם

חִיבָה יְתִירָה לוֹ נוֹדַעַת¹⁰

וּמִרְאשִׁית מַגִּיד אַחֲרִית חַיִּיתָ

וְשִׂאֲלָתָ הַמִּסְפִּיק לְעוֹבְדֵי ה'

וְלֹא הַסְפִּיק, וְלֹא הַסְפִּיקָתָ

וְהַשְׁלָהֶבֶת הַקְּשׁוּרָה בַּגְּחֹלֶת נִיתְקָה

וְעֲזָבָה הַגְּחֹלֶת

הַלּוֹחֶשֶׁת

ואתה בשלהבת עליית

ברקב אש

וקאן נותר רק

שקט

מקדש לידיד נפש, האדם הגדול בענקים, הרב עזרא לבטון זצ"ל

חיים עובדיה, טבת תשע"ד

A man will tell you

Thursday, fifth candle

cold, clear, harsh skies

on the cellular screen, cold, alienated letters flicker, saying you are gone but

on the radio, the man who knows everything happening in the world says nothing

the skies are still clear, as if they do not know either

and it is Hanukkah today, and Hallel we should say

but the words refuse to leave the mouth, how shall we sing the song

this is the day He has made! Is that so?

in the office, the sacred bureau

open books wait, scattered sheets

but your loving hand is gone

wondering, swarms of letters with tumult stream from your pen

asking, how is it possible? Where are you? with whom have you abandoned the little flock?

and the siddur pours silent prayers, words of Monday and Thursday, men

of faith are lost, those who had the power of deeds! power? not

by strength but by spirit

of wisdom and intelligence, spirit of counsel and fearlessness

intelligence, where is its place? wisdom shall be found in nothingness

you considered yourself as nothingness

from Him to Him you escape and run and return, bringing forth and back and up

and down

your great soul contained ten spheres
hanging in the void
end and beginning connected
and your end was your beginning
for in the Eden, the Garden of God you were
in the Image of God of Beresheet you lived
and you loved and nurtured and took care of
all who were created in Image
who deserved special affection
from the beginning you foretold the end
and you asked, is it enough for those who serve God?
and it was not enough, and you did not have enough time
and the flame tied to the coal was detached
and it left the coal
whispering
and you rose with the flame
in a fiery chariot
and here remained only
silence...

Dedicated to my dear friend, Rabbi Ezra Labaton

Haim Oavdia, Brooklyn, Tevet 5774

Rabbi Labaton's Headstone

אֱלֹקִים בְּצֶלֶם בְּרָאוּ וּבְחֶבֶד יָדְעוּ¹¹
כִּי בְרוּחַ דַּעַתוֹ צֶדֶק וְשָׁלוֹם נִשְׁקוּ¹²
הִגִּיד לָאָדָם מֶה דּוֹרֵשׁ ה' מֵעַמּוֹ¹³
וְעַל לִוְיָ לְבוֹ חֶסֶד, אֶמֶת וּמִשְׁפָּט נִחְקְקוּ¹⁴
בְּדֶרֶךְ ה' צִיּוּהַ בְּנוֹתָיו וּבָנָיו¹⁵
וְקִהַל עַדְתּוֹ לִימַד וְהִנְהִיג בְּקוֹל דְּמַמָּה דַּקָּה¹⁶
אֵח לְחֻכְמָה, חֵבֵר לְדַעָה
בַּעַל, אָב וּבֵן אֱהוּב, וְלֹאֲלָפִים עֲזָרָה¹⁷

God has created him in image and has known him with affection

For in his broad mind justice and peace met each other

He told man what God demands of him

And on his heart lovingkindness, truth, and justice were engraved

He educated his daughters and sons in the path of God

And has taught his congregation with a still, silent voice

A brother of wisdom, a companion of knowledge

Beloved husband, father, and son, and Ezra – Help – to thousands

¹ Micah 6:8. One of the rabbi's favorite verses.

² See Ps. 136:4.

³ Rabbi Labaton referred to his office in Hebrew not as the commonly used משרד but rather with the archaic, Mishnaic word לשכה. I loved that word of his and I felt it is connected to the term לשכת חשאים which appears in Mishnah Shekalim 5:6. That bureau distributed help for the needy in a dignified manner, an emblem of Rabbi Labaton's philosophy.

⁴ I have asked the rabbi a million times to let me organize his study, but he thrived in the apparent chaos of piles of books and floating sheets, whether printed or scribbled in his handwriting. He needed them all open and available, and he knew exactly where each one was.

⁵ 1 Sam. 17:28. The phrase was said to David, another of the Rabbi's heroes.

⁶ See Psalm 139, and Keter Malkhut of Rabbi Shelomo ibn Gevirol.

⁷ According to the Mishna Rosh HaShana 2:4. The Mishnah says that the message of the new moon was transmitted through a chain of fiery torches on the mountain tops, an appropriate analogy to the way Rabbi Labaton spread knowledge and faith.

⁸ According to Sefer Yetzirah.

⁹ See Ezekiel 28:13.

¹⁰ Pirke Avot 3:14.

¹¹ To know in the sense of to choose, as in Gen. 18:19, the verse which speaks of the choosing of Abraham and another favorite verse and theme of the Rabbi.

¹² Ps. 85:11.

¹³ See endnote 1 above.

¹⁴ See Prov. 3:3.

¹⁵ See endnote 11 above.

¹⁶ One of Rabbi Labaton's favorite biblical narratives was 1 Kings 19, in which Eliyahu encounters God after the confrontation with the false prophets and after walking in the desert for forty days. In verse 12, Eliyahu is told that God does not appear through fire, wind, or earthquakes but rather through a small still voice. Rabbi Labaton adhered to this message and taught people not by fire and brimstone but with love, compassion, and the quiet ability to listen.

¹⁷ Many Syrian rabbis used to spell the name with ה and it is very fitting to the Rabbi's legacy.