

Remembering Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz z'l by Rabbi Scott N. Bolton

Who could teach Talmud in so clear a way? Who could gather the Jews for a global day of Jewish learning?

I recall seeing a translation of the Talmud with idiomatic English and historical notes on the side and wondering why I was never allowed into that world as a child! Rabbi Steinsaltz was my first Talmud teacher; he walked me into the garden pathways of the pages of Talmud.



And then we used his elegant Hebrew translation in the Beit Midrash, in my first year at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies alongside the Vilna Shas, there was a blossoming of language. We were able to turn the many layers of Talmudic soil with questions like: Which halakhic principles apply here? What do historians understand about material culture in the Age of the Sages?

The blend of the Steinsaltz volumes of Talmud on our study stands made our learning richer and dynamic. They were classics-to-be -- just like the Vilna printed edition of the Talmud has become a standard. Beyond the Gemara, Rabbi Steinsaltz' many books about biblical figures and values, Talmudic personalities, and mystical takes on our "world below" have sparked fire in so many souls.

As my friend, Shlomo Zuckier, posted Friday morning, "The many tributes to his career will understandably focus on his works as a translator and author, but it is important that we not lose sight of the central place in his life as an educator in the institutional context." Without recognizing Rabbi Steinsaltz as a builder of Jewish educational institutions we would not be paying tribute to all he dedicated himself to.

"Early in his career, he was Israel's youngest principal, at the age of 24, and he later set up educational institutions in the former Soviet Union, spreading Torah all over the world as an emissary of the Rebbe in keeping with the Chabad tradition he affiliated with."

"More recently, he founded the Makor Chaim high school and the Tekoa Hesder Yeshiva. Each of these built upon existing Dati Leumi (religious nationalism) models - the dormitory high school for boys and the Yeshivat Hesder - but injected into them an increased focus on spirituality, Hasidut, and an emphasis on the emotional to accompany the intellectual."

Just recently, on a night of study in the Or Zarua library, we dedicated a complete set of the Koren Steinsaltz edition of the Talmud in honor of Rabbi Emeritus Harlan Wechsler. It contains an idiomatic English translation and a vocalized presentation of the classic Talmudic page from the Hebrew book direction. It sits now next to our Artscroll translation and our multi-volume, classic set of the Vilna edition of the Talmud. Those shelves are as sacred as our ark in the sanctuary, and those volumes of Talmud are as precious to us as our Torah scrolls.

Rabbi Steinsaltz brought us back to the wells of our tradition, in the original, with vowels, with additions and notes. He made our tradition accessible to the general public. And not just accessible but alive to the reader. As Professor Zuckier stated, "Only a great educator could have both the vision to undertake these projects and the acuity to produce so much so successfully, to shape the spiritual lives of so many."

I once had the blessing of sharing a Shabbat table with a student of his who is a prominent outreach rabbi for the Orthodox Union youth movement NCSY and a consummate educator himself. Over the joys of his family Shabbat table he shared with me his deep attachment to Rabbi Steinsaltz and called him a father-figure mentor in his life.

"I asked him if I should leave Israel and live on America. I wanted advice from my rebbe," my friend recounted. "And I recall how he looked at me, into me, and knew my heart and wanted for me all the joy of teaching Torah that I would have in America. So he sent me on my mission."

Yehi Zichro Baruch. May his memory be a blessing. May the inspiration we receive as readers and students of Talmud and Hasidut, attaching our hearts and minds to Torah in his memory, preserve his light in our world.