

The Three Weeks and The Penitential Season:

A Dedication In Honor Of My Parents

I am honored to dedicate this issue of the Benjamin and Rose Berger Torah To-Go in memory of my dear parents, Rabbi Meyer and Mrs. Rose Kramer, z'l.

My father's yahrzeit is on 7 Tammuz, just ten days before the beginning of The Three Weeks. The yahrzeit of my mother is on Tzom Gedalyah, 3 Tishrei, during the Ten Days of Repentance. There is a chassidic saying that the Hebrew letters of "Av" are an acronym for "*Elul ba*" — Elul is coming. With the approach of Av, we are already on the threshold of the Penitential season — the month of Elul with its commitment to preparing for the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe.

During this season of spiritual striving, growth and repentance, there are many lessons that can be learned from my parents, who lived extraordinary lives full of chessed and devotion to Klal Yisrael.

Yerushalayim and Israel

The Three Weeks commemorate the destruction of the Holy Temples and the exile of the Jews from Israel, and Yom Kippur concludes with the prayer for our return to Yerushalayim. My parents had the merit to see the rebirth of the Jewish Nation in the Holy Land through the establishment of the State of Israel. This was a miracle

for which our People waited almost 2,000 years. Their involvement in Hapoel Hamizrachi and religious Zionism gave meaning to those years of their lives and ensured that Israel would be one of their focal points. How proud my father was when he spoke at the brit milah in Israel of his first Sabra grandchild, noting the restoration of the family to Israel after 2,000 years. Whether it be the heartfelt recitation of the Prayer for the State of Israel or commemorating the wondrous days of Yom Haatzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, we, the generation living after these miracles, still need to constantly remember the words of Isaiah 62:1: "For Zion's sake I will not be silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not be still, until her righteousness emanates like bright light, and her salvation blazes like a torch."

Kibbush Hakehillot and Kiruv Rechokim: Reclaiming lost communities and bringing near those who are distant

When my father learned in Yeshiva University, Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan (RIETS) in the 1930s and 40s, Orthodoxy was in a steep decline and retreat around the country. My father embraced Yeshiva's commitment to *kibbush hakehillot* at the encouragement of

his rebbe, Rav Dr. Samuel Belkin, zt'l. My father settled in Philadelphia to attend law school, and there he met my mother. Together they made the decision to consecrate their lives to the rabbinate in that city, where Orthodoxy was especially abandoned by many congregations. My father would go on to teach part time at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, but his full-time work would be to serve in congregations where the majority of congregants, like the city itself, were not religiously observant, and seek to bring them closer to the ideals of Yahadut. My mother was his full partner in these endeavors. In this vein, my father not only worked with and related to his congregants, but also with Jews of all backgrounds, and even with rabbis of other denominations, whom he treated with respect — he always exemplified treating all human beings with respect. I recall one very prominent Reform rabbi who would periodically call my father with religious questions when that rabbi had a traditionally-raised congregant who had some concern about proper Jewish practice, such as when one can conduct a wedding after the conclusion of Shabbat or when one may not marry during the days of the Omer and The Three Weeks. My father would explain to me that these Reform rabbis may not have had these religious concerns in

their own lives, but if a congregant of theirs had a religious bent, and that rabbi sought to do the right thing in such circumstances, that too was a wonderful merit that these rabbis earned.

For my parents, kiruv rechokim had two facets: One was reaching out to those distant from Jewish observance and trying to bring them closer. The other was reaching out to them and befriending them, even if they remained “rechokim” — distant and removed from our traditions! May we likewise have the fortitude and compassion to reach out to all Jews and treat them with dignity and respect.

Civic Responsibility and Hakarat Hatov

While my mother was born and raised in Philadelphia, my father was born in Russia in the early days of Communism, and his father and grandfathers, all rabbis, faced persecution and prison. My father and his parents and sister were able to escape to the United States when he was 7, and my grandfather then served as a rav in various small communities throughout the United States. My father’s secular schooling was in public schools through high school, while his father was his personal rebbe. After high school, he left his parents’ home in Iowa, with very little resources, as the family was poor, to enroll in Yeshiva College and RIETS. *Hakarat Hatov* — being appreciative for the good rendered on one’s behalf — was a lifelong trait of my father’s, who was indebted to Yeshiva University for his advanced education and personal support, and for its commitment to the preservation of traditional Judaism. He also always remembered

the freedom and liberty that the United States offered his family. He had wanted to volunteer to be an American military chaplain during WWII, but was rejected for health reasons, and he afterwards embraced his civic responsibility by learning and teaching about American law and its relationship to Jewish law. May we always remember the obligation to demonstrate and offer *Hakarat Hatov* and be responsible and law-abiding citizens.

Experiencing Different Jewish Communities and Styles of Education

The Orthodox Jewish community is blessed with so many different “*aydot*” (groups) that span the globe and centuries of religious expression, i.e. Ashkenaz, Sepharad, Aydot hamizrach, Taymani, Nusach ha’Ari, and Chassidic. My father thought it was important to expose us to these different “*nuschaot*” (liturgical variations) via music and prayer experiences. Though his was a typical Ashkenaz congregation, on Tishah B’Av, my father often took congregants to pray in Philadelphia’s historic colonial Congregation Mikveh Israel with its Spanish-Portuguese traditions. The chanting of every kinah with a specific, dirgeful tune, along with chapters of Aychah and Iyov recited with the Sepharadic cantillation, made Tishah B’Av there a very moving and meaningful experience. [For those in New York, the same uplifting service can be — and should be — experienced in America’s first congregation, Congregation Shearith Israel, The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue.] Another time, my father took us to Williamsburg (Brooklyn) for

Hoshanah Rabbah to experience the special flavor of davening among the Chassidim. We should want our families and congregants to experience the different kehillot in our midst.

I learned an important and impactful lesson at the age of 5 in Philadelphia’s Congregation Mikveh Israel. I was given a small tallit to wear, and in that awesome and majestic sanctuary of marble and silver, draped in black bunting for Tishah B’Av, I was escorted to the bimah to place the *rimonim* upon the Torah. This made such an impression upon me at that young age, that when I became a rav, I tried to find ways to invite all of the children in the congregation to actively participate in some aspect of the Torah service, usually by carrying one of the Torah ornaments or *yad* from and to the aron hakodesh where they were placed upon the Torah. I encourage other rabbonim to do the same. Another outreach opportunity for children that we instituted — especially those from non-observant families where the father was not in shul or for those without fathers — was for my shul president and me to unite our talittot to create enough space for the children to join us under the tallit for Birkat Kohanim and to sing along with the kohanim and respond Amen, together with me.

Chesed

“*Olam chesed yibaneh*” — the world is built on kindness. How fortunate I was to grow up in a home of chesed and gemilut chasadim. May that be a privilege granted to us all. Amen.

Daniel Zvi Kramer