



A Loss of our Best: On The Passing of Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch zt”l

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This past week, the Jewish world suffered a great loss with the passing of Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch zt”l. He was a tremendously important figure in the Jewish world and I’d like to share with you a few thoughts on his life as well as one of his halakhic responsa. Like many in the American community, I did not know him personally and only encountered him briefly on a few occasions (I did shake his hand those times- back when we were able to do those types of things...). However, through his writings and students I have become better acquainted with his incredible persona and scholarship and I

therefore believe that even as we are enmeshed in this time of so many terrible losses, it is incumbent on us to recognize the passing of this great man.

R. Rabinovitch served as the Rosh Yeshiva at one of the most prominent *hesder yeshivot* in Israel, Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maalei Adumim. Before reaching this position, he served as a Rabbi in Charleston, South Carolina, Toronto, and London (where he became the primary teacher of Rabbi Jonathon Sacks).

Widely recognized as an outstanding *talmid hakham* (Torah scholar), R.

Rabinovitch was a prominent *posek* (halakhic decisor) for the Religious-Zionist community on many important topics, especially on issues of conversion and army-related matters. Since his passing, many have described him as a posek with immensely broad shoulders who was willing to take innovative positions in cases where he deemed it necessary. In addition to his teaching duties, R. Rabinovitch was an accomplished writer, and composed an impressive scholarly commentary on the Rambam's Mishneh Torah in addition to a book on Jewish thought and several important and innovative volumes of responsa. Despite his accomplishments, he was known for his humility and calm demeanor. Rabbi Haim Sabato eulogized him by saying that not once in forty years did he ever see him display an ounce of arrogance or pursue any form of honor.

In many ways, R. Rabinovitch was a unique figure in the Israeli yeshiva world. He possessed a doctorate in philosophy of science and served as a professor of mathematics at the University of Toronto. Additionally, although he studied in traditional yeshivot like Ner Yisrael in Baltimore, R. Rabinovitch's methodology of learning was quite different from the common yeshiva "Brisker" style that focused on conceptual analyses. Instead he focused on achieving the plain meaning of the text through the use of all of the Rambam's and his teachers writings. In this specific sense, he more

closely mirrored the academy than his Ner Yisrael background. While not as well known in America, R. Rabinovitch represented the best of our community: someone fully steeped in the depths of Torah, who possessed an appreciation for the value of general studies, and was sensitive and kind to the people and world around him.

A couple anecdotes:

At the funeral, one of his sons spoke about R. Rabinovitch's love for the State of Israel. He shared that his father, when he was still a Rabbi in London, once turned down a very prominent position in America because "I know if I take it I will not end up in *Eretz Yisrael*."

Another one of his sons shared a story about R. Rabinovitch's time in Charleston: "When someone commented on the waste of genius in Rav Rabinovitch teaching *aleph beis* in Charleston, he responded that it may seem that teaching such elementary things is beneath me, it is not like giving complex Gemara shiurim, but it is *Torat Emet* (true Torah), and *Torat Emet* can start a great revolution."

R. Rabinovitch was well-known as the shul candyman to the children of the community. Kids would sprint towards him on Friday nights to get their weekly sweets. When I once prayed in the same row as him at a shul in Maalei Adumim

(where he sat like a regular attendee towards the back of the shul), a small child ran through his legs during the middle of *tefilla*. I remember him just grinning and continuing to pray in his characteristically calm demeanor.

(For an amazing story about him, see <http://rabbisacks.org/heroism-tamar-vayeshev-5775/>)

Finally, a halakhic thought from his book of responsa *Si'ach Nachum* (pgs. 61- 63). R. Rabinovitch was asked a question about if social workers were allowed to travel on Shabbat to a place of a terror attack in order to assist the victims. Obviously, the social workers are not able to apply practical medical assistance to the victims. Thus, much of this question hinges upon whether we consider the psychological trauma inflicted upon the victims as constituting real sickness. If so, it would fall under the category of cases where a person is allowed to violate Shabbat for one who is dangerously ill (*holeh she-yesh bo sakanah*). R. Rabinovitch takes a strong stand on the issue and states that even if they are not fully aware of the amount and state of the victims, social workers are allowed to violate the laws of Shabbat in order to travel to the scene of the terrorist attack. Even if physically the victim might not be at risk, there is significant psychological trauma and that is considered dangerously ill. R. Rabinovitch marshals several traditional sources that indicate

there is value to attending to the mental state of the victim, independent of their practical medical state.

R. Rabinovitch's answer reflects his willingness to take strong stands on issues that likely in previous generations other halakhic decisors would have approached differently. It also reflects his sensitivity to mental health, and the realization that it must be taken into account as a real medical issue when assessing the laws of Shabbat.

May his memory be a blessing for all of us.

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