

## BLU GREENBERG

I feel very honored to have been asked by the sons to say these words in memory of their father.

As a young girl, and then as a teenager, I idolized Rabbi Rackman. I saw him every morning as he and my father, Sam Genauer, z"l — and for a time joined by Eli Horowitz and Elihu Schimmel — sat around our dining room table in Far Rockaway learning in their daily Gemara *shiur*. When Rabbi Rackman moved to Manhattan, the *shiur* continued as my father made his way every day to this building. Their *havruta* continued for 32 years. No matter how busy his life was both as a congregational rabbi and as a national leader, Rabbi Rackman always found the time. I recall from the early Far Rockaway days that if he hadn't arrived at our house by 8:05 — which rarely happened — it meant that something was amiss in his congregation and his telephone hour from 7:00 to 8:00 a.m. for morning urgencies had to be extended.

So I saw Rabbi Rackman first as a child, through my parents' eyes — beloved friend from YU college days, wise counselor, steady *havruta*. He was friend to both my parents. I remember the year that my mother decided she had had enough of Pesach preparation and company, and wanted to go to the Pioneer Hotel. My father resisted; "How can you leave your community, abandon family guests who have a *hazakah*?" This was one dispute that needed a fair hearing. "Let's ask Mendy," she suggested. Although Rabbi Rackman was not promoting Pesach hotels, he sided with my mother. "Sam," he said, "Sylvia does all the work. It's only fair that she decide."

As an adult, I came to appreciate Rabbi Rackman's international stature, his uncommon oratorical and writing skills, his respect for Jews of all stripes, and his concern for the underdog. Later still, I came to understand his bravery and integrity in standing for principles. Even later, as I became involved in women's issues, I realized that the man I had admired and loved since childhood was a longtime, lone champion of causes close to the hearts of Orthodox women. When his new book arrived a few weeks ago and I saw the beautiful photo on its cover, my mind was flooded with memories of all those stages of knowing Rabbi Rackman. With some great leaders, the more you know of them, the more faults you see, but the more I knew Rabbi Rackman, the more I understood his greatness, his heroism. When I was 11, Rabbi Fortman, z"l, the European-born, Yiddish-speaking rabbi of the White Shul in Far Rockaway died suddenly on Shabbat morning. My father knew that Rabbi Rackman would want to know about his colleague, so he sent me over to the Rackman house. As I spilled out the news abruptly, I could see that Rabbi Rackman was upset, so in the spirit of youthful consolation, I said to him, "Well, anyway he was old." In the midst of his genuine sorrow, Rabbi Rackman managed to caution me lest I ever be sent on another such mission. I still remember his words, "Blu, you must never say that, no matter how old someone is." I understand that lesson so well today: although there is consolation in knowing that Rabbi Rackman lived a good long life and that his last years and months were filled with great love and respect from his adoring family and close friends, still the pain and loss is overwhelming. Rabbi Rackman has left this Earth, and humanity and all of us are the poorer for it.

What manner of man was he? How does one come to live such an extraordinary life? What enabled him to do all that he did in his 98 years?

Rabbi Rackman's life gives meaning to the phrase "ahead of his times." A glance at today's communal agenda gives you a sense of just how far ahead he was. Issues he raised up for communal scrutiny as early as 50 and 60 years ago — the vulnerable agunah, internecine strife between the denominations, a shortfall in Diaspora responsibility to Israel, the bifurcation in Orthodoxy between ritual and ethics: all of these issues are still with us.

Yet, as much as he was ahead of his times, he was also very much a man of his times. He helped build several institutions — HILI and Shaarei Tefila in Far Rockaway, YU, Bar-Ilan, this shul, the RCA, Federation, the Jewish Week, the Synagogue Council, and more. Millions of hours in Jewish communal work. In *Kohelet*, we read, *ba'boker z'ra zar'echa ve'gam la'erev ahl ta'nach ya'de'cha*. On this the Talmud comments: whatever you did in your youth, you must do again in your old age. At age 68, when most people retire or shut down, he began a whole new career, taking over the presidency of Bar-Ilan and raising it to great new heights. When he was in his nineties, he was still traveling the globe to raise funds for Bar-Ilan.

Along with Rabbis Joseph Lookstein and Leo Jung, z"l, Rabbi Rackman presented a new model of American Orthodoxy, one that affirmed the integration of modern culture and values without diminishing commitment to halachic Judaism. He greeted the world warmly even as he was building the modern Orthodox establishments of our times.

What enabled him to do all that he did? What enabled him to be in this world and also way ahead of it? I believe it was the combination of four qualities that he possessed: an abiding passion for justice, a genuine compassion for human beings, a deep pride in Judaism, and an innate desire to do the right thing. In all of these qualities and enterprises, his beloved Ruth was a total partner. Combine all of those qualities with masterly management of time, and you have a key to his a productive, multifaceted life.

His passion for justice and his compassion for the underdog reflected themselves powerfully in his six decades of work for agunot, women victimized by their recalcitrant husbands. He wrote and wrote and pleaded their cause. And when he saw no movement, in his eighties he finally established the Bet Din L'ma'an Agunot with his colleagues Rabbis Morgenstern and Toledano and others. For this, he was attacked and isolated. Opprobrium continuously rained down on his head. But he would not cease or back down. He was fearless, relentless. He truly had a blind spot when it came to justice. Justice and compassion — in this case, for the innocent agunah — turned this gentle, loving man into a fierce warrior. It was not about himself or about winning; indeed, he had no concern for himself or his safety or stature or honor, for he was a genuinely modest person. His concern was for justice in halacha and for the abandoned wife. I recall going to his apartment with two friends several years ago to urge him to comply with a request from his RCA colleagues to publish all the proceedings of his bet din. We tried to reason that this would take the heat off of him. But he didn't care about the heat. Without rancor he said, "No other bet din is required to make public their cases; they are looking for an angle to invalidate the release of my agunot, and I won't allow that." He knew that his halachic precedents were legitimate and needed no apology. He believed that for those looking for strict interpretation when they could just as easily use lenient ones, it was really all about delaying tactics. The persistence of injustice was not a source of burnout or weariness but rather a challenge. He was proud that his daughter-in-law, Honey, z"l, chose to devote her life to working in the same arena and was guided by the same passion for justice.

The agunah was but one area where his dedication to justice was his overriding concern. It marked so many other positions he took throughout his life. One example: in the McCarthy era, when everyone ran for cover, he stood out as one who did not. Though personally threatened with a loss of security clearance, he continued to defend a friend under McCarthy attack. He could have taken the easy way out to protect his career and his family. But instead he showed great moral courage — and ultimately was vindicated. For all that he was a political scientist and historian, he was apolitical when it came to justice and compassion.

Rabbi Rackman loved his Judaism. His sermons and writings reflected his world view: that Judaism was both a responsibility and a great gift, and he conveyed this core belief to his family, students and congregants.

He carried with great pride the title Rabbi. His YU students wanted to be like him, and a number of them interned with him in the Fifties, spending Shabbat at the Rackman home. This was long before the concept of personal rabbinic mentoring existed. Many of his close students did become rabbis.

He loved halacha and all of its workings and especially, I think, its ability to remain eternal yet also be drafted to the cause of contemporary justice and modern life. This literally thrilled him. I remember a phone conversation of a dozen years ago in which he spoke almost with youthful glee in his voice at discovering a teshuva of Rabbi Moshe Rozen that could be used to free agunot. And I recall, as a teenager, overhearing many conversations over the dining room table when he proudly shared with his *havruta* partners how a principle found in Western secular law was already in place a thousand years earlier in Jewish law. He never veered off the course of halacha and was confident that his ethical interpretations of the law were correct.

His love for Judaism extended to all Jews, Jews at every point on the spectrum of religious or secular behavior. This was true all throughout his life. He had good relations with the liberal rabbis of the Five Towns at a time of growing alienation and when such friendships were verboten in Orthodoxy, and still are in parts of our community. He withstood the criticism in a most gentle and non-defensive manner. It was simply a matter of fact for him that all Jews were Jews. He built many, many alliances across borders. It was a sad day in his life when, under pressure, the Synagogue Council of America folded.

His love of Judaism also prompted him to be the most vocal internal critic when it came to a lapse in ethical behavior by his beloved Orthodox brethren. He could not tolerate halakhic behavior absent morality, a lesson he had learned from his revered and much loved rebbe, Rav Soloveithchik, z”l.

Finally, his desire to do the right thing was a strong operating principle in his life. This is different from justice, but connected to his love of human beings. It was about manners, courtliness, interpersonal relationships, right behavior. He never wanted to hurt anyone’s feelings and was sensitive to how others felt. A number of years ago, when Rabbi Rackman came to visit my father, I went to their apartment to say hello. I saw my father every day, so I burst in the door with “Rabbi Rackman how are you?” With a smile he said to me, “First, go kiss your father.” When he received an invitation, not a day went by without his answering it and sending a gift. He was tidy and proper in human relationships because doing the right thing was not about etiquette but about the feelings of others. I remember the dignity with which he would descend

the Shaarei Tefila bimah at the end of Shabbat morning services. The congregants all waited in their seats until he reached the door and Ruth joined him, and they stood there and greeted each and every person leaving the sanctuary. What class! But it wasn't about his dignity or class. It was about making sure that everyone in his shul was treated with equal respect.

If you combine all of these character qualities with his penchant for brevity and his ability to manage time, you understand how he was able to accomplish not only what was good and right but also to accomplish so much in one lifetime. He had time for everything, made time for everything. Hours for calling, for learning, for writing, for teaching. His family was never put on the back burner. A person can have the best values and intentions but if he or she cannot execute them, they hang in the stratosphere. Rabbi Rackman was practical man. As a young rabbi, he engaged a driver so that he could read or write or study as he traveled to YU. Though this was not the norm, it made sense and enabled him to do the unexpected, the extra shiva visit, the extra mitzvah, the extra meeting with a young student or congregant, attend the extra committee meeting, or raise extra philanthropic dollars for an institution. Time was a precious commodity, yours and his, and he wasted neither.

A last personal story, which I tell on behalf of so many others here who have their own version of Rabbi Rackman's managing time and mitzvot. In February 1963, New York was hit with one of the worst blizzards in decades. I had given birth in Jewish Memorial Hospital, a short walk from my apartment in Washington Heights. For two days, not a visitor showed up, and none were expected. Suddenly, Rabbi Rackman appeared on the fourth floor, having made his way from Far Rockaway. A driver waited downstairs for him as he had several other visits to make. The three other women in my maternity ward were stunned. None of their priests, who lived nearby, showed up. How did he get here? Why did he come? My instinctive reply to my awed roommates was something to the effect of "He always manages." How did he do so much in one life? He always managed.

A term that has come into wide use in the last two decades is *gadol hador*, literally, the great man of the generation. Rabbi Rackman was not a fan of the term. He critiqued its use because he felt it was being used to pull Orthodoxy to the right and to silence opposition. But there is a true meaning to the term. Rabbi Emanuel Rackman was a great man, a giant of a man in this generation of modern Orthodoxy, though his stature went far beyond the modern Orthodox community. He was a *gadol* intellectually — a genuine *talmid chacham* combined with the most sophisticated, intellectual, philosophical thinking — beyond apologetics; he was a *gadol* morally — a man who had reached such stature that he was beyond politics or pressure. He was a *gadol* in humanity and love, beginning with his wife and sons and then his daughters-in-law, and his beautiful grandchildren and great-grandchildren — his pride and joy — and extending to all Jews and all people, even to his enemies, of whom he never spoke evil or struck back pettily.

*Gadol merabban shmo.* The name Emanuel Rackman stands for greatness beyond all the titles and all the praises one can speak of him. Now that he has been taken to his final and well-deserved rest, he belongs to the ages. *Yehi zichro baruch.*