



Photo courtesy of Norman Kret

The Diminutive Giant: A TRIBUTE TO RABBI JACOB KRET

{ 1909 - 2007 }

By Chava Willig Levy

“So, when are you hannoncing?”
He asked me.

I loved talking with—and listening to—Rabbi Kret. There were superficial reasons for this: As a wheelchair user accustomed to speaking to people’s stomachs, I found it a pleasure to converse with Rabbi Jacob Kret, who measured little over five feet tall. Talking with him meant never having to strain to gaze at his face. And as a wordsmith, I was amused by his fractured English (in one sermon, he referred to a telescope as a microphone) and counter-Cockney accent (or, as he would have called it, haccent).

But more important reasons abounded. Chief among them was the simple fact that he loved me. He never said so, but his smile was a dead giveaway. And his smile was ever-present

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from the moment my husband-to-be, soon after we began dating, introduced us on February 26, 1983. (He asked when we were hannoncing eight weeks later.)

“The Krets’ hospitality taught me a fundamental truth: Some people have everything and give nothing; others have nothing and give everything.”

That smile embraced everyone who crossed Rabbi Kret’s path. For nearly half a century, that path led to and from his hole-in-the-wall synagogue in Harlem, Manhattan’s predominantly black neighborhood.

In 1923, when Congregation Chevra Talmud Torah Anschei Ma’aravi (The Torah Study Society of the People of the West [Side]) settled on Old Broadway, a narrow lane just off 125th Street, Harlem was America’s second-

largest Jewish community. But when Rabbi Kret became its spiritual leader in 1950, he struggled mightily just to round up a minyan, or quorum of ten men, for services. His smile never left him. He was happy to be alive.

An eyewitness to World War II (and World War I, for that matter), Rabbi Kret lost his parents and all of his siblings—in fact, over 120 close relatives—to Hitler’s henchmen. A brilliant Talmudic scholar, he shepherded his Polish yeshivah eastward, always one step ahead of the Nazis’ claws. In 1940, he was imprisoned and sent to a forced labor camp by the Soviet authorities. Standing under a makeshift *chuppah* in Siberia, he and his bride, Chana, were eternally grateful for the one wedding gift they received: an unbroken matzah. In a 1980 *New York Times* article, Rabbi Kret had this to say: “I could almost see, with my own hand, I could almost feel, the presence of God on me.”

I’d venture that thousands of Rabbi Kret’s congregants (at what everyone called the Old Broadway Synagogue or just “Rabbi Kret’s”) had the same thing to say about him. Some,

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like him, were Holocaust survivors. A few were converts to Judaism. Most were students from Columbia University, Barnard College or the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). All were touched by his faith in God—and in them.

Rabbi Hanan Balk of Cincinnati's Congregation Agudas Israel was an

apartment, often filled to overflowing with guests. Somehow, its walls—and its occupants' shoestring budget—stretched. "The Krets' hospitality," he asserts, "taught me a fundamental truth: Some people have everything and give nothing; others have nothing and give everything."

Dr. Michael Kaplowitz, a New

1974. The instructor taught in Hebrew, which I didn't know. Someone suggested that I study with Rabbi Kret, a Talmud tutor at JTS, when it was a more traditional institution than it is today. It was a position he accepted with the encouragement of his *posek*, Rav Henkin, who told him, 'You'll influence *them*, not the other way around.' Well, Rabbi Kret didn't teach in Hebrew; he taught in *Hinglish*. Yet he was able to open up the world of Gemara to me like no one else." He adds, "The irony is that Rabbi Kret was never officially on the JTS faculty because he didn't have an academic degree. Yet members of the Talmud faculty would frequently turn to him with questions. He was there to teach Torah. He never withheld his knowledge."

But, when asked for it, he never withheld his opinion, either. Troubled by a lecture in which an administrator pronounced the Book of Esther a forgery based on a Persian myth, Dr. Kaplowitz approached Rabbi Kret for clarification. "He calmly stated that this was absolute heresy. 'But your views might cost you your job,' I gasped. 'You work for him!' Rabbi Kret looked me straight in the eye, smiled and said, 'I know Who I work for.'"

At the Old Broadway Synagogue, a stone's throw from JTS, Biblical criticism couldn't hold a candle to Rabbi Kret's story-laden sermons. Sheila Rubin, who met Rabbi Kret in 1968 during her freshman year at Barnard, fondly recalls this parable:

Late one night in a Polish village, there was a desperate knock at the rabbi's door. In walked the wealthy Reb Levi, tears streaming down his face. "Rabbi, my son is very sick. The doctors say there's no hope!"

"Reb Levi," said the rabbi, "go home to your son. I'll gather the townspeople on my way to shul and we'll pray for his complete recovery."

As he made his way toward the synagogue, the rabbi saw that the streets were deserted; only the ganovim (robbers) were up and about. So he called to

His "Son," the President

For Jacob Worenklein, chairman of Old Broadway Synagogue's board of trustees, Rabbi Kret was more than a spiritual leader. He was the closest thing Worenklein ever had to a father in his childhood years. "My father, the director of Rabbi Kret's yeshivah in post-war Germany and subsequently his neighbor in New York, died when I was a year old. Old Broadway and the Krets' apartment were my stomping ground, where I learned lessons that will stay with me forever.

"In 1977, a few years after I graduated from law school, the shul's officers asked me to become president of Old Broadway. It was a great honor, but after two years I said to Rabbi Kret, 'My term will soon end. It's time for us to have a new president.' Rabbi Kret looked at me and said, 'Jacob, I'm sixty-five years old. At my age, I shouldn't have to deal with a new president. When I retire, you can resign as president.' And that's how I got to be president for over twenty-five years.

"It wasn't so easy being Rabbi Kret's president. Let me tell you about our biggest battle. Every other year, I would say, 'Rabbi Kret, it's time for a raise.' He'd say, 'What are you talking about, a raise? The shul can't afford a raise.' I would say, 'Rabbi Kret, you're not making that much money. You deserve a raise.' And he would answer, 'A raise? You're going to give me a raise? And then Mrs. Kret and I will have to knock on everyone's door to raise money for my raise?' Then he would look me in the eye and say, 'Jacob, *tut mir nisht kein toives* [don't do me any favors].'"

undergraduate at Columbia and JTS when he met Rabbi Kret in 1976. "Up at Columbia," he recalls, "I was often surrounded by intellectuals who prided themselves on—and judged others by—their youth and vocabulary. Rabbi Kret, almost seventy, with his thick accent and broken English, was so pure that he disarmed them all. They flocked to him. So did I."

"Rabbi Kret was a model for seekers of Torah life," adds Rabbi Balk, who subsequently earned his rabbinic ordination at Yeshiva University. He remembers Rabbi and Mrs. Kret's tiny

York-based psychiatrist, remembers that apartment, too. "It was 1976. I was a rabbinical student at JTS. Pesach was approaching and, because going home for the holiday wasn't feasible, I was dreading it. There I was, moping in my dorm room, when the phone rang. It was Rabbi Kret inviting me for a *yom tov* meal. When I got to the Krets' apartment, I found myself in the company of fifteen other 'strays' with no place to be for the holiday."

Dr. Kaplowitz recalls how his friendship with Rabbi Kret took root. "I was taking a Talmud class back in

them by name: "Avram! Shimon! Moishe! Mottel! Come with me to shul!"

In the morning, an elated Reb Levi burst through the rabbi's door. "Rabbi, it's a miracle! My son is cured! Please, I want to thank all those who prayed for him." When Reb Levi saw Avram, Shimon, Moishe and Mottel, he was shocked.

"Rabbi, I'm the richest man in town and these good-for-nothings are the ones you chose to plead with God?"

"Ah, Reb Levi," the rabbi replied. "Don't you see? The gates of heaven were locked. Who knows how to pick a lock? Ganovim!"

"The moral is pure Rabbi Kret," Rubin asserts. "Everybody has worth. We shouldn't judge anybody."

Norman Kret, Rabbi Kret's son, points to what some might view as a paradox. "From his youth, my father was firmly grounded in the Novardok school of thought, a *musar* philosophy that demanded constant self-scrutiny. But at Old Broadway, Papa never scrutinized anybody, except to pour love upon them. He was the most subtle *kiruv* worker—with no specific intention to be *mekarev*."

Avi Terry, close with Rabbi Kret since 1976, witnessed that unconditional love time and again. "One Yom Kippur, a secular man walked into Old Broadway wearing a khaki-colored safari shirt and shorts. Rabbi Kret wandered off the bimah and greeted the guy with his signature smile. So many synagogues would have shown him the door."

Like Rubin, Terry shul-hopped all over New York's Upper West Side, but after meeting Rabbi Kret, he had found his place. Old Broadway Synagogue was such an attraction that he trekked to it from his West Ninety-Seventh Street apartment. Even blizzards could not keep him away. Neither could Rabbi Kret's retirement at the age of eighty-eight; from 1997, Terry regularly took the longer trek to the Krets' new apartment on the Lower East Side. "Rabbi Kret was a one-man operation," he chuckles. "He led the prayer service, chanted the Torah portion, blew the shofar, delivered the sermons. After he retired, it seems like it took twenty people to do all that he did alone."

Terry adds, "He *paskened* [rendered halachic decisions] according to the individual. He looked into each person's soul. The next person in line might ask the same question and get a different ruling." Norman Kret confirms this. "One Shabbos, a local Jewish merchant walked into Papa's shul. 'Look,' he said nervously, 'today is my father's *yahrtzeit* and I'd like to lead the prayers. But you'll probably say no because I'm not a Sabbath observer.' Papa gazed at the man and replied, 'Go ahead. I know one day you'll keep Shabbos.' Today that man is a renowned philanthropist—and a Sabbath observer."

Rabbi Kret's generosity of spirit extended beyond the walls of Old Broadway Synagogue. He was constantly writing checks for charitable causes, even when the causes closest to home (notably the "hoil happeal" to keep his tiny shul warm) were left wanting. Terry asserts that no person

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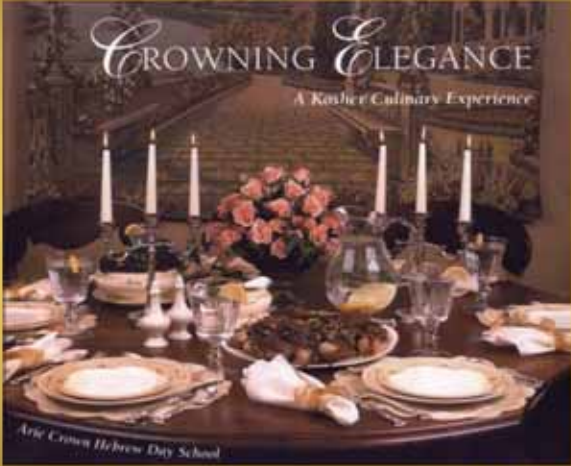
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“Richie, You Are My *Talmid!*”

Jewish educator Rabbi Richard Fagan owes so much to Rabbi Kret. “My wife and I came from secular Jewish homes. We had never met anyone quite like Rabbi Kret. Raised in the skeptical modern world, we marveled at his faith. He put his stamp, his personality, his special twinkle on everything he did—and he changed our lives. We had many teachers whom we respected. Rabbi Kret, we loved.

“His explanations were clear. His patience was amazing. Through him, not only the text, but the world of the Gemara came alive. In his Yiddish intonations, in the names and stories of his teachers, the Torah world of pre-war Poland still lived. He knew what each of his students needed: which extra *gemara* we should learn, which *halachah*, which *musar sefer*.

“A few months before our wedding, Rabbi Kret took us aside and said, ‘I know you are just starting out. Mrs. Kret can lend you some of her dishes.’ We were aghast. Just the year before we had been eating cheeseburgers! What if we made a mistake with their things? We didn’t take the dishes, but his generosity and faith in us, even at that stage in our lives, was incredible. When I asked him about *minhagim*, Rabbi Kret said, ‘Richie, follow the *minhag* of your family.’ I answered, ‘Rabbi Kret, the *minhag* of my family is to eat a ham and cheese sandwich!’ He gave me a look, he gave me a smile and he said, ‘All right, so not *that minhag*.’ A day or two later, he stammered, ‘If you wouldn’t mind ... you could take some of my family’s *minhagim*.’ Mind? I was honored. I still am.

“But more than any other, this memory crystallizes how Rabbi Kret affected us, and affects me as a Jewish teacher today. We were newlyweds, and as Purim approached, my wife baked mandelbread for *shalach manot*. We wanted to bring some to the Krets but we wondered, ‘Are they really going to eat from our kitchen?’ So I called first, and Rabbi Kret’s daughter said, ‘Bring it right over.’ When we got there, we found Rabbi Kret pacing up and down the hallway, tears streaming down his face. I grabbed his hands. ‘Rabbi, what’s the matter?’ And he said to me, ‘What do you think I am, that you would think I wouldn’t trust *you*? You are my *talmid!* If I don’t trust my *talmid*, who am I going to trust?’ And he grabbed three cookies, made a *berachah* and jammed them into his mouth. Did I learn more in that moment than I could have learned in a hundred years?”

or organization was turned away. “What’s more,” he says, “the shopkeepers of Harlem—Jew and non-Jew alike—gave Rabbi Kret charity. They literally chased after him to support his causes.”

Norman Kret was never surprised by this phenomenon. “Papa wasn’t selectively nice,” he explains. “It didn’t matter whether you were a janitor or a

judge. He knew you were entitled to his respect.” Rabbi Charles Sheer, Columbia University’s Jewish chaplain from 1969 to 2004, visited the Barnard cafeteria in 2006, nine years after Rabbi Kret, its longtime *mashgiach* (*kashrut* supervisor), had retired. “Six Hispanic kitchen workers rushed over to me to inquire about the welfare of ‘the little rabbi.’”

Betzalel Mezei, Rabbi Kret’s grandson, recalls, “One day, Zaide arrives at Old Broadway and comes to a halt. Something looks different. The entire brick facade of the shul has been steam cleaned. A man approaches and asks, ‘Yo, Rabbi, how do you like it?’ Zaide replies, ‘It’s beautiful. How much do I owe you?’ ‘Nothing, Rabbi,’ the man says. ‘I just wanted to see the look on your face.’”

The look on his face belied the hell he had endured in Europe. “Our apartment was always filled with guests and good humor,” says Miriam Mezei, Rabbi Kret’s daughter. “But when he felt I was old enough, my father told me how his Soviet captors ripped his two *semichas* [certificates of rabbinic ordination], his tefillin and his manuscript of Talmudic commentary before his eyes. Still, if anything, the war strengthened his faith. In his barracks, he taught entire tractates of Talmud from memory.”

Dr. Kaplowitz remembers the last time he saw Rabbi Kret. “It was February 2006. He was frail. He said he was worried that, as a result of several mini-strokes he had endured, his memory was now deficient. But what he forgot, most people never learned. And what he retained, most people never acquired.”

One year later (on the nineteenth of Shevat, 5767), ninety-seven years after Rabbi Kret’s pure, sweet soul descended from on high, it returned to its heavenly abode. The gates were wide open; no need to pick a lock. I can imagine the fanfare. And I can imagine an embarrassed Rabbi Kret gently chiding the welcoming committee: “So, why are you hannouncing?” **JA**

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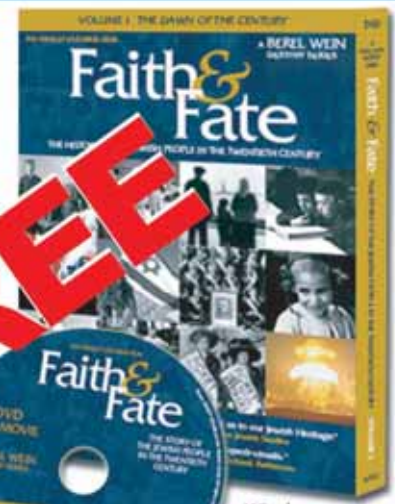
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