

Zalman Bernstein

An Unorthodox Orthodox Baal Teshuvah

By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Zalman Bernstein, z"l, was a remarkable Jew and human being, whose multi-faceted and ebullient personality expressed many paradoxes: he was an incredible character with incredible character; he was an aggressive and outspoken man of humility and anonymity; he could hurl blunt and outrageous *ad hominem* critiques one moment and could show profound sensitivity and concern to society's "forgotten" people the next; he was an international businessman and societal *enfant terrible* as well as a loving and caring friend who expended much time and energy in fostering personal relationships; he was passionately opinionated, but was constantly evolving and open to change; he was enamored by the color green (his office and home furnishings, even the ink of his pens, were all green) because it is the color of American dollar bills, but at the same time he was a committed halachic Jew whose life decisions and fundamental values were determined solely by the necessity he felt to serve the Almighty, His nation and His Torah.

In our very close relationship, Zalman taught me many things. The first lesson I learned from him, because of what he was and what he became, is that we dare never give up on any Jew, that "an Israelite, no matter how far astray he may wander, remains an Israelite," and always has the potential to return.

We first met some 25 years ago at the Lincoln Square Synagogue. I had

just given a "Wednesday evening" lecture, at the end of which – in the presence of more than 500 people – an individual I had never seen before shouted out: "I like your style, Rabbi. It's too bad I can't become a member of your synagogue." When I asked him why he felt he couldn't join, he responded with candor and self-confidence – seemingly oblivious to the knot of people surrounding us – "I've been married to a Gentile woman for more than 20 years." When I asked him why a person in his situation would attend a lecture and even entertain the notion of membership in an Orthodox congregation, he opened his shirt and revealed *arba kanfot*, the ritual fringes. "My father died a few months ago; he used to wear these *tzitzit*, so I decided to inherit them. I try to say *Kaddish* every day."

I immediately thought of the Talmudic passage "the thrice-daily prayers were instituted by our Fathers" (*Berachot* 26b). The usual interpretation is that our Sages are referring to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. However, the Chassidic interpretation is that parents, when they pass on to the other world, institute for their sons the traditional prayers in a synagogue setting because of the obligation of the sons to recite the *Kaddish*. I therefore took a deep breath, whispered a silent prayer for Divine aid and forgiveness (for what I was about to suggest was against my own *shul* policy) and held out the possibility to this fascinatingly forthright visitor that he become a single member. With tears in his eyes he waved a checkbook in front of my face, asking

what amount he should fill in. I made up an amount (I think I said \$75) but added the stipulation – which I thought of on the spot – that he had to learn Torah with me for at least one hour a week. We decided to meet the next day in his office at 1:00 p.m. As he handed me his card, he said, "Ask for the president of the company, Sanford Bernstein. That's me!"

I arrived at his plush, green ensconced Fifth Avenue offices the next day at 1:20 p.m.; his secretary, obviously expecting me, handed me a telephone, into which my newly acquired student bellowed from behind the closed door: "Rabbi, time is money; you kept me waiting 20 minutes, you'll now wait for me 20 minutes." Slightly taken aback, although not unmindful of the truth behind his chastisement (I certainly learned from him to be more prompt, although I still fall short of his standards in this regard), I responded: "No, Mr. Bernstein, time is life, and life is far more precious than money. If you are otherwise occupied because of my lateness, I'll wait even two hours for you, but if you're punishing me, we can't waste the next twenty minutes without studying Torah." He came out smiling, and as he ushered me into his even greener office, he said, "I still like your style. I'll forgive you this time, but don't let it happen again."

I had brought two Bibles, and we sat opposite each other at his exquisitely designed green marble desk. He had ordered us lunch – a cheeseburger sandwich for him, and a *glatt* kosher hamburger on roll for me. A big sign above his chair ordered "No Smoking,"

Rabbi Riskin is Chief Rabbi of Efrat, Israel, and chancellor and dean of Ohr Torah Stone Colleges and Graduate Programs.

but he was smoking the largest cigar I had ever seen. (In reply to my query about the contradiction, he said that “No Smoking” means cigarettes. “I make and interpret the rules around here,” he explained.) He had apparently informed his secretary that there were not to be telephone interruptions, and he actively participated in our Bible study with rapt attention and intense concentration. He would often inject incisive questions, and when he especially appreciated my reply, his response would be a rather colorful expletive.

After a while, he looked at me with concern. “What’s the matter? You look greener than my wife!” Indeed, the room was beginning to spin and my temples felt as if they were about to burst. I weakly explained that the combination of the cheeseburger, cigar smoke, and raw vocabulary together with the Bible learning was a contrast that was more than I could manage. Zalman opened a window, put out his cigar, threw away the mostly uneaten cheeseburger, and offered to give \$180 to Hebrew University for every expletive he uttered. Since I was beginning to come back to myself, I substituted Chabad for the University. (Rabbi J.J. Hecht received a check for \$1,800 at the conclusion of that session, and he asked to study with the “green *nadva*” three times a day.) So began an auspicious relationship in Toledo, Ohio, between both Zalman and me....

The second lesson I learned from Zalman is the importance of a burial place – and the possibility of drawing inspiration from the graves of the righteous. From a certain perspective, a connection between living individuals with gravesites of those who have passed away is an affirmation of Jewish eternity and the continuity of the generations. As long as one has descendants and disciples who live in accor-

dance with one’s example and teaching, one lives eternally and continues to influence even beyond the grave. Thus our Sages teach us that Caleb ben Yefuneh had the strength to withstand and defy the evil report of the ten scouts because he first visited the grave of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron and became duly inspired by the experience.

Shortly after Zalman and I began studying together – and he was soon attending Sabbath services regularly and putting



every morning he asked me to acquire a single gravesite for him in Israel. I was then spending the summers with my family on Kibbutz Ein Tzurim, and so I easily arranged with the *chevrah kadisha* in Jerusalem for a grave on the Mount of Olives cemetery. True to form, I received a telegram with twelve hours notice that Zalman was coming to inspect his newly-purchased acquisi-

tion. The following scorching summer’s day, Zalman, a member of the *chevrah kadisha* and I met outside the gate of Mount of Olives; as a *Kohain*, I remained behind as the other two entered for the inspection. I could hear Zalman shouting, but I couldn’t make out his words; I could see him running between the graves, but I had no way of understanding his intentions. At length, an angry Zalman and a perplexed *chevrah kadisha* member met me with the report, “I can’t see the Temple Mount from the grave you allowed Zalman. It’s not acceptable.” He pointed to a suitable gravesite – one that was either inherited or purchase – and was unobstructed by any wall or fence of the Temple Mount, but it was very close to the street of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohain Kook, one of the greatest Torah intellectuals and pious religious leaders of our generation. Both the member of the *chevrah kadisha* and I, given Zalman’s marital and religious status, understood that a grave-site was inappropriate. I explained using that after Zalman wouldn’t be looking anything from down there, so that his view was totally irrelevant –

but to no avail. Eventually, a frustrated Zalman left the cemetery as well as Israel with hardly a good-bye.

The following week I received a letter from my friend, with an apology together with an explanation. “I’m not concerned about the view for myself,” he wrote, “but before I met you and studied Torah, I made a mess of my life and had no message of inspiration to impart to my children. However, I

ordered the grave in the hope that all was not lost. I felt that perhaps if, after 120 years, my children will visit my grave and gaze upon the holiest site in the world, where Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac and where generations of Jews offered prayers and gifts to God in the Holy Temple, they may become imbued with the ideal of sanctity which I could not give them in my lifetime..." I translated his letter into Hebrew, brought it to the *chevrah kadisha*, and told them that I have every indication to believe that by the time the gravesite will be used Zalman's religious development would be such that Rav Kook would be proud to have him as a neighbor. They sold him the plot – and Zalman

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began to study and became deeply influenced by the teachings of Rav Kook for the rest of his life.

Zalman continued to evolve and grow in Torah and Commandments. He married a religious Jewish woman, attended to the Jewishness of his children, and became a fully observant Jew. Eventually, he moved his major residence to Jerusalem. There he made a new beginning, and the home he and his devoted and elegant wife, Mem, established became a model of hospitality, a meeting place for Torah scholars and classes, a magnet for yeshivah students and *baalei teshuvah* alike. Through the Avi Chai and Tikva Foundations which he founded and funded, his *tzedakah* enabled many struggling businesses to prosper and countless Torah and outreach institutions in the United States and Israel to

develop and grow. He was the spirit behind the highly visible public relations effort to bring religious and secular Jews closer together called "*Tsav Pius*," and he spared neither time nor expense in encouraging initiatives to make the sacred texts more accessible to every Jew. From Zalman's perspective, Jewish tradition was too important and too universal for it to become the property of the Orthodox alone. He never agreed, however, to accept an organizational dinner Guest of Honor tribute or to have any institution, school or program bear his name. As much as he fostered a high profile and larger-than-life image in the business and social worlds, so did he zealously guard anonymity and humility in the worlds of Torah and *tzedakah*; in effect he was teaching that the pursuit of true success in God's eyes is the exact antithesis of what brings success in the world of finance and industry.

Just as Zalman was initially brought back to Judaism by the traditionalism of his father, his major goal in life was to bring all the Children of Israel back to their Father in Heaven. And despite his impatience with stupidity and politically liberal ideologies (the two were interchangeable in his eyes), he felt a deep connection to every Jew, no matter where he or she stood on the religious or political spectrum. Although he waged a difficult and courageous battle against cancer during the last two years of his life, in many ways his final months were his most peaceful and fulfilled: he was grateful for and took pride in his wife, his children and his accomplishments. It seems to me that the only reason he agreed to be taken by the Angel of Death was because he decided that it was time for him to convince the Almighty to finally dispatch Elijah the Prophet, who would at last "restore the hearts of the parents to their children and the children to their parents."

May his memory forever serve as a blessing. 