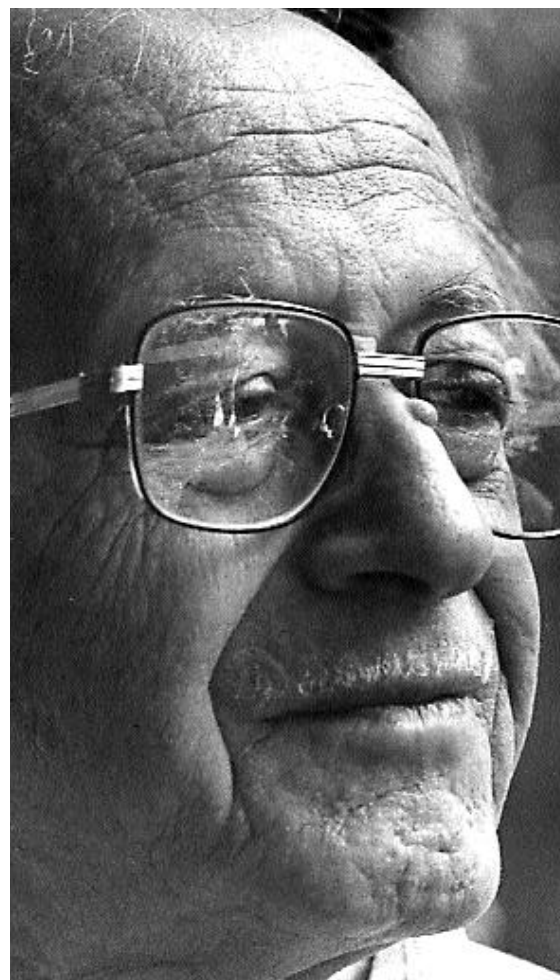


Profile

Dr. Gershon Kranzler: Tiferet Personified

By Tzvi Hersh Weinreb



Dr. Gershon Kranzler, ז"ל 1916-2000

Dr. Gershon Kranzler combined wisdom with modesty, religiosity with intellectual achievement. He conveyed thoughtfulness with an Old World courtesy, reflecting perhaps the German Jewish community into which

Rabbi Weinreb is the spiritual leader of Congregation Shomrei Emunah in Baltimore, Maryland. He is the former chief psychologist of the Potomac Foundation of Mental Health in Bethesda, Md.

he was born. His spiritual depth was expressed in the diligence with which he completed *mishnayot* numerous times and the entire Talmud several times, and in his meticulous commitment to *halachah*, even in his dying days. In these ways, and in others, he was impressive indeed, but not unique. His uniqueness was in his openness to conflicting ideas; his tolerance of clashing opinions; his ability to transcend the dichotomies of his time. In short, his distinction was in his capacity to see harmony where others saw difference and discord.

There is a concept in our tradition called *tiferet*. In the cosmos there are forces of mercy, love and compassion, which we call *chesed*. And there are the competing forces of justice, awe, and harsh judgement, or *din*. And there is the synthesis of these antithetical forces, a force in its own right, named *tiferet*, harmony. It is the capacity to transcend antithesis, to rise above it, to appreciate the positive in each of the competing forces, and especially to apprehend the beauty of a harmonious world in which polar opposites co-exist. Dr. Kranzler was, in this sense, the *ish hatiferet*, the man who could fully appreciate each instrument in the orchestra as well as the music in its entirety.

Tiferet, the theme of his life, was especially apparent with regard to some traditional dichotomies: Torah vs. *Chachmad*; Intellect vs. Emotion; Age vs. Youth; *Chassidut* vs. *Hitnagdut*. The secret of his life's success lay in his failure to recognize these dichotomies, in his refusal to see anything but consonance in these alleged dissonances.

To begin with, as far as he was

concerned, Torah is not inconsistent with secular knowledge. Nor were they in any way separate to him. His Torah learning was enriched by his knowledge of science and literature, just as his sociological insights were informed by his Torah scholarship.

He thoroughly integrated the values of *Torah Im Derech Eretz* in which he was trained. Dr. Isaac Breuer, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch's grandson, was his early master and guide, and Breuer's grand theory of Jewish history and society was the matrix for Dr. Kranzler's thought and character. His eulogy for Dr. Breuer, published in the *Orthodox Tribune* in September 1946, remains one of the most comprehensive and insightful essays on the work of this under-appreciated thinker.

Dr. Kranzler's ability to see Torah and *Derech Eretz* in harmony had its source in his exposure to various institutions of German Jewish life in its final pre-war years. He was born in Germany in 1916, and spoke fondly and enthusiastically of his participation in various youth movements, particularly Ezra. At a very young age, he was already a contributor to many German Jewish publications, especially the *Israelite*. He studied at the Maximilian University in Wurzburg, and the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin. Completing his doctoral work in philosophy in 1938, he escaped from Germany several weeks before Kristallnacht.

Upon his arrival in the United States in the early years of World War II, he threw himself into rescue work with the Vaad Hatzalah, in close association with the legendary Mike Tress. Williamsburg, Brooklyn was his home, and Mesivta Torah Vodaath his spiritual environ-

ment. That community later became the subject of his sociological research, which produced several volumes of high scientific caliber, written from the perspective of the “participant-observer.” The first of these volumes earned him his second doctorate, this one in sociology from Columbia University. His recollections of those Williamsburg years invariably returned to the rabbinical leaders with whom he became acquainted. Their diversity again illustrates his *tiferet* the *Chassidische rebbeim* of Modzitz and Klausenburg, the Lithuanian *roshyeshivah* Rav Shlomo Heiman, and the man he dubbed a true eclectic, “Mr.” Shraga Feivel Mendelovitz. This shared reverence for *Chassid* and *Mitnaged* was carried forward in later years, when he would lead his Baltimore high school boys on trips to New York to visit a broad spectrum of Torah institutions, including Yeshiva University, Torah Vodaath, Lubavitch and Chaim Berlin.

His lengthy, illustrious and innovative career in Jewish education included positions as assistant principal of Torah Vodaath in Brooklyn, principal of Zichron Moshe in the Bronx, principal of Bais Yaakov on the Lower East Side, and the creation of the Esther Schonfeld High School there. In his last formal position in Jewish education, he presided over the “golden years” of the Talmudical Academy of Baltimore from 1955 until 1966. Hundreds of students graduated these institutions with fond memories of him, and with educational experiences which led them to excellence in all walks of life. Distinguished alumni remember with equal gratitude his rigorous critiques of their literary compositions and the lessons he gave them on the *chalil* and other instruments.

His career in education was marked by his demands for academic excellence, which his students learned to appreciate in combination with his

insistence on extra-curricular activities. He particularly encouraged journalism and choir. Members of my synagogue who were his students at T.A. still recall the memorable cantatas that Dr. Kranzler wrote for them to perform.

His rare quality of *tiferet* allowed him also to transcend the split between *secheland regesh* intellect and emotion. In his own person, he combined literary scope and keen analytical skills with a delicate poetic sense and musical talent. Dual images of him dominate my personal recollections of him: one is of his eyes squinting, pondering the compatibility of a “new” *Maharal* with one of his “meta-theories;” the other is of his eyes glistening, as he dances on Simchat Torah to a new *nigun* (tune).

Tiferet also applies to the conceptual levels of his intellectual propensities. While his interests were wide-ranging and sensitive to factual detail, he was especially prone to thinking in terms of the over-arching concepts and categories into which these interests fit. The prefix “meta” (beyond) was a favorite term of his. He strove to think beyond the usual categories. His articles in the journal *B'OrHaTorah* on meta-sociology, meta-economics, and meta-biology, not to mention his as yet unpublished, but eagerly awaited, monograph titled *Meta-history of Chumash* illustrate this well. He was indeed a meta-man.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of his *tiferet* was his ability to relate to old and young alike. This social scientist and *talmid chacham* was capable of spinning fantasy tales with Jewish content for young children, who are to this day captivated by the surprising twists and turns of *The Golden Shoes*, *The Broken Bracelet*, *Yoshko the Dumbbell* and numerous other titles. After his retirement from T.A. of Baltimore, he began a new career as professor at Towson State University and Johns Hopkins University, teach-

ing general sociology, sociology of education, and Jewish sociology. His learned articles, whether on sociology or his brilliant, complex series on meta-subjects are addressed to mature, advanced students, who probably never guessed that the author of these scholarly tomes had also written popular adventure stories for children.

His talent in relating equally well to young and old was not confined to Dr. Kranzler's creative productions. It was typical in his personal relationships too. He remained friendly with his peers, but

Dr. Kranzler's ability to see Torah and Derech Eretz in harmony had its source in his exposure to various institutions of German Jewish life in its final pre-war years.

also developed close connections with those far younger than he. He respectfully participated in classes taught by men less than half his age. His grandchildren were not the only children who adored him and who responded warmly to his uncanny mastery of the secret language of childhood.

Dr. Kranzler's family included a number of siblings, distinctive and distinguished in their own right. He is survived by his wife Trude, two sons, two daughters, children-in-law, and many grandchildren, all of whom are aware that this gentle, wise, and exceptionally creative man was a precious, irreplaceable treasure not just for them, but for the thousands who were inspired and uplifted by his writings and personal example. 