

WHERE THE TREE FALLS:

Remembering Rabbi Walter Wurzburger

By Shalom Carmy

Six years before he passed away, Rabbi Walter Wurzburger suffered a massive heart attack. By then he had served in the rabbinate for half a century, had taught at Yeshiva University (YU) for almost thirty years and had presided over *Tradition*, the journal of the Rabbinical Council of America, for over two decades. He had published *Ethics of Responsibility: Pluralistic Approaches to Covenantal Ethics* (Philadelphia, 1994) and dozens of articles. Yet, until he was hospitalized last March, he continued to maintain a substantial teaching and speaking schedule and even published another book called *God is Proof Enough* (New York, 2000). In his later years, hundreds of students got to know him; the rest of us continued to learn from him. That he refused to retire, even when he could not walk from the parking lot to the classroom, defines his standard of vocation. He was fortunate that his family, and particularly his wife, Naomi, made it possible for him to end his career in the manner in which he was accustomed.

Rabbi Wurzburger was one of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik's most faithful and authentic students. He was a *halachic* man. This does not mean he was preoccupied with the metaphysical categories and the epistemology of Torah study that the Rav wrote about;

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rather he was a Jew whose most important experiences occurred in the context of *kiyyum hamitzvot*. Joy for him was the recitation of Hallel. Spiritual seriousness was the privilege of observing Yom Kippur. He failed to understand how any Jew could fritter away even a moment of Yom Kippur in idle conversation.

Recently, a student at YU dug up a published sermon that Rabbi Wurzburger had delivered to his first congregation—Chai Odom in Brighton, Massachusetts—on Yom Kippur of 1942. It was a remarkable speech, if only for the command of

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English displayed by the twenty-two-year-old rabbi who had only been speaking the language for three years. The themes he was to repeat for the next sixty years were already well formed and confirmed the extraordinary maturity imputed to him by his classmates at YU.

What stands out most of all, however, in this sermon was Rabbi Wurzburger's utter avoidance of personal display. In 1942, a war was raging. Here was a man who had walked the streets of Berlin the morning after Kristallnacht, whose family had received visits from

the Gestapo. How easy it would have been for the young rabbi to hold his flock spellbound with tales of his experience. For Rabbi Wurzburger, however, this was not the theme of Yom Kippur, nor was it the purpose of the rabbinate. And so he spoke of contrition and sin, of wasted opportunity and ethical challenge, and of the promise and glory of repentance. As far as one could tell, he never lectured on his personal experiences in Nazi Germany and rarely reminisced about the past in private.

Halachah, for Rabbi Wurzburger, meant ethics. His family will tell you how fastidiously he shunned the pecuniary "extras" often regarded as natural by-products of a rabbinical position. He spoke about ethics from the pulpit, at the risk of causing displeasure to some of the individuals who paid his salary. About twenty years ago, he lamented how times had changed. When he served as a rabbi in Toronto, he recalled, his testimony that a member of his congregation was an observant Jew created an automatic presumption that that person's behavior was above suspicion; nowadays, he said with great pain, this was no longer the case.

Ethical standards, for Rabbi Wurzburger, were intimately connected to his image of the Torah personality. Often quoting the Rav, he would say that *halachah*, in the narrow sense of the term, provides a ground floor for ethical growth, not a ceiling. The aspiration for a holy and wholesome life entails going beyond legalism, and that requires that the student be attached to

those who have internalized Torah, and that he emulate them. He rejected the notion that rabbis are primarily technicians of *pesak*. This is not the place to survey Rabbi Wurzburger's contribution as a philosopher—that is for another time. But it is telling that his most seminal contribution to Jewish thought is probably the idea of "covenantal imperative," at the core of which is the conviction that religious ethics are learned through contact with authentic teachers of Torah. This is why Rabbi Wurzburger learned so much from the Rav, and learned it so faithfully.

Rabbi Wurzburger was criticized, and sometimes vilified, for being too tolerant—that is, for speaking to certain groups; he often represented Orthodoxy in meetings with Christians and addressed gatherings of nominally Orthodox Jews whose outlook he rejected. On occasion he spoke at conferences of Conservative and Reform Jews. His job, as he saw it, was to speak for Torah, wherever this took him. His presentations to differing audiences, often prepared in consultation with the Rav, were models of concise, civilized and uncompromising communication of the word of God. Rabbi Wurzburger refused to be drawn into public argument about these activities. This was not his teacher's way and it was not his. More fundamentally, Rabbi Wurzburger did not believe that public argument settled anything.

In explaining Rabbi Wurzburger's approach, I do not mean to imply that no other policy is legitimate. At times it is necessary to excoriate evil publicly and expose hypocrisy and error. But this was not Rabbi Wurzburger's mode of *avodat Hashem*. In this area, he conducted himself with special stringency, *middat chassidut*. To understand Rabbi Wurzburger, it is necessary to understand this element in his character.

This tendency should not be confused with intellectual cowardice. Two criteria differentiate between Rabbi Wurzburger's tolerance and one that is indifferent to the truth or value of Torah. The first, which has already been alluded to, is how one reacts to criti-

cism. I suspect that Rabbi Wurzburger could have drawn the sting from some of his critics had he returned from speaking to controversial groups with a robust supply of derisive anecdotes about his audience. However, the same civility that made him an ideal participant in such meetings prevented him from capitalizing on these opportunities. Those who disapproved of his willingness to engage the world outside of Orthodoxy did not need to have their disdain confirmed. He preached what his audience needed to know, not what would entertain them or enhance their



Rabbi Walter Wurzburger, z"l, (1920-2002)

feelings about him. When he saw no alternative, Rabbi Wurzburger could remonstrate vigorously with individuals whose conduct he found intolerable. There are people whose beliefs are at variance with Orthodoxy, yet who insist, for social and psychological reasons, on identifying with the movement. One can imagine how repulsive this was to a God-fearing man like Rabbi Wurzburger, for whom honesty was a paramount value. From some of these figures he could demand, until his body literally shook with anger, the minimal decency that they resign from the Rabbinical Council of America. But when his pleas fell on predictably deaf ears, he did not disparage these people in public for the approval of those who would applaud his rage.

Another criterion: There are rabbis who are quite forbearing when it comes to *kavod Shamayim*, but are jealous of their own personal honor. While his family was sitting *shivah* for him, many of us tried to think of occasions when Rabbi Wurzburger insisted on being treated with the respect due him as a rabbi, let alone a prominent one. We had no difficulty recalling examples of the opposite. A congregant, not particularly wealthy or pugnacious, once became so upset with Rabbi Wurzburger's sermon that he stormed the pulpit. The rabbi's reaction was not to demand an abject apology to be followed by a suitable penalty, as was his right (and some would say, his duty). Instead he invited the man to explain his objections at *seudah shelishit*.

A less dramatic anecdote may communicate Rabbi Wurzburger's instinctive sense of the rabbinate. When he first became the rabbi of a *shul* in Far Rockaway, New York, a large percentage of the congregation was lax in religious observance. In the ensuing years, he battled to stop social dances and to otherwise raise halachic standards. After several years' absence, I visited the congregation and observed that the people in attendance on a Shabbat morning seemed to be the type who would pray on a weekday too. "If the old non-observant people were now Orthodox that would be cause for congratulation," Rabbi Wurzburger noted. "If they were going to some other *shul*, even if they had moved to a Conservative congregation that suited their beliefs better, one might be relieved to see them go. But they, or rather their children, have, for the most part, dropped out completely. Why should that be considered progress?" Success is not to be measured by the comfort of the rabbi, but by the communication of Torah and *mitzvot*.

This was the spiritual and ethical discipline that marked Rabbi Wurzburger's unflagging sixty years of leadership. It was a discipline lightly worn; had it been ostentatious, it would

With Grace and Dignity

I first had the pleasure of making Rabbi Wurzburger's acquaintance in 1991, in the twilight of an auspicious rabbinical career that spanned five decades. The area of Lawrence, New York, that my family moved to in the early 1990s was, at that time, attracting those of a more right-wing bent. Congregation Shaaray Tefila, once a flagship of Modern Orthodoxy, had already evolved into a very different synagogue than it had once been. It was against this backdrop of changing demographics that Rabbi Wurzburger was named rabbi emeritus in 1994. Those who recall the transitional time remember the grace and dignity he exhibited under the circumstances. In the years that followed, he spoke from the pulpit often. As Rabbi Dovid Weinberger, Rabbi Wurzburger's successor, pointed out in his *hesped*, there wasn't a single occasion that Rabbi Wurzburger didn't preface his remarks with the words "with the permission of the *morah d'atra*." While this display of deference seems wholly out of place for a man who had served the synagogue for decades, those of us who knew Rabbi Wurzburger well would have been shocked had he acted otherwise. Similarly, I recall

speaking with him on numerous occasions when someone would interrupt with a question. More often than not, these individuals were longtime members of the *shul*. Nonetheless he never failed to inquire, "Have you asked Rav Weinberger yet?" Rabbi Wurzburger was a self-effacing man with no airs about him.

While Rabbi Wurzburger's essential legacy is that of a towering intellectual, passionate teacher and scholar, there was an altogether different aspect of the man, which was no less compelling. Though he resided in the world of philosophical pursuit and higher learning, he was blessed with the ability to relate to a wide range of people in a way that made each individual most comfortable. The only commonality to these encounters is that they began and ended with his huge smile and were sprinkled with laughter throughout. This quality endeared him to all, even those who stood on the other side of the ideological divide. As a leader, a teacher and a friend, he will be sorely missed.

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A Posek, Mentor and Friend

Two images of Rabbi Walter Wurzburger loom before me. The first is of his awesome presence from the pulpit. From there he struck awe into the hearts and minds of his congregants. The second is of the most gentle, soft-spoken advisor, one who bore no grudge or grievance against anyone.

Rabbi Wurzburger entered my life in my teenage years when he became rabbi of Congregation Shaaray Tefila. In his *derashot* on Shabbat mornings, he didn't speak about politics or even *halachah*. Rather he spoke about God. His voice was loud but trembling. It was more like the voice of a prophet, one to whom the Divine was immanent. And like a prophet, he sought to transmit his constant awareness of and feelings towards God to his congregants. When he spoke of awe, his face assumed a pallor revealing that *yirah*, and when he spoke of love, his whole being radiated that love.

His message was religious, but at the same time philosophical. He often spoke about man's insignificant position in the world.

At the same time, Rabbi Wurzburger's appreciation for his fellow man dominated his one-on-one interaction with others. His face almost always bore a hint of a smile through which he exhibited both his personal interest in you and his love of humanity. Rabbi Wurzburger's blending of such a broad range of religious, intellectual and personal qualities drew me to maintain my relationship with him. During college, my subsequent single years and into my married life, Rabbi Wurzburger was my *posek*, mentor and friend.

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have defeated its purpose. Most of the time, it was manifested in his delightfully self-deprecating sense of humor. (Just think what he could have done had he employed his quick wit and ability to think on his feet to demolish others.) Because he had a sense of priorities and took his message more seriously than himself, God gave him an incomparable ability to formulate the essence of any question regarding public policy or philosophy with clarity, precision and integrity, never forgetting the most inevitable, equally incisive qualifications by which he acknowledged the other sides of the issue. He had the gift of theological perfect pitch.

"If the tree falls in the south or in the north, where the tree falls, there shall it be" (Kohelet 11:3). One may read this verse fatalistically—once the tree has fallen, it cannot give fruit or shade again. Rashi, however, notes that the root *nafal* (to fall) also means, "to spread out, to dwell." Therefore he explains, "When a wise and righteous man dwells in a place, that is where his acts are recognized after his death: his wisdom and virtues recompense for dwellers of that place where he had guided them in the right path. The tree is the sage whose merit protects, like the tree that shades the earth."

When it came to his vocation, Rabbi Wurzburger had his priorities straight. He continued to work as long as he was physically able, and he was fortunate enough to be at his best until the very end. As Kohelet continues: "Sow your seed in the morning and do not withhold it in the evening, for you do not know which will succeed."

His students, not only those whose careers he had launched and supported for decades, but even some who had only a few weeks with him, knew what he had to offer; they also know what they have lost. "How many Yom Kippurs are there in a human life?" Rabbi Wurzburger was in the habit of remarking, as he contemplated the distinctive privilege of the holy day. I can't help asking the question that would never have occurred to him: How many teachers and rabbis like Rabbi Wurzburger are there in a life? May his merit and memory stay with us. **JA**