

A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

Reprinted from the January 2004 Adath Jeshurun Newsletter

In Memory of Rabbi Abraham J. Karp: My Rabbi, Mentor, and Friend



I was at a rabbinic conference, the Chancellor's Rabbinic Cabinet, convened by Dr. Ismar Schorsch, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, when I learned that Rabbi Abraham J. Karp had passed away.

Rabbi Karp was the rabbi of Temple Beth El in Rochester, NY. He arrived the year before my *Bar Mitzvah*, and left the pulpit in 1972, the year I was ordained as a rabbi, to become a Professor of American Jewish History at the University of Rochester. Rabbi Karp was my rabbi, my teacher, my mentor, my colleague and my friend. He had a tremendous influence on my style of rabbinate. He was my first role model. He was present at many of the most important moments of my life.

I want to share with you some of my memories of him. They will introduce you to a person who played a critical role in my life, and may help you reflect on similar relationships you have had with teachers, mentors and friends.

Rabbi Karp was born in Poland in 1921, and came to America in 1930. His voice bore no trace of an accent. That voice is the first thing I think of when I picture him. He had a rich, deep bass voice that to me as a youth was the voice of God, himself, not in its overpowering or stentorian quality, because it was neither, but in its warmth, depth of feeling, and caring.

His sermons conveyed love of God and *Torah*, compassion for all, and encouragement to do better. He was able to embrace you with his voice, soothe your anxieties, and instill you with the conviction that life, learning, and observance were grand, and within reach.

Rabbi Karp was a teacher, pastor, and confidant. He was also a scholar. His passion was American Jewish History, and his avocation was books. He spent a lifetime collecting and reclaiming lost treasures of the spirit bound between covers. His scholarship was pursued and achieved late into the night. He was always studying, learning, and writing.

This, all the while ministering to a congregation of more than one thousand families, preaching complete, well thought-out sermons on Friday night and *Shabbat* morning.

Eventually, his scholarship endeavors advanced to a point where he could not progress and still be the rabbi the congregation needed. It took great courage to leave a successful pulpit to pursue a new career in academia relatively late in life. His newly found freedom rejuvenated him and he went on to publish many fine scholarly works and inspire new students at the University of Rochester. He eventually retired to New York City, where he taught and continued his research and writing.

Rabbi Karp was a great presence in my life. He was the first person I told when I decided that I wanted to be a rabbi. He followed my rabbinate with pride, installed me in my congregation in Detroit, spoke here as the first Donsky-Hunn Scholar in Residence, and presented me for my honorary doctorate in 1998, marking my twenty-fifth year in the rabbinate.

But what I remember most is his presence in time of crisis. I was in New York when my father had a massive stroke. I found out at 5:30 PM and by 7:30 PM was at the hospital in Rochester. Fear and anxiety were apparent on my mother's face. After my sister and me, she only wanted to see the rabbi. He had a busy day, but late in the evening, at 8:30 PM or 9:00 PM he arrived. I will never forget my mother's relief in seeing him, and my own.

His embrace was comforting, reassuring, and realistic. That first night, while we were trying to deal with the situation, I stayed at his home, dozing as I expected the phone to ring at any moment calling me back to the hospital. When the call came, several days later, he was at the hospital to give us guidance, and shepherd us through the funeral arrangements.

The last time I spoke with him was after my mother died. Time had separated us. I had neglected to call and tell him of her passing. He read about it in the *AJ Newsletter*, and called the office in tears. And we shared a comforting remembrance. In my mother's papers, Cindy found a letter he had written to my mother upon my ordination. She treasured it, having kept it for some thirty years. Cindy had it framed, along with a picture of my mother and me, and it is now a cherished piece to me, hanging on the wall in my study at home. A reminder both of a mother's pride and a teacher's confidence.

Sometimes we wonder about the influence we have on other people. We often find out in circuitous ways. But this was one relationship where we both knew and cherished how he had influenced and befriended me, and I know that my rabbinate brought him great pride.

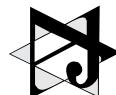
The week before Rabbi Karp died, the *Torah* reading recounted the death of Abraham, our father, and Sarah, our mother. Of Abraham the *Torah* says "This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years. And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin."

"A good ripe age... old and contented... gathered to his kin..." What does this mean? What made these years, this life, full and contented? The *Avot* were distinguished not only by length of days, but by how they lived. They were not saints. The *Torah* is not embarrassed, though the rabbis of the *Midrash* were, to show their flaws. What distinguished them was how they lived for the future, how they had a sense of destiny. They knew they were part of something greater than their own individual lives. Their lives had meaning from the aspect of that destiny.

We, on the other hand, live day to day. Our age has lost sight of the eternity of religious truth and the sense of building a future that has meaning for coming generations. We are concerned about the here and now, our individual pleasures. And we expect little of our children, but that they do the same for themselves and their children. We chase a wraith-like shadow of happiness that delights but for a moment.

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Leaders today are not people of vision either. They are slaves to polls, what they think people want, because their primary goal is not leadership but reelection. Who is willing to risk reelection by standing for principle, vision or future?

At the conference, Dr. Schorsch and I had the opportunity of sharing our growing concern about the situation in Iraq. Violence is engendering ever more intractable terrorism abroad. At home, in the name of the need for security, we are silent at the erosion of civil rights. Moreover, there is a Watergatelike quality about today, and we wonder when Americans will demand an accounting for this war. Where are the weapons of mass destruction that justified sending our heroic service men and women into combat — to be wounded and killed?

I cite this as I remember one sermon in particular that Rabbi Karp gave during the Vietnam War. It was called "The Saint who Came to Sodom." We all know that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were filled with wickedness, violence and corruption. It seems that one day there appeared in Sodom a certain man. I picture him as a disheveled individual, with a crazed look, wearing a sandwich sign or carrying a placard. "Change your ways," he cried out. "We are headed for destruction." Each day he appeared. No one paid him any attention. Sometimes they threw eggs or fruit or even stones at him. Little children made fun of him. But every day, he was out there with the same message. "Change your ways. We are headed for destruction."

One day, someone came up to him and asked "How long are you going to keep this up? No one is listening to you. People think you are crazy. The man explained, "When I began speaking out, I did it because I thought I could change the people here. Now, I speak so they do not change me."

I often think of that sermon, the despair that occasioned it, and the courage it took to give it. And I fear that such a time may be upon us again.

Rabbi Karp was 82 when he died. Though up in years, he was not as old as Avraham Avinu. But like Abraham, his life was full and contented. He loved his family. He was blessed with a passion for God, *Torah* and Israel. He spoke for them first, never pandering to political trends. He had an abiding faith that in studying the past we could build a future worthy of eternity.

Rabbi Karp was a *Kohen*. How appropriate that the *Haftarah* for *Parashat Toldot*, read during the week of his death, is from the prophet Malachi:

"The *Torah* of Truth was in his mouth, and nothing perverse was on his lips;
In peace and righteousness he walked with me, and turned many from sin.

The lips of the Kohen guard knowledge, and *Torah* is sought from his mouth,
For he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts."

Rabbi Karp taught *Torah* and spoke truth. He was a messenger of the Lord of Hosts. He was a giant of the spirit.

I am privileged to be one of his disciples, though unworthy of the fullness of his example.

May his memory be a blessing and an inspiration.

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