

Kedoshim 5782- A Tribute to Rav Nota Greenblatt zt”l

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The legendary powers of concentration of Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook were well known. He could sit for hours on end without lifting his head from the Gemara in front of him, and he studied while adorned in his Tallis and Tefillin. On the day in question, his concentration was interrupted by a concerned father and his young son who was extremely ill, and whose condition confounded the doctors of Yerushalaim. Rav Kook welcomed the pair in, and the father explained why they were there. Upon hearing the urgency in the father's voice, Rav Kook took the child under his Tallis and gave him a blessing- that he should live a long life, full of Torah study and fear of God. The father and son left, and eventually the young boy made a full recovery. This incident took place in the early 1930's, but the blessing was clearly fulfilled. The young boy in the story died at the age of 96 this past Friday, and still remembered, to his dying day, gazing at the holy countenance of Rav Kook under that Tallis¹. The boy's name was Nota Greenblatt, also known as Rav Nota Greenblatt. and he was a Rabbinic legend. This morning, I'd like to share with you who he was, and what I think are some of the most important lessons of his long life that we can learn for ourselves.

This week's Torah portion gives us a commandment that can be found at the front of every Israeli bus:

¹ <https://mishpacha.com/priestly-blessing/>

You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God: I am God. The verse seems to be redundant, doesn't it? Arising before the aged is a form of showing deference to the elderly, after all!

Rav Ovadia Seforno pointed out that there are two terms in this verse- שיבה and זקנה- and they are not the same. שיבה refers to chronological age; someone who has gained a great deal of life experience simply by living a long time is worthy of our respect. But a זקן is a revered elder, someone who has not only attained advanced age, but has accrued wisdom that comes from a lifetime of Torah study.

Rav Nota Greenblatt certainly lived a chronologically long life, but his life was one of זקנה as well, as he was extraordinarily wise. His wisdom was rooted in the life he spent studying with the greatest Torah giants of the 20th century, and in his decades spent in the study and the service of Torah. Rav Nota² was born in Washington DC, where his father was a Rabbi, but the family moved to Israel in 1930; it was then that he encountered Rav Kook. The family returned to the United States several years later, but Rav Nota would return to Israel as a student of the illustrious Chevron Yeshiva. He then traveled to New York, where he became a dedicated and prominent student of Rav Moshe Feinstein, where he gained practical experience in Halachic decision making, in some of the most sensitive areas of Jewish law.

² <https://matzav.com/rav-nota-greenblatt-ztl/>

For example, after World War II, which decimated so many Jewish families, there were many *chalitzot* performed- the ritual whereby the brother of a husband who dies without children releases his sister in law from the bonds of levirate marriage. Rav Nota observed hundreds of chalitzos done by Rav Moshe Feinstein, and later in his life, became the acknowledged halachic authority on this procedure. Actually, he was the acknowledged halachic authority in virtually every area.. Rav Nota knew phenomenal amounts of Torah, but his knowledge was, above all, practical in nature. He knew how to do everything; he was a Chazzan, *mohel*, a *sofer* and a *shochet*; for years, he inspected slaughterhouses and ran the OU's *shechitah* training program. He was an expert in *Eruvin* and *Mikvaos*, about which he consulted on for communities throughout the United States. He traveled to inspect and consult on Eruvin- an endeavor which involves considerable climbing, walking and physical stamina, until well into his 80s. He became an expert *mesader Gittin*, traveling all over to write Gittin so that couples, even in places where there were very few Jews, would be able to get divorced according to Jewish law. The story of how he did this is so insane it sounds like it is made up, but Rav Nota told it himself ³: One day, Rav Nota heard a knock on his door. When he opened it up, a man stood there holding a gun, pointed straight at Rav Nota. "Rabbi" he said, "I need that *get*, and I ain't leaving here till I have it!" Rav Nota was led indoors, whereupon he called Rav Moshe Feinstein and went over the laws of writing a Get- and the rest is American Jewish history.

³ As told to Rabbi Moshe Taub of the Young Israel of Holliswood

Rav Nota may have done more than any other person to prevent *iggun*, as he wrote over 30,000 Gittin in his lifetime! He did this even into his 90s, when his hearing and health began to fail, and his family asked him to slow down. When he refused, they asked the Rabbis in the communities where he traveled so often to stop calling him!

The famous statement from Rabbi Akiva⁴ tells us that the principle of *ואהבת לרעך כמוך* - at minimum, do not do to others what you dislike being done to you - is the central tenet of the Torah. It seems somewhat strange that this is considered so essential, when it only addresses relationships between people, and not between man and God. How can your attitude toward the person who sits in shul next to you be relevant to whether your clothes contain wool and linen? I think that if we reinterpret Rabbi Akiva's statement, the answer becomes clear.

Acting in a caring and considerate way towards others is a fundamental principle in the interpersonal aspects of the Torah, but it is also the basic rule, the *klal gadol*, in spreading Torah. When you are kind, courteous and caring toward others, they are more likely to be receptive to your values and the Torah you stand for. This is the way Rav Nota conducted himself; Rabbi Dovid'l Weinberg of Yeshivat Orayta wrote about his encounter with a ticketing agent at the Memphis airport, who told him that there was a Jewish man named Nathan Greenblatt who was her special friend. It was also why he was so trusted by people in their most vulnerable moments. He was able to defuse tension in some of the most complicated and vulnerable circumstances in ways that were, by all accounts, simply breathtaking. Now, Rav Nota's genteel manner concealed an iron will. One of his

⁴ Bereishit Rabba 24:7

grandchildren shared a story about how Rav Nota got word of a husband who refused to give his wife a Get. He further learned that the husband's mother passed away, so he traveled to the city where the funeral was taking place, and went to the burial. As the body was about to be lowered, Rav Nota interrupted the service and refused to let it continue until a Get was signed and delivered. What is even more remarkable about this incident is that it apparently took place ***on Erev Yom Kippur***. Rabbi Moshe Heinemann of Baltimore shared a story in his eulogy for Rav Nota about a businessman who was not opposed to giving his wife a Get, but never seemed to have enough time for it. Rav Nota asked him whether he flew frequently, and the man said yes. He then asked the man to show him the ticket for his next flight. When the man boarded the plane, he saw that Rav Nota purchased three tickets- one for himself, and two for witnesses. He figured that, since the man wasn't going to be working on the plane- this was before inflight wifi and laptops- he'd have nothing better to do, and he wrote the Get on the plane! This led to a complex halachic issue regarding what location should be written on the Get- and Rav Nota knew that answer immediately as well (unfortunately, Rabbi Heinemann didn't share what Rav Nota's ruling was). His interpersonal conduct, the ease with and understanding of people, were why he was truly a Rabbi's Rabbi. From across the country, Rabbis- often ones he didn't know- consulted him on every manner of sensitive issues. If a Rabbi had to deal with a complicated conversion matter, he would call Rav Nota. If there was a delicate matter of personal status, Rav Nota dispensed sage advice. In light of the potential overturn of Roe vs. Wade by the Supreme Court, people have begun once again to discuss Halachah's view on abortion, which is much more complicated and nuanced than the positions held by either the most vocal and strident

pro-life *or* pro-choice activists. The odds are extraordinarily high that you know someone who terminated a pregnancy with the guidance of a halachic authority; if you don't, it just means that no one has told you. Very often, Rav Nota was that halachic authority to whom Rabbis and laypeople turned when faced with the complicated and heartwrenching situations that render abortion permitted or even mandatory. He had the broad shoulders to render quick, decisive and compassionate rulings.

What's amazing about all this is that Rav Nota became such an iconic figure while living in Memphis, a close-knit, insular and relatively isolated Jewish community. He went there in 1948, answering an ad in a Jewish paper seeking an assistant Rabbi and teacher in a Talmud Torah at a shul called Anshe Sfard. Memphis was a community with a decent-sized population, most of whom had lived there for several generations, who were traditional but almost completely unlettered. Rav Moshe Feinstein encouraged him to move there, and wrote a letter of recommendation for him, saying he would be the "next halachic authority of the entire American Jewry." When Rav Nota's friend Rav Binyamin Kamenetsky- himself a community builder in his own right- took him to the train station for his journey to Memphis, he said "I will be back here in two years to pick you up." He was wrong- Rav Nota stayed in Memphis for over 70 years. I think part of the reason he stayed there was that he was completely independent. There was no pressure in Memphis to look or think a certain way, or fit into any Rabbinic establishment. Rav Nota was utterly confident in his halachic rulings even if they did not fit the mainstream; with his colored shirts, goatee and straw hat, he didn't look like a *posek* or a classic Rosh Yeshiva. He wasn't married to a member of a

prominent Rabbinic family; his wife, Rebbetzin Miriam, is the daughter of simple Jews from Memphis, who were among the only Shomer Shabbos families there at the time. But I think there is another reason that Memphis suited him. This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of Orlah- wherein it is prohibited to partake of the fruits of a tree in the first three years of its life; in the fourth year, the fruits are sanctified, and then one can partake freely starting in the fifth. The Torah opens up its description of this mitzvah with the phrase ונטעתם כל עץ מאכל- you shall plant fruit trees. The name Nota is a Yiddish variant on the name Natan, but in Hebrew it also means "He planted." The underlying theme of Orlah is that effort we put in initially may take a while to bear fruit- whether one is planting trees, communities or people. Rav Nota was deeply dedicated to the Memphis community, and invested in its long-term growth. He was the founder of the school that eventually became known as the Margolin Hebrew Academy, and then the boys' and girls' divisions of the Feinstone Yeshiva of the South. Rav Nota invested in a small community, and spent so much of his career traveling to other such communities, because he understood that with time and patience, *small communities can produce tremendous Jews*. Rav Nota believed that it only takes one person to change a community- and that person doesn't have to be a Rav Nota Greenblatt, either. They just have to be sincere. Someone sent me a clip this week of an interview with him, in which he was extolling the virtues of this kind of living. "When someone asks you, when you get old, what you did with your life, you can say, 'Birmingham!' Sitting in Lakewood? Gornisht!" He continued, "One mensch, if he went to New Orleans, could change the whole city!" . With a day school, parental support and solid values, he felt that anyone can become a Ben or a Bat Torah, and that's why he stayed in Memphis. Decades of painstaking work paid

off as the community he built has flourished, and produced many outstanding products. To some degree, this message- to this community- is preaching to the choir, because we are here. But it isn't enough that Rav Nota- whom many people have never heard of- believed it. We have to believe it too, with all our hearts- that our community can produce talented lay leaders, dynamic Jewish educators, Talmidei Chachamim and Talmidot Chachamot, Rabbis, poskim, halachic experts and communal servants of all kinds.

Let us learn from Rav Nota's example. Let us learn more Torah and integrate our knowledge into practical observance. Let us conduct ourselves with dignity and compassion towards others, and view it as our responsibility to spread Torah to them. Let us be inspired by his example to invest in our community- in the education of our children, so that we and our children become the kind of Bnei and Bnot Torah he envisioned we could.