



JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

REMEMBERING REB ZALMAN, MY TEACHER AND FRIEND

by Simcha Raphael,
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I first met Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, spiritual founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, in 1976 at a Shabbaton at McGill University Hillel. Preparing to light the candles, he said: “We light the outer lights to remind us to light the inner light on Shabbat.” Never had I heard a Jewish teacher connect ritual practice with inner spirituality. That Shabbaton introduced me to a spiritualized Judaism I had never encountered.

I am not alone. Thousands of people tell a similar story of how meeting Reb Zalman gave them a unique, inspired way to live Jewishly.

The former Philadelphia resident and professor emeritus of Jewish mysticism at Temple University died in his sleep in Boulder, Colo., on July 3. He was 89 years old.

He will be remembered as one of the great pioneering teachers of contemporary American Jewish life. Standing at over 6 feet tall, he literally was a spiritual giant — a visionary who dedicated his life to bringing Judaism alive.

Born in Poland in 1924 and raised in Vienna, his family fled the Nazis and eventually landed in Brooklyn in 1941. He was ordained as a rabbi in 1947 by the sixth Lubavitcher rebbe, Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson. He later got a master's degree from Boston University in the psychology of religion, and a doctorate from Hebrew Union College, which is affiliated with the Reform movement.

His last teaching post was at Naropa University, a Buddhist-inspired Colorado institution.

Influenced by 1960s countercultural trends, the Lubavitch-trained rabbi crossed traditional boundaries to help found the Havurah Movement; inspired use of creative prayer in synagogue; brought to life Kabbalistic and Chasidic teachings that he integrated with New Age thought; spawned Jewish communities with women as equal participants and leaders; and engaged in interfaith dialogue with many spiritual leaders, including Thomas Merton, Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. He also trained a generation of more than 200 Renewal rabbis and built an international network of Jewish Renewal communities; envisioned the rainbow tallit that people all over the country now wear; and authored more than 20 books and 100 articles on Jewish prayer and mysticism.

For me, he was a teacher and mentor who ordained me as a rabbinic pastor, a unique category of ordination within the Jewish Renewal movement that focuses on pastoral care. He was the academic adviser on my doctoral dissertation, officiating rabbi at my wedding, sandak at my son's bris, and my employer when I worked as the first executive director of B'nai Or Religious Fellowship. B'nai Or, which turned his vision into a reality, was founded in Philadelphia, later renamed P'nai Or Religious Fellowship and still later merged with Rabbi Arthur Waskow's Shalom Center to become Aleph: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. There remains a strong Renewal community in West Mount Airy under the leadership of Rabbi Marcia Prager, who also serves as the dean of the Aleph rabbinic ordination program.

Even more, Reb Zalman was my friend. He was a friend to all, in fact, caring for people deeply and sharing his own foibles and vulnerabilities.

He also had an uncanny ability to call people into their fullness as human beings. It was as if he could see a person's destiny and draw it out, in an instant. When we met again in 1979 at the Aquarian Minyan of Berkeley, a dynamic and ecstatic Jewish community he had created in the heyday of the San Francisco hippie culture, he inquired about my graduate studies and asked: "What will you do for your doctoral dissertation?" He was,

after all, an academic who held positions at three different universities over the course of 50 years.

I told him I had completed work on death and the afterlife in world religions.

“Good!” he replied. “Here is what you will do. Read these books,” he said, writing down the names of two traditional Jewish texts on afterlife. “You will write your dissertation on death and afterlife in Judaism. I will be on your committee.”

Just like that, he set the course for the course of my life’s work.

I completed my dissertation under his tutelage and later published *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, for which Reb Zalman wrote the forward. I have spent decades teaching others about Jewish teachings on the afterlife, and counseling the dying and bereaved.

From 1980-1982, I worked closely with Reb Zalman helping develop the national organization supporting Jewish spiritual renewal. At that time, he was a professor in the religion department of Temple University as well as an adjunct professor at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

The office of B’nai Or Religious Fellowship was originally in his Emlen Street home in Mount Airy, where he lived for two decades. Reb Zalman had an open-door policy welcoming spiritual seekers, teaching Kabbalah and leading creative davening. Many people remember sharing Shabbat or yontif at “Beit B’nai Or.” He left his mark on Mount Airy, which today remains a dynamic Jewish community.

He also had a unique ability to make serendipitous moments into teaching opportunities. One time, Reb Zalman was teaching prayer at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College when a student’s tefillin box cracked open. As the parchment inside became visible, Reb Zalman stopped what he was doing to spend the remaining class time teaching about the texts inside tefillin boxes.

Reb Zalman would say, “I don’t teach subjects, I teach students.” Over the decades, he sent a generation of rabbis into the world, bringing a new spirit of Judaism into the wider community.

He had a grand vision of what Judaism could be and never stopped working toward that. In 1981, for example, Reb Zalman and I were exploring how he would celebrate Birkat HaHamah, or the Blessing of the Sun, a rare Jewish ritual occurring every 28 years. Last celebrated in 2009, it is said to denote the time when the sun returns to its position in the sky on the fourth day of Creation.

Instantaneously, he got an idea — “Let’s do it at the Empire State Building!”

With sponsorship of the American Jewish Congress, Reb Zalman led a prayer service on the Empire State Building observation deck. That morning, he also released 70 balloons into the air, symbolic of the Jerusalem Temple sacrifice for the 70 nations of the world.

Another instance of Reb Zalman’s sense for the theatrical occurred at my wedding when he blew the shofar under the chupah after reading our ketubah. Our wedding guests in Knoxville, Tenn., had never seen a Jewish ceremony like the one Reb Zalman performed. He was a trailblazer — playful, creative and inspired.

In 1995, Reb Zalman moved to Boulder, holding the Chair of World Wisdom at Naropa University. He spent time developing ideas on spiritual eldering, training Renewal rabbis and witnessing the creation of a national network of Renewal rabbis called Ohalah.

This past spring, I got to visit Reb Zalman in Boulder one last time. He was frail, yet his mind was as sharp as ever, sharing details of what would be his last book, as yet unpublished. I asked him if dreams he had dreamed years ago had come to fruition. The question gave him a chance to reflect on what he had been able to accomplish, recognizing that some things did not turn out as he imagined. I was aware of sitting in the presence of someone of whom we can now say, of whom God would say, “Zalman, you did your job, and you did it well!”

I am sad that my teacher and friend has died. Yet I am grateful to have known him, to have shared in the beautiful vision of Judaism he shared. May his evolving soul be welcomed back to the Source of Life. *Tehei Nishmato Tzrurah B’Tzror HaHayyim.*

Reb Simcha Raphael, Ph.D., is founder of the Da’at Institute for Death Awareness, Advocacy and Training and teaches Jewish mysticism in the Religion Department of Temple University.