A Tribute to Dick Israel

Kerem mourns the passing of Rabbi Richard J. Israel who died on July 11, 2000. Teacher, rabbi, mentor, Hillel director, storyteller, beekeeper, and marathon runner, Dick Israel shaped the Jewishness of hundreds of students and other people around him. The subject of Bill Novak's interview in the first issue of *Kerem* (1992-93), Dick was known for his wit and his commitment, his love of truth and tradition. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Director of the Hillel Foundation at Tufts University, said as part of his eulogy:

> "I have never met anyone who had a deeper understanding of the importance, the methodology, and the art of engaging students in Jewish learning and moving them to construct an active Jewish life. Colleagues from around the country recognized Dick as a master, a rabbi's rabbi. His credibility came from his wonderfully broad and eclectic Jewish knowledge, his gift for formulating the right questions, and his rock solid belief that what he was teaching—our tradition, Torah and mitzvot—offered real and substantial answers to life's most profound questions...
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> "Dick had an unusual gift of sharing the right story at the right time, pulling it up from Pesikta Rabbati or the Bhagavad Gita or Jane Austen. And the story left you clearer and more settled, and you felt that you had accessed a deep stream of wisdom that you knew existed, but Dick was able to lead you to the water."

Below are two of Dick's teachings—an article that he sent to *Kerem* earlier this year, and an excerpt from his Rosh Hashanah drash at the Newton Egalitarian Minyan in 1998.

Yehi Zichro Baruch—May his memory be a blessing.

Rosh Hashanah Drash, 1998 (excerpt)

Richard J. Israel

I had considered beginning this Rosh Hashanah talk by telling you about the simple house painter who approached his rebbe. "Rebbe, Rebbe," he said, "At this season of our Holy Days I must confess to you and our Maker that I have been a dishonest house painter. I have not painted well, have not used as many coats of paint as I promised, and have thinned my paint with turpentine to the point that it will never last. Rebbe, what shall I do?"

"What should you do? answered the rebbe. "Repaint, repaint, and thin no more."

[Dick continued with a recounting of the achievements and life events of minyan members over the previous year.]

... And what about those of us who didn't have a baby, write a book, go bungee jumping, found an industry or unravel the secrets of DNA? Have we failed for the year? Wherein is our consolation? I should like to try to answer that question with an Isak Dinesen story.

She says it is a true story. It is found in her book, Shadows on the Grass, and it's called "The King's Letter." (If you go looking for it in most, but not all of her collections, it is called "Barua a Soldani," which means "The King's Letter" in Swahili.) In the story she writes of a lion that has been harassing the cattle of the settlers on her coffee plantation in Kenya. While out for a drive she comes upon the lion feasting on a dead giraffe. It is a splendid lion and after looking at it carefully she concludes that it looks exactly like one of the three blue lions on the royal Danish coat of arms. She decides at once that she will shoot it and send its skin to her king, Christian X. Shoot it she does but then there are delays in getting it properly tanned. Though she hoped to be able to bring it to the king personally on her next trip back from Africa to Denmark, that doesn't work out. Instead she has to rely on an old uncle of hers who is chamberlain to the Court. He, too, delays. Her friends meanwhile laugh at her, assuring her that it is a foolish and snobbish gesture. What, after all, will the king do with a lion skin? It will end up in a warehouse or the attic of some castle.

Months pass. She puts the matter out mind. Then one day she gets a very fancy envelope in which she finds a quite generous handwritten thank-you letter from the king. The lion skin has been placed in the state room of the Christiansborg Castle opposite another distinguished trophy, the skin of a polar bear, one on either side of the Danish throne. She is very pleased.

Having read the letter she puts it in her pocket because she needs to ride from her house out to her farm, which is at some distance. When she gets there, she finds there has been a sad accident. Kitau, a young worker, had not managed to get away quick enough when felling a tree and had one leg badly crushed beneath it. She goes to him. He groans to her, "Msabu, help me. Give me some of the medicine that helps people." She has pain killers back at her house but that would take time to get. All she has in her pockets are some bits of sugar, treats for the farm animals. They help a little but quickly run out. He begins to wail and writhe. "Have you got no more? Have you nothing to give me, Msabu?" In her distress she puts her hand back in her pocket to search and finds the king's letter.

"Yes, Kitau," she says. "I have got something more, something excellent indeed. I have got a Barua a Soldani—a letter from the king in his own hand and that is a thing which all people know will take away pain." And she lays the letter on Kitau's chest with her hand upon it, and as she says, with all of her strength into it. His terribly distorted face smoothes out, he closes his eyes. After a while he opens them, looks up and says, "Yes, it is excellent indeed."

They finally get Kitau to the hospital and set his leg. But soon afterwards others come to her, the old women at first, demanding to borrow the king's letter for the relief of the sick or dying. If someone comes to take it for a toothache, the others treat him with scornful laughter. "Give it back," they would say. "There is a very old man with long, hard pains in his stomach and going to die tonight. He should have the letter."

So what is this letter from the king? It is a talisman, an amulet, a bit of magic, but it is also a document which grants the poor man in pain a kind of certainty that he has a connection to a power who gives order to the world, a power which can be of help with his hurt. His life has more meaning and less suffering because his life is lived in relation to the king.

Now that is a pretty good letter to get. Might we get such a letter from the king, a letter that gives us comfort, that eases our pain, and gives meaning to our struggles regardless of how much we do or do not achieve in worldly terms?

It seems to me that is precisely what Torah is all about—a Torah

which is not reducible to particular values or stances, but is a living application of stories and laws, traditions and exhortations through which we become aware that we have been touched, however lightly, by the King. That is the Torah that gives us the power to transform all the actions and choices of our lives into mitzvot, into deeds that make the world holy and bring redemption to it. That is our letter and we can use it to bring us healing and help us act responsibly and choose wisely. We can use it to answer that all-important question we should be asking ourselves daily: How would the person I would like to be do what I am about to do?

And that is why at this season of renewal, the first day of the new year we say:

Avinu Malkaynu, Our King, write us a letter.

Avinu Malkaynu, katvaynu b'sefer hayim tovim. Write to us about a good life.

Avinu Malkaynu, katvaynu b'sefer geulah v'yeshuah. Write to us that things will get better.

Avinu Malkaynu, katvaynu b'sefer parnasah v'khalkalah. Write that we will be able to earn a living and sustain our families.

Avinu Malkaynu, katvaynu b'sefer z'khuyot. Write that we have merit.

Avinu Malkaynu, katvaynu b'sefer s'licha u-m'chilah. Write that we are forgiven for all the foolish things we do.

Avinu Malkaynu, we ask You, our compassionate King, to put that letter on our hearts to help us with our bruises, add to our joys, and give value and meaning to both the big and little things we do every day of our lives. That is, after all, what good kings provide and that is what we ask of You. I hope I have the permission of those of us assembled here this night to say that we, both as individuals and as a community, promise to try very hard not to waste its power but to use it well.

And so, *l'shanah tovah tikatayvu.* May we all have a good year and be written a good letter, one that is excellent indeed.

Rav Pappa and Family

Richard J. Israel

We will return to you (hadran alakh), Masekhet _____ and you will return to us; we are thinking of you, Masekhet _____, and you are thinking of us; we will not forsake you, Masekhet _____, and you will not forsake us, not in this world and not in the world to come.

Haninah Bar Pappa, Rami Bar Pappa, Nahman Bar Pappa, Ahai Bar Pappa, Aba Mari Bar Pappa, Rafram Bar Pappa, Rakhish Bar Pappa, Sorchav Bar Pappa, Ada Bar Pappa, Daru Bar Pappa...

— Recited at the *hadran* ceremony which celebrates the completion of a tractate of Talmud.

For a long time I have been intrigued by the peculiar way we list the sons of Rav Pappa at a *hadran* ceremony. Over the centuries there have been many attempts to explain their odd appearance.

Who was Rav Pappa? One of the Amoraim, the sages who lived at the time of the composition of the Talmud, roughly the third to sixth centuries of the common era. Rabbi Moses Isserles (the Rema), a 16th century codifier, says that Rav Pappa was rich. Since his sons were *talmiday hakhamim*, Torah scholars, it was his custom to make a great *seudah*, a feast for them upon their completion of a segment of study. Therefore Rav Pappa now deserves to be mentioned at similar occasions, along with his boys.[1]

The Rema suggests that Rav Pappa and his ten sons direct our attention to Moses and the ten commandments, as well as the ten sayings with which the world was created. Both these themes are recalled on Simchat Torah when we read the final words of Moses at the end of the Torah and then about the creation of the world at the start of the Torah. We do that in rapid sequence in order not to give Satan *pit'chon peh*, the opportunity to say that *Am Yisrael*, the people Israel, finished the reading of the Torah and are now just fooling around and not learning. (More on this theme a little later.)

Rabbi Moses Schreiber, a 19th century commentator known also as the Hatam Sofer, notes that in ten places in the Babylonian Talmud, Rav Pappa says that you have to satisfy both sides of an argument in order to increase peace in the world. Because Rav Pappa increased peace that way ten

times, he merited having ten scholarly sons and was further rewarded by having each of them mentioned at the conclusion of the study of a *masekhta*, a Talmudic tractate. This demonstrates the importance of increasing peace in the world and the value of those who do it. Unfortunately, it does not demonstrate how you satisfy both sides of a halakhic controversy.

Yosef Zecharia Stern, also from the 19th century, argues that since the sons of Rav Pappa were all killed, we mention their names at the end of study the same way we mention the names of our dead loved ones in the El Malay Rachamim prayer after the reading of the Torah.

In a mind-boggling feat of mathematics, 17th century talmudist Moshe Kramer points out that the numerical value of all the names of the sons of Pappa plus Pappa himself are equal to the number of pages in the *Shas*, the text of the Talmud. So when you have read the *Shas*, you have also read the names of the Bnai Pappa and we make that explicit in the *hadran* by mentioning them again.

One friend assured me that it was because the Bnai Pappa brought the beer to the *siyum* (completion) parties of their time that we still remember them in ours.

The problem with most of these explanations, and a few more like them, is history. For almost a thousand years, we have known that there wasn't a particular individual named Pappa who had those ten sons. Albeck finds five different Rav Pappas (others argue three) who lived from the second to the sixth Babylonian generation. With that information all the explanations that assume one father and ten sons fall apart.

As for the explanation that we mention the Bnai Pappa because the letters in their names add up to the pages of the Talmud—here, too, historical knowledge intrudes. The pages of the Talmud were enumerated hundreds of years after the tradition began of reciting these names at a hadran. Besides, the Bnai Pappa and the Rav add up to 2683 pages, and no one has ever seen a Talmud with that number of pages. Contemporary ones are said to add up to 2333 pages.

So why do we cite the Bnai Pappa? I am convinced that it is all about magic. Here's why.

We have to go back to Hai Gaon in the 10th century to find a convincing reason for the hadran recitation. He says we recite the names of the sons of Pappa because *yesh bo kabalah l'hasir shikhichah* ("There is a tradition that it is a charm to prevent forgetting.")

The first printed edition of the Talmud (Bomberg 1520) contains the hadran we know today. It is followed by this sentence: *Achar hashlamat ha-masekhta, yomar zeh, v'yoeel l'shikhichah, b'ezrat ha-boray yitbarakh.* "After you finish the tractate you should say this, and with the help of our blessed Creator it will help (prevent) forgetting."

Avraham Zakkuto (16th century) tells us, "I heard from Abba Mari *z"l* that he received a tradition from the elders that the recitation of the ten sons of Pappa helps prevent forgetting and that it should be said seven times in the same way that Eliyahu, may he be remembered for good, is recalled at [Havdalah at] *Motzay Shabbat*."

By the 19th century we have citations which suggest that the practice of mentioning the Bnai Pappa was actually revealed by Elijah the prophet. We see that Elijah is somehow tied up with the recitation of their names.

Working from the three available manuscripts, in 1980, Gershon Scholem transcribed and then wrote in detail about what he calls the Magical Havdalah of Rabbi Akiva. It is a strange document full of mystical names and incantations which Scholem thinks appeared in Babylonia during the Geonic period (6th-11th centuries), though it may have its origins in an earlier time. It is designed to chase away all manner of bad spirits and bring near the good ones. Rabbi Yehudah's Havdalah, the one we know today, is more or less present, but it is embeded within the much larger context of the magical Havdalah, though with differences (e.g., the Rabbi Akiva Havdalah distinguishes not only *bayn kodesh l'hol*, "between the holy and the profane," but also *bayn tahor v'tamay*, "between the pure and the impure").

One of the significant purposes of the magical Havdalah is to drive away Potah, *Sar Ha-Shikhichah*, the Prince of Forgetting, and frustrate his tactics. Near the conclusion of Rabbi Akiva's Magical Havdalah we are instructed to say, "May I learn everything that I hear and may I not forget anything that I learn." We mention some magical names and continue: "I conjure you Potah, *Sar Ha-Shikhichah*. Remove my stupidity from me and throw it onto the hills and the high places." Then we recite the names of the sons of Pappa and conclude: *L'olam lo eshkach p'kudekha*, "May I never forget your commandments."

In the Talmud there are ten *talmiday hakhamim*, scholars with a father called Pappa. Moreover, Bar Pappa is the only name in the Gemara which is

attached to ten different people. That ten scholars share one patronymic seems to have a purpose and a power. The number ten represents completeness. By invoking the names of the Bnai Pappa in a kind of mantra, we can drive away or at least control Potah *Sar Ha-Shikhichah*, an important influence on our forgetting.

In cultures where tradition has to rely heavily on oral transmission, memorizing great chunks of material is no small burden. If you intend to sit around the campfire or the banquet hall and retell the Iliad or the Odyssey, you have a big job ahead of you. In classical times, stories did not have to be repeated exactly. You had to get the story right and the characters right, but if there were changes in the phrasing no one minded. It was getting all of the pieces into place that was important.

In order to do that, a number of classical schemes were routinely recommended by rhetoricians. One of the most common was to imagine a house and fill up the house, room by room, with your memories. The first section of what you were memorizing you put in the ante-chamber, the next in a main room, and slowly you would fill up the entire house with the story.

But this kind of methodology only works if your intention is to get the story generally right, not exactly right. If you have to get every word right, as you do when you are passing on a Mishnah or a Gemara, then you have only two alternatives: endless repetition or magic. Generally you tried both. The repetition was intended to help you acquire the material, the magic to keep from forgetting it.

I know of no times that are designated as especially propitious for learning, but there are some very dangerous times for forgetting. These are the liminal times—transitional times, border times, the times between things, like *bayn ha-sh'mashot* at dawn or *bayn ha-arbayim*, in the evening, or Havdalah—the small cracks in time into which things you have memorized can slip. Shabbat should be a day of study, but between Shabbat and *hol*, the weekday, you are in danger of losing it all. Thus it is not at all strange that Havdalah, a transitional time, should be a time of particular danger for forgetting. One might conjecture that the reason we look at our nails in the Havdalah candlelight is to see that nothing leaks out and that Potah does not sneak in. Jewish folk culture links fingernails and forgetting. For example, old customs mandate the exact sequence in which nails were to be cut. If you cut them either randomly or one after another, as they are on the hand, you were certain to forget what you knew.

So Potah makes us forget, while Elijah and the Bnai Pappa help us remember.

The forces of remembering and forgetting hover in each other's presence. There is Elijah who is invited when we need to remember—at Havdalah time when we might forget our learning, and at the Seder before the prayer *Shfokh hamatkha*, "*Pour out Your wrath*," when we might forget our past suffering. There is the redeeming angel, *ha-malakh ha-goayl*, who appears at Havdalah, at Simchat Torah, and when we say the bedtime Sh'ma, other liminal times. Is he an angel of remembering? There is Potah, who is likely to appear at a *siyum* to make us forget the *masekhta* we just finished if the names of the Bnai Pappa aren't recited. Though I haven't found him yet, I feel confident that in some old siddur Potah will appear in the very small print somewhere in the Simchat Torah liturgy. After all, it is possible that we only celebrate Simchat Torah in order to keep Potah from getting us into trouble.

Medieval documents show that Potah is chased away with great care when a child is starting his education, just as he is chased away from every *hadran* when we are between pieces of learning. I suspect that if we look about in Jewish life and liturgy we will find that at transitional times there are still other clues of the need to avoid forgetting and assist remembering.

Observing the number of people these days who take pills made from ginkgo tree leaves for the improvement of their memories, we can see that the problem of memory loss has not vanished with modern times. As we age, memory continues to be one of the first two things to go. (I forgot the other.) Our ancestors simply used a different kind of magic to deal with the problem than we do.

Note from the Author: Delivered upon concluding the study of tractate Megillah to my valued Shabbat Gemara group in Newton Centre, MA. I am very grateful to Ivan Marcus, once my student, now my teacher, for directing me to most of the literature used for the preparation of this paper.

[1] Arend, Aharon, "Hazkarat B'nai Pappa b'Siyum Ha-Limud," *Sidra*, Bar Ilan University Vol. 5, (1989), pp.17-25. This list of explanations is cited in Arend's essay which has been a resource for a significant part of this article. Other sources include: Scholem, Gershom, "Havdalah d'R. Akiba," *Tarbiz*, Hebrew University, Vol. 40, (1980-1981) pp. 243-281; Marcus, Ivan, *Rituals of Childhood*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996) pp. 48, 53; Trachtenberg, Joshua, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, (New York: Behrman House, 1939) p. 191.