

Recollections of Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, Z”L

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Introduction

Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, Z”L, passed away on the first day of Pesach, one day before his 65th birthday. He was an erudite scholar who had received Semicha from the Rabbi Jacob Joseph Theological Seminary and a PhD in economics from New York University. He was equally at home in the world of Torah and in the secular world, and thus a unique combination of Torah and Chochmah, something that is increasingly rare today. Furthermore, this intellectual prowess was clothed in a mantel of extreme humility.

Rabbi Dr. Levine served for many years as the Rov of the Young Israel of Avenue J in Brooklyn and as head of the Department of Economics at Yeshiva University. He also served as a Dayan at the Beth Din of America. He was also much in demand as a lecturer, speaking both here and abroad on topics relating to economics and ethics.

Given his Torah and secular accomplishments, some have claimed him to be a foremost proponent of Torah U Madda. Others might say that he was a living example of Torah Im Derech Eretz. However, it is my opinion that he was neither. Let me explain.

Dr. Levine was not just an observant Jew whose vocation happened to be the teaching and study of economics. On the contrary, he pioneered a new approach to economics, namely, the analysis of current economic issues through the prism of Torah. Thus, his “secular” endeavors were, in truth, Torah endeavors. Based on this it is clear that all of Rav Levine’s academic accomplishments were purely Torah, and therefore it seems to me that one must conclude that all of his teaching and research were Torah.

While all of this is most impressive, it does not give one “a feel for the man.” I hope to do this by sharing some of my recollections and interactions with him. However, let me first make one thing clear. Rabbi Levine and I were not related. He used to introduce me to people saying, “This is Dr. Yitzchok Levine. We are not related. However, we are friends.” I have to admit that I was honored that he counted me amongst his friends.

Selling My Chometz

I moved to Brooklyn in 1974. Shortly before our first Pesach in Brooklyn, I went to the rabbi of a nearby shul (not the YI of J) to sell my Chometz. He asked if I was selling any Chometz *Gomer* (actual Chometz), and I replied in the affirmative. He then told me that as a rule he did not include the sale of Chometz *Gomer* for those whose Chometz he sold. I asked him, “Why not? If the sale is valid, then why not sell Chometz *Gomer*? If it is not

valid, then what am I doing here?" After some discussion this rabbi said, "OK, I will do it this year, but not in the future." The following year and for many years thereafter I sold my chometz through Rabbi Avigdor Miller, who never asked me about selling Chometz *Gomer*.

After Rav Miller passed away, I went to Rabbi Dr. Levine to sell my Chometz. I had begun davening in the YI of J from time to time, and he seemed the logical one to go to. After we exchanged pleasantries, he asked me, "Do you sell Chometz *Gomer*?" I was a bit taken aback but replied in the affirmative. He then said, "Good. Rav Moshe Feinstein also sold Chometz *Gomer*!" He then told me that when he first became the Rov of the YI of J he had gone several times to watch how Reb Moshe sold chometz. "I do things exactly as he did." Here was just one example of his meticulous observance of Halacha.

Kashrus

Over time Rav Levine became aware of my interest in kashrus. At one point he related the following to me.

Shortly after he became the Rov of the YI of J he learned that the shul's annual dinner had been scheduled in a certain well-known catering hall. (For the record, this hall no longer exists.) The caterer was an observant Jew, and he was considered reliable by the Orthodox community. Rabbi Levine called the caterer and asked whose *hashgacha* he had. The caterer replied that he had none, something that was not uncommon in the 1980s.

Rabbi Levine told the caterer that he could not let his shul's dinner take place in an establishment that did not have *hashgacha*, and that he would have to hire a Mashgiach for the dinner. The caterer replied that if he did this and it became known, then people might think that his establishment had not been reliably kosher in the past. This could wreck his business. Rabbi Levine thought for a moment and said, "I will be the Mashgiach for the shul dinner." In conclusion Rabbi Levine told me he spent most of the night before the shul dinner making sure that all was done properly. Shul members never knew, and I doubt that until he told me of this incident he had told anyone else, save for his wife and perhaps some of the members of his immediate family.

This was his style - meticulous adherence to Halacha but without show and fanfare.

Burial Erev Yom Tov

Once, as we walked home together after Maariv on the first night of a Yom Tov, he mentioned that he had gotten home only a short time before the start of Yom Tov. "I was called a couple of hours after noon about someone who had died. The family did not feel that it was important for the departed to have a halachic burial. In fact, they were initially against this. I spent several hours talking with them until I finally convinced them of the importance of a proper Jewish burial. The *kevura* took place late this afternoon, and I got home just in time for Yom Tov."

Again, he did not advertize this. I am sure there are hundreds of other *Chassodim* that he was involved in over the years that very few know about. But this was also part of his style – he did much, but he did it quietly.

Editor of a Scholarly Journal

A look at Rabbi Dr. Levine's Yeshiva University web site <http://www.yu.edu/faculty/alevine/page.aspx> and the link there to his publications shows the extent of his scholarly academic accomplishments. He was the author and/or co-author of seven books as well as numerous scholarly articles in refereed, academic journals. His most recent achievement was being the editor of the *Oxford University Handbook on Judaism and Economics* which appeared in 2010. Robert John Aumann, Professor Emeritus, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and co-winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics for 2005, wrote the following about this book.

“Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine is a world-renowned authority on the Talmud, on Economics, and on Ethics. Here he has put together a remarkable collection of essays on and surveys of a very wide range of issues bearing on the relationship between Jewish literature, law, and practice on the one hand, and, on the other hand, economic theory and business practice - especially business ethics. The volume spans thousands of years, from Biblical times to modern Israel, and one may expect it to become a standard reference.”

I had a very small role in assisting Rabbi Levine in his work as editor of this volume. Here is how this came about.

In August, 2009 he emailed asking me to call him when I had time. When I called, he told me that he had an article that had been submitted for publication in this Oxford handbook that he wanted me to read. I pointed out to him that I am a mathematician, not an economist, and that I did not see how I could be of any real assistance. He assured me that I could and then sent me the article.

While I certainly could not evaluate the economics in the article, one thing kept jumping out at me – the author seemed to have a vendetta against Orthodox Judaism and had inserted numerous negative remarks about Orthodoxy throughout the article.

After reading the article, I called Rabbi Levine and said, “This article gives a most negative view of Orthodoxy. I really do not think that you can publish it as it stands.” He told me that he felt the same way, but just wanted to make sure his evaluation was not too harsh. I assured him it was not.

He thought for a moment and said, “This is what I will do. I’ll write back to the author and ask that she document all of her comments about Judaism. I am sure she will not be able to do this and will retract her article.” A number of weeks later he told me that the author had withdrawn her submission!

This was another aspect of his style. Firm, yet diplomatic.

His Last Years

Over the years my friendship with Rabbi Levine developed. At one point he wrote to me in an email that I should stop referring to him as Rabbi Levine and simply write “Aaron.” I was not comfortable with this and settled on “Reb Aaron.” I was honored that he had extended this privilege to me.

About two years ago it became known that Rav Levine was sick. Given the humble, private person that he was, it is not surprising that his congregants knew little about the details of his illness. I respected his right to his privacy, but at one point I wrote to him saying that while I was not prying, I was certainly available if he ever wanted to talk with me. Characteristically, he never took me up on my offer.

For awhile it looked like whatever treatments he was undergoing were working. However, it became painfully clear a few months before his passing that this was not the case.

This year when I went to sell my chometz, his son, Rabbi Efraim Levine, was there to handle the sale. Sadly, I knew what this meant, and, as I wrote at the beginning, he passed away on the first day of Pesach. It is hard for me even now to believe that he is gone.

Rav Dr. Yosef Breuer, ZT”L, wrote in part in his essay **The Frankfurt Yeshiva, Torah Lehranstalt - Institute for Torah Learning** (reprinted in **A Unique Perspective: Essays of Rav Dr. Joseph Breuer, ZT”L, 1914 - 1973** by Feldheim in 2010)

“There is probably no other vocation the successful practice of which requires so varied and many-faceted an education as the rabbinical calling. A rabbi must be the teacher of his congregants. He must have a talent for reaching and influencing the minds and hearts of others. He also ought to be a good speaker, which can be a very demanding quality. The sermons of a rabbi from the pulpit are expected to be inspiring; teachings in the classroom lively and to the point; social conversation friendly; after-dinner speeches humorous; speeches at wedding ceremonies solemn; eulogies moving.

“It goes without saying that a rabbi ought to be versatile when it comes to literary abilities. A rabbi must be ready to answer any religious doubts of his congregants. He must be well versed in Jewish history. He must be a philosopher and cognizant of modern thought - and such a man of a thousand trades ought, in addition, also to be a Talmud chocham.

“We have such a high regard for the position of a rabbi that we feel certain that he will want to have as broad an outlook as possible. Half-knowledge in a rabbi is unacceptable - it borders on blasphemy.”

In my opinion Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, Z"L, admirably lived up to what Rav Breuer wrote!

Reb Aaron, my friend, I miss you! We all miss you! You have left a huge void in our lives.



Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, Z'L