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## RECOLLECTIONS OF RABBI DR. AARON LEVINE

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
Posted May 25 2011

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Rabbi Dr. Aaron Levine, z"l, passed away on the first day of *Pesach*, one day before his 65<sup>th</sup> 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 *rav* 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. In addition, he had a marked effect on the intellectual development of many of his students at Yeshiva University.



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Rabbi 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.

While all of this is most impressive, it does not give one "a feel for the man." I hope to do this by sharing a few of my recollections of

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 among his friends.

### *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 *rav* of the YI of Ave. J he learned that the shul's annual dinner had been scheduled in a certain well-known catering hall. The caterer was an observant Jew, and he was considered reliable by the Orthodox community. Rabbi Levine called the caterer and asked whose

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*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.

### Scholar Par Excellence

A look at Rabbi Dr. Levine's Yeshiva University website [www.yu.edu/faculty/alevine/page.aspx](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."

### His Last Years

Over the years my friendship with Rabbi Levine developed. At one point he wrote to me in an e-mail 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 a while 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 Ephraim Levine, was there to handle the sale. Sadly, I knew what this meant and, as I wrote above, he passed away on the first day of *Pesach*. It is hard for me even now to believe that he is gone.

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

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