A Eulogy for my Rabbi, Rav Aharon

By Rabbi Avi Baumol

Rudderless.

Judaism is sometimes too intense, incomprehensible and even overbearing. Without a sage it can consume you; without navigation one will forever sail in circles, philosophical mazes. One needs a rudder, a moral compass, a steady light of clarity in the fog of multitudinous positions and attitudes. Rav Aharon was our rudder.

Over 25 years ago Rav Aharon set my ship on course. Because of him I engaged, I took him seriously so I took myself seriously; I hadn’t until then. He set a trajectory which I believe was most essential in my spiritual development. He challenged me to reach--intellectually, mentally, vocationally. At points during my career Rav Aharon’s imprint was felt on me; I heard an innervoice—a sicha (speech) from years ago, or saw an image of Rav Aharon with all his passion and intensity; or read an article which was filled with such balanced clarity; a vision of his ecstatic prayer and his uncanny consistency.

I benefited not from Rav Aharon alone but from all his students, those who taught me Talmud, or pushed me to be creative in my Torah learning and exegesis and those who became my closest friends—the community of Rav Aharon. I felt such privilege to be in this camp, but it was no easy pass, it was great responsibility because even though we never expected to reach a tenth of his intellect, integrity, faith, work ethic, humanist outlook—we still all knew we had to try. Rav Aharon expects it of us.

The Yeshiva he created with Rav Amital was magnetic, who would ever want to leave? We all rushed to get into Rav Aharon’s shiur, to give chaburot, to learn Tanach (to be mechadesh), Rav Aharon was the source of this excitement. Rav Amital injected us with soul, chasidut, song, joy--this is true, but Rav Aharon for me was almost other-worldly in his eternal-presence in the Bet Midarsh, seeming omniscience of all aspects of Judaism, and exhaustive analyses of everything.

Shtei bechinot, dichotomy, chakira, weighing options, complexity, yes that was it, „the complexity of human experience“ is what he learned from Harvard, it’s what I learned from him and that has stuck with me all my life.

„The best lack all conviction while the worst are filled with passion and intensity“. Rav Aharon always challenged us that if we were to herald this Modern Orthodox worldview we must not ever translate it into apathy, laziness, finding the easy way out. Passion. Intensity. Excellence. Throughout the last 25 years I certainly did not achieve those noble virtues on a regular basis, but once in a while... It remains for me an ideal „devoutly to be wished“.

At crossroads in my life that still small voice of „what would Rav Aharon say“ has steered me clear of some pitfalls, guided me on a path less traveled but more rewarding. I am no ideal chasid, I struggled religiously, I questioned, but I never sailed too far off the
trajectory. I stayed close to the kotlei bet hamidrash, I built a home in Israel, and I attempted to impart Rav Aharon’s wisdom to hundreds of students. Whatever I have done is his...

I will miss Rav Aharon because to me he was the last giant; I will miss Rav Aharon because my ship is rudderless... Or maybe because I realize I must be the rudder. Do I have the nautical wherewithal? Can I rise now and adopt more of Rav Aharon in my existence? Am I courageous enough to set sail on my own?