

Profile

Rabbi Joseph Wanefsky, z"l

By Shalom Carmy

“Schooled in adversity, he conceived of life as challenge and opportunity...”

Reb Yosef once arrived at the Gottesman Library lively with the information that a new beeping device enabled blind people to go skiing. “Now,” he chuckled, “there are blind people who ski, and there are blind people who learn Gemara.” More soberly, he concluded: the blind people who ski are the ones who would ski if they were sighted; those who learn Gemara would likewise thirst for Torah if they weren’t blind. There could be no doubt to which group he belonged.

For over a quarter of a century, I read and studied with Rabbi Yosef Wanefsky, collaborated with him, and shared his conversation, his wisdom, and his peculiar humor. There were periods of crisis in his life, and I am thinking specifically of his mother’s last illness and the aftermath of her death, when I was intimately involved in the small and great details of his daily life. Never, in word or gesture, through all these years, did he express the slightest complaint or resentment towards his Maker – never, even when the conditions that enabled him to function and to flourish collapsed around him; never even in the last

years, when vital organs stopped doing their work.

At times of devastation and mortal illness, the most artfully fashioned facade crumbles. Reb Yosef was not the fountain of perpetual joviality that most of the world saw. He suffered the indignities of obscurity, the fear of sickness and old age. Much of his energy was spent in the endurance and management of everyday life, just as it is for the rest of us. Of course, his apprehension was compounded by the lack of sight. Yet those of us who were with him *in extremis* know that his outlook never altered. Schooled in adversity, he conceived of life as challenge and opportunity, a long trial and an intense joy.

It did not escape Reb Yosef that his own challenge was greater than that with which God confronted most of his fellows. But above all, he knew that it is our business, whatever our situation, to make the life which God has given us into something worthy of the Divine gift. Although he did not take himself seriously, he must have known, as he navigated among us day after day, a giant among ordinary men, and settled himself contentedly in his favorite library chair, that he had done something extraordinary with his gift.

Do not confuse any of this with formulaic devoutness. Reb Yosef often questioned the religiosity that is founded on two terms: *im yirtseh Hashem* (if God wills) and *bli ayin*

hara (without the evil eye), and he wondered whether the former term was more than a euphemism for the latter. To a man who had worked very hard to achieve what he did, such piety smacked of passivity. Worse yet, he suspected those who declaimed it of smugness, incompatible with his own apprehension of reality, but all too compatible with a conformist mentality. The conformist of whatever stripe is uneasy when faced by individuals who deviate from the one-size-fits-all uniform, and Reb Yosef certainly broke the mold. He had a nose for phony compassion, as he did for unearned intellectual pretensions and pompous self-congratulation; both the well-manicured, fastidious variety and the sullen, nail-biting type. The self-important were not immune to his charm, but had reason to be wary in his presence.

The breadth of Reb Yosef’s Torah knowledge was prodigious by any standard. Early in his career, when there was still hope that those who carried weight might notice, he published two books, one his doctoral dissertation on Rabbi Reines, the other homiletical. Yet his true *métier* was *lomdut*. The handful of journal articles he wrote later, after a belated fellowship was arranged for him at RIETS, dealt with classic Talmudic topics such as the restitution of heirless property (*gezel ha-ger*) or the analysis of simultaneous cause and effect (*ba’ink’ebed*). This

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Photo: Amy Berg- Yeshiva University

Rabbi Joseph Wanefsky, z"l (1938 – 2000)

work reflects his associative versatility and original talent, and the contribution that could have been his.

He could direct his storehouse of knowledge to almost any subject in Shas, from the *Nashim* and *Nezikin* mastered as an adolescent at Chaim Berlin and Yeshiva University — where,

aided by a powerful lens, he could still look at the print on a bright, sunny day — to the expanses of *Kodashim* and *Tohar* the patrolled in later decades. His particular stomping ground was the literature of the *acharonim*, the Eastern European commentators on Gemara and Rambam, the authors of theoretical

responsa. Many of us, whose primary training with *maran* haRav Joseph Soloveitchik centered on the intensive study of the principal *rishonim*, were infected by Reb Yosef's lifelong enthusiasm for the works of such major figures as Rabbi Yosef Engel and Rabbi Menahem Zemba.

Reb Yosef's appetite was not satisfied by reviewing what he already knew by heart. He looked forward greedily to analyzing new books and journals, and cultivated an abiding curiosity about half-forgotten works of the past century. With these authors, when they didn't get to the point, he was notoriously impatient: "You can skip a little!" was a very characteristic instruction to his reader.

At the same time, he cherished these works; and he liked to learn the obscure life stories of their authors. They too had labored faithfully in the vineyard of Torah; they had languished in the backwaters of an Eastern Europe whose cultural sun was setting, or rusticated in the novel American wilderness, unrecognized and without respect. They too had felt in their weary bones the comfort in adversity, the Word of God that gives life. Reb Yosef was their patron, summoning their neglected wares from the dark crevices of the library. It was he whose inspired rummaging uncovered their hidden glories, and brought their lips to movement in the grave.

Disabled people, we tend to think, lead constricted lives. Blindness, in certain ways, deepened Reb Yosef's appreciation of people. This was much more than the sharpened ear compensating for loss of eye; though Reb Yosef's ear was keen enough to identify, instantaneously, the voices of people he had not seen for years, and my (apparently) distinctive footsteps often apprised him wordlessly of my arrival. Nor is it just, as he once explained to me, that a blind person gains a wide circle of acquaintance simply because he can't protect himself by crossing the street when annoying or unsavory individuals approach. The experience of being dependent on others, which Reb Yosef did not enjoy, nevertheless made him sensitive to their attitudes and moods. To demolish fancy exteriors and expose the falseness within, is a matter of intelligence and integrity. To see through an unsophisticated veneer, and uncover the authentic human feeling beneath

the cliché, to embrace ephemeral awkwardness and distinguish it from moral obtuseness, is a rarer, more noble achievement.

His native intellectual elitism was thus tempered by his encounters with those less fortunate than he. He reached out to the genuine in people, and many were touched by him. People from all walks of life took him to their hearts. For many, he was one of those great individuals whose effect crucially altered their lives. They loved him, and mourn for him, as for their own flesh and blood.

One mark of a great teacher is the ability to overcome the disparity between the generations. When I first met him, Reb Yosef's aging mother was his untiring sustenance and, despite obstinate problems with Rashi script, his primary reader. She too was schooled in adversity: a woman who taught full-time to support and care for an invalid husband and a blind son. From her, he got his mental toughness and sense of humor, among other gifts. What was his, what is ours, belongs to her.

I was the first, or one of the first, significantly younger *bnei Torah* who attached themselves to him. There were to be many more. To the very last day of his life, through these last years, though medical crises intruded with increasing frequency, and the blindness to which he was accustomed was the least of Reb Yosef's afflictions, his merry men exulted in his presence. Some tapped into his vast reservoirs of knowledge; others joked around with him or elicited his uncensored stories of Chaim Berlin and Yeshiva University, and the great and not so great figures he had encountered. He was fun to be with.

This difficult world abounds in innocent pleasures, of which Reb Yosef had his fill. He enjoyed listening to the radio and TV; food was a source of pleasure until his health gave way, and even then. He liked it when people described to him what they saw; he held books in his hands to get an idea of their heft. He kept himself well

informed on a broad range of cultural matters, via the mass media, tapes and friends. Naturally, academic Jewish studies was an obligatory concern. World folklore was an intellectual passion for many years. And the old Brooklynite who, with 50 years of advanced Talmud study under his belt, regularly labeled an overwhelming line of argument or a brilliant formulation an "upper deck job," or a "Ballantine blast," and then startled the ponderous academics in their nearby carrels with a high-pitched rendition of Mel Allen's home run call, never regretted being a baseball fan.

Alone in the library, waiting for his companion to fetch a volume, waiting for his ride, he often lifted his voice. He sang the old favorites that had been his faithful friends through life: the *niggunim* of *Yamim Noraim*. Oh what a gift he had, to remember like the old, and to be mirthful like a boy! In the weeks since Reb Yosef's passing, his voice breaks out of every *Ketzot*, *Chelkat Yoav*, and *Marcheshet*; his absence is felt in every amusing incident or serious piece of news that nobody can discuss in quite his manner.

From the beginning of my career, he read, and commented on, almost everything I published, whether the subject matter attracted him or not. "What fancy words, Carmy, you mobilize to write about me!" I hear him exclaim, and don't know whether to smile or weep. Farewell, my teacher and friend. We cannot replace the *bekiut* (erudition) you took with you; we cannot, even if we wanted to — and who could possibly want to — reenact your exemplary, but burdensome, existence. If we did not benefit from you as much as we should have, if we did not do for you as much as we should have, forgive us. If I, and many others, never felt sorry for you, that is because your life did not inspire pity. The life you made for yourself was a magnificent, wonderful life. In offering it to us, you made our lives fortunate, your colleagues and your *talmidim*. Your lips are not silent. 