

From the Rabbi

Elul 5774/ August 2014

“Two Rebbes”

The smoke from Gaza still smolders, as does the emotional and political fallout.

Surely, every rabbi in the country will be talking about the summer war in their

Days of Awe sermons, as they should. But we shouldn't let ourselves lose sight of

the passing this summer of two hugely influential figures in American (and world)

Jewish life: Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Professor Leonard Fein.

Reb Zalman (as he was always known) gave us what is universally termed “Jewish

Renewal.” Laibel Fein (as he was always known) gave us Moment and Mazon and

serious American Jewish dialogue. Zalman liberated Jewish prayer and study,

while Laibel liberated Jewish political thinking and acting.

Reb Zalman came to the U.S. as a refugee from Eastern Europe in 1941. He had

been brought up with a wealth of rabbinic textual knowledge and a large dose of

“*chassidus*.” He had a rebellious and curious spiritual soul, and a mind to match.

In America, Zalman personally evolved beyond Chassidic-style Orthodoxy to experiment with truly new forms of Jewish religious expression, some of which he adapted from the many spiritual practices and faith traditions with which he had become adeptly familiar. Zalman is the key figure behind the *havurah* phenomenon, the renewed interest in *kabbalah* (the serious version, not the snake-oil variety), the Jewish “retreat” or “*shabbaton*,” and even the explosion of musical expression made famous at shuls like B’nai Jeshurun and Romemu in New York, or Kol Hanesamah, Shirah Chadashah, and Beit Tefillah Yisraeli in Israel. Zalman worked occasionally – and sometimes closely with – the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. Reb Shlomo’s music pervades our melodic thinking. But his music thrives in settings conceived by, or heavily inspired by, Reb Zalman and his out-of-the-box work.

So great was Zalman’s influence that Jewish congregations and communities who had absolutely no contact with him, his students, or his writings nonetheless experienced the *Zeitgeist* he created: the opening up of worship to *niggun*, chant, meditation, movement, mystical frames of reference, emotive prayer commentaries (including those that appear on the pages of most standard

siddurim today), and a generally experiential, meta-intellectual approach to Jewish religious practice. Indeed, when Reb Zalman took deathly sick in late May, he was at the Isabella Freedman Center in Connecticut leading the annual Shavu'ot retreat, which included a pre-dawn trek up "Mount Sinai."

Laibel Fein was born and raised in America by immigrant Jewish parents. He was a child of American progressive politics and traditional secular-leaning Zionist idealism. With a single stroke of genius, he made it unthinkable for American Jews to celebrate life-cycle events without including a *tzedakah* component. His "Mazon" project (from the Hebrew word for "food" or "sustenance") called on Jews to contribute (a measly) three per-cent of the expense of their wedding or bar mitzvah affair to a charity specifically geared to help food pantries, soup kitchens, and hunger action projects across America. He created the Pavlovian association in America Jews' minds between sumptuary spending (which we do to an historically unprecedented level) and the sharing of our bounty with the poor. That association had been part and parcel of Jewish tradition for millennia, but in America it had all but disappeared. Laibel Fein brought it back without trying to

do the impossible – without trying to change American Jews into something we are not.

Laibel revived the name of the Warsaw-based Yiddish periodical of the early Twentieth Century – “Der Moment” (“the hour”) – and created the first truly exciting popular American Jewish magazine, “Moment.” Until the arrival of Moment, American Jewish journalism was either wonkily intellectual (like Commentary) or school-paper style reportage from local federations. Moment brought Jews of all religious and political stripes together around burning issues - not just “Jewish” issues (though certainly those), but also general societal matters that Laibel believed we should be responding to *as Jews*. Moment singlehandedly changed the nature of Jewish dialogue in this country, both politically and religiously. It lovingly pushed us (kicking and screaming, I should add) toward the kind of open debate that has *sometimes* characterized our collective conversation about Israel. And it did its work in an attractively “popular” packaging that was as artistic as it was thoughtful.

As that debate has recently waned more than waxed, it was Laibel Fein who continued to prod us to get it going again. In his weekly columns in the English-language Forward (which surely owes its identity and existence to Laibel and his Moment Magazine), including in his final Forward column submitted the day before he expired, Laibel would goad American Jews to speak honestly and critically about Israel, even while he regularly shamed us into being passionate lovers and supporters of the Zionist enterprise.

No one or two individuals can change everyone and everything. But Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Professor Laibel Fein did more than any hundred thousand people to transform the landscape of American Jewry. We have gone from black-and-white to color, as it were, in the way we are conscious of – and expressive of – Jewish spiritual, intellectual, political, and artistic categories.

Our own Bet Am Shalom service draws inspiration from minute to minute from Zalman's models. What we sing, *how* we sing, how we let the service "breathe" between pages, all comes from the way Zalman taught his students to re-frame their thinking about prayer (and I proudly include myself as a grateful direct

recipient of his teaching). Even our renowned Craft Show benefits from the chutzpadik thinking of Laibel Fein, who criticized the prosaic “green stuff” that passed for Judaica in Israel and America, and who challenged us to morph our Jewish arts and crafts into something we could be proud of as a modern self-actualized people. Laibel encouraged and published young writers, artists, and teachers (myself among them) who were looking to join him on that quest for a new Jewish voice that would be aesthetically interesting and politically conscientious.

As we turn toward the holy days of renewal, I for one will be recalling the precious teachings I received from these two extraordinary souls. Whether we realize it or not, we will all be *davening* their message as we gather under the tent to begin a new Jewish year.

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