

Remembering a Great Parnas: Thoughts for Parashat Behar

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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

This is the period of the anniversary of the passing of Mr. Edgar J. Nathan 3rd, who died in May 2013. Edgar was a distinguished attorney and communal leader and served as Parnas (president) of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York from 1968 to 1991. A descendant of early members and leaders of the Congregation going back to Colonial American days, he was the personification of a wise and thoughtful gentleman, a man of gravitas and steady good judgment.

Edgar was the Parnas of Shearith Israel when I was engaged as a student rabbi of the Congregation in 1969 and he continued as Parnas for the first 22 years of my rabbinic service. I thank the Almighty for the privilege and honor of working with Edgar for all those years, and in the ensuing years as well. The last time I spoke publicly in the sanctuary of Shearith Israel was when I eulogized Edgar three years ago. That day, in many ways, was the end of an era for Shearith Israel.

In last week's Torah portion, we read: "And you shall count for yourself (usfartem lakhem--plural)" seven weeks of the Omer. In this week's Torah portion, we read: "And you shall count for yourself (vesafarta lekha--singular)" seven Sabbath years. Why is the plural used when counting the weeks, and the singular used when counting years?

An answer: the commandment to count seven weeks is addressed to the public at large. The Torah assumes that most people can keep focused on a mitzvah for seven weeks. However, when it comes to counting years for the sabbatical cycle, the Torah addresses itself to the sages of the great court--to individuals, not to the general public. Most people cannot stay focused for such a long span of time as a fifty year cycle. This commandment was aimed at those specially gifted individuals who are so wise and so visionary that they can think ahead and plan for the fifty year cycles.

Edgar was one of those unique individuals who had a long-range, trans-generational vision. Being the scion of generations of American Jewish leaders, he never forgot who he was; he never abandoned the ideals of his ancestors. In his

office as Parnas, he understood that the Congregation's earlier generations had a voice in the ongoing development of the community. The age-old traditions of dignity, honor, and courtesy were not to be abandoned. Crudeness and pettiness were to be avoided at all costs.

But while Edgar was highly sensitive to the voices of the earlier generations, he did not grant those voices veto power. He understood very well that each generation needs to address its own needs and challenges, and has to adapt to new realities. Edgar well appreciated that sometimes change is necessary...but that change should come organically, in a natural way that does not generate undue communal dissension. If Edgar had an allergy, it was an allergy to controversy. He would devote countless hours in conversations, meetings and deliberations in order to develop a strong consensus before adopting a new policy. During his tenure, "shul politics" simply did not exist. People disagreed, people had conflicting points of view...but Edgar kept everyone calmly and respectfully working together. The goal was not to gain an individual "win", but to chart a course that would be best for the entire Congregation.

Edgar's trans-generational vision respected the past and served the present generations. Yet, part of his genius for leadership was his intense concern for the future generations. He strove to maintain and enhance the Congregation's traditions in a way that would attract the allegiance and respect of generations yet to come. He was committed to the historic ideals of the Congregation, believing that they provided a solid spiritual and communal foundation for those who will come after us.

When he retired as Parnas in May 1991, I gave a sermon in his honor. I said: "An entire generation of Shearith Israel—and I include myself and my family—has never experienced a service at Shearith Israel with another Parnas. Indeed, our emotional attachment to the synagogue and to its services is inextricably linked with the image of Edgar sitting in his place as Parnas. In some ineffable way, his presence has influenced the character of our prayers to the Almighty."

Religious leadership needs to be in the hands of those, like Edgar, who see the long view of Jewish history and destiny, who are tirelessly and selflessly committed to serving God and humanity with love, kindness, compassion, wisdom and moral courage. Great leadership is the gift of few special individuals who have a trans-generational view, who draw strength from the wisdom of the past and who keep focused on the needs of their generation and the generations yet to come.

When we are blessed with the presence of such individuals, we are indeed blessed. And when we are deprived of such individuals, we keenly feel their absence.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)