

In Memoriam: Rabbi Ezra Labaton

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A Memorial Tribute to Rabbi Ezra Labaton
from Rabbi Marc D. Angel

We join the Labaton family in mourning the passing of Rabbi Ezra Labaton, one of the great American rabbis of our generation. Rabbi Labaton served for many years as rabbi of the Magen David Congregation of West Deal, New Jersey.

My personal and professional friendship with Ezra goes back about forty years. To me, he was one of the bright stars in the contemporary rabbinate in general, and in the Sephardic rabbinate in particular.

The Talmud (Ta'anit 4a) cites the opinion of Rav Ashi that "any Talmid Hakham who is not hard as iron is no Talmid Hakham!" What he meant was: a rabbi must have strong principles, must be courageous in upholding these principles, must not bend under pressure. Ezra was a man of integrity and high principles. He was authentic, he knew who he was. In a world where so many rabbis (and others!) adopt artificial personae to pass themselves off to impress others, Ezra was genuine. He could not be pressured or intimidated by the "right" or by the "left." He was a proud upholder of the Syrian Sephardic tradition as he understood it, and he was firm in his convictions.

Shortly after Rav Ashi's statement, the Gemara goes on to quote Ravina: "Even so, a person must teach himself the quality of gentleness." While it is vital to be strong in one's principles, it is equally important to be gentle. One teaches not by threatening or coercing, but by demonstrating a spirit of love, kindness and gentleness. Ezra was strong and courageous...and he also was a model of gentleness. He always seemed to have a smile on his face, a sparkle in his eye; he always seemed to have a kind word to share; he always carried himself with dignity and humility. He didn't talk at people, but engaged with them as a caring friend and teacher.

Ezra was a highly erudite scholar. He was deeply steeped in rabbinic literature and had a searching mind open to new ideas, curious to learn about various fields of intellectual endeavor. He was comfortable in the rationalist school of Rambam, but was much at home in the spiritual world of Rabbi Abraham son of Rambam. He was a unique blend of traditional and modern scholarship.

Ezra, Ezra, Me'ayin Yavo Ezri? With the passing of Rabbi Ezra Labaton, our world has become smaller and darker. Where will we find another leader with such stellar personal and intellectual qualities? Where will we find Sephardic rabbis who are true to themselves and to their traditions, who are authentic, strong, gentle, intellectually vibrant?

Zekher Tsaddik livrakha: The memory of the righteous is a blessing. We pray that the memory of

Rabbi Ezra Labaton will be a source of blessing, strength and happiness to his family, his community and to all Israel, now and for generations to come.

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