Thoughts for the Season of Teshuvah: In Memoriam, Rabbi Abraham Shalem (1928-2014)

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The theme of Shabbat Teshuvah is repentance. This does not refer only to those who are not religious who now need to repent. It refers to each of us, whatever our religious level is. Each one of us is called upon to examine our weaknesses and deficiencies and to make a determination to improve ourselves during the coming year.

When we contemplate our personal religious lives, we often find ourselves thinking of those people who have had a strong positive impact on us—our parents and grandparents, relatives, rabbis, teachers, pious and righteous individuals. In many ways, these role models have helped us fashion our individual philosophies, attitudes and behaviors. When we contemplate repentance, we draw on their strengths and insights; we strive to emulate them at their best. One such role model for me was Rabbi Abraham Shalem, who passed away in Jerusalem during the month of Elul five years ago.

Rabbi Shalem was born in Jerusalem in 1928. He studied among great rabbis in the holy land, and was ordained by the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel. Rabbi Shalem was a devoted disciple of Rabbi Uziel, and both were classic models of the Sephardic religious worldview that characterized rabbis of Judeo-Spanish background. In 1959, Rabbi Shalem became rabbi of Congregation Ezra Bessaroth in Seattle. Our family has been part of the Ezra Bessaroth community since its beginnings in the early 20th century, and my grandfather Bohor Yehudah Angel was among the founding members. When Rabbi Shalem arrived, I was 14 years old. He was not only our rabbi, he was also our neighbor! The Angel house and the Shalem house were right next door to each other on Wilson Avenue South, a block away from the synagogue. Our families immediately developed a warm friendship.

Before coming to Seattle, Rabbi Shalem had served the Sephardic community of Lima, Peru. He remained at our Congregation Ezra Bessaroth for about three and a half years, after which he served as rabbi in Mexico City. In 1977, he and his

family moved to Jerusalem where he spent many productive years as a scholar, communal leader, teacher, and rabbinic judge. Although Rabbi Shalem spent a relatively short time in Seattle, he left a strong impact on our community. He was dignified and principled—but sweet and patient. He was profoundly learned—but accessible to all, not just to scholars. He was a spiritual person whose faith simply glowed from his face—but he was tolerant, compassionate and understanding. Through his example and his energetic work, he raised the religious level of our community.

Rabbi Shalem, like other classic Sephardic rabbis, was a prayerful person. It would never occur to him to arrive late to synagogue services, or to engage in conversations during services, or to do outside reading during services. When he prayed, he was in relationship with the Almighty. He taught us to pray—by example. He believed in it, he lived it, it was genuine. Rabbi Shalem, like other classic Sephardic rabbis, was a magnificent reader of the Torah. He had a melodious voice that made the Torah's words come to life. He often led the congregation in prayer and considered this to be a great honor. Rabbi Shalem, like other classic Sephardic rabbis, had a wonderful sense of humor and a very natural manner. Yet, his sermons and classes were conducted with profound reverence. He was teaching the word of God, and this required a seriousness of mind and of purpose. The goal was to inspire, to inform, to elevate congregants and students—not to entertain them with jokes and anecdotes or clever rabbinic interpretations.

Rabbi Shalem authored important works in halakha and Jewish thought. They reflect his impressive erudition and his staunch traditionalism. But they also reflect his loving personality, his attempt to apply law in a sensible and compassionate manner. Rabbi Shalem's intellect was deep and wide-ranging; he was both self-assured…and humble. He was genuinely pious, avoiding pomposity and self-adulation. He was a servant of God. Two words that come to mind when I recall Rabbi Shalem are gravitas and sweetness. When in his presence, one instinctively felt in the presence of a great man. But one also sensed the sweetness of a loving personality. He never seemed to be talking at you—but conversing with you. When I remember Rabbi Shalem, I envision him with a kind smile and twinkle in his eye.

Over the years, I had occasion to visit Rabbi Shalem in Jerusalem and to benefit from his wisdom and friendship. He was the last person who called me by my childhood nickname "Markee!" Although I was myself a grey-bearded grandfather, to Rabbi Shalem I continued to be "Markee," his student and his

friend.

During the season of Teshuvah, we recall those special people whose ideas and ideals have helped shape who we are, and whose examples continue to inspire us to grow in our religious lives. During this season I, and so many others who knew him, will be thinking of Rabbi Abraham Shalem. May his memory continue to be a source of strength, happiness and blessing to his family, friends, students...to all the people of Israel.

Angel for Shabbat