Rabbi Dr. Chaim Wakslak: In Memoriam

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel offers these words of eulogy for a long-standing rabbinic leader and friend.

It is with deep sadness that we record the passing of Rabbi Dr. Chaim Wakslak, for many years the Rabbi of the Young Israel of Long Beach, New York. The funeral was on Friday February 21, 2020. We extend our condolences to his wife Rivkah, to their children and grandchildren.

Rabbi Wakslak was a uniquely good man, a devoted rabbi and teacher…and a wonderful friend.

Much can be said about his remarkable life and his outstanding service as a communal Rav. I, personally, have rarely met a rabbi who was so truly a servant of Hashem.

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“Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Haninah: Rabbinic scholars increase peace in the world” (end of tractate Berakhot). The hallmark of a rabbi must be the commitment to increase peace and harmony among the Jewish people and within society at large. Without this guiding focus, rabbinic scholars betray their responsibility.

How do rabbis go about increasing peace in the world? How is this general truism translated into specific action? An answer may be found in the commentary of the Maharsha on the closing passages in Berakhot and Yevamot. The Maharsha states that rabbis are obliged to bring peace between the people of Israel and Hashem. By teaching Torah, the prayers and blessings, as well as by imbuing reverence and love of God, rabbis thereby lead Jews to find peace in their relationship with

the Almighty. The rabbinic mission demands a spiritual outlook, an overwhelming desire to bring Jews closer to Hashem and Torah. This mission can only be fulfilled properly in a spirit of love, compassion, inclusivity—and much patience.

The rabbi must be—and must be seen by others to be—a selfless religious leader who places the public's interests before his own. He must set the example of what it means to be a truly religious personality.

Rabbi Chaim Wakslak was a rabbi who brought people closer to Hashem, selflessly and sincerely. When he davened, his beautiful and spiritual voice lifted all of us. When he delivered his sermons, his keen wit and love of Torah filled the synagogue. He was devoted to his "Daf Yomi" group; he was a tireless teacher to all segments of the community. He taught not only with words…but by example. If you want to visualize a genuinely pious, a sincerely religious human being—Rabbi Chaim Wakslak is the image you would call to mind.

The Maharsha points to another rabbinic characteristic that results in increasing peace in the world. It is the application of halakha in a way that reflects understanding and sensitivity to the human predicament. Our sages recognized overarching principles that guided halakhic rulings—principles such as sanctifying God's Name; avoiding desecration of God's name; making decisions with the understanding that the ways of Torah are pleasant and all its paths are peace.

Rabbi Wakslak was not only a Rabbi but was a trained psychologist; he understood people; he related to each person with sensitivity. He knew not only how to speak, but how to listen. He was a talmid hakham who was able to bring Torah and halakha into peoples' lives in a loving, thoughtful way.

To increase peace in the world, rabbinical scholars must be sensitive to the needs of the public and must see themselves as integral members of the public. These were qualities epitomized by Rabbi Wakslak. In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, he mobilized the entire Long Beach community—Jews and non-Jews—to come together, to help one another, to provide meals and comfort to those who lost so much in the storm. Whatever he did, he did with profound faith in the Almighty, and without seeking personal glory or even simple gratitude. He did what was right…because it was right, because the Torah guided his every step and every thought.

Rabbi Wakslak was the guiding spiritual light of the Young Israel. He was the tireless Rav who saw to it that the community had proper minyanim, shiurim, kosher establishments, an eiruv, a mikvah. With his passing, the community has

lost a Rav of incredible energy and dedication. We have all lost not just a fine Rav; we have lost a genuine and trusted friend.

The Gemara (Berakhot 46b) cites the opinion of Rabbi Akiva that one should recite a blessing upon learning of someone's death: Barukh Dayyan ha-Emet, blessed be the True Judge. This is a blessing of resignation. Although we are grieving, we acknowledge the ultimate wisdom of Hashem. We do not understand the mysteries of life and death.

But the Hakhamim suggest a different blessing: Barukh haTov ve-Hameitiv, blessed be the One Who is good and Who does good. This seems like a strange choice; but it is not strange. The hakhamim are reminding mourners that even in the deepest sadness, we need to remember the good things that the deceased person had experienced during the course of life. We are to remember the person's goodness and how that goodness will continue to be a source of strength, blessing and happiness in the months and years ahead.

Rabbi Chaim Wakslak was blessed with a wonderful wife and family; a devoted congregation; years of satisfaction as a teacher, guide, and communal leader. With resignation and sadness, we say Barukh Dayyan ha-Emet. With gratitude for the blessings he enjoyed over the course of his life, and for the blessings he showered on his family and community, we say Barukh ha-Tov ve-Hameitiv.

Reb Chaim, as a genuine talmid hakham, you brought peace between us and Hashem. You brought peace between us and our fellow human beings. You helped us find peace within ourselves. May you, who were the source of shalom and sheleimut during your lifetime, now find ultimate shalom and sheleimut in the Olam haEmet.

May the mourners be consoled by the Almighty. Min haShamayim Tenuhamu.