# In Praise of Critical Thinking: Remembering Dr. Louis H. Feldman

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When I think back on my years at Yeshiva College (1963-67), I am forever grateful for having studied with a number of truly remarkable professors. One of the best was Dr. Louis H. Feldman (October 29, 1926-March 25, 2017).

Dr. Feldman taught classical languages. He had very few students—there were four of us in my Latin class. When I registered for Latin, one of the upper classmen warned me: Feldman is a very tough teacher; you should avoid him if you can. But instead of discouraging me, that warning whetted my curiosity. Who was this Dr. Feldman who had such a daunting reputation?

Wikipedia offers a short biographical sketch: "Feldman received his undergraduate degree (as valedictorian) from Trinity College, Hartford, CT in 1946 and his master's degree the following year. In 1951, he received his doctoral degree in philology from Harvard University for his dissertation *Cicero's Concept of Historiography*. He returned to Trinity College as a teaching fellow and eventually served as classics instructor before leaving for Hobart and William Smith Colleges in 1953. Feldman began teaching at Yeshiva University as an instructor in 1955, became an assistant professor in 1956, an associate professor in 1961 and, in 1966, a professor of classics. In 1993, he was appointed Abraham Wouk Family Professor of Classics and Literature at Yeshiva University." Dr. Feldman published important works and won many academic honors.

Aside from teaching us Latin, Dr. Feldman taught us how to think. While I have forgotten most of my Latin, I have not forgotten his intellectual guidance.

In his lectures, he gave us the following notice. "Everything I tell you might be true or might be false. But if you ask me a question, I'll always give you the correct answer." We had to listen carefully when he spoke; and we had to use our critical faculties to assess whether the information he was giving us was true or false. If something sounded wrong, we had to ask him for clarification. His basic point was: don't rely on authorities, not even your own professor. Think for yourself, think carefully and analytically.

Sure enough, on one of his exams we all answered a question "correctly," and we all were marked wrong. When we objected, since we only wrote down what he himself taught us, he replied with a wry smile: "yes, but I wasn't telling the truth then! You should have been more perceptive, you should have challenged me." So we all received poor grades on that exam; but we learned a lesson that transcended Latin: we learned to be attentive, critical, self-reliant.

Dr. Feldman assigned us to write a paper that we would present to the class orally. Since I was taking a class in Chaucer at the time, I decided to write a paper on Virgil's influence on Chaucer. When it was

time for me to present my paper, Dr. Feldman sat in the back of the room. No sooner had I made my first point, Dr. Feldman raised his hand. “How do you know that Chaucer drew that phrase from Virgil? Maybe he came up with it himself?” I was a bit flustered, but replied with some confidence: “Professor Thompson, who is a foremost authority on Chaucer, wrote specifically that this passage was drawn from Virgil.” Dr. Feldman said: “I don’t care what Professor Thompson or anyone else thought. You have to demonstrate that in fact Chaucer was drawing on this passage from Virgil. Quoting this professor or that professor does not make something true.” “But he’s an authority,” I replied. “Don’t rely on authorities,” said Dr. Feldman. “Analyze things for yourself. Citing an authority doesn’t prove your point.”

That was a powerful lesson that has stayed with me over the years. Whereas it is very common in religious life to rely on “authorities,” Dr. Feldman taught us to think for ourselves. Yes, we certainly can and should learn from scholars, but ultimately we need to make evaluations of our own. Because rabbi x or authority y said something does not in itself make something true.

Dr. Feldman had strict rules when it came to submitting our papers. He would deduct one third of a grade for every five typos/misspelled words/grammatical errors. We had to proofread our papers very carefully before handing them in; we knew that he graded strictly. The first paper I ever published was a term paper I wrote for Dr. Feldman comparing five English translations of the Aeneid. Dr. Feldman submitted the paper on my behalf to the Classical Journal…and it was published during my senior year at Yeshiva College.

Aside from his brilliance as a teacher, he was a singular role model. He was not only a world-class scholar of Greek and Latin; he was a Torah scholar who could often be seen in the Beit Midrash well into the night as he studied Talmud. He was serious, but very witty; he had a ubiquitous smile and dry sense of humor. He was strict but not austere. He was demanding but not pedantic.

It is one of the unique joys of life to have studied with great teachers. It is one of the unique qualities of great teachers to expand the intellectual horizons of their students. Dr. Louis H. Feldman was that kind of teacher and that kind of human being.