Book Review: Rabbi Moshe Taragin on Rabbi Yehuda Amital

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By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Rabbi Moshe Taragin, *To Be Holy but Human: Reflections Upon My Rebbe, HaRav Yehuda Amital* (Kodesh Press, 2025)

Rabbi Yehuda Amital (1924-2010) was a leading Rosh Yeshiva in Israel, founding and building Yeshivat Har Etzion, a premier Hesder Yeshivah which combines Torah study with service in the Israel Defense Forces. Rabbi Moshe Taragin, a leading educator in his own right and a dedicated student of Rabbi Amital (as well as Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, who co-led Yeshivat Har Etzion), offers a strikingly personal glimpse into Rabbi Amital's unique personality.

Rabbi Taragin's book is comprised of two sections: One relates personal stories that offer a window into Rabbi Amital's outlook, and the other focuses on aspects of Rabbi Amital's ideology. The ideological essays are valuable in their own right, outlining the religious worldview of a master educator, communal leader, and model of Modern Orthodoxy and Religious Zionism. Personally, I find the stories even more illuminating, as they present elements of the inner world of Rabbi Amital. Here are just a few examples that speak to Rabbi Amital's core values.

Rabbi Amital stressed that people must develop a healthy personality before trying to become Torah scholars or communal leaders. He rejected a popular adage, often attributed to Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (1810-1883): “First, I tried to change the world. When that didn’t go as planned, I focused on changing my family. And when that didn’t work, I retreated inward to change my own inner life.” Rabbi Amital dismissed this lesson, insisting that the opposite is true. When people fail to change themselves, they often shift focus to changing the world. They use external success as self-proclaimed visionaries as a substitute for self-development or meaningful family relationships (93).

Similarly, Rabbi Amital objected when, at a relative’s circumcision, people referred to the infant as “Yankele Iluy” (Torah genius) during their speeches. They explained that they wanted him to grow into that role and therefore called him a Torah genius from infancy. Rabbi Amital objected strongly: “Just grow up to be a happy, well-adjusted *balabus* (layperson).” One first must focus on being a well-adjusted person committed to Torah, before thinking of becoming a Torah prodigy (47).

Rabbi Amital instructed his own daughter, in fourth grade at the time, to fail a test. Her teacher was placing far too much pressure on the students to excel, and Rabbi Amital wanted to teach his daughter that academic success should not overshadow emotional well-being (260).

Rabbi Amital had a profound sense of reality and humility. He was famed for changing his mind, even on the most important topics. For example, he initially saw little value in Talmud education for girls, since his own mother and grandmother had been pious without it. Only a couple of years later, when addressing a women’s learning program, he remarked, “You know, I used to think that Talmud study for women was unnecessary, but now I think it is absolutely essential.” He also had evolving views on the religious centrality of the Land of Israel. Initially, he was influenced by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook’s position that the land was at the very heart of the Zionist mission. Over time, however, Rabbi Amital came to realize that too much focus was on the land itself, and not enough attention was on people and the tenor of Israeli society (116-117).

Rabbi Amital valued creating students who can think for themselves (*talmidim*), rather than clones who mimic their teachers (*hasidim*). He once participated in a panel discussion with his illustrious student, Rabbi Yuval Cherlow. Rabbi Cherlow nervously explained to the audience that “Everything I am about to say stems from Rav Amital’s inspiration, but it completely contradicts what Rav Amital himself believes.” Rabbi Amital stood up and announced, “Ah,

finally, I have a *talmid*!" (75).

A particularly poignant story reflects Rabbi Amital's Torah leadership through his personal involvement. Once, there was a terrible snowstorm in Gush Etzion, leaving its residents without heat. A kibbutznik arrived on Shabbat, and told Rabbi Amital that the electricity in the hothouse where baby chicks were being raised had failed. If they did not restore the heat, the chicks would die. Rabbi Amital immediately put on his coat and walked through the storm to the kibbutz to offer his ruling. When he returned, people asked why he went, instead of simply asking more questions and then giving a ruling. He explained that Torah is to be lived in the real world, and is not simply book knowledge. He wanted to hear the cry of the chicks himself before issuing his ruling (28-29).

Rabbi Taragin's book title derives from a lesson Rabbi Amital frequently quoted from the Hasidic Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk (1757-1859). The Kotzker interpreted a verse, "*Ve-anshei kodesh tihyun li*" (you shall be holy people to Me, Exodus 22:30). While we strive to elevate ourselves by being holy, we must embrace the fact that we also are *anashim*, humans. We serve God precisely by recognizing our humanity, rather than falsely pursuing an angelic life (123).

Through these and so many other anecdotes, Rabbi Taragin provides readers with a means of learning transformative lessons from one of the great rabbinic figures of the previous generation.