

Opinion | Remembering Rabbi Dr. Abraham Neustein

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By Amy Neustein, Ph.D.

Each week for more than 60 years, in the Gothic-style, oak-paneled sanctuary of the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, congregants were treated to a sermon from a stately rabbi as distinguished by his oratorical skill as his Talmudic scholarship. The rabbi was Dr. Abraham Neustein — my father.

His weekly sermon was Rabbi Neustein's trademark. The sermons were described by one congregant as a "wellspring of knowledge." They began with Biblical stories and moved seamlessly into current events. It was not uncommon for visitors to walk for miles on a Shabbos to hear Rabbi Neustein speak.

Rabbi Neustein was honored with a lifetime contract at the Jewish Center of Brighton Beach — the largest Orthodox Jewish congregation in Brooklyn — over 40 years ago. But this was only one of many distinctions he received relatively early in life. At just nineteen (and still a rabbinical student at Yeshiva University), my father became the youngest man ever to hold an Orthodox synagogue position, in the Borough Park section of Brooklyn.

In 1938, at a YU-sponsored basketball game, he met Sorah Freyda Friedberg. Sorah (Shirley), whose bright face and gorgeous smile soon won over the 25-year-old Abraham Neustein, was a direct descendant of the 18th-century Rizhoner Rebbe — who likewise had been known for a radiant face and charismatic smile. Such was the young couple's popularity that when they married in Brooklyn in 1940, Ocean Parkway teemed with crowds vying for a peek into the synagogue.

Then America entered World War II, and my parents' lives changed. Rabbi and Mrs. Neustein set up a wedding parlor in their Ocean Parkway home to help Jewish servicemen who wanted to marry before going overseas. In an era before takeout food, the rebbetzin would prepare a wedding feast with her own hands, while Rabbi Neustein would officiate at the chuppah. He never forgot his wife's hard work. On her first birthday as his wife he wrote her, "This occasion means one more year of supreme happiness for me with a person who is the sweetest thing in the world. Please stay as fine as you are." The rebbetzin kept this letter in her kitchen drawer all the years of her life.

Rabbi Neustein was a counselor as well as a superb speaker. The Neustein home was always open — days, evenings, weekends — to community members. When radio psychologists and support groups were still unknown, every Jew's problems came before the rabbi and his wife. Rabbi Neustein learned how to size up a person and his problem with such precision that many people mistakenly thought he had been trained in psychology.

My mother was no different. I can remember waiting impatiently for supper many school nights while my

mother was on the phone, counseling a shul member with a personal problem. This could last for hours. (My mother even refused to cut short conversations with telemarketers, saying, "They are people too!")

During a Shabbos meal, having delivered a d'roshah, my father would often reflect, "If my sermon reaches the heart and mind of just one person, I feel I did some good." Although my mother took much pride in the food she served (and the furniture: we ate around a hand-painted, antique green Mediterranean-style table) my father saw Shabbos meals primarily as an opportunity to teach Torah. He taught by posing Talmudic questions to the family. When one of us gave the right answer he was exhilarated, and generous with his praise. (It was my mother who won it most frequently. He would say, "She has the head of Reb Chaim Brisker!")

My father loved to teach. Teaching meant so much to him that he began teaching an entirely new subject – business law – late in his life. In his sixties, an age when most people contemplate retirement, my father undertook a second career as a professor at City University. The new job involved personal and cultural changes as well: my father found himself plunged into a secular world after more than six decades spent exclusively among religious Jews. It even affected his dress. He had always worn a black three-piece suit and a homburg. For City University, for the first time in his life, he donned a gray suit and a simple, small-brimmed hat. Trying on the new outfit, he commented to my mother, "Now I know how it was for the European Jew leaving the ghetto to go to the big city!"

As a teacher, my father saw religious messages even in secular subjects. In all the courses he taught – in contracts, estate planning and estate law – he enunciated a consistent theme: never enter any transaction that isn't based on complete truth. His message must have struck a nerve: his students rated him as the best teacher in the business law program.

Over the years, Rabbi Neustein was a frequent guest speaker at major religious events. In 1966 the Rabbinical Council of America sent him to Switzerland as a delegate for a world conference of Orthodox rabbis. On his way to Switzerland he stopped in London for a Shabbos. Knowing his reputation as an orator, the largest Orthodox synagogue in Stamford Hills arranged for Rabbi Neustein to deliver a sermon that day. The congregants were delighted. One told him, "We didn't know Americans can be so eloquent!"

In 1981, having recently received my Ph.D., I was about to give my first speech, a lecture to the Bar Association of the City of New York. I was very nervous. I asked my father for some advice, and he smiled and said, "Amy, never say the word 'and' when you speak. If you do, you may not have anything to follow, and you'll be embarrassed." It was simple advice, but it seemed to work.

Rabbi Neustein was a man of many accomplishments: a rabbi, a lawyer, a Doctor of Hebrew Letters, an arbitrator in Small Claims Court, a professor of business law, and the first principal of the Joel Braverman High School.

But, first and foremost, he was a rabbi who put his duties ahead of his personal difficulties. When he had just been diagnosed with an advanced carcinoma of the lung, he asked me from his hospital bed, "Can you help me get out of this bed on Sunday to officiate at an unveiling?" At first I thought he was joking, but he wasn't. I said to him, "You have tubes in your chest; you cannot take two steps without becoming painfully short of breath. How can you go out to a cold, rainy cemetery on Sunday?" In the end, he forced me to compromise with him. I brought the family members to the hospital and my father spoke to them

right at his bedside, giving halachic guidance and words of consolation to the family of the deceased.

Dealing with those in need was such a priority in my home that as a child I was not permitted to answer the phone until I had learned how to properly respond to callers. I learned how to comfort mourners, how to congratulate brides, how to be discreet with congregants with marital problems. Only when I had mastered these skills did my parents consider me ready to answer the family telephone.

My father took his role as rabbi so seriously that he would not give it up even at his own wife's funeral. During the months before her death, while she lay comatose with an encephalitic condition originally thought to be West Nile virus, I made arrangements for Rabbi Moshe Portnoy, a dear family friend, to officiate at the funeral we all knew would come one day soon. I anticipated that my father would not have the emotional strength to do this himself.

But I was wrong. My father refused to lean on his colleague. Instead, he spoke calmly and reassuringly at the funeral about his wife of 61 years. Everyone present was astonished by his composure and dignity. (Privately, his grief was such that he refused to sleep in his empty bedroom. For months my father fell asleep at the kitchen table late every night, slumping over a gemorrah.)

But my father's indomitable strength was never more evident than shortly after my mother's death, when he learned his own days were numbered. In the eight weeks between his terminal diagnosis and his death, he revealed a resilient faith one rarely encounters outside books. When I asked him bluntly if he was afraid to die, he said, "No. I have G-d, so why should I have fear?"

Then his voice grew suddenly strong, despite his water-filled lungs. He spoke as if he were standing on the pulpit before a synagogue filled with congregants: "Go on and make a contribution to the world, Amy. G-d gave you an exceptional mind. Use it to make the world a better place!" Those were the last words I heard from my father.

Maybe he was thinking of his own life at that moment – for my father did make a contribution to the world. His was a long and active life. He died five months before his 90th birthday. He lived through the Depression, two world wars, the founding of the State of Israel, and dramatic upheavals in American society. During that time his studies were never interrupted. He completed Shas at least three times during his life. He amassed a collection of seforim that can only be rivaled by a library's.

Nevertheless, his true legacy was as a rabbi. He used his wealth of Judaic knowledge to guide his fellow Jews in the observance of the Law. And for that I, and many others, will always remember my father as the Talmid Chacham Ha'dor.

Editor's Note: Rabbi Neustein, z"l, will be the recipient of the Ponovez Yeshiva's "Talmid Chacham Ha'dor" award at the yeshiva's annual dinner in New York on Sunday, Nov. 24.

Dr. Amy Neustein has authored many academic articles on subjects ranging from artificial intelligence for natural language systems to child sex abuse and family court malfunction. She is co-authoring a book on the family court system with an Appeals Court judge and is writing a biography of her late father, "The Making of a Modern Day Sage: The Life and Legacy of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Neustein."