

BOKSER/H.L. MEMORIAL

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A day does not go by that I am not reminded of Baruch. That is not only because I continue to teach where he taught and continue to davn where he davened, and because his son and mine are now in the same class, but also because Barukh's death has made me think about why it is that we teachers teach and do research, and what it is that we leave behind, when all is said and done. Barukh was driven in that last terrible year to complete both his own work and his late father's as well. Did Barukh die content with what he had accomplished? I should like to believe that he did, but I suspect that he was tormented by the unfulfilment of many projects that he had not even begun. That is a scholar's blessing and his curse.

Those of us who are blessed with years must therefore wonder: What exactly should I spend my time on? Should I be redoubling my efforts to read and research and write or is it my teaching and interaction with students that is most valuable and lasting? Barukh's life and work, I submit to you, provides an answer to that question.

I am not a student of Rabbinics and am in no position to evaluate the quality and scope of Barukh's contribution to the

field. But what I have studied of his writings fills me with awe. I have learned more about the workings of Jewish collective memory from Baruch's analysis of Tosefta Pesahim than from whole historiographic tomes. In The Origins of the Seder, for instance, Baruch analyzes the famous Ma`aseh beRaban Gamliel and the elders who were reclining in the house of Baitos the son of Zonin in Lod, "and they were engaged in the halakhot of Passover all night, until the cock's call." In his spare and almost laconic style, Barukh explains how and why the wording of this episode was transformed to reflect the changing norms from Mishnaic to later rabbinic times. The more famous variant, he explains, the one that made its way into the Haggadah, has the sages spending the night "talking about the Exodus from Egypt," a subject of universal Jewish interest. This change befits the haggadah, which Barauch constantly reminds us is "a liturgical text aimed at popular audiences" not (like the Mishnah) a code of Jewish law intended for scholars. And from this observation (backed up, I should add, by copious notes) I suddenly understand why in my Yiddish secular education I was taught that Raban Gamliel and Co. were actually staying up all night to plan the Bar Kochba revolt. Just as the Haggadah cast the rabbis as men not merely concerned with the study of halachic minutiae but as popular figures concerned with questions of redemption, so my Yiddish school teachers wanted us to believe that these same rabbis were rebels and fighters in disguise, like Mordechai Anielewicz of Warsaw ghetto fame!

Let me now move on from Barukh's Origins of the Seder and what it has to teach us about Jewish collective memory to a lesser known essay on "Wonder-Working and the Rabbinic Tradition: The Case of Hanina ben Dosa" and what it has to teach us about its author. This is an exemplary piece of scholarship, like everything else Baruch published. In his meticulous footnotes Baruch provides a critical review of everything written on the subject. It's a mini-encyclopedia of modern Jewish scholarship. Then, in a close reading of texts that made me, a literature professor, green with envy, Baruch showed how much could be learned from each and every variation from one version to the next. This was no sleight of hand, of course, because Baruch knew everything else there was to know about the text before he began comparing it to others: he knew its philology, its exact dating, and the changing social and religious environment in which it arose.

[QUOTE MISHNA, p. 46]

Midway through the paper he stops to comment upon a minute detail in an amoraic version of the story of Haninah ben Dosa and the poisonous snake. This version in the Babylonia Talmud ends: "A that moment they said, 'Woe to the person who met an arvad and woe to the arvad that met Hanina ben Dosa.'" But the Palestinian Talmud, echoing the earliest known version, has the students saying "Woe to the person whom a havarbar has bitten, Woe to the havarbar that has bitten Hanina ben Dosa." "This variation fits

the change in context," says Baruch, "and is indicative of the overall change in meaning. The issue is not concentration in prayer but a community in danger." What's at stake, in other words, is nothing less than the changing conception of heroism and religious leadership in Jewish tradition. This -- from the substitution of the verb "to meet" for the verb "to bite" in the earlier and Palestinian versions of the story! Before he's done, Baruch has redrawn the map of Jewish miracle tales and heroic norms from biblical until late-rabbinic times. He has also shown the precise link between these changes and the different social reality in Babylonia from that in Palestine.

But why this particular subject in the first place? Certainly Baruch picked Haninah ben Dosa precisely because so many others had been there before and had failed to see what he could see. And he also understood that miracle tales lay at the foundation of the religious revolution and the religious rivalry that characterized Jewish and early Christian society in the wake of the Destruction. But I believe that Baruch's real attraction to the subject was autobiographical. What attracted him to the figure of Haninah ben Dosa was the idea of prayer as an example of absolute faith; prayer as the measure of the man and his relationship both to God and to his community.

For if ever there was a reincarnation of the rabbinic man of faith, it was Baruch ben Micah. And if ever there was a time when Baruch exemplified that faith, it was in the last year of

his life when he summoned the spiritual fortitude to comfort us (in his unforgettable dvar Torah about Netaneh Tokef); when he continued to lead the weekly study sessions in Sifrei Devarim almost until the very end; and when he couldn't do that, would meet with his friends individually and talk to them about Torah.

Baruch will certainly be remembered for his scholarship. But it's the living memory of him, his personal example, his miraculous faith that will remain even longer -- among all those who were privileged to know him and to learn from him and to daven with him. We don't need miracle tales to be told about Baruch. We saw the miracle of the man with our own eyes.