

The legend says that he sat under the table of his father, a Rebbe, in Ozarow, Poland. He would listen for hours as his father would teach students Talmud and soak it all up himself and carry it with him on his own daily chores and throughout his life. But this is a legend that was passed amongst the Rabbinic Students at HUC Cincinnati regarding our beloved Talmud teacher, Ben Zion Wacholder.

Born in 1924, in Ozarow, Poland, Ben Zion Wacholder studied in Yeshivot near and far from his small village. He became a great Talmud scholar before World War II began and he carried it with him through the Holocaust. But he had to do so in secret, for Ben Zion Wacholder survived the years of the Holocaust living as a Christian under an Aryan name and working in a Polish labor camp until liberation. The words of Talmud had to remain only in his mind's eye and never on his lips during those years if he was to survive. After the war, he made his way to Paris, then to Bogota, Columbia and finally to the United States, where he came to settle in Los Angeles as the librarian at the Hebrew Union College.

He received his doctorate in 1960 and then became a professor of Talmud for students in Cincinnati. He was truly beloved and cherished by all of us.

There was another story passed down from generations of students about Dr. Wacholder – that when his eyesight had all but disappeared, Dr. Wacholder would come into class, ask us to open the tractate, volume of Talmud we were studying that day and begin reciting verbatim the mishnah, g'mara, and commentary along the tops, sides, and bottom. He never missed a word. But the story passed on to us was that years before, the students went to the Dean and said, 'we adore our professor and we know that he is a learned man, but he comes with no book and is that truly honoring the text to come with no book?' The Dean went to Dr. Wacholder and told him the student's concerns and Dr. Wacholder, being the ever patient teacher, brought with him his tractate, his volume of Talmud to class. He carefully sat down, invited the students to open his or her tractate to the specified page as he opened his. He started to "read" the words to the students and as he was doing so, lifted the book in front of his face. The students looking at their teacher noticed two things: first, it was the wrong book and second, it was upside down. What the students saw that day was that they themselves were blind. They were blinded by their own ignorance and ego to assume that just because a professor did not have the book before him, that he would not teach them properly. The students presented themselves to Dr. Wacholder and apologized for their own misgivings and shared their appreciation of who he was as their teacher. From that day forward, they sat at their teacher's feet and absorbed every word he spoke.

When Debbie Friedman was 12 years old, she picked up a guitar, opened her mouth and the world listened. Debbie's music, writing, and love for all brought so many to sit at her feet and be inspired. She opened doors to building personal spiritual connections to those who only thought prayer and connections to God belonged to only those who studied and understood the generations of text. But Debbie took text, transformed it and returned it to you and me inviting us to make it our own. She was a learned Jew, taking the time to study the words of our sages and transform them to melodies that would remain on our lips.

For over four decades, peers and campers sat with her in the circle, singing and creating music and text that would transform synagogue worship. She gave us permission to raise our voices in song, a role once only reserved for the hazan, the cantor. But Debbie opened new doors and invited us to explore them with her. And as her music became “traditional” in synagogues of all denominations, and I do mean all, her name would fade into the background. How often we would refer to a mi chamocha tune as the traditional tune only to later realize that it was given to us by Debbie Friedman. How often we would assume that Mi Sheberach was a tune that we just “always” sang. How easily forgotten is it that (*sing havdalah la la*) was Debbie’s gift to you and me allowing us to enjoy what so many say is their favorite Shabbat moment of Havdalah and which we will sing in the next hour bidding farewell to Yom Kippur.

We sat at her feet and sang with Debbie the music and the prayers which opened our hearts. She blessed us that “may our eyes shine with the light of Torah” and reminded us “that we shall be a blessing.” And when she sang to us, we sat at her feet, took in every note and every word and she brought us wholeness and completeness.

I would walk into Torah study on Shabbat morning, so excited to share that which I gleaned for our study that morning. I set out my books, my notes, turn to the page we are going to start reading and say, “Boker Tov!” I’d have to say it a couple of times before our Torah study students would take their seats after schmoozing with friends they see only once a week in this place. I’d say, ‘let’s begin by turning to page...’ and before I could finish, Alan Friedman would call out from the back, my left corner, of the room and say, “excuse me Rabbi, shouldn’t we say the blessings first?” Humbled, I would say, “of course...please join with me...baruch, atah Adonai...Blessed are you Adonai our God, Eternal Soul of the Universe, who makes us holy through the mitzvot and commands us to engage in the study...in the wrestling of Torah.” Now, we could begin.

Alan, as we shared on Rosh Hashanah morning, was our ba’al t’kiah for almost 50 years. He not only shared his breath with us as he shared the calls of the shofar, but we sat at his feet as he studied Torah with us. Every person has the ability to be a teacher of Torah and Alan made sure to share that message with all. He would bring in new students to Torah study and after being a part of the group, he would gently encourage them to be one of the Torah study leaders on Shabbat. He opened himself to each leader to study with him, provide him or her with commentaries and websites, to help them dig deeper in to the meaning of each word of Torah. And he did so without ego, without pretense. He allowed each teacher to share Torah as he or she felt it, experienced it, and wrestled with it. We sat at his feet and we studied with him, turning the words of Torah over and over again. And we learned the words he held in his heart, “Vision looks inward and becomes duty. Vision looks outward and becomes aspiration. Vision looks upward and becomes faith.”

Slowly he walked in. Leaning on his walker, dressed in his dark blue suit, his shirt freshly pressed, and his blue kipah on his head. He made his way to the front of the service, much to the concern of his caregiver. But that didn’t matter, Ely Litsky was going to sit up front and

participate in the service. However, he was concerned and would call out, “Rabbi! Rabbi! Have you said Kaddish yet? I have to say Kaddish for my beloved Rachel and my son, Israel.” I would come off the bima, to his side and reassure him, ‘no Ely, we have not said Kaddish yet. I promise you, I will let you know when it is time.’ He would take my hands in his, bring them to his lips and kiss them gently saying, thank you.

Ely was 100 years old this year when he died. He outlived his guards and tormentors in Auschwitz and Mauthausen. No one survived from his hometown of Bialystok. He made his way to America, the Bronx, and fell in love again and had a daughter. But those whose feet he sat at, those relatives and teachers he loved, were no more. Yet he kept them alive deep down in his soul. And he shared his stories of life, song and dancing in the restaurant her worked at in Bialystok. And he openly showed his tattoo, that would serve as his name, number 100719 until the end of the war. He sat us at his feet and reminded us of a life that was and the death that came. He told us to never forget, for when his generation is gone, there will be no eyewitnesses and we are responsible to never forget his name, to never forget the stories of the millions who were killed in the gas chambers, in the camps, in the forests, in their beds. That as we sit at his feet, as we listen to each word and envision each image, we cannot forget, we must not forget. But we must also dance and we must also sing! Yes, so much was stolen from him, but no one should steal the joy of life, for there is so much to be joyful about.

Each of us sit at the feet of our teachers. Each of us has the memories of their words, their songs, their breath, their touch. These moments of yizkor bring forward the lessons taught and absorbed not only in our mind but also in our soul. Our teachers, our loved ones, have inspired us and given to us the greatest gift of all – to carry their lessons, their stories, with us and give them as a gift to the next generation so that they too may sit at our feet and share in the weaving of memory.

Dr. Wacholder, Debbie, Alan, Ely, all of our teachers, it is time to say kaddish...it is time for us to remember....it is time for us to teach, sing, breathe and hold you in our hearts.

Zichronu livracha – you are all blessings.

Amen