

From a Distance: A Tribute to Rabbi David Ellenson z"l

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Earlier this week, we started our Tuesday Night Symposium course on Intro to the Jewish Classics. One of the classical texts we're going to study together is called the *Shulchan Arukh*, by Rabbi Joseph Karo.

Karo is famous in the Jewish tradition as a master of Jewish law, and the *Shulchan Arukh* is widely accepted as the foundational text of modern *halakhah*. But Karo, who lived in Eretz Yisrael, in the city of Tzfat, during the 16th century, was also an important figure in Jewish mysticism (or, Kabbalah).

Like his biblical namesake Joseph, whom we meet in this week's parashah, Joseph Karo was a renowned dreamer.

According to his own testimony, over the course of 50 years or so, Karo received frequent nighttime visits from a mystical angel-like figure who would come to him in dreams and teach him about Kabbalah, prayer, family life, character development, and destiny.

Karo regarded this mysterious figure as his spiritual mentor, and he journaled about his encounters with the Maggid in his diary for a half century. The diary was eventually published under the title *Maggid Meisharim*—meaning: "The Preacher of Righteousness," which is how Karo referred to his heavenly teacher.

I have never studied this book, but I remember learning the story when we visited Tzfat during rabbinic school. I remember thinking it sounded fanciful to me and seemed incongruent with the character of Rabbi Joseph Karo, the logical and analytical master codifier of Jewish law.

I hadn't thought about this story of Joseph Karo's dreams in years—until today.

I thought of it, because last night I had a similar kind of dream.

Yesterday morning, as I was heading into the city to teach my class at HUC, I got word that one of my closest and most influential mentors, Rabbi David Ellenson, had passed away.

Rabbi Ellenson was the retired president of Hebrew Union College. Though I didn't know him well during rabbinic school (I studied in Cincinnati; he worked here in New York), I had the truly incredible opportunity to study with him one-on-one over the last decade as I have pursued a graduate degree in Jewish law.

See, in addition to leading HUC, David was a prominent scholar of Jewish law, history, and sociology.

He wrote numerous books and articles in which he examined the texts of Jewish law to gain insight into the daily economic, family, social, and religious lives of the communities that produced those texts.

He became one of the most important contemporary scholars in the academic field known as "Jewish social history," which was first established by his own mentor, Professor Jacob Katz.

I went to bed last night feeling sad about Rabbi Ellenson's passing and thinking about his impact on my life.

In addition to being my teacher and mentor, I also considered David my friend.

He came to Omaha six years ago to speak at my installation there, and during that visit I had the most amazing honor of co-teaching an adult education lesson with him.

We got together for lunch a few times in New York since I've lived here, most recently just a few weeks ago.

Well, last night, Rabbi Ellenson was in my dream.

He didn't come to me with any advice or message like Rabbi Karo's Maggid. I just remember seeing him and being confused, because I thought he had passed away. And I remember him saying to me, "Did I die?" and me responding to him, "Yes, I think you did."

That's all I can recall from the dream. I know it sounds strange.

And I'm wondering now about myself what I wonder about Joseph in the Torah: "Why did he feel the need to tell people about his dreams? Why didn't he just keep them to himself?"

But at the same time, I'm thinking about what Nina said yesterday when we were discussing the parashah at minyan. She said Joseph's dreams were weighing on him, and he needed to process them with people he thought he could trust.

I guess I'm telling you this because I really did experience it, and because I feel like there's some message in it that I want to think through.

My dream prompted me to scour the parashah for some clue as to what that message was. One line in particular jumped out at me.

It says: "When [Joseph's] brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him so that they could not speak peaceably to him." (*Gen. 37:4*)

What does this mean: "They could not speak peaceably to him"?

As Rashi interprets it, "to their credit, they did not speak *one* thing with their mouths while having something *different* in their hearts."¹

In other words, they hated Joseph; but since they couldn't say something nice, they didn't say anything at all.

But the rabbis of the midrash read it a bit differently. As they see it, the statement that "they could not speak peaceably to him" means that "what was in [the brothers'] hearts was *also* in their mouths."² That is to say, the brothers hated Joseph so much that they could no longer keep their feelings to themselves. So, they spoke to him with hate and malice.

All this made me think of something Rabbi Ellenson said to me when we had lunch a few weeks ago. It was just a day or two after those Jewish students at Cooper Union had to barricade themselves in the library to escape from pro-Hamas demonstrators who had chased after them and were banging on the glass chanting "free Palestine!"

As we discussed the terrible turn of events since October 7, Rabbi Ellenson, looking at things through the lens of a perceptive historian, said he worried that what we're seeing is the end of the post-World War II era of Jewish life in America.

Ever since the end of World War II, the Jewish people have steadily moved toward full acceptance by and integration into American society.

One of the strongest indicators of this is a statistic Rabbi Ellenson highlighted in his book *After Emancipation*: that the rate of intermarriage among American Jews "increased from less than 5 percent in the 1950s to 31 percent in 1970 and 52 percent in 1990."³ According to recent surveys, that number today is more than 70 percent.

This remarkable trajectory of increase in intermarriage reflects the reality that the economic, social, and cultural barriers that used to keep Jews at a distance from non-Jewish America have broken down steadily throughout the post-war period, to the point of disappearing almost completely.

For the same reasons, in the 1950s, the Jewish philosopher Will Herberg wrote his landmark book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, arguing that American Jews had taken a full and equal place alongside Christians in the cultural tapestry of American life.

In that environment, even if people secretly disliked Jews, they tended to either say positive things about us in public or just keep quiet.

But since October 7, things have changed.

Now, they can no longer conceal their contempt for Joseph, and, as the midrash puts it, "what is in their hearts is *also* in their mouths."

Tragically, we are seeing this every day in the news, as disdain for Jews is being spoken *easily* in public—not only by pro-Hamas demonstrators on the streets of New York and other American cities, but also by elite university presidents testifying before Congress.

Maybe we are indeed witnessing the end of the equilibrium we've lived with for the past 75 years. Maybe we *are* in the midst of a shift toward a dark new Jewish reality in America.

If so, then it seems to me that it is our duty, in the famous words of the poet Dylan Thomas, to “rage against the dying of the light.”

As we sang tonight:

“We have come this far always believing
that justice will somehow prevail.
This is the burden and this is the promise
and this is why we will not fail.”

I'm not sure if this is the message I am supposed to take from my dream or not. But it's what I came to as a result of it.

Tonight, we're celebrating the Shabbat of Hanukkah. So, in tribute to my mentor and friend Rabbi David Ellenson, I want to conclude by bringing in a teaching from the *halakhah*, as he would so often do.

Our dreamer, Rabbi Joseph Karo, writes in the *Shulchan Arukh*: “On the night of the Shabbat that comes during Hanukkah, it is permissible to kindle the Hanukkah light with the oils and wicks that are not permitted for use in lighting the Shabbat candles. This is because it is prohibited to use the Hanukkah light, whether on Shabbat or on a weekday, even to check coins or to count them by its illumination; even a *holy* use is prohibited, such as studying Torah by its illumination.” (*OH* 673:1)

The bottom line of this law is that you can't use the Hanukkah candles as a source of light for reading or doing any kind of activity.

This is because, symbolically, the Hanukkah lights are what Rav Soloveitchik calls “lights that are revealed from afar.”

While we can see their light, that light is only a refraction of the mysterious light from the realm of God—the light of the first day of Creation, the light that God “reserved for the righteous in the World to Come.”⁴

Last night, as we lit the first Hanukkah candle, a bit more of that primal light was claimed by a new righteous arrival.

While David's light is no longer near to us as it once was, it will continue, from a distance, to illumine the minds and hearts of everyone who had the privilege of knowing him, as well as those who will yet study his writings.

Rabbi David Ellenson was a brilliant scholar and teacher, a true mensch, the most kind-hearted and friendly person you could hope to meet, a caring mentor, and a good friend.

May the light of his memory and legacy pierce the darkness of our world from the place where the righteous dwell with God, and may it shine as a blessing forever.

1 Rashi, *Gen.* 37:4

2 Genesis Rabbah 84:9

3 David Ellenson, *After Emancipation*, 43-44

4 Rashi, *Gen.* 1:4