

## Norman Janis: Eulogy for Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold

**12 Nisan 5776 – April 20, 2016**

We are gathered here as a community today to mourn the loss of Ben-Zion Gold – *rabbenu umorenu* / our rabbi and teacher, and we are here to support and offer comfort to Rabbi Gold's beloved daughters, Hannah and Merav.

I first met Rabbi Gold in the spring of 1959. We had both come to Harvard the previous fall – he as a Hillel rabbi, I as a freshman. On our first walk together, after lunch in the Freshman Union, he stopped several times to enjoy the sunny day and to inhale the fragrance of the lilacs we were brushing into along our way. How characteristic of Ben's love of life and of lilacs that walk was! How characteristic also and truly remarkable was the fact that I, a freshman, not quite 18, Jewish but quite secular and uninvolved and not apparently inclined to be otherwise, had been invited to lunch and a walk by this vigorous rabbi who had noticed me when I happened to accompany a friend to 5 Bryant Street – for that's where Hillel House was located in those days, on the periphery of the university – to say kaddish for her mother at a tiny Friday evening service with very few in attendance.

After leading the service, Rabbi Gold invited us for a bit of refreshment in a little library under the stairs. So my friend and I and one or two others sat around a library table with Ben, and I guess I asked a couple of interested questions. They were enough to change my life forever. For Ben-Zion Gold was a fisher of souls, and he must have thought he had spotted a lively fish in his net. So he invited me to have lunch with him, and then we walked, and then asked me into his house, where I got my first glimpse of the adorable one-month-old Hannah, and then he arranged for me to go to a seven-day Hillel camp that August. There I had my first experience of a

week understood as 6 days leading to Shabbat. And the guest scholar on that Shabbat was the still-quite-youthful Abraham Joshua Heschel, who had just written *God in Search of Man*, and was overflowing with the ideas that had inspired the book. And thus began a long Jewish trajectory in my life.

In the years that followed, my friendship with Ben drew me by degrees into Jewish life and Jewish study, especially through the medium of the little, quite informal Worship & Study congregation which Ben had begun leading around a library table in Phillips Brooks House in a corner of Harvard Yard. Ben was a fascinating, engagingly ironic teacher, deeply knowledgeable about traditional Polish Jewish religion and life, and deeply intuitive and imaginative about how to be Jewish in our very different modern American world and, more specifically, at Harvard. This fisher of souls drew in not only undergraduates like me who happened to cross his path, but all kinds of Jews around Harvard, including professors and deans, hitherto unaffiliated and non-religious who nevertheless wanted their 11-year-old children to be aware they were Jewish and to become bar- or bat-mitzvah. W&S under Ben Gold proved to be an excellent place for all that to happen, as some here today can surely attest.

Nineteen years after I first met him, Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold stood under a chuppah with Patricia and me, to marry us on our wedding day, in the very room at Phillips Brooks House where, at a Friday evening service under Ben's auspices, I had first seen Patricia. A couple of years later, we anointed him "god-father" of our newborn daughter Clara Goldie. Ben and I have been close friends all these 57 years since we met, and looking back, I really don't know how to separate my life from his – my soul has been bound up with his. When they were little, I watch his daughters

frolic in a New Hampshire brook, ate many meals at their table, observed them growing up. Ben and I took so many country walks together, and he sometimes called me his brother. What's more, having known Hannah and Merav all these years, and their mother Carol too, I feel not so much like an officiating rabbi here, but more like an uncle or cousin, mourning with them, for the wonderful person we have lost, a man who deeply touched and transformed so many lives, including the lives of many of the people sitting in this very room at this very moment.

(The above eulogy was NJ's introduction to the funeral proceedings. There followed eulogies by Jonah Steinberg, Richard Fein, Civia and Irv Rosenberg, Jane Myers. Also, NJ and Patricia Herzog sang a two-part setting of Esa Einai, and the community sang Ki vesimchah in the melody that BZG had taught us.)