Words of Parting

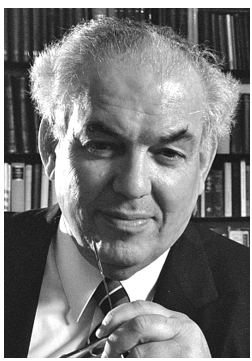
Leon Wiener Dow

IMMEDIATELY UPON LEARNING OF THE PASSING OF my rabbi and teacher, David Hartman, I rent my shirt. Hartman had been my *rav muvhak* — the towering rabbinic figure in my life who enabled me to dwell in the tent of Torah and, with his blessing, become a teacher of Torah. Having learned under his guidance the passage in the Babylonian Talmud (Moed Katan 26a) that mandates rending one's garment upon the death of one's teacher, I did so without pondering the matter, neither asking whether this was, in fact, the practical *halakhah*/law, nor whether Hartman would have wanted me, as his *musmach*/ordained student, to do so.

The fact that at that moment of decision my source of direction came from the Talmud — not from one of the codes of Jewish law nor from Hartman's presumed stance on the issue — tells much about who he was, as a person and as a teacher. He sought students who did not mimic him, and his vision of Judaism fostered what he called "the primacy of the Talmud," as opposed to the oft-encountered supremacy of the codes. His was an uncompromising commitment to allowing the voice of the Divine to be heard here and today, by re-interpreting it in a way that could allow both the textual tradition and the halakhah to be challenging, intelligible, and meaningful.

For that reason, the course of study that he outlined for my *hevruta*/study partner and me on our path to ordination had not one element of practical halakhah — *not one.* He would often tell the story: "They trained me at Yeshiva University so that I would be able answer people's halakhic questions, and I went to my first congregation in the Bronx teeming with excitement, armed with answers. I waited and waited, only to discover that no one had any questions. And then I realized that the task of the rabbi is to help people *ask* questions, not to provide answers."

My hevruta and I, however, had not grown up in a Hasidic family as he had, so on our own initiative we added some *halakhah l'maaseh*/practical halakhah, to our course of study. One day he walked into the room while we were learning the classic text of practical halakhah, the *Mishnah Brurah*. He glanced over our shoulders and said, with a mixture of surprise, disappointment, and disgust: "Fine, if that's what you want to learn," and left the room. And his leaving that room, like his leaving our world, left a powerful silence in its wake. I write these words of parting in an effort to articulate some of the pockets of quiet that he left behind.



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David Hartman was truly a prodigious figure. He was by all accounts a master teacher, riveting audiences, large and small. He could captivate an audience of Israeli university students in a Hebrew that was strewn with English and Yiddish, and it made not an iota of difference to anyone in the room. He could, alternatively, command an audience of 300 North American adults crammed into the *beit midrash*/study hall, laughing in astonishment to hear him tell of the wonders of saying a blessing upon his first bowel movement after abdominal surgery.

But he was much more than a scholarly entertainer, and in many ways the depth and seriousness of his thought were underappreciated precisely because of his ability to amuse, to make accessible a section of the Talmud or Maimonides, or to express an idea of profound import — such as the crisis of meaning and authority — by telling a story about his decision as a youth to ride the subway on Shabbat in order to play basketball in Madison Square Garden. I only came to understand how deceptive the effect of his oratorical prowess was when I was sitting in his office, about two years into my private course of study with him. Into his office to ask a question wandered Professor Moshe Halbertal, someone whose horizons of knowledge seemed limitless: I had witnessed Halbertal in discussion as an equal with scholars of Talmudic literature, medieval Jewish philosophy, modern critical theory, philosophy, theology, and political philosophy. I would not have been surprised had Halbertal asked Hartman about the Rambam or even possible readings of a Talmudic passage. But Halbertal turned to Hartman and asked him a question

regarding the writings of Rabbi Menachem Meiri — about whom Halbertal later wrote an entire book. And I was left to wonder: knowing full well that I was studying under one of the most significant Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, could it be that I had still underestimated his magnitude?

As everyone who has heard of the Shalom Hartman Institute knows, Hartman was also an institution builder. Hartman grafted together magnificently the disparate components that could allow the creation of a new kind of institute: a core of dedicated supporters to whom he turned for financial assistance; a nexus of institutional and political connections that he had cultivated; and a coterie of young scholars who would be his students in the immediate future and, in the years to come, his intellectual and spiritual significant others as well as the backbone of the Institute, training new generations of scholars and educators.

Beyond all these things, Hartman was a true visionary. That means that not only could he bring the past to life, making it relevant now; and not only could he analyze honestly and insightfully the ills of the present. He could — and, indeed, did — imagine how the future ought to be, what it *needs* to be if we are to provide meaning and direction to the present. It was no wonder, then, that — despite his ability and willingness to engage in institution building and political-organizational life — he was keenly aware of its limits.

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I remember, in particular, a seminar on the subject of women and halakhah that took place in 1998 in which he advocated the occasional but real need to step outside of normative behavior in protest against the system. At that time — thirteen years before he wrote about it publicly in *The God Who Hates Lies* — Hartman told of his decision, as a young congregational rabbi in Montreal, to violate halakhah and perform a marriage between a middle-aged Cohen and the love of his life — who happened to be a divorcee. Cruder than he was in print some years later, Hartman expressed his deep disgust at the duplicitous nature of his former community: "I would be expected to perform

a marriage between a Cohen and the daughter of a prominent member of the shul, whom everyone knew to be promiscuous, but I was forbidden to conduct the ceremony between this older couple who loved each other?!" His wrath, however, was not limited to the members of the community that he had led back then, nor to the rabbis who considered him deviant for his utter disregard for an explicit biblical prohibition. He also attacked the women in the seminar who were arguing eruditely and passionately for incremental change, garnering proof texts and arguments that bolstered their claims. Stop waiting for the rabbis to change things, Hartman enjoined. Just do it: make the changes, live a committed, halakhic life, and you'll see that the rabbis will follow suit. Hartman knew that the horizon of future possibility demanded a holy disregard of authority — and an utter refusal to temper one's behavior with considerations of patience or pragmatic incrementalism.

The world will miss Hartman for the vast array of talents that he brought. His close friends and family will simply miss him, as they encounter the vacuum of his absence on a regular basis. I will miss him not only as a person, but as my teacher, my rabbi. I learned much Torah from him — but I want to share here a few pieces of the meta-Torah, the *Torat hayyim*/the Torah of living, that he taught me.

When Hartman first suggested I study with him for *smichah*/ordination, I was taken aback. I was at a crossroads, trying to figure out whether to pursue a doctorate or rabbinical studies, and I sought his counsel as someone who had both degrees — by which I meant, both impulses in his personality. When I asked him to meet, I had no intention of asking him whether he might consider ordaining me. He was running the Institute, and I assumed he would not want to get into the smichah business, and certainly not enter the fray on the question of ordaining women. Which was precisely why he surprised me when we met, suggesting that I spend a few years learning under his guidance and eventually he would grant me smichah. I didn't know how to react. The central question for me was: would I want to receive smichah from someone who wouldn't ordain women? I thanked Hartman profusely for his offer and asked for a few days to think about it.

At some point a few days later, I had a moment of clarity of thought that left me ashamed, even as I felt comforted by the sense of resolve that accompanied it. Hartman knew that I was committed to an egalitarian

halakhah: he had presided over our wedding and begrudgingly allowed my wife to give me a ring under the huppah. So if Hartman as a rabbi could offer smichah – and his blessing — to a student who held a different position than him, what kind of pettiness and narrowness of vision was I exhibiting in expecting my *rabbi* to be like *me*? He was not only pluralistic in the narrow sense of tolerating divergent views; he actively sought out a student who saw the world differently than him, and who would continue to teach an ever-expanding Torah emergent from — but not identical to — his teachings.

So I humbly accepted his offer, beginning my journey without a hevruta. After about a year-and-a-half of learning, I was approached by Joel Levy, who had bounced around numerous institutions in search of the right one to learn for ordination. He articulated various reasons why each of the other institutions had failed him, but — after about a year of study together — he articulated beautifully and succinctly what made learning with Hartman so exhilarating: Here I can hate Judaism! As much as Hartman loved Judaism and its carriers — the Jews — he hated them, too. There was no inherent holiness, no privileged status for Jews, no guaranteed right answer. In fact, a good portion of our curriculum of study was on the subject of the tradition's attitudes towards women and non-Jews, for in these areas Hartman

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found the existent voices to be most lacking, most offensive, most in need of creative and radical re-interpretation. But that constructive work could only take place after a real, raw, painful acknowledgment of how ugly our tradition can be. "A non-Jew who observes the Sabbath is subject to the death penalty:" that is not only a Talmudic dictum, it was the first thing Hartman asked us to explain in our oral examination. And by explain he most certainly did not mean "justify."

That ability to — nay, need for — critique, was born of Hartman's sense of Judaism having an outer limit. As much as Judaism was, for him, all-consuming, it was not all-encompassing. On one occasion, our study meeting

was scheduled for the morning after one of his public lectures. There had no doubt been at least 250 attendees, but I was not among them, a fact that did not escape Hartman's eagle eyes. Why weren't you at my lecture last night? he shot at me when we sat down. Without missing a beat, I answered: Monday night is basketball night. I didn't have to tell him that moments of exaltation on the basketball court can rival the holiness of study in the beit midrash; he knew that.

He also knew that the Torah learned in the beit midrash must spill outward to that external expanse called the world. After Joel and I had finished our oral examination in front of the *beit din*/panel that Hartman assembled, he invited us to move from his office into the kitchenette across the hallway in order to celebrate. It was early afternoon at best, and there we were, sitting around the table drinking whiskey. "Do you know what I did right after I got my smichah from Soloveitchik?" he asked us. We waited for his reply. "I went right back into the beit midrash and continued to learn." I felt rebuked, although the shots of whiskey tempered the blow. After all, Hartman used to joke, "Do you know what Original Sin is in Orthodoxy? Being born — later." The further you get from Sinai, the further you are from the source of holiness in this world, the further you are from the truth of Torah, from God's revelatory word. And the quieter and more unassuming you should be. When he told us how he spent the moments following his ordination, I couldn't help but think: *yeridat ha-dorot*/the decline of the generations. He kept studying, I'm drinking whiskey.

But the truth is, he wasn't telling us that as a reprimand, and here's how I know: because he was drinking whiskey with us, encouraging us to play hooky from the beit midrash. Or, put otherwise: he expected our years of learning in the fiery crucible of his beit midrash to so shape and form us that we could spend extended periods out there, in the real world — fixing it, fighting its fights, and yes, drinking whiskey and playing ball, too — and not lose our form.

But above all, and beneath it all, I will miss his humanity: the continued, warm radiance that flowed from the embers of a flawed teacher. Just as rebellion is, ultimately, a sign of deep fealty, acknowledging my teacher's flaws — even after his death, and even publicly — is an act of love and admiration. For those who knew Hartman up close, the sheer power of his persona was precisely in this: that, as another of my teachers, Rabbi

Edward Feld, once pointed out: *yatza hefseido b'secharo*/his good points outweighed his flaws. His foibles were so overtly visible to those in his presence that we could overcome them. And because hagiography is a logical impossibility when describing a flawed teacher, I would go so far as to say that the true greatness of Hartman as a person was that, like nearly every Biblical figure and prominent rabbinic sage, his blemishes were in plain view.

Their visibility did not mitigate their unsightly nature, not in the least. In fact, at one low point I found myself reconsidering whether I wanted to continue learning with him. Joel and I were in his office to go over some materials, and he walked in, fire in his eyes. "Let's go," he started, the way he always started our sessions, impatient to get to the Torah learning. But the attempt to talk Torah didn't last long, and he started to attack. As I was soon to learn, it turned out that in fundraising for a small educational organization I headed at the time, I had approached someone that Hartman had intended to ask for a donation. When I mentioned that I was learning with David Hartman for ordination, this donor somehow associated me with the Hartman Institute, and so

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when representatives of the Institute approached him shortly thereafter, he was, it seems, less generous than they were hoping. The substance of Hartman's words to me and his tone were hurtful beyond measure. And they simply didn't belong: not in our relationship and certainly not in the presence of a third party (Joel). I was caught totally off-guard, but to my surprise (and, I admit, my delight), I held my ground, explaining that it was clearly a misunderstanding on the donor's part, and adding, more importantly, that I was hurt by the way he had addressed me. We left the room and Joel expressed a combination of surprise and admiration that I had held my ground; after all, Hartman's presence was a force. But I was unable to fully relish the compliment and I found myself asking: As brilliant and beautiful as his Torah is, how can I learn from a teacher capable of such an outburst?

I pondered, I talked to two close confidants, but the resolution came the very next morning. In turning a corner in the Institute, I almost literally ran into Hartman. He looked at me with warmth in his eyes, put his hand on my cheek, and said, "That was a good conversation we had yesterday, an honest one." "That's one way to describe it," I said. The conversation itself was not good, not at any level. But what was good was acknowledging the multiple facets of the relationship even as I decided to continue to learn Torah from him. That's how complex people are, that's how complicated learning Torah is: like a hammer that shatters a rock into thousands of pieces.

David Hartman — hewn in the image of the divine word — was a boulder cast into thousands of pieces. It was a privilege to be in the presence of the sparks that went flying.

LEON WIENER DOW *is a research fellow and a faculty member at the Shalom Hartman Institute, and teaches at Bina. He received his BA from Princeton University, his MA in Jewish thought from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, private rabbinic ordination from Rabbi Professor David Hartman* z"l*, and a Ph.D. in philosophy from Bar Ilan University. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and their five children.*