

Jay Miller, ZTS”L

The death of a friend is a terrible, personal, painful, tragedy. The death of a talmid chacham is a great tragedy. The death of a teacher is a *universal* tragedy.

Jay Miller was a TEACHER.

Jay was a good and true friend to many of us. There is no question as well that he was a major *talmid chacham*, not only a big *talmid chacham* but a *creative* talmid chacham, with unusual insights into text, be it G’mara or Chumash or Nach. Scientists in the room will recognize the word “elegance”; Jay’s questions, and his solutions to problems, were *elegant*, meaning that they were brilliant, indeed profound, and *simple* at the same time. The tiniest details held magic for Jay, and were magical for the person at the receiving end. (Often I asked myself, “Why didn’t I think of that?”) Elegant.

But it is Jay as *teacher* that is salient. It’s been said by many, but it’s worth repeating. Jay was an unusual teacher, a gifted teacher. It mattered not whether you had great *b’kius*, or you were a beginner; whether you were an experienced adult or a teen-ager or a child. It was all about *text*, and learning to master the text by yourself. Jay had a truly creative approach to teaching. I have had the experience of encountering people, some of whom are now university professors, who were in high-school at the Ramaz School whilst Jay was teaching there. “Did you have Rabbi Miller for Talmud?” Universal response: “Best teacher I ever had.”

My own experience with Jay? Best teacher I ever had—and I have had some good ones. In high-school with Rav Tendler, as *chavrusa*; fast-forward forty years to learning with him on a weekly basis. He was my best teacher. But my *dearest* memory is of Jay and my son Adam poring over the first g’maras in Bava Metziah and Bava Kama, in preparation for the shi’ur that my son gave at his Bar-Mitzvah. I will treasure that memory forever.

I never had a conversation with Jay Miller in which I did not learn something. A teacher.

As a teacher he was tough. In learning with Jay, you would be graded. The following was standard: “Chanes, your analysis should be at the 90 level; for this Rashi, I will accept an 80; what you just said was a 50. At best.” Gulp.

Those of us who studied Greek with Louis Feldman will recall what the Classical Greeks called the ideal of “*arête*,” usually, and imperfectly, translated as “virtue,” or better, “excellence.” Jay Miller was to me the personification of *arête*. I know of few people to whom “excellence” meant more than it did to Jay.

And this is what Jay Miller was all about, the whole person in the pursuit of excellence, and the truly decent human being.

Hanging out with Jay was *always* an unusual experience. Jay was an unusual guy. He was—how shall I put it?—colorful. He was, frankly, an idiosyncratic guy, with boundless, endless, enthusiasm. Jay Miller was the one of the last of the genuine polymaths; there was little that did not interest Jay, and indeed little about which he did not know. He had a long-term interest in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and was in fact a therapist. He knew Chazanut, well. He knew classical music, well. He knew about Charley Parker and Miles Davis. He knew Chaucer and art history. He knew Bialik and Uri Zvi Greenberg. And he had great hats.

Jay Miller was many things to many of us. To me, he was good and true friend, an unusually generous person. He was a fellow music nut, quite a dandy when it came to dress; more than a teacher—a mentor; an occasional sparring-partner.

It is a cliché to say that we are diminished by Jay's death. We *are* all truly diminished.

Yehe zichro baruch.

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