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## In Memory of Ari Landa, zt"l

By Mordy Plotsker | May 30, 2024

Yehuda Aryeh Leib ben Dovid, z"tl

*"Wonder rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge." – Abraham Joshua Heschel*

It is challenging to properly mourn a friend. It is equally daunting to continue as "normal," when visiting and enjoying a novel thought — on any subject matter — from Torah to philosophy, is no longer possible.

During shiva, nearly every visitor that entered the Landa home expressed a personal, compelling story about their unique connection to Ari, zt"l. "Ari shared, instructed, guided, related and understood." These were some of the many ways family and friends described his unique personality rooted in his ability to tap into each individual's interests and then develop enduring friendships. Ari questioned, reasoned and appreciated differences of opinion and the complexities of the human mind, recognizing its capacity for empathy, reason and growth. He had a plenary power to readily absorb and master a myriad of diverse interests.

The "Happy Minyan" that Ari generously hosted week after week, filled with robust singing, dancing and sheer joy, enabled all to decompress from the stresses of the week and soak in the holy radiance of the kindled Shabbat flame. "*Ki ner mitzvah v'Torah ohr*" (Mishlei 6:23), and serve God with true "joy and gladness" (Devarim 28:47).

This past Purim, even though Ari was in a weakened state, he still somehow managed to create his amazing chili, cooked to perfection. Although he shared his recipe, I doubt I could replicate the unique flavor that simmered from hours of preparation. As the Rav (Rav Soloveitchik) would often say, "*Ein kedusha b'lo hachana*, There is no sanctity without preparation." (Shemot, 24:15-18).

Ari was in a perpetual state of intellectual curiosity. He was cultured and appreciated the finer elements of the arts and sciences. More specifically, he had his fingerprint on the *sheva chochmot* (seven branches of wisdom), from astronomy to literature, philosophy, law, mathematics, music, as well as a unique appreciation for fine wine.

Choosing a friend requires one to seek a man of greater distinction than yourself. Our sages tell us, "*Sak darga bchar shushvina*, Go up a step to choose a confidant" (BT Yevamot 63A). Ari, zt"l, had a brilliant mind, a *Gemara kop*, and those fortunate to learn with Ari — as I was — were instantly taken aback by his uncanny ability to understand and relate Torah complexities with ease and eloquence, explaining *davar mitoch davar*, matter within matter. Ari's deep and insightful Torah knowledge merited him the verse, "Whoever honors the Torah, is himself honored by the people" (Pirkei Avot, 4:6).

Ari was a seeker of truth. As William Wallace, portrayed by Mel Gibson in the movie "Braveheart" once said, "Everyone dies, but not everyone lives." Ari was a leader, who, similar to a king, broke down fences of misunderstanding to create a new path of understanding (BT Pesachim 110a). He envisioned a world in which opinionated champions of Torah and secular thought, from *litvish* to chassidish, and from the widest spectrum of liberalism to conservatism, can coalesce and freely communicate around a table, sharing the construct of a world rebuilt with true compassion and enduring peace. He was, like so many Torah giants and pioneering leaders of yesteryear, way ahead of his time.

Ari aspired that we not take life too seriously but, rather, find room for laughter and meaningful relationships with family and friends.

He downplayed “tribalism” and reminded his friends of the biblical dictum to “not gloat when your enemy falls” (Mishlei 24:17), and not sing when your enemy is vanquished (BT Sanhedrin 39b). Our personal elation should *never* result in us forgetting the misfortunes of others (BT Berachot 31a). This is precisely why we spill drops of wine on Seder night, to remind us that our cup cannot remain full while others suffer (Ibid., Tosfot).

Therein we find the dichotomy. If we are not happy that evil has been punished, then we do not care enough, but if we are not sad at the loss of life, then our humanity is weakened. Yechezkel Hanavi provides resolution, saying, “As I live, says Hashem, I do not wish for the death of the wicked, but for the wicked to repent of their ways, so that they may live” (Ibid., 33:11).

However unpopular, this is a divine objective in sync with Ari’s beliefs. In the sea-splitting story, Pharaoh did not die but fled, eventually becoming king of Nineveh. When Yonah appeared, Pharaoh immediately repented, as did Nineveh, which served as the paradigm of required change, as we read in Maftir Yonah on Yom Kippur.

Perhaps the metaphor for this dichotomy are the two shores of the sea, each representing the sides we must pass through in order to preserve life and not drown in hate. The middle path between justice and mercy is a difficult one to tread, for at any moment one can be washed away. Ari was somehow comfortable in that uncomfortable middle space, and undoubtedly inspired all of us through his divinely enthused rationalism.

Hundreds of friends and family members sadly escorted Ari, who was so young — only 46 — full of promise and conviction, to his final resting place on 18 Nissan, Erev Shabbat, the third day of Chol Hamoed Pesach, April 26, 2024. He was beloved by all who knew him. “*Kol sheruach habriyot noche hemenu, ruach haMakom noche hemenu*, Anyone who is beloved by man is beloved by God” (Pirkei Avot, 3:13). In Latin there is a saying, “*Mens sana in corpore sano*, A healthy mind in a healthy body.” When thinking of Ari, a new translation emerges: *A pure mind can only reside in a pure body.*

When Ari and I studied the verse, “And he (Avraham) put his trust in Hashem, who reckoned it to his merit” (Bereishit 15:6), we found three unique opinions. Our Rabbis say that Torah scholars, through their learning, increase peace in the world (BT Brachot 64a), but can there really be peace when we differ in opinion?

Yes! The word shalom means “peace” *and* “completeness” (Yehoshua 8:31). Peace can only be attained through the proliferation of divergent views that help reveal the inner kernel of truth within each concept. Our appreciation and understanding of the differences within our schools of thought enable us to derive a higher form of completeness in our continued quest to accumulate knowledge.

Ari smiled when I conveyed that indeed the differences of opinion nicely complemented one another. We then coalesced all three opinions into a fine fabric of enhanced Torah thought.

As a truth seeker, this is what I believe Ari championed, and the proud legacy we humbly carry forward. Indeed, Ari put all his trust in Hashem, and it was reckoned to him and all who knew him, family and dear friends, as an eternal merit. Ari, my dear friend, you are very missed.

*Tehai nishmato tzurura b'tzror hachaim; umacha Hashem dima mai-al kol panim*, May his soul be bound in the bond of eternal life; God will wipe the tears away from all faces.

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*Mordechai Plotsker runs a popular 10-minute nightly shiur on the parsha with a keen interest on the invigorating teachings of the Berditchever Rav, the Kedushas Levi. Plotsker resides in Elizabeth with his wife and children, and can be reached by email at [marc.plotsker@gmail.com](mailto:marc.plotsker@gmail.com).*