

A Pastor's Life

Rabbi Maklouf ("Mac") Portal passed from this life into the Garden of Paradise on the 18th of February 2015. The Rabbi of Congregation Ohev Sholom, Williamsport, Pennsylvania, for more than 14 years, Rabbi Portal was mostly retired in the City of Modi'in, Israel. He will be buried according to his wishes in the Holy City of Jerusalem.

I was one of those responsible for the recruitment of Rabbi Portal to Williamsport. Rabbi Norman Singer, of blessed memory, had recently died, and it seemed like it would be impossible to find a replacement to fill the giant shoes of Rabbi Singer. When I called for references on Rabbi Mac, one of the people I spoke to said, "He has the perfect pastoral skills." How correct that reference was.

When the Board of the Congregation voted as to whether to recommend Rabbi Portal for the position in Williamsport, I was a bit hesitant. Born in Morocco, the city of Marrakech, he did not come to the United States until age 15. He arrived in this country on a scholarship by being the boy in his Yeshiva who was able to memorize the most Gemara of any of the students. An understanding of the laws, rules, debates and discussions concerning Biblical interpretation is crucial for any Jewish clergyman.

Rabbi Portal was a Sephardic (Eastern) Jew in his newly adopted country made up mostly of Ashkenazim (Europeans). How unnecessary were my initial concerns. Indeed, Rabbi Portal went on to become that great inspiration that changes people for the better and enriches all the lives around him.

What distinguished Rabbi Portal from anyone that I have known was his genuine, unrepentant love for people. What was it which formed the basis of the high regard that Rabbi Portal held for others?

The Portals were poor Jews living in a ghetto of their city. Morocco was Muslim, and the Jews were a tiny minority. Rabbi Mac loved to tell the children in the Hebrew school about the time he was approached by an Arab child holding a rock. The boy commanded him to say that Allah is the great and the only G-d. Portal refused and was hit on the head with the rock. He ran home crying to his mother, with blood running down from his forehead. His mother told him, the Rabbi said as he laughed out loud, "What's the difference; you should have said it. It's not like you believe it." In spite of the poverty of being raised in the ghetto with 8 or 9 siblings, and a father who worked as a lowly scribe, Rabbi Portal became educated and productive.

Virtually all the Jews in Arab countries, including North Africa, were expelled by their Muslim "brothers". Instead of becoming terrorists or wandering the Earth as angry people, the Sephardic Jews from Arab-speaking countries became some of the most respected and loyal members of the societies in which they live. The first thing that

Rabbi Portal did in the United States was to serve in the United States Army. He figured that he simply owed it to the country that gave him a chance. When he was sent to Germany with the Army, he was asked to keep an eye on a famous American serving in the Army. Portal's commander made this request of the young immigrant because Portal had no idea who the popular singer was; it was Elvis Presley. "The King" was a "very nice young man," said Portal; "His neighbors, growing up, were Jewish, you know."

Another story the young people liked was Portal explaining that he once ran away from home to visit his older brother. He somehow made his way from Marrakech to Casablanca, and when he was returned home, he was hung upside down and had the soles of his feet beaten to teach him not to run away from home. The children were terrified, but every single one of them remembered the story.

In spite of these privations, Rabbi Portal not only did not become antagonistic, but in fact triumphed in his love and respect for others.

In Williamsport, the Portals found a home. I remember once getting a call, when I was President of the Synagogue, complaining that Rabbi Portal was feeding the neighborhood dogs. The Rabbi and his beautiful, lovely wife, Rachael, of Ashkenazi English ancestry, would sit out on their front porch frequently. The Rabbi always carried candy and treats with him. He loved dogs, and he fed them liberally. Guess where all the dogs went when they wanted a little snack that they could not get at home?

When young children would learn the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the Rabbi would give them a piece of chocolate as a reward. This ancient Jewish Moroccan tradition encouraged plenty of kids to attend Sunday school. Everyone waited for their candy.

Rabbi Portal introduced a tradition among the young people at Congregation Ohev Sholom, followed in many Synagogues around the country. He made sure that each child, as their first prayer, would learn *Anim Zemirot*, in Hebrew of course. The long and complex Hebrew, with its mellifluous tones, will leave even the most musical adult somewhat challenged. Kim and I will never forget the time that, as a 7-year-old, the Rabbi had Joshua face the congregation with his back to the book, and he sang the entire Hymn of Glory by heart. When, as a child, he was hungry for dinner, Joshua would merely quote the scriptures to his mother, "and give them their food in due season." The words, the melodies, and the lifestyle resonated with the children as something they wanted to emulate because of their relationship with the Rabbi. That kind of pastoral skill, imparting intergenerational learning and traditions, does not grow in every clergyman's backyard.

The Rabbi was prone to send cards, letters and treats not only to children, but to adults. Every time Rabbi Portal came to my office to drop off some Synagogue work,

he would hand out kosher chewing gum and other treats to the staff. Everyone here loved him.

Congregants have told me how he saved their marriage by not accepting that people could not work out problems. When at first I was undecided as to whether to support the hiring of Rabbi Portal, I was much influenced by a young man with a large family. He had seen Rabbi Portal interact with children, and he said “this is the guy; the kids will love him.” I thought of Rabbi Portal as the “pied piper.” The kids were comfortable with the Rabbi, and he infused them with the love of religion, G-d, Judaism and Israel.

Rabbi Portal was an old-fashioned sort of guy. He did not try to impress people with philosophical logic or debates about existential subjects in religion. He was a simple believer in the goodness and grace of G-d, the mission of the Jewish people as a kingdom of priests, and the need to treat others in the way that he wanted to be treated. Rabbi Portal did not talk about the Golden Rule; he lived it. Once, when a woman told the Rabbi that nothing in the world was real, he pinched her arm and said to the shocked woman, “was that real?” He was a direct sort of guy.

I used to joke with Rabbi Portal that he was a “hyperactive man” because he was so interested in doing everything he could for the community. Portal set up one of the first interfaith meeting groups and enjoyed his relationship with priests, ministers, Imams, Native Americans and Buddhist priests.

I once asked Rabbi Portal if he was more comfortable with Christians or Muslims. To my surprise, he said that he was more comfortable with Muslims because he had grown up with them in Morocco, notwithstanding the rock on his head for not praising the supremacy of Allah. Apparently he was able to forgive that.

The only fight I ever saw Rabbi Portal have with anybody was when Rachael was anxious to retire so that the family could be with their adult children. Rabbi Portal was not anxious to retire, and extended his stay in Williamsport at least two years after his planned retirement date. Finally, Rabbi Portal gave in and retired to Israel where he could be with his children and many grandchildren. His family loved him, and it was obvious. We saw several members of the family in Israel on trips to that country. Any parent or grandparent would want to be treated the way Rabbi Portal was treated by his family. When we visited the Portals in Israel, Mac counseled me never to retire. He said retirement was boring and useless. I promised him that maybe someday I would work less hard, but that I would never be indolent.

After Rabbi Portal left Williamsport, he continued to be a shepherd to his flock in Williamsport. The Rabbi stayed in touch with congregants, visited them when they traveled to Israel, and expressed continual concern about the state of everyone’s mental, physical and spiritual health.

It was easy for Rabbi Portal to say, "Clifford, I love you," and give me a hug. Of course, he did that with everyone, and he meant it with everyone.

I heard that Rabbi Portal developed pancreatic cancer perhaps a year ago. He never complained or whined. He did not argue with G-d. He accepted his fate, and he went for treatment. He was delighted that when the doctor saw him, the physician was willing to meet with his entire family, all 18 of them who showed up at the doctor's office! After a course of chemo to reduce the pain, Rabbi Portal lost weight, became frail, and ultimately succumbed. Through it all, he would call me and express concern about my daughter, Kaila, who is serving in the Israeli Defense Forces.

Rabbi Portal came to know my oldest daughter, Sasha, even though she was pretty much out of the community when he came here. He attended her wedding, and, when she had some difficulty becoming pregnant, he would regularly send her prayers to say. There are a host of Psalms and prayers related to fertility. Sasha, not particularly religious at the time, was caught up in the goodness and sincerity of Rabbi Portal, and she complied with all of his suggestions. Now, as the mother of healthy twins, she will never forget the role Rabbi Portal played in her life.

Joshua and Kaila, who were students of the great Rabbi, are, in part, the strong-spirited people that they have grown into because of the inspiration that Rabbi Portal gave them. He taught the simple pleasures of love, commitment, and pride in being a Torah-observing Jew. Even those who are not particularly observant or who were skeptics could not help but be ensnared in the Portal web of positive thinking.

Joshua was almost always the only Jewish kid in whatever school he attended in Williamsport. There were times when he had to put up with bullying, and even an indiscreet comment by a teacher. In general, the administration and staff in Williamsport were great and very supportive. Rabbi Portal no doubt appreciating the situation as a result of his own upbringing, would stand on the corner of Cherry and Belmont until school let out in order to usher Joshua across the street and into the Synagogue building, where Joshua would pursue his Hebrew studies. There was plenty of study, but also basketball, candy, and schmoozing (the kids would say "rapping") with a man they simply called "Rabbi."

I happened to be having a root canal on the day Rachael Portal was having a kidney transplant in Philadelphia. As I sat in the dentist's chair in State College, I determined that I should not complain or feel any pain about this since I never heard the Portals even once express the slightest bit of dismay or nervousness over Rachael's kidney disease and the need for the surgery. Not surprisingly, the kidney donor was one of their children. Rachael came through with flying colors, and is in good health today.

Someone once told me that when a beloved and important person passes away, they can be made to live eternally when the living attempt to emulate their behavior. Rabbi Portal will live on through the memories, impressions and influence on others. May G-d bless and keep Rabbi Portal's soul where he will enjoy the pleasures of Gan Eden.

This piece will be sent to the Portal family in Israel. If the reader has any particular stories or homilies about Rabbi Portal, please send them to this writer so they can be included in a written tribute.

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