

Rabbi Dr Abraham Joshua Heshel Twerski זצ"ל

In honour of his 5th yahrzeit

The 19th of Shevat marks the fifth yahrzeit of the late Rabbi Dr Abraham Yehoshua Heshel Twerski זצ"ל, one of the most remarkable men of recent years. This will be commemorated with a video presentation featuring international speakers next Sunday, the 8th of February.

(The link to access the event is at the end of the article)

He was the grandson of Rabbi Menachem Nachum Twerski, the founder of the Chernobyl Chasidische dynasty, and also the Bobove Rebbe who was to play a big part in his early education.

When he became head of psychiatry at Pittsburgh's St. Francis of Assisi Hospital, he still wore his Chasidische clothes which made his appointment all the more surprising to him. He was actually "headhunted" for the position. Rabbi Twerski said that they had approached the wrong man to which he was told "we have the right man." Later on, he authored the book, "The Rabbi and the nuns," detailing many encounters and lessons.

Rabbi Twerski was at home both in the Chasidische world into which he was born and whose minhagim he maintained throughout his life, and the medical / scientific world in which he worked. At no time did he ever compromise his Yiddishkeit.

He told the story of the first time he was in an operating theatre. There are strict rules on how you maintain sterility, particularly by not touching things. He said growing up in his mother's house with the preparations for Pesach, particularly in the changeover period before Yom Tov equipped him with the skills for this, ahead of his classmates.

Rabbi Twerski used the metaphor of alcoholism and addiction to relate to the yetzer hora. He also used recovery as a model for explaining the teshuvah process and was a great aficionado of the Twelve Steps programme of Alcoholics Anonymous in that respect.

Rabbi Twerski composed the world-famous tune for "Hoshia es Amecha". It was sung at his levaya at Rabbi Twerski's request rather than the giving of a hesped - a mark of his humility. His humility stands out in "From pulpit to couch." In the chapter "Death is always unexpected," he writes publicly how he was wrong. In this particular case, there was a patient who was terminal who then passed away. When Rabbi Twerski phoned the newly-widowed wife he said, "As you know, the death was expected." The reply he received was "that when death comes, it is always unexpected." Lesson learnt.

Rabbi Twerski dedicated a large part of his professional life to the subject of having a good sense of self-esteem. Whenever he was ever introduced of as the author of eighty books, he would joke "I have only ever written one new book, just eighty different ways"!! He emphasised that it is crucial that we pass this on to our children. His father would tell him that the matter was beneath him - he was too good to behave like that, rather than tell him off. He got the message.

Along with self-esteem was the subject of personal growth and the "lobster story" was one of his best-known ones. When a lobster grows, its shell becomes uncomfortably tight. It has to go to the bottom of the ocean, shed the existing shell and wait to grow a new one. At the time, the lobster is vulnerable to predators. In other words, if we want to grow, we are going to have to go through uncomfortable periods. If we do not, we will never grow.

When you first met Rabbi Twerski, you were always struck by the kindly face which fitted so well with the writings. Many people thought that if chas veshalom, they needed a psychiatrist, this is the sort of person that I would want to see.

Rabbi Twerski taught that you have to be so careful of other people's feelings. Many people have sensitivities of which we are not aware. He explained this using sunburn as an example. If you see a friend and give him a friendly pat on the shoulder, there is no problem. But for the person who has sunburn, this simple gesture is agony.

When the Rabbonim of North West London decided a number of years ago that the kehilla needed a drugs awareness evening, they sent for Rabbi Twerski. Kinloss shul was packed, with people standing in the hallway to learn from him.

The landmark sefer, "Living Each Day" was born out of an alcoholic's retreat. The book itself was written at the behest of someone at the retreat. Members are encouraged to increase their spirituality, rather than relying on alcohol and there is an accompanying handbook for daily thoughts. Many of the



references used in the daily booklet were Christian. He was asked to author a book with daily inspiration and reflection, based on Jewish values.

Rabbi Twerski took on difficult subjects and his book "The Shame Born in Silence" aroused considerable opposition at the time. Nonetheless, he was fearless in bringing the subject matter to the fore and then trying to have the issue dealt with. He realised that alcoholism affected the community and needs to be addressed. He told the story of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings usually being held in church halls, which would be an uncomfortable place for Jews. So, he decided to use a local shul and put up posters advertising the event. On the evening, the place was full. But he had miscalculated; the participants were not Jewish! They didn't want to go to the church in case others would recognise them.

Rabbi Twerski often used the phrase, "the advice of a 'competent professional,'" just because somebody has a qualification does not mean that they are competent to treat specific cases. This was one of his spurs to enter the world of psychiatry. He realised at the time how relatively little training doctors had received in that discipline.

He was also referring to not giving advice on a subject that you are not competent to give. This was based on one of his favourite seforim: Mesillas Yesharim. So beloved was it, that he wrote a companion to it "Lights Along the Way," explaining various paragraphs and inyanim. Based on the mechaber (author) he confirmed that giving bad advice is **לפני עוור לא תתן מכשול**. Whilst people always mean well, you can damage somebody by giving advice that you are not competent to give. The comment on time wasting due to non-punctuality in "Lights Along the Way" explains that *gneivas zman* can never be repaid.

It would have been fascinating to hear his take on AI.

So many of his teachings have impacted on the lives of people, religiously, socially, and professionally on very many occasions.

Sadly, the last public visit to the UK was in 2005. During the evening Rabbi Twerski had to sit down due to his spinal issues

and was "interviewed" rather than having to stand for the whole evening. Sadly, his spinal issues were to increase in severity. He remarked that this might be his last visit, and so it proved to be.

After an event finished, there was always a queue of people staying on to ask further questions and others to hear the answers. On this particular occasion, Rabbi Twerski was asked what his favourite book was. He replied, "Living Each Day," but that he did not have a copy of every book he had written.

It was so sad to read when he wrote in "Growing Up" that he was retiring due to health reasons, and he felt "the well had run dry." Those who read the sefer felt this was not the case.

Rabbi Twerski was the father-in-law of Rabbi Daniel Myers, the Rav of Menorat Hamaor in Ramat Beit Shemesh. Rabbi Twerski gave both the Shabbos Shuva and Shabbos Hagadol droshos. More than that, he davened Neilah on Yom Kippur which members report as being inspirational. They felt the yerusha of countless generations in the Twerski family, particularly as grandchildren and great grandchildren accompanied him. On what proved to be his final Yom Kippur, so bad were his spinal problems, that he davened from his wheelchair. To this day, family members return.

We know that Tzaddikim are still alive even if they are not physically with us. This is so true of Rabbi Twerski. There are people who have taken it upon themselves to learn from one of his seforim every day since his passing.

The memorial video presentation
link is: Link to the event:
shorturl.at/PZTJs
Password: Twersky2026
The presentation will be
uploaded and can be accessed
with the link and password
afterwards for those who wish to
view it a different time.
May Rabbi Twerski's memory
be a as a blessing - יהי זכרו ברוך -
Dr Harold Kandler



Password: Twersky2026