Thursday, Elul 7, 5766 - August 31, 2006, marked the 70th yahrzeit of my great-grandfather, Rabbi Moses Zevulun Margolies, known as the RaMaZ. No one in our congregation remembers him except, perhaps, for my aunt, Hilda Fischman. But many of us remember my father, Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein, of blessed memory, whose life was greatly influenced by the man he described as “A Rabbi of the Old School” in a chapter from his unpublished autobiography entitled “God Owes Me Nothing.”

My father’s reputation was that of a builder of institutions, a broadly involved Jew in every facet of Jewish life, and a person who was loved and admired by the broadest spectrum of Jews. What is not generally known is that my father came from a rather narrow background. Born in Russia in 1902, he emigrated to America in 1909, lived on the Lower East Side and in East New York, attended the Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, studied for the rabbinate in the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (which became Yeshiva University), and only thereafter received his B.A. from City College and an M.A. in sociology from Columbia University. He was a firebrand and a religious activist. He told me how he used to picket the kosher butchers on the Lower East Side because their standards were inadequate. I’m not sure whether it was kashrut or ethical standards to which he was referring. My father was an Agudanik, an anti-Zionist. As a young man, he had none of the breadth that he later developed as an assistant to the man who became his grandfather (my mother was Rabbi Margolies’ granddaughter), and from his association with him from 1923 until 1936. A year after Rabbi Margolies’ passing, my father
founded Ramaz and named it for his grandfather. But it was much more than a name; it was and is, like Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, an extension of the life and the spirit of this “rabbi of the old school.”

Rabbi Margolies was born in 1851 in Lithuania. On his father’s side, he was a descendent of Rashi; on his mother’s side, he was a grandson of the brother-in-law of the Gaon of Vilna. His life as a talmid chacham more than justified his extraordinary lineage.

And what a talmid chacham he was. He virtually knew the Talmud by heart, rising every day before 5:00 in the morning and turning immediately to the Gemorah, which was his constant companion. He could pore over it for hours at a stretch unless communal duties demanded his attention. He made a siyum on the completion of the entire Talmud every year on the yahrzeit of his mother. In other words, he was learning more than seven pages a day!

He was an expert in p’sak - the literature of Responsa and Codes. It enabled him to decide questions of Jewish law for the many rabbis and laymen who turned to him for his expertise. His library was voluminous, and he not only knew where every sefer was; he knew precisely on what page the issue which concerned him could be found.

But he was not an ivory tower talmid chacham. His Torah was a Torat chesed - a Torah of love, of involvement, of making people’s lives more liveable and more meaningful. There were at least three ways in which his Torat chesed was manifested.

1. He was a caring decisor of Jewish law. In 1889, at the age of 38, he came to Boston and presided there as Chief Rabbi. He established a city-wide Chevra Shas. He also supervised the kosher meat industry in Boston. It was not a happy time for him. The slaughterhouses and the butcher shops which he had to supervise were in the hands of unsavory characters who caused him hardship and anguish. But he was determined to provide kosher meat for the
community.

In 1906, he was called to the rabbinate at KJ. Here, he undertook the responsibility of supervising the kashrut for the Borden’s Company. In particular, he arranged for kosher milk and dairy products for Pesach. At the time, this was quite revolutionary. Observant Jews generally ate only pareve or fleishig on Passover because there were no kosher for Passover dairy products available. Rabbi Margolies was determined to change that.

Before Passover, he would go with my father on long trips far into the Catskills - before there was a new Route 17 - to inspect milking barns, depots and even farm houses to make sure that his instructions and regulations were observed. There was a theory behind all of this which he enunciated as follows: “The more kosher products that can be provided, the more kashrut will be observed.”

My father described a personal encounter which illustrates the caring quality of the halakhic decisions of my great-grandfather: A woman came to his home on Friday afternoon with a chicken that had a hole in its stomach. She wanted to know if it was kosher or not. Rabbi Margolies, together with my father, examined the chicken and then the RaMaZ called my father into his library and asked him: “What do you think, mein kind?” My father answered that it was an open and shut case. The chicken obviously swallowed a needle which punctured its stomach and this was one of the 18 primary examples of tarfus, thereby rendering the chicken unusable. The RaMaZ cautioned him not to be so hasty. He went over to the bookshelf and took out a sefer and showed him that in precisely such a case a particular Acharon (a post 16th century decisor of Jewish law) permitted eating the chicken. He then took out another sefer in which a similar decision was made by another Acharon. Thereupon, he said to my father: “Mein kind: This is a poor woman. If we declare her chicken to be treif she will have nothing to eat for
Shabbos. Let’s rely on these two Acharonim and you take a little responsibility on your shoulders and I’ll take some on my shoulders and let this woman have a good Shabbos.”

2. His Torat chesed was demonstrated not alone by his care for people but also by his natural tendency toward leniency in deciding questions of Jewish law. He embodied in his personality the Talmudic principle that koach d’heteira adif, (the power to permit is preferable to the power to prohibit). In an era like ours, where so many Orthodox Jews seem to belong to the “Chumrah of the Month Club,” this disposition toward leniency is almost suspect; but it was not so for Rabbi Margolies. He believed that it was the responsibility of a posek to make Judaism liveable for people and not difficult for them. He was once asked by a rabbi who posed a religious question to him: “How come that whatever you say, people follow?” He responded: “That is not correct, it’s not that whatever I say people follow; what people will follow, I say.” This could, of course, be the policy of a charlatan. Needless to say, in the case of the RaMaZ it wasn’t that at all. He knew Jewish law comprehensively, and because he knew it he took into consideration people’s ability to live according to Jewish law and that formed part of his personality as a posek. In that sense, it reminds me of what the Rav, of blessed memory, told us when we were studying Yoreh De’ah with him. He said that it was not our job to declare things treif and to tell people to throw out questionable dishes. He said it was our job to know the principles of kashrus so well that we could combine views and approaches and, wherever possible, declare things permissible rather than prohibited. Torah giants of the old school - and some of the new school - live by the principle of koach d’heteira adif.

An example of this was the way Rabbi Margolies used the elevator on Shabbat when it was operated by a non-Jew. He lived on the second floor and in his later years, when it was difficult for him to climb the stairs, he went into the elevator and a non-Jew operated the elevator
for him. My father describes his father when he came for a visit to this community and saw Rabbi Margolies enter the elevator on Shabbat and he followed him into the elevator with his knees shaking because it was the first time he had ever been in an elevator on Shabbat. Rabbi Margolies’ views were echoed by Rabbi Soloveitchik in a personal conversation with me in the early 1980's, when he reiterated what I had heard him say in a shiur more than 20 years before that. He said that using an elevator on Shabbat when operated by a non-Jew is permissible under two circumstances: (1) where it is not reasonable to do otherwise (e.g., when one is going above the 5th floor); and (2) where one is going to perform one of the mitzvot of Shabbat (e.g., eating one of the Shabbat meals, visiting the sick, learning Torah, or another kind of Shabbat activity). This thought, so natural to Rabbi Margolies and Rabbi Soloveitchik, appears so frightening today in some quarters that when I submitted to the OU’s publication Jewish Action a tribute to the Rav on the 10th anniversary of his passing, the tribute (which included the elevator p’sak) was accepted on condition that I remove any halakhic references from the article. The editor said that the editorial board did not want to get into any conflicts over halakhic material. How times have changed!
3. My great-grandfather’s *Torat chesed* was most evident in his broad communal involvement and in his being accepted almost universally by all Jews. He was a founder of the Central Relief Committee, the forerunner of the JDC. In the boardroom of the JDC today there is a famous photograph of its founding board members. Rabbi Margolies is prominently shown, with his long flowing white beard, just off-center at the head of the table. He was a leader of Mizrachi, obviously influencing my father to move away from his Agudah roots. He was the President of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary as well as one of the signatories on the *semicha* parchments. He was very much involved in the early years of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, urging Orthodox rabbis to become supportive of it.

He was *persona grata* in the community and not afraid to mingle with Jews who were not observant. For example, he officiated at wedding ceremonies with Dr. Nathan Krass of Temple Emanuel, and Dr. Samuel Schulman of Temple Beth E-l. My father attended with the RaMaZ the funeral service for Louis Marshall held at Temple Emanuel. He sat there with his high *yarmulka* adorning his white head, unconcerned with what his colleagues might say.

It was that same Louis Marshall who, together with Judge Otto A. Rosalsky, approached Rabbi Margolies to ask him to intercede with Adolph S. Ochs, the publisher of The New York Times. It seems that a series of articles appeared in that newspaper unfavorable to the Jewish community (so, what else is new?). It was felt that the prestige of Rabbi Margolies might bring some sort of retraction of those articles. My great-grandfather, who had a wonderful sense of humor, reacted very quickly: “Gentlemen,” he said, “let me quote Isaiah: ‘The ox (Ochs) knows its purchaser.’”
On another occasion, Meir Weisgal, the famous impresario, scheduled a Zionist pageant at the Polo Grounds (home of the then New York Giants, of blessed memory) on a Saturday night in late August which happened to be the night of the first Selichot. The performance was to start at 8:00 in the evening which, at that season of the year, would involve violating the Sabbath. Weisgal came to see Rabbi Margolies to ask my great-grandfather to grant permission, as it were, for the “slight” Sabbath violation involved. By way of inducement, Weisgal proposed that after the performance, which would end at midnight, the entire audience of 60,000 would recite Selichot led by a chorus of cantors. Rabbi Margolies reacted immediately. “If you would ask me to absolve 60,000 Jews from saying Selichot, I could do that easily. But violating the Sabbath is a different matter entirely.”

Weisgal continued to plead. “We consulted the great rabbis of New York. All of them advised us to speak to you. We now come to you as the court of last resort.”

“Mr. Weisgal,” the RaMaZ responded with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, “The rabbis misdirected you. You came to the wrong Moses. I would have to refer you to Moses our Law Giver. He was the one who gave us the Sabbath.”

His last days on earth in August of 1936 were somewhat reminiscent of the tales about the tzadikim of old. The RaMaZ used to spend his summers in Belmar, N.J. at the Carlton Hotel. Day after day he sat in his appointed chair in a corner of a porch, deeply engrossed in study. On the Thursday prior to the week of his passing he was at the Gemorah, as usual. When he finished his learning, he closed the Gemorah and kissed it. It was a kiss of farewell. He never returned to it.

On Shabbat he was wheeled into the hotel synagogue. He was accustomed to
receiving Shelishi - the prestigious third aliya - at the Torah every Shabbat in that hotel. The owner of the hotel, Morris Goldstein, noticed that the Rabbi looked unusually weak that morning. Solicitously, he asked: “Rabbi would you want your regular aliya this morning?” The Rabbi answered softly: “No, today please give me Acharon (the last aliya).” The Monday following, he passed away.

There was a woman in our shul by the name of Mrs. Harry Freundlich. Some 20 years ago, when I was preparing to lead a special service on the 50th yahrzeit of the RaMaZ, she told me that she remembered coming to shul on Kol Nidre night at the age of four of five. She recalled gazing at my great-grandfather, robed in his white kittel, with a high white yarmulka on his head and with his flowing beard adorning his face. She remembers pointing him out to her mother and saying: “Is that God there?”

No, Mrs. Freundlich, it wasn’t God. It was “a rabbi of the old school” who had a powerful impact on a rabbi of the new school, on the congregation that he led, on the school that bears his name, and on me as well. His life of Torah, chesed and communal involvement are the pillars on which our community rests today. May we all prove worthy of his heritage: learning Torah, loving all Jews, and committing ourselves to the well-being of klal Yisrael.