

TRIBUTE TO RABBI IRVING JACOBS Z"l
(Video screened on Sunday, 10th January 2021 on theus.tv)

It is a sad privilege that has been extended to me to send a message of tribute to the memory of Rabbi Irving z"l , and, at the outset, to express, on behalf of Gloria and myself, our sincerest wishes of comfort and long life to Ann and to all her dear family.

Irving was a fellow student at Jews' College, a colleague in the rabbinate, and then a fellow lecturer at Jews' College. In fact, we both made history at Jews' College, in 1963, as the first students to have been appointed as part-time lecturers immediately after having gained our Bachelors' degrees. It remains a mystery to me how the College Council - a most conservative and staid body – came to make such a bold, and, for that institution, revolutionary decision, and more, how they managed to persuade the existing lecturers – Continental scholars with international reputations and old- fashioned perspectives – to tolerate our young presence in their august company! I can appreciate why Irving was appointed, but I think I was pulled in on his coat-tails!

As we know, Irving stayed on as a full-time member of staff for 37 years, where he gained an enviable reputation as a scholar of Biblical interpretation and Midrash, and as a spell-binding lecturer whose presentations were always peppered with a large dose of humour and frequently with more than a touch of irony and criticism of the establishment. He served for 3 yrs as Principal of the College, before being compelled to retire as a result of ill-health. He continued to lecture at Montefiore, to give shiurim to groups of ba'alei battim, and to serve for many years as rabbi at Neve Shalom where he was loved and esteemed.

I was asked to include a relevant Torah insight, so, given Irving's love of Midrash and Torah teaching, I shall attempt to synthesize those two themes:

Students of Mishnah will know the order of the six main Sedarim by the mnemonic *ZeMaN NeKaT*, which stands for Zera'im (laws of agriculture), Moed (dealing with laws of Shabbat and the festivals), Nashim (matrimonial law, as well as the laws of vows and Nazarites), fourthly, Nezikin (torts, court administration and sentencing). Kodoshim (laws of sacrifices) and Taharot (laws of purity and impurity).

It all seems very neat and straightforward. There is one anomaly, however, associated with a small cluster of what are called Masechtot ketanot, small or minor tractates. These include *Pirkei Avot*, *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, *Masachet Soferim*, *masechet semachot* (a euphemism for laws of mourning), *Masechet Kallah* and *Masechet Derech Eretz*).

Now, oddly, these were all tacked on to the end of the fourth Order of Nezikin, instead of being placed, as a sort of appendix, at the very end of the sixth and last order, Taharot.

How do we explain this? Well, to do so, connects us with Rabbi Irving's speciality of Midrash and with his love of teaching. It also reveals a fact about the Torah syllabus in Talmudic times:

One such Midrash (*Vayik.Rabb.7(3)*) states: 'Why do we begin teaching young children with the book of Vayikra, and not with Bereshit? It is because the children are pure and the sacrifices are pure. Let the pure ones come and occupy themselves with pure matters.'

Now, if the syllabus of the schoolchildren began with the study of Vayikra's sacrifices, it is almost certain that the syllabus of the yeshivot would also have begun with a deeper study of the fifth Mishnaic order dealing with the sacrificial system, namely Kodoshim. So, if Kodashim was their first Mishnaic Order, and they worked steadily through the Orders, their order of learning would have been: Kodashim, Toharot, Zeraim, Moed, Nashim, **and, finally, Nezikim.**

If so, our problem – why did they stick the Minor Tractates into ***the middle*** of the Orders, at the end of Nezikin - is solved.

The answer is that, in Talmudic times, Nezikim was *not* the middle Order; it was the last! And hence, and quite logically, they tacked those Minor Tractates on, at the very end of Nezikin, as an Appendix to the entire corpus of the Mishnah.

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Friends, the passing of Rabbi Irving z”l similarly marks the end of a *shoneh*, ‘a teacher of our Oral Law,’ a great expounder, an amiable and warm personality, who has left behind a rich legacy of inspired disciples, and whose life was a veritable Kiddush Hashem.

אלו תלמידך – ושננתם לבניך – *‘Teach them diligently to your children* – for that is how you are to cherish your disciples.’ Rabbi Irving did just that.

ונפקדת כי יפקד מושבך - *‘You will be sorely missed, now that your seat is empty’*

Amen.