

# JACKIE MASON SHLOSHIM

BY MICHAEL FINE

At the time of writing this, we mark the *shloshim* (30 days) since headlines and news outlets rang out all over the world reporting on the passing of Jackie Mason (Yaakov Moshe *ben* Mordechai Eliyahu HaKohen, *z"l*). The world lost a brilliant talent and wit whose likes will never be duplicated; I lost a *rebbe*, a teacher, and a friend. The void in my life that Jackie's *petirah* has created is impossible to quantify. The few people who really knew Jackie like I did I'm sure feel the same.

Although I had several requests, I initially had no interest or intention of writing or commenting about my friend or friendship, one reason due to still feeling very numb and the other due to the belief that some things are best left private. In every major media outlet's obituaries or coverage (excluding radio hosts Mark Levin and Marc Simone), they seemed to completely miss reporting on who Jackie was, what he meant, and what he stood for. True, he was a brilliant performer, but he was an even more brilliant person. After spending the week of *shivah* with Jackie's family and other close friends, I felt encouraged to attempt to help shine light onto things that truly made Jackie Mason great.

People always ask how I first met my friend Jackie. The first time we met was about seven years ago. Jack-



Jackie getting ready to do his *chazzanus* at the shul in the Garment District

ie was walking down 57th Street with his friend Arnold, who recognized me from a shul fundraiser he recently saw me perform at and wanted to introduce us. We spoke for a couple of minutes, but a couple of years later I bumped into Jackie again, standing in front of his building, on my walk back from shul one *yom tov*. I stopped to wish him a good *yom tov* and he remembered me and we started talking, as if picking up where we left off a few years prior. By this time I already had received my *semichah*, and he seemed impressed. I remember joking that he



Jackie visiting the destruction in Israel shortly after rockets landed during war, shutting down his Broadway show

started out as a rabbi and became a comedian and I started out as a comedian and became a rabbi.

That day was the day our friendship really began to blossom. Yankel Moshe (Jackie) and I would talk every day. The painful silence of not hearing the phone ring at those same daily times we'd always speak is something that I'm still trying to cope with.

Yankel Moshe, as he was called growing up, descended from a long line of *rabbanim*. His father and three brothers were all *rabbanim* and tremendous *talmidei chachamim*. Born in Sheboygan, WI, where his father served as a *rav*, the family eventually moved and settled on the Lower East

Side. Yankel Moshe learned in MTJ and was a classmate of Rav Dovid Feinstein, *z"l*, and would eventually go on to get *semichah* from Rav Dovid's father, Rav Moshe Feinstein, *z"l*.

In our daily conversations Jackie would be very inquisitive as to what I was learning in the *kollel*. I remember one time in particular I mentioned that I was learning *Shaarei Teshuvah (Mussar)*, and then would learn *Shulchan Aruch, Hilchos Aveilus*, and Jackie proceeded to ask what Gemara I was learning as well. As I tried to explain how I'm only there in the mornings for 2-3 hours, and how I've learned Gemara in previous yeshivas, but wasn't learning Gemara at that time, Yankel

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Mike, comedian Gilbert Gottfried, and Jackie celebrating Chamukah together at Gottlieb's



Jackie and Mike at Purim Seuda

Moshe seemed very shocked and taken aback that I didn't have a set *seder* for learning Gemara. I'll never forget how serious he got with me, sharing how important it is to learn Gemara and why I needed to start learning it every day. He was very serious. Jackie told me that when he was in MTJ, he would learn in the *beis midrash* 16–18 hours a day. If you knew Jackie the way I do, you'd know he wasn't exaggerating. If you listen to Jackie telling one of his jokes, it's not hard to hear how it sounds identical to a yeshiva *bachur* working out a *daf* of Gemara. The rhythm, tone, and inflections were all tools he learned in MTJ. The value and importance of the teachings he was brought up with never diminished over time.

I liked to ask Jackie about his memories of Rav Moshe Feinstein and what he was like. A few months ago, I found a video on the internet of Rav Moshe *davening* and played it for him. At first he said he didn't recognize him, because he only knew Rav Moshe when he was much younger. Jackie would tell me what a brilliant, once-in-a-generation type of mind Rav Moshe had. It made a lasting impression, how he'd see people from all over the world flying in and waiting hours just to ask his advice and how you just knew he was a saintly type of man. It also made a lasting impression on Jackie, how Rav Moshe was also just a normal person, like you could talk to him. The type of person you'd see on the street taking out his own trash. I spoke with Jackie's sister Gail during *shivah* about her brother and the influence Rav Moshe had on him in his formative years and she agreed that he was possibly the biggest influence in Jackie's life. Jackie emulated his *rebbe* in that respect, with no pretensions, no chasing honor, and the ability to relate to anyone.

Jackie used to go as a child to the Pitt Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side to hear all the great *chazzanim* of the generation. His dream was initially to become a cantor like Moshe Koussevitzky. When he was younger, Jackie had his tonsils taken out because he was told it would help with his voice. His sister Gail, with whom he was extremely close, paid for his lessons for several years until he

eventually scrapped his dream after he realized he couldn't hit a high C like Koussevitzky.

With all the record-breaking Broadway shows, command performances

for the Royal Family, for presidents, starring in movies and on TV, the highlight of Jackie's entire career came when he got the chance to be *chazzan* for the High Holy Days at a shul in the

Garment District. He worked tirelessly with the great operatic baritone Robert Merrill to help get him ready.

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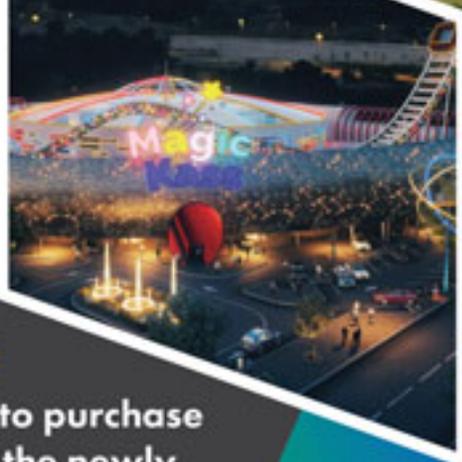
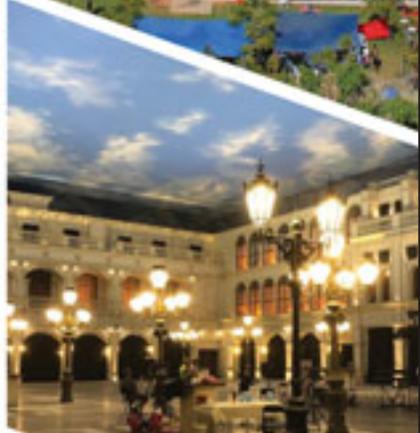
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## JACKIE MASON

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Jackie was very patriotic and was the biggest defender of the State of Israel. During the first Gulf War, Jackie shut down his play on Broadway, losing millions of dollars to go to Israel to perform for the IDF. No other performer, previously or since, has done that. When Jackie was performing on Broadway, Jackie and his wife Jyll bought 100 *mezuzos* and had them hung on every doorpost in the entire theater, which has never been done before, or since, either.

Jackie was also a tremendous *ba'al tzedakah*. I don't think we'll ever know the full extent, mainly because he gave money to help others very privately. Jackie's nephew, Rabbi Avi Shulman, said at the *levayah* how Jackie supported him for eight years while he learned in *kollel*. Initially he and his mother (Jackie's sister) refused and didn't want to take Jackie's money, but Jackie simply said to his sister, "If you had a million shirts hanging in your closet, you wouldn't give your brother

a couple of shirts? So if I have a million dollars in a bank, why shouldn't I be able to give my sister or her kids a couple of dollars?" Jackie and his wife gave the money to fund his nephew's Yeshiva Be'er Yitzchak and the Elizabeth Community Kollel.

Jackie, as a *rav*, led congregations in Weldon, North Carolina, and at Beth Israel Congregation in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Jackie would tell me how he would give a *derashah* on Shabbos. He wanted to make it interesting so that the congregation would pay attention, so he incorporated jokes into it, just so they wouldn't fall asleep. People seemed to like the jokes so he would add more and more jokes. Then people would comment on what a funny rabbi he was, and *goyim* in town started to come to the shul. He'd often joke how he was the only rabbi of a shul with the only non-Jewish congregation.

Jackie's *Yiddishkeit* was so intertwined with who he was. When he decided to no longer lead a congregation, Jackie never stopped being a rabbi. Jackie's wife, Jyll (who was also his manager), helped relaunch his career

when he was down and written off. Jyll said that she grew up very secular in the Midwest, raised with little to no Jewish affiliation, and she was able to relate to Jackie instantly. Even though Jackie and she grew up worlds apart, she saw how brilliant he was and just wanted to show the whole world they would feel the same way as her if only they could be exposed to him. (Continued on 5TJT.com) ■

*If anyone would like to learn Mishnayos or a masechta l'zecher nishmas Jackie Mason, please have in mind Yaakov Moshe ben Eliyahu Mordechai HaKohen.*

*Mike Fine was born in Queens, NY, and learned in Yeshiva Toras Chaim at South Shore, MTA, Neveh Tzion in Israel, and Yeshiva Gedolah of Waterbury. He currently learns mornings in the West Side Kollel b'chavrusa with Rabbi Aaron Mehlman, shlita. He has been a professional comedian and comedy writer for close to 20 years. In 2016, Fine became a chaplain with the New York State Chaplain Task Force, went on to get semichah, and after witnessing so many elderly secular Jewish comics opting for cremation upon their passing, started the Jewish Burial Fund for The Performing Arts, providing free traditional Jewish burials for those who opt for one but can't afford it.*

## SURFSIDE DISASTER: THE BREAKDOWNS AND BREAKTHROUGHS

BY CHAPLAIN MENDY COËN  
United States Chaplain Corps

**A**s we come to the close of the year 5781, we may wonder if the families of the Surfside disaster will be able to get full closure.

This disaster was not just a critical event with mass casualties. It was hell on earth.

I arrived on site together with the IDF team, and what we were about to witness was unimaginable. A brutal nightmare.

The 12-story building collapsed—that was old news. But the speculation for two full weeks whether its residents were alive or not was burning hell. The raw pain that the families were enduring on a minute-to-minute basis, the breakdown of fathers, mothers, and children waiting for news, any news, was debilitating.

It was surreal. Like watching a movie that would not stop. Several dozen families waiting and hoping to be the recipient of a miracle. The twice-daily official briefings led by the IDF were optimistic. "We believe pockets of air exist under the rubble where people can have survived," they said, showing diagrams of air-pocket possibilities. For 14 days, they gave hope of life to these poor souls, grasping for breaths in between sobs.

But how long can a human being wait and hope after bodies upon bodies are recovered and officially announced in the news?

Nerves were about to crack. The tension and pain were building. People were breaking down one after the other. Some reacted with hyperactivity, a manic behavior that resembles that of mentally deranged people, while others were stricken with depression and hopelessness. In week two, people had heavy black bags under their eyes from lack of sleep, nervousness, and exasperation.

It's almost impossible to describe the atmosphere that reigned in these rooms. The raw pain and agony were palpable and deep. We came to wonder what these families had done to deserve such devastating, inhumane existence.

It reminded me of the story of the Exodus. When the Egyptian army drowned in the Red Sea after wanting to battle with the Jewish people, the Torah states (*Exodus 14:30*): "And Israel saw the Egyptians dead." Rashi brings the Talmud (*Pesachim 118:b*): "The Jews were afraid that the Egyptians were not dead, that they might have escaped the water and its torrents and were still about to attack them. G-d had the water regurgitate the dead bodies of the Egyptian army for all to see." So, Israel saw their enemy's dead bodies.

The logic follows that these thousands of bodies were physically visible as a testament of their deaths. Surely their Egyptian families came to claim their loved ones' bodies and provide burials or rituals. I wondered why this wicked nation of Egypt was given closure and not the righteous people who perished in the Champlain tower in Surfside?

Why was this iconic tower chosen by destiny to be destroyed, while so many other buildings on the same Collins Avenue in Miami are so old, fractured, and in worse shape, and they are still proudly standing?

Why is it that, as of this writing, there is no answer as to what really made this build-

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