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## Rabbi Paul Ackerman, 1928-2013

By Robert Rand

Rabbi Paul (Pesach) Ackerman, *zt"l*, passed away on June 14 at the age of 84. For 44 years, he was the guiding light of Congregation Anshe Meseritz, a synagogue founded in 1883 by immigrants from the town of Meseritz, the home of the Maggid, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. A beloved figure, Rabbi Ackerman was a veritable fixture in Manhattan's Lower East Side. The role he played in the neighborhood was Biblical in its scope.

Like Moshe Rabbeinu, Rabbi Ackerman tended his flock for over four decades in what was once the wilderness of Alphabet City but has since been transformed into a new promised land.

The modest 103-year-old synagogue over which Rabbi Ackerman presided reflects the history and character of the neighborhood and is known as the "last of the tenement synagogues." This neighborhood, once rife with hundreds of tenement buildings, has witnessed the rise of condos and luxury high-rise buildings. Yet, through sheer force of will, the tenement shul has managed to survive while almost all of the other neighborhood synagogues have closed their doors, were abandoned, or turned into churches.

Rabbi Ackerman was, not unlike Moshe, among the humblest of men. A true folk hero of the neighborhood, the love and care he displayed for all those with whom he came in contact, whether Jewish or not, was amply returned by the community. He presided over a congregation that epitomized the diversity of the neighborhood, from wheelchair bound senior citizens to dreadlocked hipsters and everything in-between. His wit and charm touched all who passed through the synagogue gates. His ability to communicate through prayer with both

the congregation and the Almighty was unique. There was a "tear in his voice" that touched the soul of all who heard him *daven*. He made communal prayer a rare and poignant experience for those present.

Rabbi Ackerman had a vision for the future of the Meseritz synagogue. He was intent on saving the century-old synagogue from falling into a state of terminal disrepair. As he observed, "You can't make a person go to shul, but you can have a shul for him to go to." The development plan that the rabbi supported called for preserving the historic facade while creating a new and vibrant, though smaller, synagogue space, one that he believed to be more suited to needs of a changing congregation. The plan would ensure that the synagogue could become a self-sustaining entity capable of serving the community for the next century and beyond.

While the plan was controversial and opposed by some, it was unanimously approved by the Community Board, the Landmarks and Preservation Commission, the Office of the New York Attorney General and the State Supreme Court. Like a man who plants an acorn for the benefit of future generations, knowing full well that he may not live to see a mighty oak, Rabbi Ackerman sought to ensure the continuity of the synagogue so that it would continue to serve the community for generations to come.

In much the same way that Moshe anticipated crossing into the Promised Land leading his people through the wilderness, so too did Rabbi Ackerman hope to see the day when he would enter into the new Meseritz Synagogue with his congregation. Sadly, this was not to be.

*Robert Rand is the President of the Anshe Meseritz Synagogue*