

# Remembering Arie Halachmi: Scholar, Teacher and Person

By: Chester Robinson

On June 7, 2014, the field of public administration lost a lifelong contributor to the profession: Arie Halachmi. He was a self-proclaimed pracademic, a practitioner who became an academic. His name garners little recognition among the general public. But, it carries much meaning for those in public administration who are aware of the scholarship and leadership required for the field to thrive and meet contemporary challenges. His absence will be greatly felt by his colleagues, students, friends and loved ones.

Halachmi was a well-respected scholar and long-standing ASPA member. He received his PhD in Policy Sciences in 1972 at SUNY-Buffalo, launching his academic career. Previously, he was a civil servant specializing in public policy and productivity issues. Widely published, he had more than 200 scholarly articles and book chapters, many of them translated to other languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Danish, Dutch, German, Indonesian, Korean, Spanish, Swedish, French and Greek. Twelve of his books are shelved at the U.S. Library of Congress.

In 2010, he received ASPA's Paul P. Van Riper Award for Excellence in Service, which recognizes an ASPA member who has made significant contributions to both the academic and practitioner communities. Halachmi's tireless efforts to bridge the classroom and practice of public administration are well known. This is explicitly demonstrated in his now epic 2007 article, "Where the Rubber Meets the Road: Governance and Accountability Issues in Civil-Service-Based Organizations." The article uses a case study to suggest that in theory governance and accountability occur at the top, but that in reality they occur at the point where an organization interface with its "owners." For top executives at commercial organizations, these owners are stockholders. For those in government and non-profit organizations, they are citizens.

Describing Halachmi's contributions to his home state of Tennessee, U.S. Representative

Jim Cooper said, "Over the last three decades, Halachmi has become one of the world's leading experts on public sector performance and productivity." He was honored by his colleagues with the Faculty Showcase Award from Tennessee State University for outstanding service to the university and community. He also received a Goodwill Ambassador Award from then-Governor Phil Bredesen.

When I met Halachmi, I had been teaching public administration for about 10 years. During that time, I believed my students could not learn without me to guide their studies. Now, I am no longer sure. Observing Halachmi caused me to revisit the age old education dilemma of which is more important: critical thinking skills or memorizing. The answer may seem obvious, but it is not as clear as you might think.

The major difference involves how students use their time. Memorizers spend time regurgitating facts, situations and past events. On a fact-based examination, these students are able to answer more questions more efficiently. The critical thinker spends more time examining each question, thinking about issues and alternatives—in fact, Socratic questioning if it is indeed the "right question" to ask.

Halachmi's goal was to teach students how to learn and think for themselves. But, not all of his students got it and encountered considerable frustration in his classes. These were students accustomed to rote learning and often inadequately prepared for the Halachmi approach, generating comments such as:

*... If you have an option of taking a different professor, I highly suggest it. He did not give out a syllabus or required books. He expects a lot of information, but does not provide any guidance on how to obtain it ...*

Conversely, comments from students who thrived under his tutelage resembled the following:

*...Halachmi was one of the most challenging professors I had throughout my college career. He expected a lot of his students; you could never quite get the answer right. He was always pushing you to go further, think more, research more and expand your knowledge. I appreciate his sincerity, honesty, and wisdom. His knowledge of public administration and his ability to be frank and honest about the good, bad and ugly of our field was what I enjoyed most about him. If you ever receive a paper with a good grade, or a compliment from him, you knew you truly deserved it.*

*...It's been six years since I was in the MPA program. Halachmi is a professor I still talk about and remember vividly. Everyone has their own Halachmi story. He was one of the toughest and most challenging teachers I've ever had—making you think critically and work hard to earn your grade.*

When teachers see comments like these, you are confident that you helped make sense of the barrage of information available to students. Halachmi showed that it is not sufficient to impart one's knowledge to young minds; it is our job to manage what, when, why and how our students learn. We usually remember most, if not all, of our teachers. But, only a few in a truly memorable way. Unforgettable teachers possess qualities that may not show up on paper, but always shows up where it matters most: in the minds and even hearts of the people they taught.

Very few of us can live up to Halachmi's indefatigable work ethic. Nights and weekends regularly found him reading, grading papers or working on manuscripts. It was not unusual to get an e-mail from him at 4:00 a.m. When asked what he was doing at that early hour, he would respond, "Since I couldn't sleep, I might as well work." He was a colleague who had been there, done that and was still doing that. He never stopped paying his dues. This virtue



resulted in his career long contributions to public administration, which made him memorable.

This enormous work ethic frequently put him on the cutting edge of emerging issues. He embraced the concept of better public productivity though quality and strategic management long before it became the norm. He pointed out that quality is by no means a simple or single concept; it can mean compliance with predetermined specifications, or process or outputs. It also can mean assessment of outcomes or gate keeping. His productivity principles have been presented in a number of his publications.

I may have doubts about many things, but I know this very clearly: I am a better person and a better academic because I was privileged to work with Halachmi. Whenever I was struggling and wanted to bounce an idea off somebody, he always had time to talk to me and showed me a different context for the problem. He never told me the answer, but showed me how to think about the problem contextually. I am not sure I told him, more than once, how much it meant to have him as a colleague at a pivotal point in my career. I am certain that I never told him adequately what an important mentor he was to me. Years of working with him, lessons from him, large and small, continue to resonate. We all will miss Halachmi in our own way, but his contributions to the field will impact future students and practitioners far more than what he would have imagined.

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