Twersky’s death was a sad and untimely milestone in the history of Jewish scholarship in America. He was one of the few Judaica scholars in this country who adamantly refused to compromise the very high standards of classical Jewish learning that ought to be the prerequisites for teaching in any field of Judaica at the university level. The convergence of Twersky’s academic rigor with his austere personality made him a terribly forbidding mentor.

While Twersky contributed immeasurably to the growth and maturation of critical Jewish scholarship in America — both through his masterful, landmark studies of medieval Jewish intellectual history, and in the creation of the venerable and richly endowed Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard — Twersky at the same time stubbornly fought the dilution of academic standards and the shallowness that plague the Judaica disciplines as a very consequence of their rapid growth and inherently unwieldy, interdisciplinary nature.

Twersky’s toughness was legendary. After my first two years in his demanding doctoral program, I was on the verge of a breakdown and came to inform Twersky that I had decided to leave Harvard for a position as executive director of the Mizrachi (religious Zionist) Organization in Toronto. I was half-hoping that Twersky would, just this once, adopt a warmer, paternal role and encourage me to persevere and finish my degree. But after hearing my complaints about the overwhelmingly rigorous nature of the program, he simply wished me well and advised me to remain registered as an absentee graduate student for the coming academic year, saying, “You’ll come back.” When I asked him why he thought so, he simply cited a two-word Talmudic epigram: “ye’ach notzarta” (you were created for this) — and showed me the door. Sure enough, I returned to Harvard, and to Twersky, nine months later.

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He stubbornly fought the dilution of academic standards that plagues the Judaic disciplines.

familiarity with the writings of Immanuel Kant, or writing about radical Catholic theology with no knowledge of Latin or the writings of the Church fathers.

Twerky's high standards and vast knowledge were reflected in everything he wrote, most notably his monumental "Introduction to the Code of Maimonides' Mishne Torah," a 640-page account of that seminal codex of Jewish law. But those standards found their incarnation in the few students who were granted admission to the notoriously difficult graduate program in Jewish Intellectual History at Harvard that Twerky administered for decades. More than half of Twerky's students over the years were Rabbinic rabbis, who came to Harvard with a wealth of prior communitarian knowledge but a dearth of critical textual methodology and historical perspective.

Twerky masterfully fine-tuned the knowledge of these rabbis to form graduate students, transforming them into critical and sensitive readers of traditional texts, without compromising their beliefs in the sanctity of those texts.

Twerky's own life was a rare and paradigmatic instance of maintaining a delicate, almost perfect balance between Orthodoxy and critical Jewish scholarship. While in Cambridge on weekdays, in his tweed jacket and slouch hat, Twerky was the embodiment of Harvard intellectualism. But in Brookline, at the beginning and end of each day, and, of course, on Shabbat and Yom Tov, in his black satin and fedora, he presided over his chasidic congregation as the Talme Rebbe.

It was not only chasidic Orthodoxy and Ivy League scholarship that Twerky embodied and uniquely synthesized. A son of the great Ukrainian chasidic dynasty of Tzanz, which began with Reb Nohum of Tzanzelshein, he inherited the chasidic berith of his great-grandfather — Atara, daughter of Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik. The world's greatest expert on Maimonides, who instructed at Harvard on medieval Jewish rationalism, he preserved the anti-rational, mystic traditions of Tzanzelshein-Talmer chasidism in his Rabbinic practice.

During a period when Orthodoxy — and chasidic ultra-Orthodoxy in particular — may assume the necessary role of the gadfly, and show how the tyranny of the present is potentially worse than the tyranny of the past.

While ostensibly written about Wolfsen, there is no doubt that these paragraphs are largely autobiographical. And few among his colleagues and students would deny that Twerky was indeed a tyrant of the past. His Rabbinic learning was so vast and his critical scholarship so profound that he was feared in his field who could rival, let alone criticize, his work. In fact, the only significant and convincing work of "Twerky criticism" ever published was a devastating review of his very first book, "Rabah of Pia toldTIM," (Harvard University Press, 1962), written by his brother-in-law, the remarkably erudite and brilliant Professor Haym Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University.

Twerky was neither a warm person nor a gifted pedagogue. But his belief in the precision of language and the economy of Jewish writings was reflected in his own private speech and public lectures. When Twerky taught, it was as if each and every word had been chosen with almost perfect precision and prior deliberation. His ideas were always expressed in very sharp, clear, and concise formulations. He taught largely through intimidation and the power of example of his own awesome erudition. An intimidating man with a grave demeanor, piercing eyes and of very few words, he rarely developed close personal relationships with his students and did not lightly suffer mediocrity in his class. The dropout rate in Twerky's doctoral program at Harvard (or "Twerky's pogrom" as it was endearingly called by his graduate students) was unusually high. Even those who did complete their dissertations rarely managed to do so in less than 10 years. (It took me 12.)

While the high attrition rate and meager output of his department was a source of some tension between Twerky and the administration of Harvard's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, it never seemed to trouble him. The maintenance of the highest scholarly standards always seemed to matter more to him than the felicity of his students or his own popularity.

In that sense, too, Twerky retained loyal admirers and students. The Sages of the Talmud instruct: "Let the fear of your teacher always be as great upon you as the fear of heaven." While I can't honestly testify to my exceptional fear of heaven, Isadore Twerky terrified me more than any man I have known. And for that, I shall ever be grateful.