

Eulogy for Kurt Weinbach (Tzvi ben Yisrael v' Rachel) by Rabbi Matt Field of Temple Beth El



September 22, 2010

Today, on the Jewish calendar, is the eve of the festival of Sukkot. Sukkot is one in a string of many Jewish holidays that fall in the autumn. In a week, the Jewish community will gather one final time, this season, to celebrate the departure of the festival season with the final day of Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret. Shemini Atzeret is a time for taking leave-1 is the time when the pilgrims who travelled to Jerusalem for Sukkot would begin to make the rounds to bid farewell to the family and friends with whom they shared the festival days.

The very same Sukkah, which is so glorious and beautiful **now** at the beginning of the week will have faded and lost its attraction by the arrival of the festival's 8th and final day. After we observe seven days of the Sukkot festival, the eighth day will bring the Atzeret - a clinging to the joyous holiday that unceremoniously passes. It is natural to hold onto joyous experiences, to hold fast to the happy festival. But nobody can stay the passage of time. And so, after the Atzeret, the last nostalgic holiday - we will leave the Sukkah behind - and move on into the normal rhythm of the calendar year.

In life, too, there are many crucial periods when we would like to declare an Atzeret, and make a determined effort to hold on to the experiences and joys we were privileged to have. We want to hold fast to the happiness that we enjoyed. We want to cling to a love that has been.

The fact that we will recite the Yizkor memorial prayer on the final day of Sukkot, on Shemini Atzeret, reminds us that all whom we love are mortal, and that the time must come when we have to take leave of them as well. It is human nature to hold on, as long as we can, to that which is precious to us. However, even when we must take a leave of one another, we can still "retain" that which is significant, because God has given us the power to remember. Memory is a faculty which enables us to make the past a present reality, and to keep alive the challenges surmounted, the joys experienced, the sorrows faced, and all the love and blessings from the years that we were privileged to share with our beloved.

And that is our Atzeret- even as we mourn Kurt Weinbach's passing, through the power of memory and the gift of love, we retain so much of his spirit that somehow we will come to find comfort in his continued presence and influence in our lives.

The story of Kurt's life reads like a novel. His years were filled with constant adventure that was motivated by his lifelong pursuit of the Torah's command to "choose life". Wherever Kurt found himself, in whatever situation or predicament, he did indeed take giant steps forward to affirm life.

Born in Vienna while there was shelling on the streets, Kurt's welcome into the world was perhaps foreshadowing for the years ahead. Kurt witnessed the rise of Nazi power, and even saw Hitler with his own eyes on two occasions. And in spite of everything Kurt saw, he never grew bitter. For a Jew living in that part of the world at that time, Kurt's life would take an unusual turn when he was saved by a German general.

Kurt boarded the last train that would take Jews away in safety. He found himself on the Trans-Siberian Railroad and soon arrived in China. Kurt eventually landed in Tientsen where he attended a British Government- sponsored English-speaking Jewish school. Life would force Kurt to learn language after language, and all told, Kurt was able to speak 12 different languages. When the American Marine's arrived in China, Kurt met a general who needed his assistance. Soon, Kurt was declaring buildings to be confiscated in Chinese, "in the name of Harry Truman".

In 1949, Kurt's family arrived in Israel. Shortly after, his father died on his way to the hospital after suffering a heart attack. Kurt had been supporting his extended family since he was just 18 or 19 years old. He served in the Israeli army for six years, and he fought in the 1956 Sinai campaign.

As if Kurt's life had not been tumultuous enough by this point, Kurt moved to Rochester in 1957, and several years later witnessed the race riots.

Kurt and Sheila met at an international folk dance festival. Engrossed in conversation, they both agreed that it was a shame that there was no Jewish singles' group at the old JY. So, as friends, they took upon themselves the duty to organize one. Both insisted that they were looking for someone **else**, that **they** were **just friends**. But as he once confessed to Julie, Kurt used to watch Sheila from afar as she would walk down the street, on her way to teach Sunday School. But it wasn't ultimately until one of the executives at the JY asked when they were getting engaged, that their relationship finally took a fateful step forward. When they quickly responded that they were not interested in one another in a romantic way, the JY executive told them that the organizers of these single groups **always** marry each other. And, as they say, the rest was history.

Kurt had a special bond with Judaism. He immersed himself fully in the Jewish community. He served on the Board at the Jewish Community Federation. He chaired the local chapter of CAMERA- the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America. He was part of Temple Beth El's first chavurah. He was proud of his Jewish identity, his heritage and its traditions.

Kurt had a profound intellectual curiosity. He was fascinated with politics. He always wanted to know what was happening in the world, and he had a special interest in issues related to Israel. He was an avid reader of newspapers and magazines. He always watched the news on television. He would record news shows he slept through so he could catch up in the morning. His passion for knowledge made news junkies of

his entire family. Kurt was so well informed and self-educated that he could **convincingly** argue **any** position on an issue...And he would. He could negotiate **anything**. He would engage people in debate just for fun, and sometimes he would argue one position, and then argue the opposing position. Whatever **your** position, he would play the devil's advocate. He loved debate and he was a terrific orator. He won the Junior Chamber of Commerce "Speak-Up" Public Speaking Award. Kurt had his last formal speaking engagement just a couple weeks ago.

Kurt was comfortable in **any** social situation. No scenario intimidated him, and he never felt embarrassed or self-conscious. No doubt this helped him to excel at foreign languages, as he was never ashamed or afraid to practice what he knew, or test what he didn't.

As interested as Kurt was in the affairs of the world, he was equally interested in the people in it. When he met people he would interrogate them. He wanted to know everything and anything about everyone in the room. Kurt would talk to everyone wherever he went. He had a genuine interest in people. He wanted to know all about you: your religion, your political inclinations, and certainly where you came from. He had a gift of making people feel noticed and important. He had a gift of making people feel like family. In this way, Kurt had an impact wherever he went.

To David and to Susan, Kurt was a great father. He was always very engaged and engaging. His family always felt that they could go to Kurt with any question or any dilemma. He always seemed to have the answer. The man whose adventure of a life took him across four continents always had the greatest bedtime stories. He would share with his children the stories from his own childhood. But he always told the stories just as they happened. Never with any bitterness or anger.

To Julie, Kurt was more than just a father-in-law. They formed a special bond from the start, and she always valued Kurt as the fascinating, unique and very special man he was.

Kurt's family always enjoyed his quick wit and his sharp sense of humor. He never told other people's jokes. He always had his own ironic, funny observations to share that never failed to bring smiles and laughter.

Sheila and Kurt shared 50 years as husband and wife, and as best friends. He was a caring, loving, affectionate husband. For Sheila, life with Kurt was always interesting. She was always learning from him. She met the most fascinating people from around the world because of him. Each day, Kurt indeed **did** choose life. He was not the type to sit around. They always had the best times together- going dancing, attending parties. He would take his family to every parade and festival around. When work brought him out of town, he would bring his family when he could. He wanted to take advantage of life's every opportunity. And just in February, Kurt and his family took an opportunity to celebrate life, to celebrate love, and to celebrate each other. Honoring

50 years of Kurt's and Sheila's marriage, the family packed up and travelled to the Bahamas, together.

Kurt lived his life with a unique brand of courage. He saw more with his own two eyes than most could even imagine. But in his commitment to choosing life, he would let nothing get in the way of moving forward and living fully. By his example, he taught his loved one's some of the most important lessons:

- Be true to who you are.
- Stand up for yourself and what you believe.
- Live unafraid.
- And never, ever lose your curiosity. Always marvel at the wonders of life and God's world.

Kurt's story may be written down in books, but the impact of his life cannot be contained by all the pages in the world. It can only be fully captured in the hearts of those he loved and the people whose lives he touched. And while his story may now be formally over, there are still new chapters to be written. Kurt's love and his legacy will continue to influence lives, to shape spirits, and to touch the world. Just like you did so many times, Kurt, your spirit and your legacy will survive.

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