

Eulogy for Herman Taube, by Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

THE BOOK OF JOB, a book which challenges traditional notions about God is appropriate to quote when speaking about Herman Taube. It says, "*Yesh lakesef motza, umakom lazahav yazoku:*

"There are mines for silver, and places where gold is refined.
Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from rock.
But where can wisdom be found, and where is the source of understanding?"
"Talmid chacham im met, mee yavee lanu temurato?
For when a person of wisdom dies, who can replace him?"

Herman Taube was such a man – a man of wisdom and of understanding; a man who is truly irreplaceable. There will not be another one like him. We have lost one of God's precious treasures. Now that he is gone, we ask:

Where will we go to find wisdom and understanding --- especially of the incomprehensible? Who will be the voice of the people the Nazis murdered and sought to silence and extinguish? Where will we go to learn of the beauty of our tradition, the richness of life in the shtetl, and to teach us of the fabric of our precious heritage? Who will speak up with compassion for the ideals of our faith? Who will write poems and stories that will move our souls, touch our spirit, send chills down our spines, and summon us to act?

How fortunate we were to have known him, and to have had him in our midst, as a teacher, a friend, a colleague, a parent, a grandparent.

Herman was a witness to a vanished world; a window to a world that was vanquished and is no more. With anger, but not malice, his writings took us back and recreated and brought to life those whose lives were taken so cruelly, and the way of life that was destroyed.

His images of cobblestone streets and of open fields were so descriptive. One poem is about a stone he picked up from the street where the Warsaw ghetto uprising took place and brought home with him. In one of his poems, he wrote:

"Often, when the house is asleep and visions
Burn my mind
I take the stone
Into my hands;
Like friends, we share
Our secret memories.
The stone has a heart...
Sometimes past midnight
I think I hear the stone cry:
Why? Why? Why?...
I take the stone,
Hold it to my face
And wash it with my tears."

When he saw the display of suitcases at Auschwitz, he wrote movingly about the suitcase of his beloved grandfather, who helped to raise him after his parents died at a young age. His grandfather kept a suitcase packed so they would be ready

when the messiah arrived to be able to go to Eretz Yisrael. Looking at the pile of suitcases, he asked what happened to his grandfather's dream and promise?

One of my favorite poems was one of his most powerful, "A Single Hair". It is the voice of a single hair in the display case of hair at Auschwitz, which beckons the tourists gazing at the glass case to realize that it once was on the head of an 18-year-old girl who loved life. What a keen eye and mind he had to think in these terms. He wrote that if only the hair which once was caressed could break out of the glass case, to be blown into the eyes of the world's leaders "to irritate and disturb their vision enough to make them feel a little sting."

But he did not only dwell on the past. He had a great appreciation for modernity and progress and was not mired in the past. In addition to the poems and over 20 books he wrote and translated he would send by email weekly Shabbos messages, which told us what "Popsie" was thinking or what was happening in his life or the lives of his family. He loved God's creation, and so he also often sent out beautiful images and pictures of nature and God's glorious world.

When you think about it, it is remarkable how quickly he learned to use a computer, and adapted to and embraced modern technology. He had the ability to straddle many worlds.

Herman was the moral conscience of the Washington Jewish community. He was the thread that tied together Holocaust survivors in Washington, Baltimore, and around the world, having founded survivors and Yiddish groups in Washington and Baltimore. He was a volunteer at the Holocaust Museum, and involved in planning the World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors. He prodded us to do more to ensure that Holocaust survivors would live out their lives in dignity. He helped to guide a new generation of lay leaders to create Capitol Camps. He reminded us of the importance of observing Yom HaShoah, but also of remembering the anniversaries of Kristallnacht, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the Night of the Murdered Poets and the Doctor's Plot, so that the victims would not be forgotten.

Anyone who ever met Herman immediately sensed his decency and his kindness, and instantly knew they were in the presence of a very special person, a gutte neshama, someone who was precious, who epitomized the qualities our tradition says we should try to live by. He had a wonderful smile and sharp mind. Like Will Rogers, Herman never met a person he didn't like, and no one who ever met Herman did not love him instantly and feel his love in return.

Most of all, of course, he loved his family. He loved Suzi, his beloved wife of 69 years, about whom he constantly worried, his children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, and was so proud of all of them. And we thank you his mishpoche, for sharing him with all of us.

His other love was Yiddishkeit - which meant - Judaism, the Jewish people, Israel, Jewish values, Jews, as well as all of humanity. His love for clal yisrael, of his fellow Jews and of Jewish traditions oozed from every ounce of Herman's being and was the quintessence and source of his strength. Writing, which he began doing at a young age, was the means whereby he could convey his innermost feelings, his theology, experiences, reflections and emotions.

I first met Herman when he was working for UJA Federation, over 30 years ago, and immediately fell in love with him. He was the hardest working employee there. I don't think he ever missed a Super Sunday, and he worked longer and harder than people half his age. When he worked at Federation and when he was a volunteer, he would always try to make one more call, encourage us to make one

more solicitation, because he knew the donations were a lifeline that kept people alive.

One time a number of years ago, I saw him at the UJA office when it was on Wisconsin Avenue. It was the day before Thanksgiving, and before I left he wished me a gut yom tov.

“Gut yom tov?” I said to him, expressing surprise that he would call this secular holiday a yom tov, the Yiddish word for holiday. He said to me words I will never forget and that I recall every Thanksgiving since then. “Yes. This is a yom tov,” he said. “The fact that I can walk down a street and not have someone pull on mein beard, or knock off my yarmulke if I choose to wear one, that I can live here in this country as a proud Jew, that I do not have to live in fear – yes. This is a yom tov.”

He loved Israel. I would take his book, “Land of Blue Skies” with me and read selections whenever I take a group to Israel. His poem, “Shehechyanu” describes the joy he felt when in Israel.

“For being able to visit Israel:
Cities, kibbutziem, settlements,
From Rosh Pina to Eilat.
For the opportunity to pray,
To dance with new immigrants
At the Western Wall,
To cry at Yad Vashem, Mt Herzl,
Rejoice on Yom Ha’Atzmaut at the Knesset,
For having known Chaim Weizmann,
Chaim Nahman Bialik, Ben Gurion,
Zalman Shazar and Golda,
For having witnessed the shaping of their ideals
into reality: The transformation
Of “sharit Hapleita” from lands of oppression
into a nation living in dignity...
Admiring the reflection of
The blue sky in the Kinneret,
The green fields and orchards
Of the kibbutzim.
I lifted my eyes to
The heights of Mt. Hermon,
Inhaled the cool air...
I felt a desire to sing—
To rupture the stillness
Around me with a prayer:
Shehechyanu.”

What a blessing it was to be Herman’s friend. He was a teacher and a mentor to so many in our community.

At a time when few believed it would be possible, he encouraged me to start my synagogue, and spoke at our very first Selichot service as well as at our groundbreaking dedication ceremony.

Shortly after B’nai Tzedek was built, and we moved into our new building, there were times when I would come back to my office after being out at a meeting, and

my secretary would give me a message. She would tell me, "Your grandfather called." Sometimes it would be - Your grandfather called to tell you he loves you. I knew right away. It was Herman who had called and left those messages. He was a beloved grandfather to all of us.

To most of us he was a survivor. But he was always careful to point out that Suzi was a survivor, but that since he had not been in a concentration camp, he was not. Herman served as a medic in the Polish army during the war. His whole life was about healing, helping others, remembering and honoring the victims, and preserving and perpetuating Judaism.

After serving in Baltimore in the Histadrut and as a writer for the Jewish Forward he came to Washington. In addition to working at Federation, where he was the very heart and soul of Federation, for years he continued to work as a volunteer chaplain. He loved visiting people and being able to fulfill the mitzvah of bikur cholim, of cheering them up. He dedicated himself to helping others and to transmitting his love for the principles that guided him throughout his life, for his whole life was devoted to serving God and the Jewish people.

What a loss this is, a loss for all of us, a loss for the Jewish people. How fortunate we were to have him for 96 blessed years. I was fortunate to have visited him twice last week and to hear his voice, feel his gentle touch, reminisce, tell him a story, and know that he felt fulfilled.

Although he would surely bristle at the characterization, I hope you will forgive me Herman, but he was a tzaddik. For as long as I have known him, I have always thought Herman was a Lamed vavnik, one of the 36 righteous people on account of whom, according to legend, the world exists.

It is my hope and prayer that each and every one of us who knew Herman, who was touched by him, who was inspired by him will remember him fondly and often. His words will continue to inspire us. His poem, "A Single Hair" concludes:

"Have you someone dear
Who has long hair?
Please, when you see her, touch her, think of me, remember me,
A little hair
In the corner of a showcase
In Auschwitz..."

Let us honor him and his memory by seeking to keep alive his love of all that was precious and dear to him.