

Eulogizing a Giant
Shemini Atzeret 5770
Yizkor
Tribute to Rabbi Mark Loeb

This week I read Mitch Albom's newly-published book, Have a Little Faith. It is a true story of how Mitch Albom, sportswriter, playwright, author of several books including the best-selling books Tuesdays with Morrie, The Five People You Meet in Heaven, and For One More Day, was asked in the spring of 2000 by his childhood rabbi, Rabbi Albert Lewis (z"l), to deliver his eulogy. Initially, Albom was shocked and surprised by this request, for a number of reasons. He hadn't really been around Rabbi Lewis in nearly 25 years, since Albom had long since left the South Jersey area and now lived in Detroit; he was not a particularly active, practicing Jew, "no longer religious", as Albom said; and he didn't really know him well as a person, just as "The Reb"—what he and the other teenagers at Beth Sholom used to call him. As Albom said, "he was kind of like a superhero. The Rock. The Hulk. The Reb.... Back then he was an imposing force, tall, serious, broad cheeks, thick eyebrows, a full head of dark hair".

After thinking about this unusual request for a few days, he agreed to honor it, but only if he could get to know his rabbi as a "man, so [he] could speak of him as such". And so began not a stretch of a few meetings, as Albom had expected, but what initially would have seemed like an unlikely

eight year journey of relationship-building and faith-strengthening. Whereas at the beginning Albom reflected on how, when he was younger, he would always run the other way when Rabbi Lewis, the seemingly imposing man of faith, passed by, at the end he notes that this odyssey, his time spent with “the Reb”, helped him realize that there was no need to run, and, in fact, it was well worth stopping for a minute, or longer, to learn something beautiful, to journey towards belief, to recognize so much more clearly that a divine spark lies within each of us. In the year 2000, Mitch Albom wondered what he would say to eulogize Rabbi Albert Lewis. In 2008, when the time sadly came, he figured it out, and he didn’t even need to refer to the tapes, the notes, the photos, the texts, the sermons, or the newspaper clippings to do it.

Why am I telling you all of this? Well, for one, because I would encourage you to read this book that I just picked up on Wednesday—it is a very touching and inspiring book. But there is another reason. You see, I picked up this book and started reading it, with its focus on the eulogizing of an iconic long-time congregational rabbi, on Wednesday afternoon. And on Wednesday night, a few minutes before 10:00 PM, I looked at my blackberry and saw that a condolence e-mail had come in on RAVNET, our Conservative rabbinic listserv. As I read the words on my little blackberry

screen, my heart sunk. “*We are sad to inform you of the passing of our colleague, Rabbi Mark Loeb, rabbi emeritus of Beth El Congregation in Baltimore*”. Many of you may not know this, but during my last year of rabbinical school I did intern work at Beth El two weekends a month, conducting family services and teaching Hebrew High and adult ed classes, and during most of those weekends I stayed with Rabbi Loeb. And over the course of those ten months worth of Shabbatot together he became a trusted mentor and friend. When I read the news of his passing, I was in shock. I saw Mark most recently a few months ago when he came here to BSO for shul on a Shabbat morning to visit me and my family and see me at work in my congregation; as was his nature, he stayed to chat for a few minutes after services, then quietly slipped out. Subsequently I spoke with him over the summer and he told me that in September he was going to Italy for three months to work at a congregation there. And so it was that, on Wednesday evening, he passed away in Milan, Italy.

Since he passed away in Italy, the earliest possible date for a funeral in Baltimore is likely to be next Thursday or Friday, and so formal mourning is on hold for the time being. But in this awkward interval, this period of waiting, those who knew him are finding ways to support each other, reflect and grieve in their own fashion. Beth El has started posting people’s tributes

to him on its website. In that same spirit, I would like to ask your indulgence for just a couple of moments today, as I share with you a brief tribute, just a few of my thoughts, about Rabbi Mark Loeb, an icon, a great teacher and rabbi in the Baltimore Jewish community, and a kind friend and source of inspiration for me. I'm not going to dwell on all of Rabbi Loeb's professional accomplishments, though they were many and significant—among them, he served Beth El with love for 32 years, including 28 as its Senior Rabbi; he was a board president of MAZON: the Jewish Response to Hunger, was a founding board member of the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, got involved in many issues of social justice and tikun olam, and served on gubernatorial commissions on discrimination and adolescent pregnancy.

What I want to focus on is Mark Loeb, the mensch. As I mentioned earlier, when we met and got to know each other in 2001-2002, I was a senior rabbinical student. Over the course of our many weekends together, he opened his home to me (and to Jen as well, when she was able to come down), sharing his hospitality, his kindness, and the wealth of 25 years of accumulated rabbinic wisdom and experience. For those who never saw or met Mark, he was a large man, but his physical stature was not only matched, but surpassed, by his endless supply of love, generosity, and

loyalty. He was always there with a big hug and kiss, and he really would go to any lengths to do nice things for people he was close to. He helped send one of his former assistant rabbis on a vacation, helped another with a family life cycle event, and, whenever a mutual close friend of ours moved to a new home, there was a gift waiting for him from Mark. What more can I say to describe Rabbi Loeb's devotion to those he cared about than to point out that he took a weekend off from working at the largest Conservative synagogue in Maryland to fly down to Charlotte, North Carolina to officiate at my installation as Associate Rabbi at Temple Israel—a first-year rabbi whom he had known for little more than a year! I can't imagine there are all that many 25-year tenured rabbis who would make the effort to do that. The beautiful Noah's Ark mezuzah he gave us that weekend hangs on Elana's doorpost. Mark did not have a family of his own, but he gave so much love to people, and he received it in equal measure in return. The massive crowd of people that came from near and far to honor him at his retirement celebration at Beth El in June of 2008 is just further testament to that fact—it was a remarkable and special evening.

Mark's sudden passing leaves a big gaping hole in the lives of all those who treasured him as a teacher, spiritual leader, and friend. He left an indelible impression on me—I wish I had more time to talk with him, seek

his advice, enjoy his company; he and I had talked about my family meeting up with him in Baltimore in August before he left for Italy, but it never came together. I am deeply saddened that I won't have that chance again. But though Mark's passing was sudden and unexpected, I can take some measure of solace knowing how he spent his last days, *without knowing they would be his last*. The day before he died, Mark, a passionate, devoted fan and supporter of opera, saw the opera Orpheo at one of the most famous opera houses in the world, L'Escaia, in Milan, and happened to get there early, at which point he ended up in conversation with one of the ushers. Not long thereafter, the usher told him, "I have a seat that I think will be more comfortable for you", and then escorted him to the Royal Box, where he sat by himself that night—it was an extraordinary opera experience unlike any he had ever experienced before. The next night, walking home from dinner, he wasn't feeling so well and stopped to sit down on a park bench from which he never got up. Rabbi Mark Loeb died in a city that he loved doing the things that he loved—serving the Jewish community and enjoying the Italian culture—and the last opera he saw was one he experienced differently, and perhaps more beautifully, than any other opera before in his life.

We don't know the length of our days and we surely don't know when people we care about will slip away. It is not, nor will it ever be, in our power to know. But no matter what the relationship we had with our loved ones whom we recall and mourn today, it is in our power to remember their values—values like community, joy, kindness, generosity, love, and loyalty, the values that Rabbi Mark Loeb exemplified in his life, the values that many of our dearly departed shared. And how do we remember their values? Each and every one of the values I just mentioned are actionable; they are in our hands to do. And so we remember them with our *deeds*—we are inspired to build and sustain community, to find joy, to demonstrate kindness, tzedakah, loyalty and love. When we take these steps, we prevent our loved ones from realizing their fear of dying a “second death”, as Rabbi Albert Lewis refers to it in Have a Little Faith—the fear of not only dying, but also subsequently being forgotten.

My good friend Hazzan Gideon Zelermyer told me that on Kol Nidrei evening before services, Rabbi Loeb used to say to him—“Go out there and give them heaven.” And you know what? If we find a way to live these sacred and holy values that Rabbi Loeb and our dearly departed share, then, in a way, in our lives we are doing just that. We are creating a more heavenly and beautiful earth. May the life and inspiration of our loved ones

continue to be a blessing for each of us as today and let them not die a second death—let our deeds never forget them.