

## Rabbi Jacob Pressman

*Harav Yaakov ben Sh'lomo u'Devorah*

Died 10/1/15. Funeral: 10/4/15

I have been honored with an impossible task. My father's achievements were so many; his talents so wide-ranging, that were I to speak for hours, I still could not do him justice.

A number of years ago someone collected oral histories from the residents of a Jewish old age home, and the title was *By Myself, I'm a Book*. Well, here are 5 books, anthologies of his brilliant sermons, collections of his wise essays in the Beverly Hills Courier, and the massive illustrated joint autobiography that my mother wrote a few years ago. I can't show you the dozens of binders that hold his career body of work. By himself, he was a library.

Over the past year, very conscious of his mortality, he often asked, "Who will be delivering my eulogy?" I would say, "Well, Dad, you've made it clear that you want me to do it." The last time I told him that, he said, "Do you want me to write it?"

So here it is: In the book of Genesis, Jacob is described as *Ish tam, yoshev ohalim*. "Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents." But *tam* is a multivalent word, it can also mean a man of integrity, wholehearted, complete. That was my dad.

But I would dare to change the wording of the text. Jacob Pressman was not *yoshev ohalim*, one who just sat in his tent. He was *boneh ohalim*, he built tents, many tents, and transformed the landscape of the Los Angeles Jewish community.

So let us consider the life of this paragon, this multi-talented man.

Jacob Pressman was born on October 26, 1919, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His parents, Solomon and Dora Pressman, were born in Russia and immigrated as young adults.

There are two fascinating details of his ancestry. As he told it, Solomon's father Hyman "was one of at least three brothers who attempted to avoid The Czar's military draft by being only sons. So they took the last name of Fuchs, Ingber, the original family name, and Pressman. The Ingber clan, we believe, were originally in the Khazar kingdom, a state that converted to Judaism in the late Middle Ages."

There is also a tragic note to his story, and one that may be a key to my father's remarkable drive. He had a younger brother, Irving, who was born profoundly disabled. He died at age six—in fact, his *yahrzeit* is this week. After the funeral Dad's mother said to him, "Jack, you are all we have now. You must make us proud of you."

Dad went on to excel at everything he did. In High School he starred in plays edited the school newspaper, was class Valedictorian, and received a full scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. His college career was equally brilliant.

After Dad's Bar Mitzvah, believe it or not, he quit Hebrew school! One day his Rabbi, Morris Goodblatt, grabbed him and said, "How would you like to make 50 cents a week." The job was teaching Hebrew school. Since this was during the Depression, the only possible answer was "yes." Rabbi Goodblatt also gave him sound pedagogical advice, "All you have to do is stay one page ahead of the kids." Dad survived, and eventually ended up teaching four days a week and leading youth services.

Jack met Margie on Yom Kippur in 1936, on the steps of their synagogue. She was already aware of him, since he was a star of their High School. One of Mom's friends invited him to her sweet 16 birthday party. Dad said, "I'll come if I can bring that girl with the glasses."

Thus began one of the great love stories of our time. They were married on June 14th, 1942. 73 years is a lifetime. Growing up, I don't ever remember seeing them argue. But I do remember that we children could never play the "mommy-daddy" game on them. They were aligned in everything. And of course, Mom was a remarkable rebbetzin

Dad went off to the Jewish Theological Seminary, and since it was wartime, he also served as the substitute rabbi at the Forest Hills Jewish Center. When he was ordained, he was offered an assistantship with the great Rabbi Milton Steinberg at Park Avenue Synagogue, and with Jacob Kohn at Sinai Temple here in Los Angeles. Dr. Louis Finkelstein, the Chancellor of the Seminary, urged him to go to LA, saying, "In the future, there will be three centers of Jewish life, New York, Jerusalem, and Los Angeles." And that young rabbi whom he dispatched to what then was considered a remote Jewish outpost, helped make his prophecy come true.

After a few years at Sinai, Dad came to what was then the Olympic Jewish Temple and Center. And here we are, before the ark he designed, in the vibrant synagogue he created.

During those early years in LA, our family grew. I was born in 1947, Joel in 1950, and Judy in 1951. Despite Dad's busy schedule, there were many family dinners together, and memorable family vacations, including visits to the Seattle and New York World's Fairs.

Meanwhile, Dad was building tents. He was involved with the founding of the University of Judaism, and served as its first registrar.

He was the first director of Camp Ramah in California. At that time people weren't sure if west coast kids would go to overnight camp. After all, you could take a bus to the beach. So my Dad led a ten-day experimental session at the site of a former hotel and boy's

boarding school in Ojai. I was there, and I remember the camp's lush crops of clinging beige dust and crawling creatures. But that initial venture was a success, and Ramah has transformed young Jewish lives ever since.

So you see the pattern, and the challenge of eulogizing Jack Pressman. There could be a long talk just about the early University of Judaism days, or Camp Ramah, or LA Hebrew High School, let alone the many pioneering and creative ways Dad built Beth Am into an exemplary shul. He worked with Shlomo Bardin in the early days of the Brandeis Camp Institute. He sold tens of millions of dollars of Israel Bonds. He founded the Akiba Academy, and, of course, he helped found the Pressman Academy, and the Maple Counseling Center in Beverly Hills. If not the founder, he was the midwife of the library minyan, opening Beth Am to an alternate minyan, way ahead of his time. After 34 years in Silicon Valley, I realize that my father had the true entrepreneurial spirit.

So it's best for me to take a different tack, and talk about his talents and his character. Again, there is no way to be comprehensive, but here are some illuminating snapshots.

Dad had a fearless self-confidence. He thought he could do anything and everything, and so he did: drawing, painting, woodwork, design, singing, playing piano by ear, dancing, writing witty parodies for any and all occasions. He built furniture for his children's rooms, the High Holiday ark for the services of the Carthay Circle Theater. And did you know that for years, often late at night at home, he did the paste-up of the Beth Am bulletin? To this day, the smell of rubber cement evokes memories.

Who remembers the synagogue shows from the fifties? He and Cantor Abraham Salkov did shtik. In one, Dad was Liberace. In another, he taught himself some guitar chords so he could play Elvis Presley. In another he was Dean Martin and Salkov was Jerry Lewis. I have a clear memory of my father painstakingly painting a disk of foam rubber to resemble a pizza, so that when, as Martin, he sang, "When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amoré!" Salkov threw the pizza at him!

I can only imagine the impact of this young rabbi entertaining so brilliantly, at a time when pulpit style was generally very formal and distant.

But there's another lesson in this story. The creativity, energy, and time he spent on what was literally a throwaway gag, he applied to everything he did: whether sermon writing, teaching, pastoral work, or institution building. That was one of the profound lessons he taught me: that Judaism and Jewish life are important, and demand our best talents.

And by the way, in his later years he was still singing and entertaining. When I told my congregants about the celebrations for his 80th, 85th and 89th birthday, they couldn't

believe it. After hearing me describe the 85th birthday event, someone said, “My father never gets up from his recliner!” Judy remembers that she said to him, “This is so amazing, you put so much work into this!” He told her, “This isn’t just for me. I’m raising money for the synagogue.”

Dad’s self-confidence and courage extended to every aspect of his life. Even as a Rabbinical student, he was never afraid to speak out clearly about the issues of the day. In *Dear Friends*, his remarkable collection of historical sermons, the first chapter a talk he gave in 1938, when he was an 18-year-old sophomore at Penn. It’s titled “Is Zionism the Answer?” As you can imagine, the answer was yes, but listen to a few of his passionate words: “Night falls over Tel Aviv, the only Jewish city in the world. As the stars brighten, bonfires leap up to meet them from streets named after the lovers and builders of Zion. Jewish boy scouts pass in the street carrying their blue and white flags. Schoolgirls sing a Hebrew song. The broad shouldered young chalutzim, who have made the stony land bear fruit and have cleared the swamps, dance together in the square. Farmers, professors, little children, everyone speaks the Hebrew tongue...There is proof here: proof that Zionism is the answer.”

I learned about one of Dad’s great moments of courage only when I read his book. The 1950’s saw a great wave of fear-mongering and demagoguery about the threat of Communist subversion. The state of California was threatening to deny tax exemption to any non-profit whose leadership would not sign a loyalty oath. Most religious institutions went along. In a time when most people were intimidated, my father spoke out against signing the oath.

Many of you know of his support of the civil rights movement. I remember seeing my father off at Burbank Airport with a group of clergy to join Martin Luther King in the March on Montgomery—another book of its own—and I remember being frightened on his behalf, and very proud.

Another facet of this gem of a man was his genuine love of people, and his respect for everyone. Marshall Tempkin used to drive my father around to weddings and other events on Sundays. He told me that it didn’t matter if it was a bare-bones wedding in someone’s backyard or a sumptuous affair in a five-star hotel, Dad gave each couple his complete focus and his full talents.

Ultimately, that human concern, and its impact on thousands of people, is Dad’s legacy, which highlights yet another reason why this eulogy is necessarily incomplete. He inspired many people to become better Jews, to become Jewish leaders, and enter the rabbinate. Those waves and ripples of influence are immeasurable.

One small example from the dozens of emails I have received from Rabbinic colleagues. Someone I don't know wrote, "I met your dad at Brandeis Camp in California in the summer of 1949. I was a young staff member at the Camp at that time. Your dad so impressed me that although I had an excellent Jewish background, including Yeshivah training, it was the first time I ever thought about considering the Rabbinate. Our meeting was brief, only an evening, but his influence was pivotal to my life."

Over the years, people have said to me, "You must have learned so much from your father about being a rabbi." And that's true, but not in the way they thought. They usually meant things like pulpit skills or how to do a wedding. But the more important, I learned, from word and deed, his philosophy of the rabbinate. Here are just a few examples:

You can and should be friends with congregants. Some rabbis were afraid to let their professional guard down, but he and my mother formed decades-long friendships, and many of those dear friends are here today, mourning like family.

Everyone deserves your respect. I already spoke of this, and will just add that this really was an expression of *adam nivra b'tzelem elohim*—every person is created in the image of God.

When you write a sermon or *drash*, always ask yourself, "what do you want them to do?" You are not there to be a dispassionate professor of Jewish studies—Torah is a guide to life. Help people to grasp it so they can live by it. And my father was the master. To read his sermons is to encounter greatness. Rabbi Bradley Artson put it beautifully in an e-mail to me: "He held out a vision of how a rabbi could move people's emotions while elevating their minds as well."

Never be afraid to talk about your deepest beliefs. If you love God and feel God's love in your life—talk about it. My father was an *ish tam* in this aspect, too: a man of simple faith.

Be a friend to rabbis—we need each other. My father consistently reached out to colleagues in distress, and generously helped all who asked. My inbox is filled with testimonials from rabbis of all ages who knew him as a rabbi's rabbi.

And on a personal level, at my wedding he told me, "Treat your wife like a queen." And he was the greatest model of that. He loved my mother unconditionally and completely, and she was his partner in so many great ventures. In fact, everything I've described today could have the note "with the support and active involvement of his loving wife Marjorie."

In his later years, he showed how to have a productive retirement, and then he taught us grace in the face of adversity. He declined physically and then cognitively, he felt deeply the loss of my dear wife Beverly, and my brother Joel's death was a wound that did

not heal. But through it all he kept a positive attitude. Just last week, my Niece Aviva asked him how he was doing, and he said, “On scale from 1 to 10, I’m a 9!”

And that also captures another facet of my Father. He was really funny. In fact, he could be a bit of a *mazik*. It’s no surprise that he won the Funniest Rabbi in Los Angeles award. And that was also a life lesson—sermons and Jewish teaching should not be humorless!

For all his public persona, my father also loved and took pride in his children, his grandchildren Aliza, Benjamin, Rebecca, Aviva and Elijah, and his three great-grandchildren: Batsheva, Avital, and Nathan.

He expressed his love of us in many ways, “I’ve loved three things in my life: Judaism, music, and Israel. And I have a son, Daniel, who became a Rabbi; a son, Joel, who fulfilled my secret wishes to be a teacher, performer, musician and conductor; and a daughter, Judy, as lovely as the dawn who fulfilled my dream of Aliyah.” In his last years, he went out of his way to tell us all that he loved us, and we returned his love.

And so I’ve said a lot, and yet, not enough. Because Jack Pressman’s book of life was a library, with volumes on Jewish learning, Jewish leadership, institution building, love of the Jewish people, love of family, love of God, courage, creativity, and many more.

My father excelled at every aspect of the rabbinate, but most importantly, he excelled as a human being. As my brother Joel wrote in his introduction to the second volume of Dad’s sermons, “Every sermon begins with ‘Dear Friends.’ Not ‘Dearly Beloved,’ or ‘My Children,’ or any other ‘to Whom It May Concern’ salutation. To this day, Rabbi Jack remains a man wholly fascinated by people.”

Dad was indeed an *ish tam*, complete and authentic, and all his talents were employed in the service of his great heart; in helping others; in serving God.

Many people, including my congregants, treasure the memory of Dad’s annual blessings, so I’m going to give him the last word with some excerpts from the last one he wrote, five years ago. I warn you, in recent years, conscious that each year might be his last, I teared up. So who knows how today will go? Pay particular attention to the end, because it sums up so much of who he was.

In the New Year may you discover that your home is built on solid rock able to withstand hurricanes, floods, mud slides, earthquakes, wildfires and escalating insurance and tax rates.

May it be free of mold, mildew and mice, and safe from termites, rug mites, mosquito bites, and family fights.

If you have trouble hearing, may you give in and get a hearing aid. If you have trouble seeing, may you get respectable spectacles. If you cannot drive, may you cultivate

friends who do. If you cannot chew, may you acquire designer dentures. If you cannot smell, may you take frequent showers.

May your cardiologist hear no murmur, your dentist see no cavity, your dermatologist see no lesion, your ophthalmologist see no cataract, and your proctologist tell you, "You look marvelous!"

...May your children take a liking to you, and your grandchildren call you even when they don't want money, and your great-grandchildren teach you how to use your text messenger.

May all seven billion people everywhere in the world learn to love the people everywhere in the world so that we can survive the twenty-first century without blowing up everyone in the world.

And should you ever feel alone and unloved, may you know that you are never alone, for God is with you, in you, and loves you, and so do I. May Messiah come this year, and if he does not, may you live as if she has, and be blessed with the happiest, healthiest, and wealthiest year of your life.

Thank you Dad, for all your wisdom, for all your love, for all your gifts. Your memory, and your legacy, will always be a blessing.

Rabbi Daniel Pressman