

## AZKARAH FOR RABBI AARON PANKEN, z"l

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2019 | WGF ALUM SARI LAUFER (CLASS 14)

For weeks after Aaron's death, and still today, I kept coming back to a text from the *Gemara* about how we mourn a great teacher. Asking about the public obligations of mourning, and for whom we are obligated, and noting that the answer is usually only our close relatives, the rabbis teach: **When a Torah scholar dies, everyone is their relative.**

It certainly felt true of Aaron, then and now. So, feeling the *kaved*—the heaviness of remembering my teacher and with great *kavod* (honor)—of doing so in a room full of cherished teachers and mentors, I feel deeply privileged to speak today. Thank you, Or.

When first asked, though, my immediate instinct was that there must be another person who was more of Aaron's student. There must be someone here who sat with him week after week in a classroom. Someone here who wrote their thesis under his guidance. Someone here who felt his hands on their head as they became a rabbi with his blessing. And as I said as much to Or, but he gave me this gift anyway. Perhaps because he knew that like anyone who encountered Aaron, once or a thousand times, he was my teacher in deep, powerful ways.

I consider myself one of the lucky ones whose interactions with Aaron were myriad—from the halls of HUC to the stones of Jerusalem, on the bimah at Rodeph Sholom in New York, in a zillion conference rooms and on the shores of the Stockbridge Bowl. And while I appreciated all of those encounters with my teacher then, I treasure them now.

At the beginning, my attempts to follow in Aaron's footsteps were entirely coincidental. While Elana Kagan and Lin Manuel Miranda have far eclipsed us in fame, I am equally as proud to share an alma mater with Aaron. And while I'm no guitar-playing pied piper, I tried my best to be the hip young rabbi for Rodeph Sholom as well—one out of three isn't bad. But as Aaron became more formally my teacher, my *rav* and my *Rosh Yeshiva*, I realized that I wanted my emulation to be conscious. He was a role-model for me as a pastor, a scholar, a teacher, a spouse, a parent and a human.

And here's the thing. I think that everyone in this room, everyone watching and just about everyone who did have a chance to learn from Aaron would say the same thing. And in this world, that is remarkable. He had a way—or maybe it was just HIS WAY—of making everyone feel known; he remembered you, he'd stop and chat with you, he'd crack that Aaron grin and he would listen to you. Never once, when Aaron was leading a class or session, did I feel embarrassed or afraid to offer an opinion or ask a question. Because Aaron always seemed to want to hear it, to respond to it, to make each of his students feel like they had something important to share.

Aaron was a mensch. Simplistic, to be sure, but also it was my deepest experience of him. In all that he was—and perhaps especially in my encounters with his intellect and his Torah—he was authentic: funny, human, a

little mischievous and deeply curious about the world around him.

I have a habit with my favorite teachers of jotting down their *bon mots* as much as I take notes on their Torah. After a session with Aaron, my page would look like one of Talmud. The text would be in the center, and he was a masterful teacher of text. His interpretations would surround that and I had to write quickly to keep up because he was SO SMART. And quick. His intellect was powerful and could dwarf pretty much anyone in the rooms where I encountered it, but he never needed or wanted it to. He wanted to hear from us, even to learn from us.

While I often teach from those notes on a text I learned from him, I live from—and treasure—those notes scribbled on the edges—his witty observations, sarcastic asides or mischievous jokes. He blended it all seamlessly, and whether consciously or unconsciously, I strive to do the same when I have the honor of teaching Torah.

(I always felt privileged that familial connections let me connect with him and Lisa in the Berkshires, but other than the occasional life jacket or swim trunks and a little more relaxation—he wasn't DIFFERENT there. And I respected that and admired it. Ben and I, in mourning Aaron's death, reflected on how, for both of us, Aaron and Lisa were teachers in marriage; they were always partners and I loved interacting with them and seeing their fierce love, support of and belief in one another.)

Another student of his would, perhaps, cite a favorite text or teaching they learned from Aaron. But while I know that his knowledge was vast, and I know how passionately he taught the texts he loved, I did not find "the one" to share.

But just last week, encountered the text about the Mishkan, which gives rise the rabbinic idea that we should strive to be *tocho k'boro*, that our insides should match our outsides. I usually read that as living with authenticity; other than obvious social conventions, we should not be different in the different parts of our lives. I do not think that is an easy task and I treasure the people in my life who inspire me to work harder at that. Aaron was always that for me.

He never put on airs, never demanded respect or deference—not as a rabbi, a professor, a dean or as President. But we gave it to him, with the deepest love. He deserved all of that and more.

*Tocho k'boro*—Aaron was always Aaron, and he was truly one of the greats: a great pastor, a great teacher, a great intellect, a great spouse, a great parent....a great person. One of our alums noted to me that his goodness was uncomplicated, and that in and of itself is a rare legacy.

In all senses of the word, he was *mori v'rabi; rabbeinu moroteinu*. Lisa—thank you for sharing him with us. And to you Aaron, to your memory—thank you for the generosity of your Torah and all the ways you taught—and teach—it to us.

***Zichrono livracha—we miss you and always will.***