

Mourning a Pure Soul

(02/02/2021)

Rabbi Moshe Ulmer passed away last week. May his beloved wife, Rivka, a Professor at Bucknell University, be comforted among the Mourners of Zion in Israel.

I first met Moshe in Williamsport. When he found out that my wife was an Ulmer, he walked up to her, never having met her before, and said: "Nice to see you, cousin." Whether they were actually related somewhere long in the past is unknown, but the Ulmers became like family.

Moshe was a unique soul. He was tentative, delicate and thoughtful, but also robust, opinionated and strong-willed. Most importantly, Moshe Ulmer was a mensch, who cared about everybody and everything. Whether it was politics or an individual struggle for identity, Moshe was there. We enjoyed arguing about politics, and never was a dispute followed by anger. It would be wonderful if more people could be like that.

When one of my kids had some difficulty deciding on her future educationally, Moshe would sit down with her and make suggestions and recommendations. But he did not leave it at that. He would call and send emails to follow up to see if she had any other questions or if she had checked out the educational opportunities he had mentioned to her.

I once asked Moshe why he stopped being a lawyer. He told me that it was just too hard to lose cases when he represented poor and disenfranchised people in California. He represented those who typically were not in a position to afford high-priced lawyers but nevertheless who had legitimate disputes and needed representation. He was uncomfortable with the winning and losing component of the law because it did not fit his gentle and determined personality. Right was right, and justice should always prevail. Unfortunately, that is not always the case.

Moshe then described to me how he began his journey as a Rabbi. He took on what is probably the most difficult ministerial job; serving congregations who were without a Rabbi or were in transition and needed somebody temporarily until they could get their act together. It is difficult enough serving as a clergyman when everyone thinks that G-d is on their side. Moshe, nevertheless, served in one of the most difficult capacities as an interim Rabbi at a number of different locations. He spoke about the difficulties and challenges, as well as the rewards of doing that job.

Moshe became a regular at Congregation Ohev Sholom in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. At one point, we had a lovely young Rabbi, Shaul Rappeport, who Moshe was determined to take under his wing. As a small, informal congregation, Rabbi Ulmer would not hesitate to ask penetrating questions and to challenge the Rabbi, who loved Moshe as much as Moshe loved him. Sometimes Moshe would even speak up during a drash, or sermon, to give his own point of view. I know that Rabbi Rappeport relished the opportunity of

interacting with this older, very wise colleague. They were different in many ways from a point of view of their religious training and practice, but that did not stop the two Rabbis from demonstrating the kind of mutual affection which we should all embrace.

For a short time, until his health prohibited it, Rabbi Ulmer served on the Board of Ohev Sholom while I was President. At every Board meeting, Moshe had something to say that was thoughtful and of value.

Watching Rabbi Ulmer as his illness progressed was difficult, to say the least. Often, I have wondered that when we hurt over the suffering of others, are we really worried about them or ourselves? Perhaps the truth is that when a good human being suffers, we are all affected. It is said in Jewish lore that the world is sustained by the good deeds of a small number of people. Moshe Ulmer was one of those people the Talmud was talking about. The Pirkei Avot, the last book of the Talmud, has a saying that is very descriptive of Rabbi Moshe Ulmer: "Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge each person favorably." Chapter 1 Mishna 6, Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Perachya. Moshe Ulmer was to others a teacher, a friend, and he judged everyone favorably. To the very end of his life, Rabbi Ulmer studied via Zoom with his close friend, Dr. Jan Schwartz, and Rabbi Yisroel Baumgarten in Lewisburg.

It is an understatement to say that Moshe Ulmer sustained a life well lived. He was an example to us all, and his memory will be a blessing to all those who knew him.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Humphrey,
Waters & Dohrmann
161 West Third Street
Williamsport, PA 17701
(570) 323-8711 (telephone)
(570) 323-4192 (facsimile)*

Cliff Rieders is a Board-Certified Trial Advocate in Williamsport, is Past President of the Pennsylvania Trial Lawyers Association and a past member of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority. None of the opinions expressed necessarily represent the views of these organizations.