

The Loss of My Rabbi, My Friend

HaRav Yirmiyahu Fox was not a Rabbi of any congregation I ever belonged to. He was simply my friend, who fulfilled the role of confidant and, in large measure, adopted family.

I knew Jerry Fox in high school. He was one of the really smart kids. He spoke several foreign languages, hung out with the erudite top-of-the-class types, and was gifted in the arts and letters. We hung out in different crowds. He helped to start a Reform Synagogue in Great Neck, Temple Isaiah. My crowd were the more religious types, and our paths rarely crossed. In fact, I am not sure that we liked each other very much in high school.

At New York University, he was granted a full scholarship, including spending money. He deserved the credit, having graduated at the top of his high school class in Great Neck, and, more importantly, he needed it. His father passed away when he was very young. I never knew his father, but I remember hearing that he was a cartoonist with an office at the Empire State Building. That always impressed me.

Mrs. Fox was a seamstress, originally having hailed from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She was an incredibly hard-working, devoted mother, a woman with an iron will and strong hands. She and Jerry sometimes butted heads, and I was a receptive sounding board for the future Rabbi's expressions of frustration now and then.

We met frequently on the Long Island Railroad, commuting to NYU. We said nasty things to each other, but, for some strange reason, we frequently sat next to one another anyway. Jerry was on such a strict budget, that he would wait for the train to arrive at Penn Station and pick up a *New York Times* discarded by one of the rich banker commuters. I would exit the train promptly, and I told Jerry that sooner or later the doors of the train would close, and he would be trapped inside. Well, finally it happened. He was looking for a barely read copy of *The New York Times* while I waited for him on the platform outside. The doors closed, and, sure enough, he was banging to get out. I managed to flag down a conductor, and rescued Jerry from being carried away into the long, dark tunnel leading to nowhere.

One day, Jerry said to me on the train, "You know, we ought to stop being so sarcastic to each other. After all, we are both doing this commuting thing together. Let's be friends." From that moment on, we did indeed become close friends.

Our intellectual forays into the meandering of the human spirit centered on a debate, one day, about whether a man sitting on a train should offer his seat to a pregnant working woman. Jerry, much more liberal than I was, took the position that equality meant that a man should not have to offer the woman the seat. Just to get Jerry's goat, I promptly got up and offered my seat to the woman we were both talking about. Jerry

looked off in the distance, and did not deign to insult me for my obvious attempt to slight him.

One fine spring day, we were standing on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Fourth Street, or perhaps it was Waverly. Across the street was a great looking blonde, whom Jerry said that he had met in class and would love to date. In my typical no-subtleties fashion, I encouraged him to introduce me to her. He did, they dated, and eventually they got married. I was best man at their wedding.

Carol was the perfect antidote for Jerry. Thoughtful, kind, quirky to some, beautiful and tolerant. Jerry hit a home run and he knew it.

Shortly after they got married, I went off to law school and Jerry to rabbinical college. I was invited over to the first dinner Carol made. I still remember that dinner. She did not put enough water in the pot to cook the spaghetti, and what she presented to me was a lump of undercooked, congealed spaghetti, with a little red sauce on top. It was barely edible, but I did my best to lie and say that it was the greatest meal I ever had. They were such a cute couple.

One indication that Carol is one of the most well-disciplined, courteous and thoughtful people in the universe, if not the metaverse, was when I took Jerry and Carol sailing. I was always at my best when I had people under my command, trapped on my sailboat, an unwilling audience to vignettes, stories, and perambulatory ramblings. It was a beautiful day, and not much in the way of waves or rough sea. Carol turned to me and, with the greatest of decorum asked, "Do you mind if I throw up?" Assuming she was joking, I replied, "Of course not, so long as you do it over the side." Carol immediately upchucked over the side of the boat, and thanked me for granting her permission. After that, I imposed a new rule, that no one could go sailing with me unless they signed a statement in advance that they would not throw up while on the sailing excursion.

We stayed in touch, and when I married Kim, we were making plans to leave for Israel on our honeymoon. I talked with Jerry, only to find out that he and Carol were also going to Israel and had almost the same itinerary that we did. They were the long-time married couple, perhaps ten years by then, and we were the newlyweds. We had an absolutely great time with Jerry and Carol, to the extent that our itineraries overlapped. It was marvelous for Cogan Station Kim to get to know New York Jerry and Carol. We bonded as couples immediately.

The years progressed, and we frequently talked about our struggles and the highs and lows which life offered. While I was working hard to make it as a lawyer, Jerry traveled as a Rabbi throughout the south. He officiated at several different congregations, where he never seemed quite happy. He once told me that, "the Jews in the south want a country club, not a synagogue." That bothered him a lot, and, as time progressed, he became more conservative in his views about religion as well as politics.

I would complain to Jerry about partners, the occasional unpleasant client, and problematic synagogue management issues in Williamsport, while he told me stories of mistreatment and disrespect which he faced in the southern communities that he served. We also had many good times to share, whether it was about our families, our kids, or just life in general.

At one point, I conned Jerry into writing a booklet concerning ten questions that people have about the Jewish people. The idea was to give it to college Rabbis and make it available to Jewish organizations throughout the country. The scholarship was all Jerry's, but the connections were mine. We published several editions of the book, and it is still around and given out on some campuses. General issues of anti-Semitism have been surpassed by the horrors of Jihadist terrorist attacks on the State of Israel, and the challenges faced by the Jewish community in the United States and Western Europe.

I regret that I did not go back to our high school reunion, when Jerry asked me to attend with him. At that time, there was a lot going on in my life. My mother was at the end stages of her own life, having surpassed the age of 100. When Jerry was back in Great Neck, he did not miss the opportunity to visit with my mother. He was the last Rabbi she saw, and it meant all the more to the family that it was Jerry Fox. Jerry had been a regular in our home, in years bygone, and while I am not sure that Mom recognized Jerry, I have to believe that, at some level of consciousness, there was an awareness based upon a long and caring relationship. Jerry was one of my parents' favorites, and for good reason.

When I last saw Jerry, he was in a nursing home in Maryland. He still had all his marbles, and he was extremely happy to see me. He assured me, as I must have looked very worried, that he was not in pain and that he was doing well. He showed me the pictures on his wall drawn by grandchildren, and he expressed great pride in his family.

My own kids had such high regard for Jerry, that my oldest daughter, Sasha, asked him to officiate at her wedding in Brooklyn. He had the kindness and thoughtfulness to defer, as appropriate, to Rabbi Portal from Williamsport.

We did not always agree on politics or religion, but we grew closer with the passage of time. Notwithstanding the differences we had when we were younger, from the time we decided to be friends until Jerry's passing, we overcame any differences with mutual respect and the kind of love which only grows when planted in the soil of experience and the ability to accept others who are different.

I recall one time when in college, or perhaps it was law school by then, Jerry calling me on a Sunday and wanting to know if I wanted to see some X-rated movie with him. Such movies were becoming mainstream at that time, flicks like *Deep Throat*. I expressed surprise and was somewhat judgmental in my response. Jerry expressed the view that, "If I am going to be a Rabbi and counsel people, I should at least experience some measure of what other people think is important." I was either too shy or socially backward to go with Jerry to the movie.

When Jerry Fox, Bob Zausner and I attained Phi Beta Kappa status at New York University, I am positive that it was my mother's proudest moment. Finally, her son, who did not care much for high school, sat with the elites of Great Neck North High School. The nachus that she felt was palpable. I remember being glad to please her, and, in some measure, I thought I would be more acceptable to the likes of Jerry Fox. In college, I helped him with psychology since I somehow managed to secure a role as an instructor, and he got me through Biblical Hebrew. Thanks to high school Spanish, I did not need to take a language, but someone convinced me to enroll in a class in Biblical Hebrew. What I did not realize was that the people in the class would be brilliant, knowledgeable theologians, like the Catholic Priest who sat next to me. The other students knew Hebrew already, and for them this was kind of a refresher and something a little bit different. I would have flunked but for the help of Jerry Fox, and today, rather than being a lawyer, I would be down at the docks slugging rats. He probably would have done just fine in psychology without me, but at least I thought I was being useful.

In recent years, we did not see each other as much or even talk to each other as often as we should have. Life happens, and we were both busy with family, career, moving about geographically, and dealing with our aging parents. I was surprised and upset when I heard of Jerry's illness, and I knew, in talking to Carol, that he would not have an extended time on earth.

Only recently, I was fortunate to be able to see Jerry in Maryland when I was driving back from court in Virginia. Unfortunately, I did not see Carol; but the visit with Jerry was meaningful, happy, and terribly sad.

As we say in Hebrew, *Baruch Dayan Ha'emet*, "Blessed is the True Judge".

I have no doubt that, as Rabbi Fox sits with the great and wise sages in Gan Edan, he will have thoughtful and meaningful repertoire of thoughts to convey. He will be one of the honored guests at the Shabbat table, and will be respected by all his peers, as he should be.

While I have lost a great friend, the memories of his decency, humanity, and caring for others will never be forgotten.

One last story. We were sitting at the Outer Banks in North Carolina with Jerry and Carol and my oldest daughter, Sasha. Carol liked to describe herself as the quintessential "dumb blonde". Blonde she was, but not dumb. She mentioned that during driver's education, she was having difficulty figuring out how to put the key in the ignition. The teacher said, "Teeth up." At that command, she lifted up her head, opened her mouth, and showed her top teeth. We all had a great laugh about that, and teased Carol about it ever since. Jerry loved the story. Carol, at this difficult time, keep your teeth up!

True friends learn from friends. I owe a great deal to Jerry Fox as my personally adopted Rabbi Fox. We talked about Judaism, philosophy and history, one time until the early morning rising sun. I was a student of Rabbi Fox, and here I use a formal designation, and well as of another Great Neck friend, Lawrence Schiffman. Learning from them was a lot more fun than sitting in a classroom because I could ask questions, challenge them, argue, and perhaps even show some minor aptitude. These were relationships that cannot be discounted in terms of how they affected my own trajectory. Jerry, the Rav, was a one-of-a-kind human being, unique in a way that we all are but special in a way that only he could be.

It is not easy for me to express love for others in writing, but I love both of you, Jerry and Carol, and have been a far improved man for the relationship that we have all shared together.

*Clifford A. Rieders, Esquire
Rieders, Travis, Dohrmann, Mowrey
Humphrey & Waters
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.