

Remembrance of Mike Ferrara by Rabbi Mike Rothbaum – Sunday, January 12, 2020

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In the Jewish scriptural calendar, this week marks the beginning of the reading of a new book of Torah — *sefer Shemot*, in English, the book of Exodus. We know Exodus as the Jewish foundational story, the Jewish liberation story, in which the Israelites are tormented and oppressed in Pharaoh's Egypt, and a God of justice liberates them.

But this story of a people's liberation is also about individual people – the most famous of which is, of course, Moses. We know Moses as the leader, the liberator, the lawgiver. But before any of that, Moses is a boy. A baby. In a world that is harsh and unforgiving — a child who is loved.

Mike Ferrara – *Mordechai ben Mordechai v'Dina*, son of Deena and Bob, sister of Liz — also lived in a harsh and unforgiving world.

But like Moses, he persevered. Like Moses, he was loved.

Before we know anything about Moses, before we even know his name, we are told he's a son, with parents. *V'teireh oto ki tov...* The Torah says his mother saw that he was a good and beautiful boy.

Before we knew about Mike's challenges, before he had a diagnosis, he was a beautiful boy.

Growing up, Liz "saw him as my smarter and more athletic older brother. He could run fast and do math, things I could never do."

His friend Laura: "he was a typical boy in a lot of ways... we all loved Star Wars and Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi and we played "pretend" Star Wars stuff and traded action cards. He loved video games and to play outside and build forts."

And he could be a sensitive boy. Once when Bob & Deena were driving back from Brookline in separate cars, and Liz rode with Bob, he insisted on riding with Deena. "You'll be lonely," he said, "if you drive alone."

He loved soccer and hockey — a highlight for him was spending an afternoon with Bobby Orr at his home. Laura remembers their two families traveling to Disney World together, staying in the same hotel together.

Close to Deena's dad, professor at BU. So excited to see grandpa, sitting on his lap, making up stories to tell — or just sharing a bowl of Froot Loops.

As he grew up, we're told that Moses was incredibly smart and talented boy.

A great math student, a teacher at the Fenn School called Mike "Best intuitive mathematician" he'd ever taught.

Great chess player

He became a bar mitzvah here at CBE, and "did a great job," Never complained.

He remained a strong athlete, played wing on his hockey traveling team.

At Kimball Union Academy, a 200-year-old boarding school, he scored the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest grade on the National Latin Exam in the school's history

Though we also know Moses by his achievements, his life was marked by constant struggle, a boy in such danger that he could never stay in one place very long. Though they loved him greatly, Moses' parents know that it is dangerous for him to stay in his home. They send him down the Nile, praying that he will be safe.

And, for awhile, he is indeed safe, raised in the privilege of Pharaoh's palace. Until, one day, he sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew and — perhaps in rage — he strikes out and kills the taskmaster.

And, after that, he knows he has to leave.

Those of us who know Mike will feel the resonance of a boy, of a young man, both *in* danger and who also capable of *creating* danger, a man never at rest.

In Moses' case, despite a life of constant movement and chronic stress, there is still love in his life. His parents, his sister, Pharaoh's daughter, his wife Tziporah — and, yes, God — they all love Moses.

Even at his most challenging, Mike seemed to have a knack for inspiring love in people. Friends would coach him on how to navigate the world.

Laura: "He is the reason the Ferraras and the Tannenbaums became friends 44 yrs ago and for that I am forever and eternally grateful."

Liz: "It didn't occur to me not to love him even when I hated him."

Bob and Deena said that, even at the depths of his illness, "He always told us he loved us." Every time they said goodbye, Mike would tell Deena "I love you mom."

The relationships that Mike maintained, despite his profound illness, are a testament to the power of love in this world. They remind us that every soul is created in the image of the Divine. That God, and God's love, reside in all of God's creations. Whoever and wherever they are.

Moses' life was one of relentless struggle. He lived a life on the run because of the oppression of Pharaoh's Egypt. Many of us never got to meet Mike because he didn't live here in Massachusetts. But he was not on the run from Pharaoh. Rather, his challenge was to find a home that honored both his illness and his spirit. Bob explained to me that Mike was out in Minnesota, because it's a state that truly understands mental health.

Which means, tragically, that Massachusetts is not. The galling truth is that Mike, the same Mike who as a boy was worried about Deena being lonely if she had to drive alone, could not live in his home state because his home state did not take care of him. It is an indictment of all of us — and a challenge to all of us. We must insist that we do better. That men like Mike never have to ride alone.

At the end of the parashah, Moses levels a challenge at God. *V'hatzeil lo-hitzalta et-amecha*, Moses says. "You still haven't delivered the people."

Those who suffer mental illness, too, await deliverance. From science, yes. But also from those who fail to devote the resources to properly care for them.

Mike Ferrara had a brain that wasn't healthy. But Mike was more than his brain disease. He wasn't a set of symptoms, or a diagnosis. He was a man, a man who loved hockey, and chess, and Star Wars, and junk food, and his family. A family who loved him right back. Who never abandoned him.

I wish I could say the same about the rest of us.

May we honor Mike's memory by raising up the beauty and love that lived in his sweet soul. And by standing up, today, for men like Mike — who all deserve life, all entitled to love, each and every one created in God's image.