

Jacob Neusner

1932-2016

Eulogy prepared by Noam Neusner

When we were growing up in Providence, our childhood had a soundtrack and it was this: The constant clacking of a typewriter from the office in the upstairs attic.

We didn't think that was odd. Just like we didn't think it strange that while other kids wore sweatshirts emblazoned with sports team logos or from the latest fashionable labels, ours came from universities in faraway and difficult-to-pronounce universities like Tübingen or Heidelberg or Malmö.

Other kids went on vacation to Disney or Hawaii. We went to university towns like Bologna and Cambridge.

Letters to camp were postmarked from South Africa and Australia and Germany and Israel.

And they were typewritten.

In quadruplicate.

We each got the same letters, and to denote that it was meant for us, he would circle our name in the salutation. That was it.

I saved the letters, and they make for remarkably revealing reading. His latest book project is a “piece of cake” – a review was “grunt work.”

He was a working father, telling us about his work.

And we were bored senseless -- mostly.

We didn't think it was odd that every Friday night we would get to meet two or three students from Brown University... or a great and famous artist...or a visiting professor from another town... or a Pulitzer Prize winning novelist.

Again, we didn't think it was exciting.

It was our duty to shake everyone's hand firmly. Look them in the eye. Answer their questions directly. Help our mother serve the meal and clean up.

Perform a mini recital for our guests after dinner.

And otherwise, just bear with it.

Years later, we would meet these former students... and they would ask us what it was like to be a child of the "great Professor Neusner."

To be a child of Jack Neusner was to be a child of wonder and discovery and fun.

Reading my father's books gives you perhaps only 10% of a window into who he was.

There on the pages of his works were his most profound discoveries and insights. He could dazzle in those pages, and he delighted in it.

But when the typewriter or the keys of the keyboard stopped clacking away, there was another person who loved and laughed and lived boldly.

Most of all he loved dogs – his dogs, Shapur, then Winston, then Koby. Even as the Parkinson's took away so much of his ability to communicate, dogs would open him up like a magical drug. He was especially fond of his grand-dogs – and we can all admit it, his favorite was Margalit's dog, Shuli.

He would loosen up. Smile more.

In 1984, he wrote to us about a trip he took with Winston, who was a bright dog but poorly behaved. "I took him for a walk up to the new CVS store. He heeled the entire way, coming and going. I took him into the store and said: Sit, stay and he sat and stayed. So I bought him a reward – some treif chewy bar – and then he acted like a total ass. So he's still our normal dog after all."

Second only to dogs were sweets and desserts. There wasn't a cake or a pie or a cookie that he didn't love – except the time my mom tried a tofu honey cake recipe for my birthday. We all sat silently and made a

brave show of it. Until my dad, in his classic manner, said through his laughter: “Imma, this is AWFUL!”

His favorite for a long time was the birthday cakes they made at Publix in Florida.

Then Poly came into the family, and she raised the game quite a bit. Especially with the prune pie.

We were at the party after Lev’s bar mitzvah in Chicago. Eli noticed that he hadn’t touched one of the small cakes on his plate. “Baba, why didn’t you eat that one?” He paused a second and said. “Because I didn’t see it.”

He loved his daughters in law and made them feel at home from their first day in our family. Jill, Poly and Andrea all could have been intimidated by this man.

But with them he was gentle and loving. And with his in-laws too – they will tell you that he was easy to get along with, right from the beginning.

He loved adding to his family... and he wasn't ashamed to say that he loved adding grandchildren most of all.

So Emma, Lila, Nani, Lev, Leora, Mikey, Miranda, Natalie (and Ilana – who is in Israel), please know that Baba adored you... took pride in everything you did... and knew that you will give credit to his name. Which by the way, will follow you around the rest of your life whenever you walk into a synagogue or any Jewish institution. “Are you related to...?”

He loved talking about money and insurance and investing. He always told us how much he was earning, and saving. There was one time somebody paid him for a lecture with a giant salmon. He wasn't offended – it was an excellent salmon.

But we never thought we had a lot of money. My dad – both of our parents – didn't want us raised to think we were entitled to anything. He wanted us working, producing, earning. He hated the idea of unpaid internships. If you don't get paid, you're not being valued, he would say. And he was right.

He wanted us to be A-students, and we mostly disappointed him. But he had a surprisingly high threshold for our complaints about our schools. One day, Margalit cut school at the Providence Hebrew Day School. She was in sixth grade. Fed up with the kids and the teachers. She was walking down Elmgrove Avenue in Providence and who happened to be driving by?

My dad. But he did the most amazing thing. He didn't yell at her or get her in trouble. He just took her back to school, no commentary. He understood: School can sometimes be a struggle – especially at that age.

He wasn't a practical joker or a joke-teller. He preferred straight-up slapstick. He loved Benny Hill. He loved any situation where someone was on the precipice of minor personal social embarrassment – especially if he was somehow involved.

When he went to meet the Pope, he wrote later that at that moment, his mind was not consumed with what you'd think – you know, the history-making quality of his visit, here, the grandson of common shtetl Jews, on the threshold of meeting the Holy See, as intellectual equals... but rather, he wasn't sure if his zipper was up or down.

And, for the record, it was NOT up.

But he raised it at the last second.

I remember at my own bar mitzvah, when I was just about to chant the kohein Aliyah, and so it was just me, and him and the gabbai, and I must have looked white as a ghost with fear.

And he just looked at me and cupped his hands in front of him, which was his international signal of: “Do you want to throw up? Because if you do, I’ll catch it!”

He was an unconventional father of pretty conventional kids. We loved sports, but he was not a great athlete. Far from it.

When we got him to come outside to play catch or basketball, his efforts were awful, and he knew it. We tried to engage him in talking about sports and he loved frustrating us: Did the Celtics score a touchdown? How many home runs did the Pats have?

But he still indulged us and supported our sports fanaticism. He bought us season tickets to Brown football games, which I think was more because it got us out of the house on Saturday afternoons so he and mom could nap.

He would take us to the Pawtucket Red Sox, but would usually just drop us off – this was when you could abandon children in public places – and pick us up a few hours later.

There was one exception to his indulgence on the matter of sports: He forbade us from doing high school sports on Friday nights. That was a sore spot at the time, but Shabbat was something he insisted on.

It was something he didn't have as a child, and he wanted us to have it. It was a gift. We built a sukkah before it was fashionable – and it went on our front porch, so all of our yankee neighbors could see it. He taught us to be proud of our Judaism. And he gave us big Jewish names to make sure.

He made sure we all learned to play an instrument – we learned to love classical music through him and our mother. His great dream was to see

us all perform a quartet together. We never made it work. Creative differences, I guess.

Most academics in the 70s sneered at television. Not my dad. Far from it. He loved TV, and not just the occasional public television documentaries, but popular shows like Barney Miller, Cheers, Murder She Wrote, Golden Girls and even Judge Judy.

I remember how much I enjoyed as a child hearing him laugh at some bit on one of his shows.

His study upstairs was largely off-limits. But when she was a little girl, my sister and her friends would come up in the middle of graduate seminars and fetch a pack of gum that you could find on his shelves. Margalit was cute, and he enjoyed showing her off.

He was a man of firm principles and quick decisions. If you were conflicted about serious things in life, you weren't serious about doing them.

We were told that when we left for college we were not to return home except to visit, or to work. And the lesson came through because none of us did.

He didn't think parents should indulge their children.

He was appalled by the early onset of helicopter parents who he met at Brown University -- people who indulged their children with compliments for things they didn't earn.

If we struggled – and all of us struggled – we were encouraged but we were not coddled.

When we expressed a passion for something, he supported us completely. When Shmuel decided he wanted to join the Navy ROTC, he had my father's full support – and was especially proud to see him in his formal navy whites. He loved the military and regretted that he didn't serve.

From him, I learned not to be intimidated by intelligence or wealth or power or prestige. To my father, every man was to be taken at face value. He hated pretension and social climbing.

When we watched the State of the Union together, he would sarcastically note that in Washington, everyone has very thick hands and very thick tushies because they have to clap a lot and sit for a long time. He was right.

He loved talking to everyone – store clerks, police officers, college secretaries -- and he didn't think he was above anybody.

When he went to Smoke Enders, the guy he sat next to every week one day said to him: Hey buddy, what's your route? "My route?" Yeah, your truck route. You're a delivery guy, right? The idea delighted my dad. He liked the idea that he could pass as just another Rhode Island truck driver!

You could take away a lot from his example – and I suppose we took different things.

But one of them was this: never be afraid of anyone, no matter their title. He waged battles throughout his life against people who probably didn't think they had it coming. His friend Bill Safire famously said: Kick 'em when they're up.

And my dad would do that. With joy.

That's a good lesson – if you know how to use it.

But there were other lessons, ones that really shaped us as people. From him, we learned how to love another person, and how to be a partner in life.

Don't get me wrong: He was not a domestic all-star. He didn't know how to fix a thing. He never changed a diaper. He never took out the garbage cans.

Once, when my mom had surgery, he had to walk the dog and feed himself for a week. It exhausted him. He never outgrew his bachelorhood or got better at it.

When my parents first met, he kept books in his unused oven. His diet consisted of yogurt, bananas and cold cereal. Years later, when he had to live by himself for a week or two at a distant university, his diet reverted to ... yogurt, bananas and cold cereal.

My mom saved his life, and he knew it.

So he worked all his life to keep my mom happy. You could tell because there was nobody else he wanted to be with. When dinner was served, he made us wait until my mom had food on her plate and sat down herself.

On Sundays, he would take all of us out of the house to amusement parks and zoos and beaches so that my mom could get a rest... work on her art... and just get a break.

We saw what love is. And we felt it every day.

His life was always filled with new interests. New horizons. He didn't have hobbies. He had a voracious brain. And he kept feeding it.

He read outside his field, history and biography and some literature, especially anything by his friend John Updike. He watched documentaries about World War II with intensity – and he never tired of hearing Winston Churchill's wartime speeches.

He didn't treat history with bemused detachment. It was real to him, and he felt it in his bones.

He learned to speak new languages all his life: Portuguese, Swedish, German, Italian, Persian. When he went to a new place, he wanted to give his lectures in the native language. When he went to marry Eli and Poly in Montevideo, he wanted to speak to them in Spanish. That was his way of showing respect.

People who didn't know him thought he could be unsentimental and brusque, and he made a good show of that, even to us.

When I broke my nose in college, he said: "The old one wasn't so special anyhow."

There was a bit of that Connecticut Yankee in him. A little tight. He wasn't a big hugger.

But then there were other moments, and if you weren't paying attention, you missed them. There was the moment when Eli and Poly announced their engagement, and my father shed tears of joy.

There was the moment after when he helped to bury the son of a dear friend, and his face was so drawn and sad that it broke my heart.

He didn't like dancing, but he did when it mattered, at our weddings, with anyone who would ask.

There was the moment – at my cousin Peter's bar mitzvah -- when he and his brother Freddie finally set aside whatever petty dispute separated them – it was like the decades of distance closed to a distant pinprick, and all that was left was a warm, loving relationship among brothers. An angry word never came between them again.

Once: He worked on a speech for one of my daughters' b'nei mitzvah – and he sent it to me. It was good, but it needed punching up, so I did some work to it. I'll admit, I gave it more schmaltz – but it was good schmaltz. I gave it a great close.

He cut the ending. I said: "Why'd you cut it?" He said: "Because I won't be able to get through it."

The academic, the scholar, the man whose work was historiography and theology and translation, that same man was a soulful, loving and

deeply emotional man, who wore his joys and his wounds on his sleeve, where everybody could see them.

The men he admired were not kings ... but men of reflection and conviction – Rashi and Jeremiah.

Remember: His career began with the men of Yavneh, who looked into the ashes of exile and still saw a bright future.

He loved the long shot – the people everyone gave up on. Some of his best students were long shots.

He fought hard for them. Harder than they sometimes were willing to fight for themselves.

The very best ones were changed by him... and he always took pride in what they became. They were his children, too.

Back in the late 80s, he was up for the position of Librarian of Congress.

It was an exciting opportunity and he made it to the final round. He said: “I’d give my right arm for the job, and maybe two toes.” But – and

he knew this -- he was a lefty so he really didn't need the right hand, and he added: "If they take my toes, I hope they take the ones with gout."

You can see that he had an inkling it wasn't going to happen. But, he said, he wouldn't mind if he could just go on writing books:

He wrote: "Whatever I do, I'll be the one to do it. I am in command. Nothing will be the same after me and I now know that everyone knows it.... I used to be afraid I'd run out of ideas. Now I know I won't."

And he never did.

In chapter 2, Rabbi Eleazar states, "Know for whom you work, for your employer [God] can be depended upon to pay your wages for what you do."

To this verse, my father commented,

"The deepest convictions of all forms of Judaism from the first century onward begin in the simple affirmation that we do not die at the grave.... Lest you think that I am describing the strange fantasies of some far-off tribe. I state my deepest conviction that

all of us are possessed of an immortal soul from God... Death is not the end for any human being. The grave receives only our tired bodies." [pp. 79-80]