

Eulogy – Rene Reboh – Rafael ben Meir u’Miriam

Rene Reboh was a kind and good man, who treasured his family. He had a brilliant mind. He was a traditional man, who had an open mind. Rene had an independent spirit. He walked his own path. You knew where you stood with Rene – he always told the truth, had a keen sense of right and wrong, and a very strong will. He had a wonderful sense of humor and was a true scientist at his core. He was fighter, who defied a diagnosis that gave him only a short time to live, and lived for 11 good years following that diagnosis through strong will, determination, medicine, and love. He was a man intensely involved in life. He died too young and will be missed.

There is a scene in Pirkei Avot that captures a piece of Rene’s essence. A Rabbi wanted to teach his students about life through practical experience, so he told them to go to the market and observe people. They were to come back to him with their conclusion as to the most important trait that a person could possess. They each came back with their answers, and the answer that the teacher found most compelling was the answer of Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, who responded that the most important trait a person can possess is a *lev tov – a good heart*. Rene Reboh had a *lev tov* and it manifest itself in many ways.

The seeds of Rene’s *lev tov* were planted in his birthplace of Morocco. He grew up as the second child of 11 children. It was a traditional society with set roles - his father could be strict, yet gave him a clear identity – knowing who he was as a Jew and as a human. His mother’s love was soft and gentle. She always had a special place in her heart for him, and his sisters shared that the soft kindness was something they saw in Kerstin. It was the love from hearts of parents that encoded itself on Rene’s soul and shaped his *lev tov*.

In large families the children cluster together by age when they are growing up; as adults all those distinctions fade away. His older sister Alyse tells how Rene taught her how movies were made and how intelligent and proud it made her feel. The *lev tov* – a heart which knew kindness – manifest itself as a young man.

Lev tov – good heart – manifests itself in courage to find and make one's own way in the world. Rene's life is the kind that stories and books are written about in terms of taking chances and finding his own way in the world. In high school, he studied in yeshiva, Jewish school, for a year; but Rene felt that it didn't have enough science, so he returned to the secular school after having missed a year. You would have thought that he might have difficulty catching up, but he was up to speed quickly.

As the family tells the story, Rene knew that the only way to have the university education he wanted was to go abroad. He ended up at the port, and there were two boats, one to Scandinavia and one to Japan. He took the boat to Scandinavia and spent the trip studying an English dictionary so that he could succeed in his studies. He arrived in Sweden, worked in Finland for some time, and then went to Germany to acquire the language skills to study engineering. While at the Goethe Institute he met Kerstin, and knew he had found his life's love. Once again, he let his *lev tov* – his good heart – define his actions. Kerstin wasn't born Jewish, and his decision to marry her may not have been approved of by a traditional family, but Rene honored his heart and would do anything to be with his beloved Kerstin. Kerstin is a wonderful Jewish wife and converted in Stockholm; and the decisions you made to follow your hearts resulted in a beautiful life together and were ultimately embraced by his family.

Rene worked in computer science, and he was offered the opportunity to come to America from 1972 to 1974, and then he and Kerstin went back to Uppsala. He was so good at what he did that SRI wanted him to come back, so Rene and Kerstin decided to come for five more years; and that was 35 years ago.

Lev Tov – good heart – is the word his children, Marie, Jennifer and Michael, use to describe their father. In Jennifer’s words, “His heart is always looking out for family.” You didn’t always understand your father’s intent when you were growing up, but as time went on you did understand his decisions and actions. You may have resented taking computer classes as kids, but you realize now that your father was preparing you to succeed in the world.

As a father he was strong willed. He would have you do the right thing even if you resented it. He would say, “I’m not here to be popular.” Yet for all of his tough love, he would also come around, especially when Kerstin worked on him if he was being too tough. He was strong, but open minded.

When he was around extended family, he was ferocious in his love for you. His sisters remember so many times when he would defend his family and stand up for you. For Rene, his family was everything.

Marie shares stories of how funny her father could be. She remembers one story of Rene sharing that he bought an old calculator at an antique fair. One day he brought it to work, and when someone asked him to make a calculation, he casually took out the ancient calculator and used it without batting an eye. It was the kind of subtle humor Rene loved. His sister told a great story about coming to visit during Sukkot. Rene built a beautiful Sukkah, full of fruit and careful construction, just like the one the family had in

Morocco; but he also built a diversion – a simple, little hut with but a chair and a palm frond, and he showed it to her, apologizing that he couldn't build a more appropriate Sukkah – he was sick, you know. And then a few minutes later, imagine her surprise when he showed her the real Sukkah! Rene was a trickster who loved a good joke.

When you hear the work *lev tov* – a good heart – often your first reaction is thinking of generosity. When I think of Rene, it is of his generosity. He wouldn't be comfortable of this being spoken about in public. His generosity was humble and done quietly. He learned from his father that *tzedakah*, charity, was to be given in secret. This spirit, which led him to give to so many others and organizations with quiet dignity, also manifest itself in an ethic that thought of others before himself. His brother-in-law Richard tells of enjoying a jam that he ate when visiting here. Rene went to store after store to find the same jam, and sent a box by Fed Ex to them. His siblings all have stories about Rene's generosity. "Take the credit card and buy whatever you want," he would say. He reflected love of family through deeds of kindness.

Rene's *lev tov* – his good heart – was steeped in Jewish tradition. All of us at Beth Jacob have fond memories of Rene praying and reading Torah with the beautiful Sephardic melodies. He was a regular at Wednesday morning minyan before becoming sick, and I remember him reading from his own megillah during Purim. His love of Yiddishkeit and devotion to Jewish life defined his essence. Rene thought deeply about life and philosophy. His children tell the story of his being on the beach, watching an ant walk up and down a stick over and over. He would switch ends of the stick he was holding and the ant continued to move up and down the stick. The ant didn't have the facility to move to another object, or change its behavior. That limitation for Rene

reflects the human condition. Like the ant, we have a limited view, and we cannot understand broader dimensions of the world. He came to this insight through his own observation that the world is mystery and beyond our capacity to understand, while holding an order and coherence.

Rene's keen mind manifest itself in many ways. He was a scientist to the core, in an artistic, creative sense. He methodically solved any problem that came his way. He was an innovative inventor who knew how to improvise. When his fingernails became soft, he found a way to attach a piece of a coffee stirrer to his finger to do the job of fingernails. When his eyesight failed, he devised methods to continue his work. When his skin was fragile, he crafted shin-guards to allow him to continue his projects. He was always doing something amazing – fixing the kitchen, making a shed, building a Sukkah, research about stamps – and when obstacles arose he found ways around them. Everything he did was with precision, and it worked perfectly. His final project about Scandinavian stamps will hopefully be published soon.

So many of us admired Rene's *lev tov* – his good heart – as we watched him fight cancer these past eleven years. It was heart in the true sense of courage and will to survive. Rene desperately wanted to live for his family. When he received his diagnosis and was told he only had a few months to live – when he saw how much his family loved him and how much they were working to find treatment options and hope – he fought with every fiber of his being. He was patient, never complained, despite difficult physical setbacks. He was a doctor's dream in terms of adhering to medical programs, and he made the most of his second chance – mainly treasuring family, especially the beautiful new grandson Milo who was recently born.

He had many partners in this battle. His sister Claire donated bone marrow, a procedure that gave him nine precious years. He called her his second mother as she gave him new life. His children stood by him and encouraged him. His wife Kerstin gave never-ending love and devotion. When I gathered with the family, Rene's sister Alyse expressed what so many feel: deep gratitude and blessing for Kerstin. She said that if God gave Rene more years of life, Kerstin was God's partner in making those years possible. Thank you, Kerstin. You helped give Rene life filled with meaning and love and deep care.

Rene made sure that everything was in order: finances, end-of-life wishes. For all that we are grateful for these extra eleven years, it is also true that he died too young. He filled his days with meaningful deeds, and there was more life to be lived. We grieve that life was taken too soon. At the end of his life, he was surrounded by his loving family. He asked for their forgiveness and forgave them. He told them how much he loved them. If there is a way to die, it is surrounded by love at peace with your life. Rene taught us how to live, and he taught us how to die. May he rest in peace. Our prayer for him at this time is: *T'he nishmato tzura b'tzror ha'chayim*. May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.