

Peter Knobel, Lux et Veritas, August, 2019

Hope declined into resignation last Tuesday, as Peter, Rabbi Peter Knobel, slipped from the grip of technology, and slowly abandoned the caring attention of those who loved him the most. Peter never gave up hope, --hope about his many projects, about completing tasks he set for himself; but in matters of life and death, he did not trust hope against hope, and he assured his family—always—that should the occasion require it, they might have to abandon him to the arms of the eternal spirit, and to become part of the legend of American Jewish history. Allowing nature to take over from machinery was one of Peter's guiding principles as he often wrote about or discussed with his medical ethics colleagues. I must confess that Peter also enjoyed the legendary status that he earned.

For make no mistake about it, Peter Knobel is part of the American Jewish legend now. Peter had made his life into an engine of our modern liberal Jewish history. He never shirked from a public responsibility or from a task that might benefit from his considerable talent and his singular understanding of what was right and what needed to be done. I can attest to that after having served under him on numerous committees, and after having asked him to join in some of our work at Hebrew Union College.

At times like these, our statements are directed both to the broader public of admirers of the man who has just died, and to the more intimate circle of his family and closest friends. Elaine and her family and friends will have to forgive so many hundreds (perhaps thousands) of us who can actually say: "We share in your sorrow", even tho' we know we cannot share the profoundest emotions that his family must be experiencing.

So for many of us here, this is a time to reflect on our gratitude for his life—that part of our collective memory that is part of the public history. It is the public part of Peter’s life that makes me think of the final lines from an important poem by our 19th Century bard, Haim Nachman Bialik: “There was a man, and look: he is with us no longer; the song of his life has been interrupted before its time. And the melody (that he didn’t have time to express) will be lost—lost forever.”

What we lost, then, was the public man we mourn today; and what might have been more song, more prayer, more challenge to improve people’s lives—all that lost. Being realistic, however, Peter knew that such things must always end with tasks unfinished and projects incomplete, and he wrote about that very often: about Rabbi Judah’s death, about King Saul’s death, about decisions in the hospital room.

The public part, after all, is what is always finite—limited, bound by the realities of our science and our machinery. The song is gone, our leader is gone.

The private part, however, the part that really counts today, is the love, closer to unlimited, infinite passion, that belongs to Peter’s family: to Elaine, and Seth and Jeremy and their children. For them, the Bialik poem presents us with another way to read the epigram:

There was a man and look: he is no longer, for he died before he should have. He had one more song to give. And here is my comment, my “Rashi” as Peter’s late friend Michael Signer would have said: And he would have had one more song after that one more song and yet again after whatever that song would have been. For that his how the private love of family and of closest friends overtakes even the public man: there is always one more melody.

When a person of Peter’s public stature passes from our midst, those who dare to speak of him must remember these two communities we are speaking to: All the people of his public on the one hand, and yet the smaller number of people in his intimate circle, on the other. Let the public mourn, but do not

do so to the point of invading the private grief of those he loved the most. And be not jealous of that privilege—the privilege enjoyed for so much of their lives by Elaine and her boys, and by those grandchildren who phoned him to say good bye last Tuesday and Wednesday. Not all of us could phone in our goodbyes to Peter. We can do it now, Peter’s public, with all the gratefulness for what he has given us. Let it flow freely as we reach out our hands to offer our friendship and to “Participate in their sorrow.”

There has yet been another cluster of people whom he touched—represented most recently by Temple Israel in Los Angeles, where in a few short weeks Peter Knobel had begun to make an impression, and stir the gratitude of the temple’s two younger rabbis, their retired senior, John Rosove, along with a host of lay leaders who had already begun to witness the strength of his wisdom and experience. They, too, have lost something of his final songs. Rabbis Hudson and Missagieh were at his side during those final days, and the synagogue’s membership pitched in with support for the family. It was the best of synagogue strength, which Peter fostered, and which he helped build here, in Evanston, even in these halls with other great rabbinic leaders.

I would like to share two memorable moments I had with Peter.: first, of his eloquent far reaching and feisty argument for a liberal approach to ethics, delivered at a conference HUC sponsored; and, second: a warm night in San Francisco after some Reform Jewish meeting or other, when Peter and I ate a huge dinner at some family trattoria on the Heights. We had both recovered from pretty serious medical stuff, and Peter urged us to walk the three or four miles downtown—up and down hills that we Californians know so well, undaunted in our enthusiasm, in our energy, and in his encouragement that we keep talking and keep moving!!

I was privileged to be among his first teachers. He made the teaching easier. Here, I said 55 years ago, was a man full of work to do, pride in his projects, and the strength to see them through. Here was a

man whose life characterized his name—Knobel, indeed, who would write and teach and—however limited his singing voice, —would sing or enable us to sing our songs.

After my death, Bialik said: mourn me simply and thus: There was a man, and look, he is no longer with us; this man died before his time; his life song was cut off halfway; how sad because he had another song to sing, and that song is lost. We now [have to compose that song for ourselves.](#)

We will do so in his memory, and in his fashion, and in his spirit.

Rabbi William (Bill) Cutter

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