

In the Talmud (*Moed Katan* 23a) we read that when a sage of the Sanhedrin dies, the whole community mourns and the study hall closes. How can we study, how can we learn, and how can we lead at such a moment? For the past 48 hours, the rabbinic world of San Diego has faced a profound and terrible new reality - that we must now live in a world without our beloved, cantankerous, ornery, sarcastic, loving, devoted, learned, and exceedingly kind friend, our colleague, our brother, Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal. We have no answer and no words of comfort to offer each other for how do we comfort the one who comforts others and how, God, do we comfort each other when we know that this beautiful *neshama* would hate to be the subject of so much fanfare, love, and adoration? How do we comfort each other when we know our rabbinic world is irreparably diminished because of the loss of this truly great rabbi, colleague, and friend? All words feel inadequate and in this moment, we recognize the poverty of human language.

The first time I met Len, my husband and I had just moved from New York to San Diego. I was excited to start my new position while simultaneously reeling from the death of my father. As I was working on unpacking boxes in my office, I was asked to go to the lobby to meet a Rabbi Rosenthal from up the road who had come by to say hi. I walked out to meet my new colleague who welcomed me with a smile to my new home in San Diego. He was ready with some dry humor, a cheeky quip about his dear friend, my Emeritus Marty, and an appreciation of the superiority of San Diego summer weather over New York summer weather. We laughed together - the first of many such exchanges and conversations with his wry, dry, and brilliant humor. And then, in a way that was truly profound, sincere, and free from schmaltz, Len expressed that he heard that I had just lost

my father. He gave me a sideways nod in a gesture I came to know and love, as he expressed his sorrow for the mixed emotional bag I was in, and a sincere offer that should I, or Sebastian need anything, he and Judy were here for us both. These moments were so characteristic of this profound man - someone who took the time to make time for meaningful connections with others. Someone who took the time to welcome a new colleague and to make them laugh during a period of transition and stress, and someone who offered love, friendship, and support in a gentle and honest way during a profoundly difficult period. I was not surprised then that over the last 48 hours, most of our rabbinic colleagues texted or emailed me to express that Len had been one of the first of our ranks to welcome them, to help them settle, and to offer them a warm connection upon landing in San Diego.

The second time I met Len it was at Tashlich at Lake Murray. I didn't see him at first until I realized that the strange man who's back I was facing, in the chili pepper shirt, the fedora hat, and the accordion was my new rabbi friend, Len. I knew that any rabbi who would dress like that in public while marking sacred Jewish time and simultaneously playing with solid skills on the accordion, singing with abandon... that rabbi was definitely going to be a good friend and he was - for so many of us in this room.

Over the past five and a half years that I had the privilege to know and work with this amazing person, I came to realize some fundamental truths about Rabbi Rosenthal. The first is that he was a rabbi's rabbi. He was someone who was not afraid to speak the truth to a colleague nor was he afraid to speak truth to power.

We enjoyed debating Torah, Talmud, and Midrash. He enjoyed challenging people's assuredness and assumptions. He was willing to argue with halacha for the sake of justice and to challenge conventions, even his own, for the sake of Jewish continuity, community, and human dignity. He loved serving on *Betei Din* to help colleagues bring new Jews into the world.

The second fundamental truth is that he and Rabbi Marty Lawson made the most amazing duet of humor, wisdom, irreverence, and participation much like the two old men in the balcony on the Muppet Show. They could rail against the injustices of the world, large and small, while laughing at it all, themselves and each other. Many a SDRA meeting was delayed as they got going on an unending back and forth schtick which might have been frustrating had we not all understood that they were a living embodiment of the most important thing to rabbis and that is a close circle of colleagues who are there to love and support each other through the most difficult moments of living such a public life of leadership. And the life-saving power of a good, dare we say, brilliant and wicked sense of humor.

The third fundamental truth is that Rabbi Rosenthal was the consummate teacher every rabbi should strive to be. He loved teaching. He loved working with people studying for conversion. He beamed with pride when he brought students before the Beit Din and he reveled in the success of his students, young and old. He made time to teach every week, every year, at Community Jewish High as a demonstration and reminder to us all, that while some rabbis may achieve fame and be on the news and be named by newspapers as the "greatest" - the true test of rabbinic greatness was not political sparring on CNN but was helping a 9th

grader realize they love being Jewish; helping a high school senior feel prepared to leave for college secure in their Jewish identity; helping a student through the grief of loss and the stress of adolescence; and creating safe space for students to wrestle with life's great questions and mysteries while fostering a love of learning and a close-knit community.

As colleagues, we were all blessed to have our friend, Len, to lead us, guide us, tease us, connect us, challenge us, and welcome us. He elevated the holiness and the wholeness of our rabbinic world. As a tribute to my friend, and our amazing colleague I want to share with you all my favorite story of Rabbi Rosenthal in his Holy Rascal finest... Two years ago, when it emerged that the Chief Rabbi in Israel had created a blacklist of rabbis who were not considered responsible sources of authentic Jewish conversions, weddings, and identity, Rabbi Rosenthal penned an open letter published in The Jerusalem Post. In it he said, "We, the following San Diego, California rabbis are outraged that we were left off of your blacklist of rabbis whose testimony as to the Jewish identity of their congregants are unacceptable to Israel's Chief Rabbinate. In the future please include our names among the other blacklisted rabbis. We would consider it an honor." These are the words of a true rabbi - someone willing to speak truth to power. Someone who led by example in all things. Someone who offered us the opportunity to sign our name to a letter expressing, with Len's signature cheekiness, our belief in broad Jewish unity, our solidarity with maligned colleagues, and our belief in Jewish pluralism as a strength of our people and our future. We have lost a sage, a leader of our community, our dear, dear friend and our world is mourning. We will not see his like again and we will always feel his absence when we gather as

rabbis and as a community. May his memory inspire each of us to find the humor of the world, to speak with integrity, to learn and to teach with passion and patience, and to offer each other friendship and kindness for this is true holiness and this is the legacy of this great and learned Rabbi.