

Rabbi Jonathan V. Plaut

Holy Blossom Temple

Toronto Ontario Canada

Eulogy

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut

Feb 12, 2012

Dear Family and Friends: David Shenk, the author of Forgetting: Alzheimer's Portrait of an Epidemic, refers to Alzheimer's disease as "death by a thousand subtractions." Each month, Carol and I drove to Toronto to visit with my father and my sister, Judith. The ravages of the disease became all too clear with every passing trip. I know how hard it was for Judith, to witness, on a daily basis, the deterioration from learned scholar and loving father to the state of utter dependency. How many times did my sister and I look at each other as this disease took its toll, and realize that our father no longer knew us. We would watch him sit vacantly when we lit the Shabbat candles or chanted the *Kiddish*? You might ask why I would make this trip each month to Toronto when he did not know us. The answer is simple: While dad did not know us, Judith, Carol and I knew him. In an article in the *Detroit Jewish News* in August 2008, Elie Wiesel said: "I devoted my life to memory. Alzheimer's means total despair. It is a cancer of identity. Every day you tear out a page. What remains---the covers." Watching this slow decline progress has been hard for Judith, Carol and me, as it has been for many of you. Now our father is at peace!!

Judith and I were so very fortunate to find Arlene and Ray Oliveros to care for dad. They have been with him for 9 years; and there are really no words that we can say to adequately thank them for their devotion to our father. Arlene and Ray kept him actively involved in life by driving him to play golf and tennis, attend services and "out of the cold" dinners at Holy Blossom

Temple and other functions until his debilitation limited those activities. Their love and care was without bounds.

There is an old German expression: "*Der Mensch denkt und Gott lenkt*"-----"Man proposes and God disposes." God gave my father a brilliant mind with which he wrote thousands of articles and 25 books. The plan did not include him coming to the end of his life in such a devastating way. But, he knew quite well that we do not have choices. Judith, Carol and I have learned the true meaning of the fifth commandment. "Honor your father and mother." On the surface-paying honor to your parents seemed no more than being properly respectful. But, our family came to understand the challenges this commandment presented in ensuring his care and the continuity of his legacy. Today we gather to celebrate his life, his legacy and to pay our final tribute.

The last television interview my father gave in 2002 on a CBC program with Evan Solomon, he was asked about death and dying. I recall my father's short summary of his life. "I have lived a charmed life. I have survived the Nazis. I have survived the war; and I have been in extraordinary health. I have never been ill in my life; and I have full command of my mental and reasonable command of my physical capacities. Sooner or later, I have to expect to die anyway. Maybe a little sooner or later—who knows?" For him, "the fear of death was zero" and at nearly 90 years of age when interviewed, he knew "that death was down the road." But, when it would occur or how it would unfold, he left to the hands of the One above!

Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut was a most unusual human being. He was multi-talented both mentally and physically, unusually disciplined, genuinely curious for knowledge and gifted with a mind and talent to pursue scholarly work. Our father was well organized, insightful, able to read people and was a master of problem solving. He had a great sense of humor and told a joke

with due seriousness. Ask him a mathematical question and dad solved the problem quickly in his head, while you worked with paper and pencil. Our father was a person who had tremendous love and respect for humankind, was committed to *k'la Israel*, and a champion of human rights for all people. He had a profound sense of his origins and of world history in general, and was truly a spiritual individual.

Throughout his entire life, everything had its time and place. His family came first, although the pressures of his rabbinical career made quality more important than quantity. Our father was more at ease with a book and a pen than with the merriment of a social gathering. He was totally disinterested in the trivia and gossip of the day. Seemingly aloof at first encounter, he was, however, a compassionate pastor, a sought-after counselor, and an eminently fair judge.

With our mother's help, he learned how to bridge his European upbringing, to adapt to life's changing ways in America and later in Canada. He worked hard while a new immigrant in America, to be fully taken as a product of the culture, losing his accent, something highly unusual for anyone after adulthood. Not only did he speak with no accent, but also his vocabulary and knowledge of the English language was far superior to many who were raised in America. Few knew that my mother corrected his sermons, helped him develop clear ideas for his articles, even edited and returned his war letters with red-line corrections of his English. Dad was unique in his capacity to listen to constructive criticism. He honed his skills meticulously and was able, on nearly all-speaking engagements, to rely only on a few notes to craft a skillful address. He had an encompassing worldview and an ability to predict with uncanny accuracy developments that would occur thirty years hence. He was an electrifying speaker who held his audiences spellbound, by combining various techniques to keep his listeners on the edge of their seats.

Dad was a person of strong conviction. In 1964 at the CCAR Convention in Cincinnati he took the position that Friday night services were not the future for the reform movement. This stance and his theological convictions prevented him from becoming president of many organizations for many years. When he was chairman of the Human Rights Commission he ruled on a case in which a Sikh was permitted to carry his ceremonial dagger. The case was heard by the Supreme Court of Canada and was upheld. He received many death threats due to this ruling but his convictions never wavered.

Dad was also a transformational leader in the Reform Movement, because he has led Reform Jews around the world to Torah study. Each week thousands of Jews are reading and studying The Commentary that he wrote. His contribution to the Reform movement will continue because he was willing to give up his position as senior Rabbi to complete the Commentary even though there were many who thought that it would not be as successful as it's become.

Our father brought Holy Blossom into the forefront of the community, becoming the undisputed Jewish representative at all major events affecting the local, Provincial and Federal Canadian governments. He was the galvanizing spirit at John Phillips Square when some 10,000 anxious Jews stood while he challenged them to action and also comforted them during the dark days of the Yom Kippur War. I remember traveling with him to Ottawa in 1971 and hearing his stirring words spoken directly to Alexei Kosygin.

Dad was instrumental in the establishment of Reform congregations in Vancouver and Winnipeg as well as in Mississauga, Thornhill and the North York area. He assisted in the development of *Kadimah*, the Leo Baeck Day School, and his early friendship with many Orthodox and Conservative rabbis boded well for the community in general. There was seldom a request that he rejected to assist the community or Israel.

There is no need to review the chronology of his life's work for that is quite well known by reading his autobiographies. But, before speaking about our relationship with him, there was one discovery that I found that surprised all of us. We knew that our father had published chess problems and he sculpted in clay. In the course of six and a half years of sorting through his papers, closing his office at Holy Blossom Temple, gifting his library to York University and sending all his papers to the Library and Archives Canada, I found Act One of a libretto, entitled, A Tale of a Father and Son: after Nachman of Bratzlav; a lyrical parable. Apparently, our father had written the words while Lothar Klein, former Professor of Music at the University of Toronto, had written the music. After many months of research, I discovered that this two-act libretto was commissioned by the 92nd Street Y in New York City for their 100th anniversary and it was performed in Banff in 1983. This was something entirely unexpected.

But, Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut was after all, our dad, and I would like to talk about our relationship with him and specifically, about the many valuable lessons he taught me, my sister Judith, my wife, Carol, his beloved grandchildren, Daniel and Deborah, their spouses, Amy and David; and the great-grandchildren, Steven and Jeffrey, whom he hardly knew. Steven and Jeffrey seem to have inherited many of dad's trait ---playing soccer, listening to music, an ear for languages, and the love of learning. What lessons has he left for our family? First and foremost, total honesty was expected at all times of my sister and me, and we always knew that confessing a misdeed was far better than telling a lie. What usually followed an admission of error was a serious discussion about what Judith and I should learn from it. Our parents preferred to treat our misbehavior as an opportunity for us to acquire knowledge rather than as an occasion to mete out punishment. Throughout our childhood, however, the mere thought of letting them down was enough of a motive to keep us in line.

My father taught us how important it was to preserve our family's good name. How many times did he remind us that ours was an honorable name that never must be blemished? "Whatever you do," he would say, "always protect the "Plaut name." Many times in my life I have asked myself, when thinking of taking some action, whether it might cause harm to the Plaut name. Throughout my career, I have done my best to pass on that message to my children and to my grandchildren. I know that others in politics and business today would benefit from his sage advice.

When Judith and I displeased him, dad was not afraid to let us know. But, while our father never spanked us, he managed to get his disappointment across without saying a single word. He lowered his head ever so slightly, peered over the rim of his glasses and gave us that look. We just knew that we had made him angry. Likewise if someone were disrupting services he would stop, remain totally silent until the offender looked at him, saw the stern look, signaling his disapproval and would stop talking during services.

The role of education in our family's life was instilled in us. It was understood that we would graduate from college and have professional careers. While on sabbatical in Switzerland for six months, both parents taught us each day according to a strict schedule. Judith remembers dad helping her study for history exams and as they worked together, dad would recall colorful stories that came to mind. While Judith remembered the stories, unfortunately they were not part of the exam. Dad also warned me not to become so consumed with congregational work that I would have no time for further study. "Get your doctorate," he said, pointing to the many new and exciting challenges that would open up for me. He knew that it took discipline and commitment to achieve, but he was correct that once completed, it opened opportunities for me to teach at universities, which I have found very rewarding.

Dad was a wonderful problem solver. Whenever my sister and I had difficulties, he wanted to talk to us about it and help us. He gave us his total attention, quizzed us to make sure he understood all the details, even if the circumstances might disturb him, he would talk through the possible solutions so we could learn how to resolve our dilemma. When we left the discussion as uncomfortable as it might have been, we felt supported and knew we had a caring person on our side. When I acquired my first pulpit in Windsor, my father and I established a new dialogue. Often seeking his counsel on rabbinical issues, I marveled at his ability to listen and to offer me sound advice. He taught me many lessons about how to be an effective rabbi.

Our father was an extremely disciplined individual. His German upbringing made a lasting impression. Every moment in his day was scheduled---even his tennis or golf. He rose early, began his writing or preparation for a speaking engagement and then left for the office. But, every Friday at noon, regardless of other pressing needs, he went to have lunch with his mother, Mutti. There were few exceptions to his routines. Rabbinic colleagues would ask how he could devote so much time writing and still find time for his duties in such a large congregation. He made it clear that time management was a critical aspect of achieving your goals. He had several favorite sayings that were ingrained in us.

1. "Don't ever procrastinate. If something has to be done, do it now!"
2. List what needs to be done and then begin doing it.
3. Stay focused and plan each day so you work on achieving your goals.
4. "If you want a quick decision, speak to the person at the top. If you can, always talk to the boss!"

These are lessons imbedded in my very being!

Dad almost always came home for dinner even when he had to go out for an evening meeting. While sitting around the dinner table, we usually were encouraged to freely discuss any subject we wished, as well as to review our daily activities. My sister and I would talk about school, our mother her day, while Dad would discuss current issues occurring around the world. As children, we remember sitting in front of the television watching sports together, or Perry Mason where we all tried to figure out who was guilty of murder. As we grew older, we still tried to be together for the various Jewish holidays. We are grateful to our parents that they treated us more like adults than children when we were growing up.

Our parents were most welcoming hosts and our family table was often graced with strangers and many well-known individuals, or visiting dignitaries. Both my sister and I were always included in these gatherings. Hundreds of people from all walks of life shared our dinner table, including such personages as Elie Wiesel, Hubert H. Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Martin Luther King Jr and many well-known Canadians.

We all know that dad was fiercely competitive and he always played to win. His first love was soccer and later tennis and golf. He would go as far as trying to coax his opponents into "giving him the putt," whenever he knew that a win or loss depended on his sinking a tricky putt. They seldom relented, but he tried anyway. You can imagine his grandson Daniel's delight when he finally won a tennis match against his normally unbeatable grandfather! Daniel has inherited his competitive spirit.

Needless to say, my father also instilled in us a love of Judaism and the resolve to work for the survival of the Jewish people. He loved tradition but did not consider it immutable. There is no doubt that his example as a caring guardian of the faith had a tremendous influence on my decision to follow in his footsteps. I know how pleased he was to

stand on the *bimah* when Rabbi Nelson Glueck ordained me in 1970. And when Dad and I openly hugged at the end of the ceremony, I literally felt how very proud he was not only of my accomplishment but that I had followed in his footsteps.

Dad had many acquaintances, but only a few close friends. While his closest friends were life-long many have already gone to their eternal reward. But, dad had many younger friends who continued to visit him even when he no longer knew them.

While studying at Hebrew Union College, he met Elizabeth Strauss, a fifth generation Cincinnati. They fell in love and were married on November 10, 1938, unaware of the fact that on that very night all the synagogues of Germany were ablaze and that his father, Jonas Plaut, had gone into hiding to escape the Nazi's action that became known as *Kristallnacht*. Fate brought my father out of harm's way and it was "*beshert*" that my parents found each other and spent nearly 65 years of married life together. They were truly a loving, caring and respectful team. They could be often seen holding hands, or dad stroking mom's shoulder, signs of their true love and affection. As seniors, both of them mastered computers, learning to work them with great adroitness, and both crafted several books on their computers. My father trusted my mother's judgment. My mother had great common sense, disliked pretense, shared dad's dry sense of humor; and she had the ability to keep dad's ego in check. She kept life in balance and also watched out for him on necessary occasions. If he did not seem to accept her warnings or insistence to take some action, she would raise her voice and threaten to divorce him. That was the sign, not of an impending familial disaster, but her way of getting his attention on a matter she felt was extremely important. The very fact that the name "Plaut" is on the spine of the Torah commentary is due in no small part to her strong admonishment to ensure her husband's legacy, the Torah Commentary, his *magnum opus*. Dad was truly blessed to have such a

devoted *rebbitzin* and life partner and our father's success is due in no small measure to her willingness to help him in achieving his goals.

Blessed is Holy Blossom for having had such a rabbi in their midst for 51 years. Our father grew as your rabbi and both the Temple and he thrived. Blessed is this city of Toronto and Canada for knowing such a leader. Blessed are the many new immigrants today in Canada who had such a champion for human rights for all Canadians. Blessed is the state of Israel for having such a strong supporter. Blessed is the Reform Movement for having a scholar who would provide greater study and understanding of the Torah. Blessed is our G-d for having such a loving, devoted and beloved servant of his People. Blessed were we—his family-- to have such a loving, caring and inspirational father, grandfather, and great-grandfather! We are all blessed for the privilege of sharing his life. To all the members of this congregation, whom he loved so much and who loved him, I know you feel the loss of your former rabbi and friend as our family mourns his passing.

While our hearts are heavy, dad's example will continue to guide us, inspire us, encourage us and help us follow his example. Such is his legacy and all of us are richer for knowing Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut. May his memory be for blessing! Amen.