

Ron Freeman's Eightieth Birthday Party

22 October, 2011

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Joshua, Rabbi Elazar, Rabbi Akiba, and Rabbi Tarphon were reclining at the Seder table, we are told, and they talked all night about the same thing, over and over, until one of their students came in to tell them that it was morning and time to *doven* Shema. I sense that tonight's dinner is rapidly taking on the tone of a Seder night: we might well be here until the small hours if everyone adopts the rabbis' maxim, "And the more a person tells about it, the better it is."

But, when one thinks of Uncle Ron's life, one cannot help feeling that *Dayenu* might well have been the theme song for the screen adaptation:

Had he have survived the aneurism, but not the car accident ... *dayenu*;

Had he have survived the car accident, but not the stroke ... *dayenu*.

And on we could go. It does seem astonishing that he has been smitten almost as much as the Egyptians were, when Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. And yet he is here tonight. So we must be thankful again and again for every time that he has been delivered from adversity, that we might come together tonight to celebrate.

But my family has more to celebrate than that Uncle Ron is still with us.

Had he survived, but not displayed his commitment to family ... *dayenu*.

My father, Richard, sends the following message from Singapore:

"I have known Ron longer than anyone there tonight, and have been reminded by him, on several occasions, of how he pushed me around the streets, in my pram, as a baby... From my earliest days, Ron showed me his commitment to family. As a family, we left England and travelled to the Colony. Our father was never happy here, and suffered a long illness before his passing. Ron was always the devoted son, and took care of him over a long period, again showing his commitment to family. After his passing, Ron took care of our mother and his little brother, again showing commitment to his family. During my formative years, Ron tried to provide me with guidance, help, and to fulfill the role of a father-figure... With his own family, Ron has been totally committed, and I am sure that all of you have seen this over the years, and much will be recounted here tonight. Ron, you are a true *mensch*, and Lin and I are proud to have you as our brother."

Had he maintained his sense of commitment to his immediate family, but not fostered bonds of friendship with his family abroad ... *dayenu*.

There seems to be a theme developing in early memories of Uncle Ron, because his cousin, Valerie, has a similar first memory from life in North Wales during the War:

“One day, while sitting happily outdoors, in my pram, I became aware that the pram was not being pushed by a grownup, and that it was being rocked considerably more than usual... Poor Ron got a ticking off, but that memory of fun has forever remained, for, at that time, Ron was the only one to give me any excitement!”

It was many years before all the branches of the family would be reunited again, Valerie recalls:

“We all promised to keep in touch. But of course we didn’t, and time marched on again... My mother and Auntie Sarah kept in touch, and, when Ron & Susi came again to England, they visited us in Manchester.

“We became firm friends, managing to meet often during your many visits to the UK... Ron’s concern for those around him is apparent to all. He makes us all feel special, but, in my mind, Ron, you are the most special of them all.”

Had he have fostered bonds of friendship with his family abroad, but not identified so closely with our family’s faith and community ... *dayenu*.

I missed the most recent family *simcha*, as I was in Cambridge earlier this year, when Caroline had her bat mitzvah. But Auntie Susi was very keen that I should have a copy of the speeches. I know how much it must have meant to her and Uncle Ron to hear Jeremy reflect aloud on the value that Judaism held for him and Caroline, as it has always held for his parents, when he asked rhetorically:

“What does it mean, to a parent, for your child to turn 13, and have a bat mitzvah? It means many things: it is a chance to have a break in our busy lives, to reflect, and to take stock... Immersing yourself in being Jewish has many joys: the culture, the tradition, the food. For Caroline, it was an opportunity for her to explore her own family’s Jewish heritage... We are very proud of how she has engaged with both bitter and sweet parts of her heritage.”

And it must have been a source of even greater pleasure for them to hear Caroline express the sentiments that they both felt, when she said:

“Today was not just about becoming a woman, surrounded by family and friends, but about my religion and my identity as a Jewish woman... Now I really feel part of the community, of God’s community... I am really proud of what I achieved today, as I know I have made history. I have completed yet another link in the huge chain of the Jewish religion, and ... I know [that] I have contributed to our history.”

And so we must give thanks again and again: for his surviving so much adversity; for his commitment to his immediate family; for his fostering bonds of friendship with family abroad; for his identifying so closely with our family’s faith and our community.

It would have been enough had our family had one, but not all of these blessings. However, there is, of course, one great misfortune that we cannot help but to remember. The prospect of losing a father prematurely is painful, I am sure, but perhaps not devastating. The prospect of losing a son prematurely was enough even to soften Pharaoh's heart. We all know that, like Pharaoh, Uncle Ron would have given anything for Bruce's life to be spared; that he might have celebrated with us tonight – and we all know how much Bruce enjoyed a *simchah* and a nosh.

I was recently looking at a volume of parliamentary speeches that shaped the Australian nation. Sandwiched between Bill O'Chee's response to Pauline Hanson, and Alexander Downer's speech moving a motion to endorse Australia's peacekeeping role in East Timor, was a speech by Senator John Herron. It was a speech that he gave on the occasion of the sudden death of his intellectually disabled daughter, at the age of 37. He quoted from a letter that another of his daughters had sent him, "People like Maryann so often spend their lives behind closed doors and without acceptance, and you diminished a lot of the stigma for people with the same disabilities, just by exposing our family as it is – we were privileged to have her as part of our family." He ended the speech by referring to another card he received, explaining:

"I particularly appreciate the action of Senator John Faulkner, the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, who came to my office last Tuesday with a condolence card signed by opposition senators. John Faulkner had taught intellectually handicapped children in the past and was aware of the bond between the intellectually handicapped and their families."

We are here today in recognition of the acceptance that Bruce found here, and in the wider community, and we all know that this was possible only because of Uncle Ron's tireless devotion to him and the needs of people like him. I also know that the years since his death have served only to reiterate, for my family, the special bond that he had with us, and how privileged we were to have him as part of our family. So, perhaps of all the blessings that my family can be thankful for, that one is the greatest.

Not all of our family can be here tonight, but I know that my sister, Elissa, who is en route to Paris, my father, Richard, and my stepmother, Lin, who are in Singapore, and our cousins, Valerie and Michael, in Manchester, would wish to join with the rest of our family in giving thanks for the many blessings that we have known during Uncle Ron's lifetime, and in wishing him a very happy eightieth birthday.

Damien Freeman