

MAGDALENE COLLEGE

CAMBRIDGE

1 MAY, 2007

Three times a year my family would converge: seder night, lunch after shul on Rosh Hashana, and Bruce's birthday. These things were fixed; they were certain. They gave structure to our individual lives and to the life of our family; they gave us our identity as a family. It is impossible to conceive of our family life without imagining the central place that Bruce occupied in it. It was not merely that he was a family member with special needs. He was a hub around which the whole corporate life of the family delighted in revolving.

The day after I sent out invitations to my thirtieth birthday cocktail party, I received a phone call asking whether we would be having takeaway or a barbeque. It was Bruce. He was the first to reply. He was always the most excited to hear about any family event and he lived in anticipation of these. If you can imagine the excitement my little party stimulated, you must multiply it tenfold to imagine the sense of excitement that came bursting out of him before his nephew, Michael, and niece, Caroline, were born. I can imagine that within the next few months he would probably have started the countdown to Michael's Bar Mitzvah. That would be after the countdown to his own birthday had finished. His birthday was the focus of his year and each birthday was greeted with the solemn pronouncement that he was catching up to Jeremy. With his birthday came associated rituals like the anticipated ticket to accompany Ronnie to the football. Then with the birthday festivities out of the way, it was time to start thinking about the Easter Show.

"The girls" took it in turns each year to take him to the Easter Show. Elissa and Lucinda, the twins, were known as the giblets, and the giblets and I were collectively known as "the girls". If

others were slightly bemused that the girls were called giblets, and that I was referred to as one of the girls, we wore it as a badge of pride. If we were mildly inconvenienced by going to the Easter Show on a triennial basis, we regarded it as small consideration for what Bruce had taught us. He taught us patience. He taught us acceptance. He taught us just how much a phone call, or a lift here or there, or rearranging engagements to make it to a birthday party could mean. In all these things he taught us how much just caring meant. Most of all, he taught us humility.

For all that he taught us, there were some things that Bruce would never understand. I don't think, for instance, that he ever fathomed how I could follow no sport at all whereas he was fascinated by them all. And of course it is this aspect of his life that many of us will immediately remember: Bruce arranging to get himself a lift to some football match, or phoning up to discuss what we thought about the result in the cricket. But it would be a mistake to think that this was simply a fascination or even a mania. It was a search for something he could be part of, a place where he could belong. Of course he had his family, but like all of us he sought other kinds of belonging too. For much of his life he found that at Easts Leagues Club and, especially during his last years, with the Maccabi soccer team. This desire to belong to something was part of the desire to live a meaningful life. In this respect, the desire and the obstacles that frustrate it were no different from those encountered by any of us who seek such a life.

For Bruce, however, the obstacles encountered on this common struggle were unique. For him, the desire to belong, to be part of something, was the desire to belong or be part of the wider community, and the obstacle to this was his intellectual disability. Bruce was never content to live in a subculture in which he socialized only with disabled people or was employed in a sheltered workshop. He wanted – indeed, needed – to live an independent life and participate in the wider community. That he was able to do this is in no small measure due to the support he

received from JewishCare. That he should ever have imagined such a life; that he should have desired it for himself; and that he should have believed that he was entitled to it, came from somewhere else. It came squarely from the commitment of Uncle Ron and Auntie Susi to instill in Bruce a sense of his own dignity as an individual, a member of a family, and a part of a community. If it was the Almighty who gave him *nepshesh*, it was his parents who gave him *ruach*. Their forty-three years of love, commitment, and dedication meant that, like all of us, Bruce dared to hope for ever more from life.

In the final speech in *King Lear*, Albany says:

“The weight of this sad time we must obey;
Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.”

If there was one thing you could count on with Bruce, it was that he would instinctively speak what he felt not what he ought to say. That was one of the genuine pleasures of spending time with him. For the rest of us, however, the weight of this sad time does prompt us to consider the difference between what we feel and what we ought to say. When we think about the often sad and difficult circumstances of Bruce’s life, I think there is a tendency to avoid speaking how we feel. When it comes to Bruce’s character, his personality, the way he lived his life, I sincerely believe that there is no disparity between how any of us feel and what we believe we ought to say. Bruce lived with *chesed*, with loving-kindness. In his own simple way he offered it to all of us and aroused it in all of us. So it is right that we should dwell on how Bruce lived rather than on his circumstances, and speak of what we feel: of the gentle giant that we loved and the family hub that we have lost, and give thanks to God for a life lived in anticipation of small pleasures.

Damien Freeman