

Eulogy of Rabbi Aaron Landes (z"l) by Samuel Rank

I got married two years ago and I was blessed to have Saba officiate at the wedding. In his charge he said, "It is a privilege granted by the Almighty for a grandfather to officiate at the wedding of his grandchildren." As full of grief as my heart may be, it is a tremendous privilege for me to speak on behalf of Saba's 12 grandchildren today.

Since being asked to eulogize Saba, I've been thinking of the refrain from the Yom Kippur liturgy:

Mah nomar lefanecha yoshev yoshev marom

"What can we say to you who sit on high"

Who am I to eulogize such a great man? It seems ironic to me that I should be standing at the same pulpit where Saba stood for so many years, preaching long, meaningful sermons with ease. I have struggled to express two minutes worth of words that I believe do justice to the reputation or legacy of a man who rose to the rank of admiral and who led the most robust Conservative congregation in the Philadelphia region. But, while Saba was proud of his service to the rabbinate and to the Navy, he was most proud of his family: its meaningful Jewish identity, its love for one another, the professional, personal, and educational accomplishments of every family member. To this I am qualified to speak. However, it is not an easy thing to convey in words the significant impact that Saba had on my life. I know in my heart all the wonderful things I feel for and about Saba. Expressing these sentiments is hard. But, today and going forward, I hope to do my best to convey the lessons I learned, the experiences we shared, and the rich legacy he leaves to his grandchildren. Saba would often remind his grandchildren of the Talmudic teaching that says:

B'nai vanim k'mo vanim

"The children of your children are like your children"

Saba felt that his grandchildren were like children to him. In the same way, his grandchildren felt that he was like a parent to each of us. He was full of warmth and love. He would frequently remind his *actual* children that they should never miss an opportunity to hug and kiss *their* children. From the time I was little, I remember that every time we saw him, Saba would invite a hug. He would open his arms wide, smile, and say "look at who's here! Come here, kid. I need a hug and a kiss." And, in the commotion of coming and going from Saba's presence, if you somehow managed to avoid his loving embrace, he would say, "I don't recall getting a hug and a kiss from you."

In my childhood, weekends included frequent trips to Philadelphia especially around the Jewish holidays. On Shabbat we would go to synagogue. Saba would allow us to horse around in his

office and eat his candies. On the off chance that you actually found me in the sanctuary during services, you would often find me on the bima, the pulpit, where I had the chutzpah to sit between Saba and the Assistant Rabbi during the Torah service. Saba would shake the hand of a prominent member who had been called upon for an honor. Following Saba, I always shook hands as well. Saba never reprimanded or corrected me. In fact, he always acted like this was perfectly acceptable.

During the summer, our parents would leave us at Saba and Savta's house while they went on vacation for a week. Saba would take us on long walks, on paddle boats, and to minor league baseball games. He would take us to the basketball court and shoot hoops with us or accompany us on trips to the pool where he would insist that we take regular breaks to rest – just as he used to do when he was a lifeguard many years before. In the afternoon, we enjoyed playing chess together. Do you think an admiral ever loses a game of chess? I don't think I ever beat him. In the mornings, Saba and I would say the morning prayers; it was on one of those occasions that Saba taught me to wrap tefillin, just the way that I do to this day.

Throughout the years, Saba's good name and reputation were a constant source of support for me. In college, some of the first people I met were Jews from the greater Philadelphia area – many of them not members of Beth Shalom. But they all knew Saba. Upon hearing that I was *The Admiral's* grandson, I had instant credibility and friends. All these years since college, visits with friends have included frequent inquiries of "how are the Admiral and Sora?" One of these friends commissioned a custom-made chess set and requested that the king should be a rabbi. When the craftsman asked "what should a Rabbi look like?" she produced a picture of Saba. And the chess piece really looks like him. Saba's grandchildren respected his business and political acumen. Saba was serious when we called for advice about a work, family or school-related matter. But Saba was also a lot of fun to be with and he had a great sense of humor. On many occasions, Saba would tell a joke at the dinner table and even though everyone else had stopped laughing, Saba was still laughing – usually crying and laughing at his own joke. This always gave everyone a second laugh. We enjoyed spending time together while watching *Old Jews Telling Jokes*. I remember on one occasion I unknowingly played what I thought was a clean joke that turned out to be particularly raunchy. Those who were watching with us recognized a few seconds into the joke that this would not be a clean joke and we began looking nervously at each other wondering who would have the courage to turn off the computer while Saba was still watching. No one volunteered. When the joke reached the punchline, Saba laughed the hardest. I apologized for letting his virgin ears hear such a joke. But Saba just laughed and said, "That was charming and this is real borscht belt stuff!"

Saba was the consummate role model exuding abundant love in everything that he did. We loved all the trademark lines that were unique to Saba, like "I want you to know...", "Just a minute...!" and "Very good...!" I got so good at imitating the many things that Saba would say that one Passover some years ago, I did Saba's Kiddush in exactly his style. The whole family was smiling recognizing the obvious attempt at imitating Saba. At the end of the Kiddush, we asked Saba if he recognized the Kiddush. He said, "uhuh... was that me?!" As with many of you, Saba's good ways rubbed off on me!

As you know, Saba had a propensity for wishing everyone "God Bless You." His grandchildren were no exception. Many years ago following one wonderful weekend at Saba and Savta's, we were in the backseat of the car getting ready for our return trip to Connecticut. I remember

feeling sad to be leaving the comfort of Saba and Savta's presence. As he slowly closed the rear door, I remember Saba leaning in and saying "God Bless You" just as the door closed. As we pulled away, I was moved and broke down saying "Why does he always have to say 'God Bless You?!'"

I was moved – as we all were – by the way Saba could use the power of his words and his kindness to bring comfort in our times of loss, need, or vulnerability. In 2007, I had appendicitis and made a hospital visit. Saba called and assured me that when I went in for surgery, the Almighty would be with me. He told me that God would guide the hands of the surgeon towards a successful outcome and he blessed me with a priestly blessing. I have written proof, as I am sure many of you do, of Saba's prowess with words. Since going to college, I have saved every letter that Saba and Savta have sent to me. While they share many of the same themes, one letter stood out to me and I would like to share it with you. This is from my 25th Birthday card: "Dearest Samuel, it is hard to believe that 25 years ago you brought so much joy to your parents and to us. *You* changed our status from parents to grandparents. Your presence is transformative. We love you and are proud of you. May the Almighty continue to bless you with life, good health and ever growing success. With love, Savta and Saba."

Saba, you long ago earned my admiration and respect. I love and miss you very much. But I find solace in knowing that your influence on me and so many others has been profound. While you are not here, I am comforted in knowing that your ways and memory endure not only with me, but with your family and friends. Thank you, Saba, and I love you.

