

Remembering Rabbi Panken

Rabbi PJ Schwartz

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As Shabbat ended last week, clergy and Jewish professionals throughout the United States and world learned that Rabbi Aaron D. Panken, Ph.D., President of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute (HUC-JIR), the seminary that Cantor Felder-Levy, Rabbi Aron, and I attended, had died tragically in a plane. He served as the 12th President in HUC-JIR's 143-year history.

He was a distinguished rabbi and scholar, dedicated teacher, and exemplary leader of the Reform Movement for nearly three decades. As President of HUC-JIR, he sought to help its students grow into authentic Jewish thought leaders, able to articulate and advance their own visions of a rich Jewish life for a new and rapidly changing religious landscape. For him, Reform Judaism has always symbolized what I consider to be the best of Judaism—firmly rooted in our tradition, yet egalitarian, inclusive of patrilineal Jews and intermarried families, welcoming to the LGBT community, politically active, and respectful of other faiths and ideologies.

As Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman noted earlier this week, Rabbi Panken's logic was impeccable: The world needs Reform Judaism; Reform Judaism needs a movement; and a movement needs a college. The college is the key to it all: the source for clergy and for leadership, and the center for thinking and for re-engineering Jewish existence for our time. So he set his sights on doing it right,

not succumbing to the self-satisfied bureaucratic sclerosis that institutions often settle for.

Interestingly, Rabbi Panken's first career was that of an engineer. For Rabbi Panken, then, the world was a challenge worth solving, and each of us has the capacity to engineer its solution. He was driven with intellect and vision, goodness and sweetness. The tragedy is that he was just hitting his stride before his untimely death last week.

Most importantly, though, especially for our students who are in Religious School and Hebrew School, he was a life-long learner who never stopped studying. He had a passion for learning about Jewish ritual and practice and was driven to always discover and rediscover new things. He believed that Judaism was a gift, filled with wisdom that we all can learn from, even today. And while Rabbi Panken could cite any source of Jewish wisdom, speaking true to the very heart of Jewish tradition, his greatest strength was being able to speak from the heart. We learn within Judaism that the heart and the mind are intertwined, working together, and helping us be our best selves. Rabbi Panken knew this. He lived this.

For me personally, I never had the opportunity to take a class with Rabbi Panken, but I did have numerous opportunities to speak with him one-on-one. A few years ago, I was working toward a Certificate in Jewish Education Specializing in Adolescents and Emerging Adults. He admired the fact that I was the only rabbi in the certificate program. He told me that the best leaders are competent and confident; they are guides who make demanding and inspirational achievement

possible. He told me that my participation in this program meant that I was one who refused mediocrity. He was right.

Like all of those who have come before us, Rabbi Panken leaves a legacy that will continue to live on through us. He knew that learning was hard work and that it doesn't come easy for everyone. But he challenged us to persevere—to try and try again, to pick ourselves back up when we fall, and to be willing to make mistakes. He reminded us that to make mistakes is not a sign of failure, but a sign of greatness. For when we are able to improve and do better, we are stronger than we were before.

And that is true of Hebrew learning. It is difficult and it can be a struggle. But even when we struggle, we must and can persevere. We can try and try again. And know that we can do better and be better. And perhaps the greatest lesson that we can learn is that we do not have to do this alone. You have your teachers, your clergy, your parents, and your friends, who always will cheer you on as you strive for excellence.

And excellence is what we reached this morning. Each of you were our rabbis and our cantors, leading us and guiding us in our worship this morning. We are proud of you and your accomplishments, proud of your successes and your opportunities for growth. We love you. We care for you. And we wish you Shabbat Shalom.