

Honoring Avrum Rosensweig's 20 Years at Ve'ahavta

By Eli Rubenstein

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Karen Goldenberg called me a few weeks back to say a few words about Avrum, both humorous and serious.

So let me start off with the humorous (which, if you know, Avrum, is not such a challenge!)

As you know, Avrum has had occasion to mingle with some of the upper echelons of political society.

A few years back he met, President Clinton – that would be Bill Clinton – at a large function. And Avrum addresses the President as if he was just someone he met on the beach or on the bus. And he said to President Clinton - you know Bill, or he may even have said “Billy boy” - you seem like a real down to earth guy- someone who I would like to go to a bar, kick back and down a few beers with. The President smiled politely, mumbled something incoherently, and walked away. Some time later, at the same function, their paths crossed again – and the former president, with a look of visible consternation on his face – said to Avrum, “Oh it’s you again.”, and quickly turned in a different direction to make a hasty getaway. I often told Avrum, if he wrote an autobiography: “Oh, Its You Again,” would be a great title!

Avrum’s second brush with greatness – among many - happened in the presence of Tony Blair – the former British PM. Seated next to each other at a function, Avrum mentioned to Tony Blair, “You know I did some research on you, and you used to be a member of a rock band”. Blair looked at Avrum, sizing up his unconventional hairstyle and attire, and without skipping a beat, said to him, “Evidently, you are still very much part of one...”

Avrum, if you ever bump into Donald Trump, I would love to hear how that conversation goes!

I started off with these two stories, not just because they are funny, but because they are emblematic of who Avrum is, whether he is dining with kings and queens, or meeting a homeless person on the street – he is still the

same person, the same Avrum, no airs, no pretenses, always trying to make a human connection.

Now for a more serious reflections on Avrum:

I have known Avrum since we were teenagers studying in Yeshiva in Toronto. Our close friendship — which has spanned some 40 years — has afforded me the privilege of watching Avrum grow and develop into the outstanding individual he is today.

What makes Avrum the totally original human being that he most certainly is?

Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, “When I was young, I used to admire people of great intelligence; when I became older, I admired people of great compassion.”

Avrum embodies both characteristics. He is an exceptionally gifted, creative, and brilliant individual. But his extraordinary intelligence is matched — and perhaps even superseded — by his endless compassion for everyone whose life he touches.

As founder and head of Ve’ahavta, Avrum’s compassion is not just his profession; it is not something he dons as he walks in the door of his office, and removes like a coat when he finishes his workday. No, Avrum’s compassion is the 24-hour, seven-day-a-week kind.

As every member of his family, every friend, or even a stranger who has met Avrum on the street for the first time, will agree:

Avrum is the real thing.

Thich Nhat Hanh once said: “There is no way to peace. Peace is the way....”

In a similar vein, Avrum’s entire life — not just his *professional* life — is dedicated to “tikkun olam” — mending our shattered world. He will (as he has done in the past), open his own home to the homeless, comfort a bereaved family, bring cheer to senior citizens in a nursing home, lend support to a struggling friend or, on a moment’s notice, befriend a complete stranger, learn his life story, and then become his most loyal friend.

Billy Wilder, the noted American (and Jewish) filmmaker once described the generosity he saw in America thus: “In America,” Wilder said, “a penniless beggar can approach a man on the street and ask him for the time. In America, not only might the man give him the time, he might also give him his watch!”

This is what Avrum is like.

Avrum gives each and every human being he comes into contact with, regardless of age or social status (no matter how young or old, how lost or forgotten, how poor or rich), his undivided attention and compassion. He will sacrifice his own physical comfort, and give up even the last of his own personal possessions, to assist another in need. I’ve seen him do it.

Ve’ahavta, the name that Avrum chose for the organization, is taken from the Biblical verse, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” Commentators explain that unlike most other commandments, this mitzvah must stem not from Biblical fiat – not just because God commanded it - but from actually feeling the pain of your neighbor.

When one is cold and hungry, one does not say to oneself: “I am hungry and cold and, therefore, I must clothe and feed myself”; it is an automatic and autonomic response of self-preservation.

So, too, must we feel the cold and hunger of our fellow human beings. Our need to clothe the cold and feed the hungry must become as natural and as instinctive as our need to clothe and feed ourselves.

Their pain is our pain; their needs are our own needs.

This is the understanding and the spirit from which Avrum leads his life.

In truth, I have met tens of thousands of people in my life, many of them in the Jewish communal world, or working for NGOs in the non-profit sector.

In my well-traveled and well-populated life, I have met only one person who has exhibited this level of “fellow-feel,” this instinctive reaction, to the suffering and pain of others.

And that person is Avrum Rosensweig.

I want to add one last point about the legacy that Avrum has created.

At the time of Ve’ahavta’s inception, there were literally thousands of young people who wanted to make a difference in the world, and they wanted to achieve this through their involvement in the Jewish community. Ve’ahavta has given them a way to do just that. As it turned out, there are also thousands of *older* Jewish men and women, who have been overjoyed to support Ve’havata’s efforts through their generous donations.

I speak for myself and many other Jewish people I know, especially of the younger generation, when I say that Avrum has made us proud to be Jewish.... Why? Because we feel honored and privileged to belong to a people who focus so passionately on the needs of others, and place this emphasis at the very centre of their religious expression. As Hillel said, thousands of years ago, “If am only for myself, then what am I?” If the Jewish people are only “out for themselves” then of what value is the existence of the Jewish people to the progress of humanity?

The Torah commands the Jewish people to be a “light unto the nations,” to act in such a fashion that the rest of the world will remark in praise “on this wise and discerning nation...” (Deut. 4:6)

The vision and leadership of Avrum Rosensweig has not only helped countless people in all corners of the globe, it has also generated great honor for the world’s Jewish people. He has quite literally changed the landscape of Jewish communal responsibility.

In countries across the globe – in Africa, Asia and South America - mention of the Jewish people will bring a smile to people’s faces and a light into their eyes, because, through Ve’ahavta’s activities, they know that in this war-weary world, there is at least one other people — the Jewish people — are looking out for their welfare.

A Somali child in a Ve'ahavta-sponsored homework club in Toronto, an infant being saved from the scourge of AIDS in Africa, a child in Guyana being rescued from a life of blindness, an infant from South America whose heart was repaired at Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, all owe their good fortune to Avrum Rosensweig's leadership, human compassion, and vision.

They may not know who saved their lives — but we do....

And that is why, on this, the 20th anniversary of the founding of Ve'ahavta, Avrum Rosensweig so richly deserves our heartfelt admiration and applause!

Eli Rubenstein and Avrum Rosensweig both studied – and misbehaved – at Yeshivahs in Toronto and Israel in the mid 1970s They have been inseparable friends and co-conspirators ever since.