

Eulogy for Ron Shlensky
Tuesday, August 1, 2006
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Congregation B'nai Brith, Santa Barbara

We have come together today to say goodbye to Ron Shlensky, to lay his body to rest in the earth, and before we do to say a few inadequate words about this complicated, unpredictable, infuriating, gifted, tormented, deeply loving man who has been taken from us – his friends and family – suddenly, with no warning whatsoever.

In telling the story of Ron's life, there are some important facts to set forth, and then there is the mystery of this man. Let me start with the facts.

Ron was born on 1935 and grew up on the south side of Chicago. He and his sister Gerry were the two children of Florence and Isidore; Ron's father was a pharmacist and Ron worked as a soda jerk in the pharmacy. Ron's childhood unfolded in a tough neighborhood, in which a Jewish kid could get beat up simply for being a Jew, but it was also a wonderful world surrounded by a huge extended family which Ron enjoyed.

When Ron went to college, he was enormously popular – smart enough to do well without going to class (which he often did not), dazzlingly handsome (his mother, by the way, was a candidate for Miss Illinois); he was witty and he was powerfully charismatic.

Resisting his father's desire for him to become a pharmacist, Ron chose medicine instead and did his residency in psychiatry.

It was during his time as a psych resident that Ron fixed his eye upon Evely. She was a young college student, on a summer internship in social work at a hospital and her supervisor had sent her to observe a session of psychodrama. Young Evely sat there, and realized that a young doctor was staring at her – relentlessly, and not in as subtle way! At a break in the session the intense young doctor said “Miss Laser, would you come into my office please?”

Evely was intimidated and awestruck; Ron was the most dashing man she had ever met, and on their first date, when she mentioned her fantasy of one day living out west on a ranch, Ron asked “well, could it be a Jewish rancher?”

They married and by the time Evely graduated from college she was pregnant with Lincoln. Ron entered the armed service and they were stationed in Germany, where Sheba was born, spent two year there and then returned to Chicago. In Chicago Aviva arrived, completing their family and after 12 or 13 years there, Ron became restless and by sheer force of his own will - uprooted his family, against all their wishes, and in 1979 they moved to Santa Barbara, CA.

And here we need to pause with the facts and turn to Ron and who he was. This no easy task, since Ron himself as he got older became increasingly unsure of who he was. Here are a few observations.

As a young man, as I have already mentioned, Ron was immensely charismatic – remember that Evely Laser was swept off her feet by him – he was powerful, expansive and fun. And in those days he also had what his children describe as a volcanic temper. He could be brutally harsh – although never physically violent, and when they were young, they were terrified of him. As Ron aged, he mellowed – and he lost a large measure of his confidence. He became much less sure of himself, and at the same time he learned to show his love for his family, he became more expressively loving.

Ron was a man of immense contradictions, and so he evoked vastly contradictory responses among us – his friends. Having been his friend for the past 20 years, I have heard the most silly, inane, inappropriate things issue from his mouth...and yet no one has touched me more deeply than Ron, repeatedly over the years, with a simple, honest, penetrating word of encouragement or love.

Ron loved to break rules; he would show up at any occasion dressed in any way he liked, would say things that would shock, or annoy or infuriate us. When Aviva and Andrew were looking for a site for their wedding, Ron discovered the Natural History Museum and climbed into a tree to take aerial photos of his chosen site; when Ron ran on the street - which he did constantly, and long before jogging became a fad, he would wave his arms as though he was conducting an orchestra. I will always remember one comment Ron made about 13 years ago. A group of us were learning about an inspiring program for Jewish ex-convicts in Los Angeles, called Bet T'shuvah. The rest of us were nodding our heads solemnly, moved by the presentation about this organization which rebuilds people's lives, and when we heard that representatives of Bet T'shuvah would be coming to speak in Santa Barbara, Ron-- with impeccable timing—murmured “better lock up the silver.” This elicited Evely's famous, exasperated “Ronnie!!”...but then, as the rest of us were rolling on the floor, she did not suppress a smile.

I think you have been our community's most shocking couple, Evely. How could we not be struck by the contrast, between your stately, regal bearing and Ron's wild, wacky disregard for convention. And yet we also saw, if we looked closely, that in your marriage, the two of you were striving to unify two opposing but equally essential sides of the human spirit: the noble and the comic iconoclast.

The struggle to live with contradictions can be exhausting, and it often was – for both Ron and Evely. But behold the fruit produced by that union: Aviva, Sheba and Lincoln. As you said to me yesterday, Evely, three astounding human beings – the central blessing of your life. They are clearly an awesome legacy of your long, difficult, marvelous marriage with Ron.

As I sat with the three of you, yesterday, Lincoln, Sheba and Aviva, and your mom, I was struck repeatedly by the miraculous blending of your mother and your father in each of

you – the honesty (at times brutal), the tenderness, the intelligence, the humor and the love in each of you is breath-taking. I see in each of you, your dad’s spirit vibrantly alive and well.

And let’s not forget the next generation: Jared, Eli, Solomon and Celia – I know it’s hard to suddenly have your grandpa gone. But he loved you, and loved being with you...it was one of the few things that kept making him happy until the day he died. He poured himself into you, and so he is alive in each of you--forever.

A final thought: Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav taught about 200 years ago that human beings grow in stages. We spend years creating a solid sense of ourself and our world, and then-- if we are open, and courageous-- we encounter a person or an idea that shatters that sense of our world. And we go through a painful process of slowly constructing a new, more inclusive and truer picture of the world. Eventually, if we stay open and courageous, that process of shattering and recreating occurs over and over until we die.

Rabbi Nachman’s philosophy did not make him peaceful or happy. His biography is entitled Tormented Master. And yet his personality, his teaching and his impact on the people around him continues to be with us unto this day.

In his life, Ron built worlds. He built the world of Forensic Psychiatry, and in his marriage with Evely, he built a world of a marvelous family. There is no question that everything that Evely has given to the world, to the country and to this community are due in part to Ron’s unconditional support and encouragement. But for most of his life, Ron Shlensky was a breaker of rules, to our irritation and to our delight.

In his final years, he was building a new world for himself, based on a single rule...the rule “thou shalt love”. In this rule, Ron kept growing stronger and stronger – expressing his love for Evely, for his children and grandchildren, and for all of us more and more openly. The tragedy of Ron’s life, if there was one, is that he died so suddenly, and had no opportunity to step back and look at and enjoy the new world he was creating.

But for all of us who felt his love, and who know that there will never be another Ron Shlensky – his memory will be a blessing for the rest of our lives.