

## **MY FATHER, LEONARD LASER**

By Evely Laser Shlensky

I was sitting in synagogue in Santa Barbara on Rosh Hashanah, reading some of the meditations that were placed in our prayerbooks. I found one by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, the opening sentence of which turned my mind to my father. Rabbi Nachman wrote: “Two people who live in different places, or even in different generations, may still converse.” Back to Reb Nachman in a moment.

My father was known in the Jewish community for his leadership and his fund-raising prowess. He had served as President of the Young Men’s Jewish Council and then as General Chairman of the Combined Jewish Appeal of Metropolitan Chicago. Many people have told me over the years that everyone looked up to Lenny Laser--though I suspect more than a few were actually fairly intimidated by his, shall we say, “strong-armed” fund raising tactics. Those funds, raised by either arm-twisting or his substantial persuasive powers, were used primarily to ransom Jews coming out of Eastern Europe and North Africa in the wake of World War II.

The words of respect for my father were sweet to hear. But for me, Lenny and Lois’s younger daughter, my father was about teaching values, primarily, though not exclusively, Jewish values. He taught with love and with the evidence of his own life, as well as the lives of his parents and grandparents. That’s what I thought about in reflecting on

Reb Nachman's words: that my father's forebears, through Dad's tales of their lives, had spoken to me, though we lived in different times, different places. I thought also of how my father's teachings had framed my life, and the lives and my children, Doris's children, and my grandchildren.

I'll say a bit more about these values in just a moment. But first a few memories I hold dear:

1. During World War II, my father worked two jobs, the one mandated by the military, and the other, his own business. He had one day a week to himself. That day he devoted to my sister Doris and me. And how we relished his time, his company--and his pancakes! He was so damn much fun! I hear my children recollecting him in the same way. Even his great grandchildren have had the pleasure of his festive ways, particularly around tables in restaurants where my father entertained them with spoon tricks and cheating at tic tac toe.
2. A second incident: Beginning in girlhood, I had a great passion for horseback riding. As in my other pursuits, my father supported me every step of the way. Sports had, after all, been an important part of his life, playing football at both Hyde Park High and at the University of Michigan—with Jerry Ford no less. Soon I was riding in horseshows. After some early successes in the showing, I rode in a show in which I did not place. At age 9, that had me in tears.

Afterwards, my father who was with me, as he always was, watching the show, took me home, saying nothing about my disappointment or my poor performance. The next day, to my surprise, Dad stayed home from work. He felt that I would then be ready to talk about the experience I had had at the show. And he wanted to teach me about sportsmanship, about the importance of doing one's best but not expecting to win every time, about engaging in the sport to learn, and grow, and enjoy. It was a lesson I never forgot. And I never forgot that it had been more important for him to teach me, at a time I was ready to listen, than to go to work that morning.

3. Last vignette. This one is one of those tales from my forebears brought to me by my father: My great grandmother, Etta Leah Laser, after whom I'm named, passed on her devotion to the poor through simple, selfless deeds. Frequently she was seen going about in well-worn garments as she distributed her new clothes to needy women in her neighborhood. On her death it was discovered that her *tachrichim* (burial garments) were missing. It seems that she had parted even with her shrouds, giving them to a poor woman who had died before she did.

These vignettes illustrate but a few of the ways my father taught us values. The value that was of overarching importance to him was that of *tzedakah*. It was a precious

legacy he'd inherited from his parents and his grandparents. I came to regard it as a holy idea, or more accurately, holy action. He stressed that *tzedakah* was about justice, not charity. He saw his own work on behalf of Jewish refugees making their way to Israel in just those terms. As a young person I became convinced that my father did business primarily to support his "tzedakah habit."

I remember fondly the way he recounted a life choice he made during the 1950's. Here's how he voiced that choice in the oral history that my late husband, Ronald, of blessed memory, and I, arranged to have taken on the occasion of my father's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday:

"I said [to Rabbi] Edgar [Siskin] (who was trying at the time to persuade him to become President of North Shore Congregation Israel), you know, there are a hundred people in this congregation who would love to be president. [That's] great....You know where my heart is. It is overseas and it is going to stay overseas. If you think I am going to serve an overprivileged community just because I need *yiches* forget it. I am staying overseas."

As he saw it, the chance to provide leadership and sustenance that would benefit Jews on their way to Israel, rather than leadership of comfortable Jews among whom we lived, both opportunities open to him at the time, was an easy choice. It was, basically, a preference for doing justice, for *tzedakah*.

My son, Lincoln, visited and then interviewed my father just a couple of months ago. Already Dad was failing, miserable with shingles. Lincoln asked his grandfather if he had any advice for us. Initially Dad said “*Gey gesunt.*” Then he added, “You know what to do.” It was a brief summary of one of the most important child-rearing lessons we received from my father: let your children know that you value their judgment. Tell them to use their own good judgment, even to make mistakes, though encourage them to make the same mistake only once. This sounds simple, but is actually incredibly affirming, confidence-building: to know that one is trusted by one’s parent to do the right thing, to make good decisions. That trust is a life force.

My father’s ethical will was never written, but was voiced throughout his life. His grandchildren reflect his *menschlichkeit*, his devotion to causes beyond self, his involvement in Jewish life, his interest in the world, his generosity of substance and spirit. His later years were made fuller and more comfortable by my sister through her incredible goodness, patience and attentiveness to his needs. She served also as his household, health and *tzedakah* manager. My gratitude to Doris is without measure. And I speak for both of us in thanking his beloved caregivers, Emily and Christina.

Dad, may your memory be not only for blessing, but also for teaching, even now, across the generations.