

# RABBI JOEL BERMAN

## Max Huberman Eulogy (Delivered May 11, 2008)

My connection with the Huberman family started about 10 years ago when a young man named Jeff Huberman, not the one that's here today, not Max's son, came to our Shabbat table in Jerusalem. About three or four years ago I found that he was a distant cousin of Mark's. And in some ways, I felt that when I met our Hubermans, here in Youngstown, the connection was already in place with a remarkable family. Today, sadly, we're here to say goodbye to the patriarch of that family.

He was larger than life. He was a crusader and a homebody. He was a character and he was personable. He was Max Huberman. And now he's left us, but what a life he had.

Max's parents, Nosson and Dora Huberman came from Poland, toward the end of the mass migration from Europe that would end just a few years later. They had made it as far as Paris, France when Max was born on September 23, 1921. They reached the United States on September 22, 1924 entering through Ellis Island; Max's name on the ship's manifest can be seen on the Ellis Island website. Life wasn't easy on New York's Lower East Side, where they set up their new life. Nosson was a leather worker and Dora ran a kosher restaurant.

Max dropped out of high school, and he ran with a rough gang on the Lower East Side, one known for violence. In fact because of that he found himself in a New York City police station (and the Hawthorne Reform School for Jewish Youth) as one of four young men involved in an early psycho-drama program aimed at rehabilitating delinquents. This program turned him around and instilled in Max a love of the stage that never left. And he also discovered the destinations open to him with a library card, and that kept him off the streets. As such, Max is a poster child for rehab.

His life took a big turn when Pearl Harbor was attacked. He volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army the very next day. He really wanted to go and fight Nazis in Europe, but it turned out that since he'd been born in France, he would always be regarded as a French citizen, no matter how many other passports he carried, and if he were to be captured in France, he'd have been

considered not a prisoner of war, but a traitor to the Vichy government, and liable for execution. So they shipped him off to the China-Burma-and-India theater of war, or CBI as it was known, and that's where he spent most of his time overseas in the army.

The family went to great pains to tell me that Max didn't really believe in Gd, he wasn't religiously Jewish, but there were so many stories they told me that just resonated with a Jewish flavor, and during these next few minutes, I'll mention a few **of** them.

In the first story, Max was almost court-martialed for hitting a British field lieutenant who was cruelly whipping an elderly rickshaw driver, and I couldn't help but think of Moses hitting the Egyptian taskmaster who was mistreating a Hebrew. Like Moses, Max was moved to act by an injustice. He had been trained as a boxer, and he knocked the officer down pretty hard. He was brought up on charges of striking a superior officer in wartime, which carried some brig time and a dishonorable discharge, but then it turned out that the rank of British field lieutenant was, after examination, not higher than his own rank of first sergeant in the U.S. Army, so they slapped him on the wrist, and nothing much came of it. But this sense of justice was another step closer to what we recognize when we think about Max.

But before he was deployed, he won awards and citations for writing and producing shows to entertain the troops. He had Broadway in his blood, and he loved to perform, and he toured. He was doing a show at the Jewish USO on Hazel Street in Youngstown and a pretty woman caught his eye. But there were a couple of other soldiers gathered around her, so, thinking fast, he told them that he just heard that their unit had been called up and they were to report for duty immediately. It worked; they left and Max introduced himself to Ruth Shulman. He left shortly for CBI, but they kept in touch, and when he came back they were married on March 24, 1946.

He and Ruth lived in New York City for the next two years. He applied to what was to become Columbia University's School of Journalism. Since he technically never finished high school, he had to take an entrance examination. But how would he prepare? Armed with his trusty library card, he went into the New York Public Library and, legend has it, read the Encyclopedia Britannica. Took him a week. He scored a 96, the highest score anyone had gotten on the entrance exams in three years.

He worked as well. He was the head waiter at the Taft Hotel when he became the first amateur poet to have a poem read before the Poetry Society of America. He would have read it himself, but he was off participating in a May Day parade, representing the Hotel and Restaurant Workers union. He was already crusading.

Max and Ruth moved to Youngstown in 1948 shortly after Jeff was born. Mark came on the scene in 1951. Max worked for various furniture companies including Robin's, Reichart's, Leslie's and Copeland's. He was "the closer." If you weren't sure the sofa was for you, you'd know by the time you were done with Max that you'd been waiting for this sofa all your life, and here it was. And a benefit of this kind of work was that it had regular hours and he could do what he wanted when he wasn't working. So he'd come home and take the kids to Mill Creek Park, or some other activity. He made sure Jeff and Mark got a lot of his time.

He had two brothers, Abe and Ben. They're gone now, but he was close to both of them by phone to Atlantic City where Abe's son Robbie and his wife Laura are coming from today, and Cincinnati, where Abe's son Brad and his partner Lee are coming in from and to Florida where Ben and his family lived. They'd go to all the family simchas, and by phone they'd swap jokes and stories, they were all storytellers. He loved his sister Florence, and of course she's here, and I understand as well as her daughter Judy and her husband Dov are here from Cleveland. Florence and Max would dance, and cut a rug like nobody's business. Max loved to dance. He and Ruth would clear the floor. Everyone would stop just to watch them dance. Waltz, polka, jitterbug. In recent years he'd tell Lisa, and Liz and Heather, I'll be better when I'll be able to dance at your wedding.

Max overcame a health crisis when he contracted polio in 1950. He escaped some of the crippling effects of the disease, but it led him and Ruth to start practicing a vegetarian and eventually a vegan lifestyle. This led to opening a health food store in 1958. Two years later it became the Natural Health Foods and Barbell Center which they operated for the next 31 years. Barry Davis told me that *his* father, also named Max, bought him a set of barbells there, and I'm sure others here have similar stories.

Max became a leader in the health food industry. He rose to be President of the National Nutritional Foods Association from 1992 to 1997. During his

tenure, Max led the successful fight against Federal Legislation which tried to make vitamin and mineral supplements available through prescription only. He championed movements for health freedom and to restrict or label irradiated and genetically engineered foods and to develop standards for natural food products. He was also a 55- year member of the National Health Association and served on its board of directors.

When an important movement or action needed a leader, Max was there. He was a problem-solver and the family came to him for advice, which was given freely, but thoughtfully and pointedly. He wrote the family newsletter. And he'd write mindful poems for relatives for birthdays and other occasions. He was there for his family, and he was there for the world.

And through it all, the sun rose and set with Ruth. Since opening the store they were never apart for more than a day, and almost never that long. They worked together. They went home together. Their life was one of the great loves.

He did have some absent minded moments. It's doubtful he ever really understood the process by which clothing was picked up, cleaned and appeared fresh in his drawer. Ruth also gave him the same card for his birthday and anniversary for almost 30 years before he caught on. She'd give him the card, then take it back and put it in the drawer until next year. She wanted to see if he'd notice.

As I mentioned, everyone kept telling me that Max wasn't religious. Ok, so he wasn't exactly a "godaholic." Maybe he'd fold the New York Times and put it in his Siddur, his prayer book when he was forced to go to services. Maybe he didn't look to prayer or a higher being to inspire him. But nonetheless, inspired he was.

He had a moral compass that always pointed to inequality and discrimination. He'd *defend* the **faith**, even if he didn't *practice* it much, or so he thought. His Judaism was action-oriented.

Maybe he wasn't so religious, but he was on the committee that built the new synagogue, and he did all the publicity and PR and ad copy, and worked the Bingo here. He was involved with all the temple activities. Well, except services. It was hard to just sit around praising God when there was so much to do for his people.

His was less the practice of Judaism than the experience of being Jewish, and being part of the Jewish civilization. He understood that Judaism demands actions more than faith, so he translated that into doing good deeds, all the time. He was a proud Zionist. Although he might have had some complaints about Israel in his later years, his Zionism was that post-WWII, post Holocaust, 1948 pride. He felt part of an oppressed minority, and as such his sense of peoplehood was strong. He wrote essays, short stories, and poems. He wrote a powerful poem called “Naturally, the Jews,” expressing his outrage at one people’s being cast as the eternal scapegoat. He got involved with local African American clergy on civil rights issues. He’d ride with Black family friends to segregated events, just to see if they could get in.

Like the prophets of Israel he stood for human rights all over the globe. He and Ruth quit the ACLU for a while because they defended the rights of the Nazis to march in Skokie Illinois. Maybe he didn’t daven so much, but the lens he used to see the injustices of the world had a filter tinted by the Holocaust.

Maybe he wasn’t religious, but he liked to be involved in Jewish organizations. He was involved with B’nai Brith. He edited their newsletter, made it relevant and it won awards. He was the secretary for BB for years.

Maybe he wasn’t so religious, but the boys got to Hebrew School and met all their obligations, and were confirmed here at OT. Booker Kessler told Mark, “Your father was larger than life.” And he was. He did everything with flair. He even had a flamboyant way of picking up and dropping off the kids who carpooled to Hebrew school. Jill Smythe remembered how he’d pick up the kids in the dead of winter wearing shorts and flip-flops. He’d make these wide turns, wider than you’d need to, they’d start a block ahead. And he’d forget what street Booker and Lee were on, almost every time. He had some bad driving habits because his mind would be on higher things. There’d be newspapers on the dashboard, because he read while he drove. And his dog, Mr. Chips, would be on his lap, sticking his head out the driver’s side window. Lots of people here who were kids in Hebrew school remember when Mr. Huberman drove.

He acted in local productions. The synagogue had talent shows, especially around Hanukah, and as you may know there were full musical productions

here, and Max would be in them. He also appeared in several productions at the Youngstown Playhouse.

The boys grew up on a steady diet of Broadway, Jolson and other performances. They grew up on Broadway tunes. A lot of review stuff, “Mention my name in Sheboygan, it’s the greatest little town in the world...” “Give my regards to Broadway,” and others. His favorite song was a Louis Armstrong number called Muscat Ramble.

Mark and Jeff wouldn’t go to sleep until he’d dance the Whisk Away, a little two-step that ended with his throwing them into bed. It’s something that continued with grandchildren and nieces.

Heather remembered how he loved “I Love Lucy.” Mark always associated him with Ricky Ricardo. Handsome, chest out, hair in place, performing. The world was Max’s Copa.

Jeff talked about the stacks of clipped and marked New York Times articles. He stood for preserving the forests, but he printed every email he ever got. He had a need to share the interesting articles he read, it meant there was a bit of him everywhere.

If books are the key to understanding, Max understood a lot. He had a well-stocked eclectic library. And when the VCR was invented, his worked non-stop, and he had a well-stocked library of video, films and TV shows, as well. If you’ve ever seen Mark’s video library or Jeff’s bookshelf, you’d understand how this works.

Maybe he wasn’t so religious but he did everything in the spirit of fixing the world; we call that Tikun Olam, leaving the world better than you found it. For Max, everything was a step in the betterment of mankind. The food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe. And he was still getting Jewish Currents magazine, put out by Workmen’s’ Circle, a union publication, right up to the latest issue. He reminded me of Pete Seeger, and I asked the family if he was a Pete Seeger fan, and Mark and Jeff both said, “Our father had a hammer.”

He was proud to have served in the Army in World War II. And he was proud to help his family members and others write their essays to get

conscientious objector deferments for military service during the Vietnam conflict.

\*And then there were the jokes. Max had a mind that catalogued jokes. He used them as an instructional tool or to communicate. He knew he could get a point across with a joke. I remember his telling a few at the shul's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this past summer.

When he was first in intensive care about five weeks ago, I went to go see him over at St. E's. When he saw me and recognized who I was, there was no "hello," or "How are you?" He simply began, "There was a rabbi, a priest and a minister..."

He fought for your rights, and he stood up to tyranny, but he never hurt a fly. Literally, he wouldn't kill a fly, or a bug or anything. He was a vegan, he ate no animal products. The other day I was shaving and a spider descended on its web right above the mirror. I could have killed it but I had just seen Max the day before. So I took a container, trapped the arachnid, took it outside and let it go. Thank you, Max.

He needed to know as much as possible, and he needed to share it all. He understood that knowledge was not a zero-sum game. If he gave some away, he didn't have any less. And love was like that too. It was like a candle. If he gave some to you, he still glowed; in fact he glowed a little brighter. Maybe that explains why he'd wake Mark and Jeff up at 2 in the morning to read them a limerick he just finished. Jeff, as a drama professor is a combination of Max's voracious appetite for reading and a love of the stage. Mark is a magistrate making sure people are treated fairly. To me, these are natural consequences of living with Max Huberman.

These last days were hard. And it really isn't fair. He took such good care of his body; he should have gone for another 86 years. It's not fair. His body was in great shape, he had no arterial sclerosis, his organs were all in good condition; he lasted without hydration for almost two weeks. Max, you continue to amaze us. And even though you may be lost to us now, you are not lost on us. So many of us see more clearly what's right and what's not. So many of us have seen your example, and it has changed us, and made us better. So many of us have seen how much you have done, with none of it being for you, but for the betterment of your family, your town, your country, your world.

Osip Mandelstam once said that Judaism is like a bit of perfume that permeates an entire house. That bit of ‘perfume’ has been evident from the beginning in Max’s attitude and in his best poems and other writings, which portray a passion for justice, compassion, and unselfish love. He may have denied a belief in Gd, but he exemplified the divine traits befitting a God of justice and mercy. There’s a Chassidic saying that only the holy die on Shabbat.

A story is told of a certain rabbi (R. Baruka of Chuza) who used to visit the market. One day, the prophet Elijah appeared to him. The rabbi asked Elijah, "Are there any people here who are destined to share in the world to come?" "Two men appeared on the scene, and Elijah said to the rabbi, "These two men will share in the world to come." The rabbi asked these two men, "What is your occupation?" They said, "We are professional jesters; when we see a person who is downcast, we cheer him up..." (Tan. 22a).

This Talmudic story reveals much about the rabbis who told it. Who is it that inherits eternal life? In this story, it's not the pious Jew—it's not the rabbi. Rather, it is the compassionate person, who tries to provide comfort to another human being. This afternoon, we have gathered to mourn the passing of Mordecai ben Nosson v'D'vorah—Max Huberman. And because in his own life he was a kind, generous and compassionate human being, a man of principle, who stood up for his convictions and the causes he believed in, dedicated to the triumph of justice in our society, and who cheered up the hearts of others, he is someone who surely has merited eternity. Whether he believed in it or not.

Y'hi Zichron Baruch.

May his memory be for a blessing.