

**A Thundering Silence:  
In Memory of Rabbi David J. Forman**

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My friends, these are sad and difficult words for me to write, and hard to stand and deliver. Sometimes people have more of an impact on your life than you do on theirs... and sometimes you don't even realize how important a presence someone was... how much they influenced you...until, suddenly, there are no more dinners left to schedule, no more "see you this summer," no more deep discussions and intense arguments or logistical arrangements to make. No taking him up... on Shabbat hospitality offered to my family... for just a few weeks from now.

With the death on May 4 of Rabbi David J. Forman, ten days shy of his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday, I have lost a friend and teacher, who touched my life at many moments, from high school to college, to graduate school and my early career, even and at a new level, in the past several years, and here, in Washington, at this congregation, as well as in Israel. Our Reform movement has lost an original and impassioned voice for justice and equality for all. Israel has lost one of its fiercest defenders and patriotic critics, all in the same man. Our world has lost a moral giant almost uniquely capable of balancing particularistic commitments with universal rights.

Ordained in 1972, David finished his studies with an already impressive record of standing up for liberty and equality and peace. He joined the Freedom Riders in 1964, at age 19, founded the Cincinnati Council for Soviet Jewry in 1970, and served as the vice chairman of Seminars for Peace and an active member of Clergy and Laity Against the War in Vietnam in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Upon becoming a rabbi, he also became an Israeli.

It is fitting, in a way, that it is Tenth Grade Graduation on this night when we reflect of the life and legacy of Rabbi Forman. For in the first telling of his career, the "day job" he held for much of his working life, he served full time and more on behalf of the youth of our movement. I first met him on my first trip to Israel, in 1977, when he was the director of NFTY in Israel, where he developed a unique educational approach to teaching layers of Jewish history by visiting the same sites multiple times, instead of cramming all of the history of a particular place into the heads of first time visitors just because that was when you happened to be there. I am not doing justice in this description to how powerfully effective this method of running Israel trips was, because there is so much more to say, but there was a time when NFTY brought more young people to Israel than all other non-Orthodox Israel youth trips *combined*, and David Forman was a large part of the reason for that.

I met Rabbi Forman again – and worked closely with him for the first time, during my junior year of college, which I spent at the Hebrew University. Then, he suggested to four of us that we move out of the dorms for spring semester, into an apartment, and serve as a kind of Reform *bayit*, a “house” available to provide home hospitality to a variety of different traveling Reform youth from all over the world.

Rabbi Forman also ran the Israeli office of what was then called the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, where he and a number of other transplanted Americans led the fight, internally, for religious pluralism in Israel. He served as Chairman of Interns for Peace, an Israeli NGO bringing young Jews from abroad into Israeli Arab villages, from 1984 to 1986.

And in 1988 he founded Rabbis for Human Rights, the first and still only religious organization in Israel in which rabbis of all denominations of Judaism sit and work together, on behalf of a shared Jewish vision, the value of justice and equality and dignity for all. It has served as the single greatest countervailing voice against the rightward drift of religious extremism found in too much of the yeshiva worlds, a shining example for all the world to see that Judaism teaches ethics, compassion and fairness, rather than the narrow, violent and self-serving parochialism promoted by the settler rabbis and their expansionist followers.

Just listing David's biography is impressive enough. But as so many have done, on websites and at his funeral in Israel – including his father-in-law, Rabbi Joshua Haberman, of Washington Hebrew Congregation – the best way to get a glimpse of who this man was is to share stories.

The first thing I want to share comes from a simple phrase, two-words dropped into the middle of a sentence. David Forman met with our synagogue trip to Israel the last two times we were there – as well as speaking here at least three times that I can recall. That first meeting, downstairs in a conference room at the Inbal hotel, with a faint echo of the Boston accent of his youth, he used the phrase “we Israelis.” Speaking in American English, to a group of American Reform Jews... this phrase sent chills down my spine. Here is a man steeped in the struggles and moral conflicts of the country of his birth, and everything it went through in the 1960's... but there was something... powerful... about the words. “We Israelis.” It is... the life choice he made. And one which he made with the full weight of all of its implications for those of us who remain behind. Never shy of controversy, one of David's very first books was called *Israel on Broadway; America Off Broadway*. A mouthful of a title, a bit polemical, his thesis is nevertheless clear from the words themselves. Israel is “where it is at” in Jewish life. The Diaspora remains what it has been – dispersion, a diversion, a

distraction. Certainly a deviation from the original plan and purpose of our people. A bit pedantic, a bit more heavy-handed than his later writing, and a bit unfair to Jewish creativity and energy in this country, still, in my view... he's... not... all...wrong. At the very least I believe it is an obligation and a religious responsibility for American Jews to come face-to-face with this kind of red-meat Zionism... some in our midst have never really encountered it before. Ignoring such a viewpoint – not encountering it or dismissing it too quickly -- is to lose out on half of the Jewish conversation of the modern world, to protect our own assumptions at the expense of facing well-thought out and deeply important perspectives which are very different from our own. You can't know what it means to be a Jew in the world today without at least stepping into the vantage point of what Israel means, to us and to Israelis themselves. Hearing such a view will challenge our identity, provoke some kind of reaction... and facing up to it will, I believe, only deepen our Jewish lives, wherever we choose to live. Two words, from a native-son of Boston. "We Israelis."

On that visit Rabbi Forman shared with us two personal experiences in facing the conflict with the Arab world. One story was about an ambulance, and the other about a tank. The first took place when he was on reserve duty in the West Bank, the second while serving in the first war in Lebanon.

On reserve duty, one of his jobs was to stop and inspect Palestinian ambulances. The job is almost indefensible, morally problematic, seemingly inhuman. Everyone knows that when ambulances are stopped, lives are put at risk. As I think I said before in sharing his story, babies get born in the wrong places, heart attack victims do not make it to the hospital in time, people in need die who should not have had to die.

And yet, Rabbi Forman said – a man who has repeatedly criticized and profoundly challenged his own Israeli government many times for its inhumane, immoral and simply undignified treatment of its minority population – and yet, on average one ambulance out of 20 – 5% or so of the total number he stopped to check – was smuggling bombs and explosives rather than patients. What do you do in such a world? How do you act against such an enemy? Condemnations of Israel come in based on criterion and expectations of just conduct in war and universal respect for symbols of medicine and neutrality that are simply exploited as weakness by a foe which does not share the same moral universe as the critics. Stopping ambulances at checkpoints is unspeakably horrible. And absolutely required.

In Lebanon, in the early 1980's. Ten tanks on a mission, with a rendezvous point at a river several kilometers ahead. Every single one of the tanks, in its forward motion, encountered Lebanese hiding behind

trees or other obstacles to their line of vision. Every one. There is a choice here. You simply don't know who these Lebanese are. They could be civilians, hiding for their lives. Or they could be armed combatants. That year, we had on our trip with us a recent graduate of West Point. Rabbi Forman asked him what the American rules of engagement were in such a situation. Whatever the answer for Americans might be, whatever you can imagine our country's military doctrine to be – not one of the Israeli tanks opened fire. They all held their fire, to wait and see. Nine of the ten tanks made it to the rendezvous point. It is clear that opening fire would have made it ten out of ten. What, Rabbi Forman asked us... what do you say to the parents... of the soldiers in that tenth tank?

On our trip to Israel two years ago, Rabbi Forman gave us a tour of the security fence. He was to have done so again this summer. Remember – this is a man who has protested against the route of the fence, lamented its existence, made a point of meeting the Arab families whose villages the fence goes through. But his tour had us stop first at one of the bus stops which had been blown up, to see the memorial there – pictures and poems and candles and wreaths... memories for the young ones, who never made it home that day. And by the time we got to the vantage point over this ugly, horrible snaking monstrosity of a fence... listening to him speak with us... David's words were so powerful, so nuanced yet so passionate, that our right-wing bus driver, and our left-

wing tour guide found themselves nodding at the same time...and then looked at each other as if they had been tricked. Such was the tight-rope walked, the balancing act mastered by this man who spoke from a deep, *deep* place of personal commitment to the Jewish people, who put his life and his family's lives on the line in the choices he made – and who also spoke to the very highest and holiest of Jewish values.

When I first received a copy of David Forman's latest book, I read its title and first few pages with a sense of dread and foreboding. The book is called *Over My Dead Body: Some Grave Questions for God*. It is a quite well-done review of ultimate questions, using a frightening conceit – the premise is the author, picturing himself on his death bed, reviewing the kind of questions we might ask ourselves if we had time to reflect in the midst of such dire straights.

But for personal reasons, David and I have talked about his health in recent years, and I knew that this was no idle speculation. He had a liver disease – either primary biliary cirrhosis, or primary sclerosing cholangitis, conditions which are often mistaken for one another. I know others who have or even were thought to have the same condition. In theory and for some time it is manageable. Unless and until, that is, it is not. David Forman's condition took a rapid and sudden turn for the worse, and recently I received a cancellation notice for his appearance here this coming November... he was headed, instead, to Dallas, to await



a liver transplant. Finding the organ was not the issue, though. After his arrival in Dallas, his condition never stabilized enough to go ahead with the transplant.

The last chapter of his last book is called “The End of the Beginning.” He writes:

I have completely exhausted myself, and I am afraid that I have run out of time. What has driven me to struggle with my belief, and to question God, which obviously suggests that deep down I believe in the existence of some sort of Deity? I am beginning to think it is less about finding out why I am going to die prematurely than it is about making sense out of my life. I cannot accept that I lived in a Godless world, nor can I accept that my children and grandchildren will grow up in a Godless world.

At the wedding of one of my daughters, which I officiated, I quoted from a popular Israeli song: *The Children of the Winter of 1973*, which referred to the Yom Kippur War. My daughter’s birth was the result of her parents’ love and passion in the aftermath of that war. The refrain of the song:

You promised a dove, an olive branch. You promised peace in our home, spring and renewal. You swore to fulfill that promise. You promised a dove.

I did not see that promise through to its end, but in the midst of the continued turmoil that surrounds Israel, I tried to create a sense of security and tranquility and peace within our family, and to pass on to my children the desire to work for peace in a wider setting. No longer can I protect them. I helped them, guided them, and supported them, and hopefully that help, guidance and support will lead them to create a peaceful home...

Through my questioning I have come to learn that while death is the crisis of our life, it need not be our enemy... Sensing that the fateful and inevitable hour has arrived, one of my daughters takes my hand in hers. If I have one last Divine question, it is in the form of a plea: “God, watch over my family. They were the greatest gift You gave me.”

In Israel, at the funeral, Rabbi Haberman wrote of his son-in-law: “I would not be surprised to hear that David is already organizing a protest march up in heaven, against the injustice and unfairness of the prosperity of the wicked, and the suffering of the righteous.”

Many in our movement, I am proud to say, many in our Reform movement and in our world, have raised their voices against injustice and stood up to power on behalf of the weak, the oppressed, the disenfranchised and downtrodden who could not speak up for themselves. Many have raised their voices, but no voice did so as clearly and as well, as this man.

For me, there is one image that comes to my mind when I think of Israel without David Forman. It is this: that we are left... with a thundering silence.

May his readers, his students, his colleagues and his friends... may all of us take up his call, in our own work in the world. And may we somehow hear his voice again, echoing out of the deepest places... in our own soul.

*Zecher tzadik livracha*; may his memory be a blessing.