

Jacob W. Heller: Model Jewish-American Lawyer

By Ira W. Heller

My beloved father, Jacob W. Heller – Yaakov ben Moshe Ze'ev, z"l – passed away on *Rosh Chodesh Iyar*. Though it is quite difficult to find the right words to publicly convey feelings that are so personal, I felt strongly that this needed to be written, as my father was a man who left a profound legacy and affected many lives.

Jacob Heller can fairly be described as the model of the 20th-century Jewish American attorney – and someone who blazed a trail that many others would subsequently follow. His formative years, in the 1940s and 1950s, were a time when Torah Judaism in America was still struggling to gain traction. Many Jews during that era believed the “American Dream” could be accomplished only through assimilation and the abandonment of Jewish tradition.

Even as a very young man my father was driven to achieve professional success. So extraordinary was his early academic performance that upon his graduation from high school, both Harvard and Yale pursued him with offers of full academic scholarships. This was unusual enough, but the offers were made during a period in which Jewish students were largely unwelcome in those institutions.

Though these scholarships seemed to be the prize my father had worked for, his parents, Elsie and Elias Heller, pioneers of the Young Israel movement and staunch supporters of Yeshiva University, felt strongly that the place for a Jewish student with my father's abilities was YU.

Not surprisingly, my father's academic performance at Yeshiva University was exemplary. In 1955 he was elected president of the Student Council (fellow officers on the council were classmates Julius Berman and Nathan Lewin). He was also appointed captain of the Yeshiva debating team, which was a hot ticket: That year, the Yeshiva debating team faced off against the top universities in the nation, almost all of whom YU roundly defeated – including Harvard.

That same year, my father took Yeshiva University debating into the national spotlight when he competed in the individual National Collegiate Debate finals, held at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City (then-vice president Richard Nixon was one of the judges). My father took second place in that competition, but people who were present that night assert it was Jacob Heller who won the competition hands down. Apparently, given the social climate that existed back then, the judges simply could not bring themselves to award first place to the contestant from Yeshiva University.

When his storied academic career at Yeshiva University came to a close, my father put in his applications to law school – and Harvard and Yale were back at his door with scholarship offers. My father chose Yale and went on to graduate 8th in his class.

After receiving his law degree in 1959, my father applied to the major law firms, which at the time were still largely closed to Jewish applicants, even those with my father's impeccable credentials. Fortunately, he caught the eye of John P. McGrath, senior partner at Reavis & McGrath, who felt that hiring this promising young attorney was worth break-

ing with accepted convention. My father became a prized assistant to Mr. McGrath in several high profile cases, likely another factor in blowing open the doors of the major law firms to hundreds of aspiring Jewish attorneys who would follow.

Having already established himself as a brilliant and fierce litigator, my father was offered a senior partnership at one of the larger Madison Avenue law firms, which he accepted. Only 33 years of age, he was one of the youngest attorneys ever offered a senior partnership of this magnitude. After heading the litigation department at Weiss, Rosenthal, Heller & Schwartzman for eleven years, he formed his own firm in 1979 – Heller, Horowitz & Feit, a commercial litigation practice that established a reputation for the highest standards of integrity and excellence.



Jacob W. Heller, z"l

He was always sharply dressed and elegant, and had a magnificent, resonating baritone voice that could make a room stand still. He also had a beautiful singing voice, and many people fondly remember how he masterfully led the *davening* on the *Yamim Noraim* for so many years at the Young Israel of Woodmere.

In fact, it was my father who was my first singing teacher, having taught me all of his *nusach hatefillah*, as well everything he knew about vocal technique. Later, he sent me for professional training but he remained engaged, even periodically taking off from work to sit in on my lessons.

Throughout the years I always kept him up to date on all developments in my music career, which was something special we always shared. My thirty-plus years in the music business had some truly great moments, but I can honestly say there is little that came close to the feeling of looking out into the audience and seeing my father's proud face.

In 2005 I decided to go to law school and in 2008 joined Heller, Horowitz & Feit. My two brothers – older brother Maury and younger brother Alan – both already accomplished lawyers, had been working with my father for more than twenty years. I was privileged to work with him for only five, but for that priceless opportunity alone it was worth get-

ting a law degree.

It was during this time that I was able to truly experience, up close, what made my father so exceptional at what he did. Where others might have run out of ideas, my father had that extra sense that enabled to think outside the box or find that one possibility nobody else had thought of. Working with him helped me understand that greatness lies in that small step beyond excellence.

What I found most significant about my father's shining 54-year legal career was not only the way he shared his extraordinary talents but how he gave of himself. Whether representing one of his big clients or simply an individual in need, he always gave his entire heart. When a yeshiva or charitable organization found itself in a bind, Jacob Heller was the go-to address. He was also widely known as a “lawyer's lawyer,” frequently sought out by other lawyers who themselves needed counsel.

He possessed not only wisdom but also a deep sense of compassion. When someone came to him in distress, he never turned that person away and always managed to find a way to help.

On the outside he usually bore a serious expression, typical of a tough litigator. From afar people revered him, but those who were privileged to get to know him inevitably came to love him.

He was the patriarch of our family, a mountain of strength for whom nothing in the world was more important than making sure we were all well and taken care of. It was fitting, therefore, that like his namesake, the archetypal Patriarch Yaakov, he was surrounded by his family when he passed to the next world. We were all gathered around his bed in the final hours prior to his passing; we reminisced, sang the songs he used to sing, and each of us had the opportunity to whisper our personal thoughts into his ear before his *neshamah* departed.

In the end, a person's greatest accomplishments in life are surely measured not by what he amassed for himself but by what he gave to others. He and my mother, his beloved wife of nearly 57 years, were inseparable. Together they raised three boys, all of whom followed in their path, establishing homes of Torah and *mitzvot*.

Above all, the crown jewels in his life were his grandchildren, and he had unique and special relationships with each of them. They competed among themselves as to who could make Grandpa Jacob laugh the hardest, and each insisted that he or she was his favorite. In truth, they were all correct.

His giving heart extended well beyond his family. At his funeral, which took place on an early Thursday afternoon, the sanctuary was filled well beyond its capacity, the crowd swelling out of every door and into the parking lot. Nearly all had a story about how Jacob Heller had been there for them in a time of need, how he saved their businesses, their livelihoods, and in some cases even their lives.

In the world of show business, the final tribute afforded to a life as successful as my father's would be a rousing standing ovation, and it would go on and on. Dad, it has been an enormous honor and privilege to be your son, and I am so very, very proud of you. Bravo, Dad, bravo!

The author acknowledges the valuable contributions to this article by his brother Maurice W. Heller.

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