

Leonard (Leibel) Fein, Social Justice Champion, z”l

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Last week we lost a true champion of social justice.

Leonard Fein, known to family and friends by his Hebrew name “Leibel,” passed away on August 14.

I was privileged to know him through his work with us on the American Jewish Congress. So I call him Leibel rather than Leonard or Mr. Fein.

Leibel accomplished more in his time on earth than one might expect of any two or three other righteous people.

Leibel’s career was not one career; it was one career after another, each one motivated by his passion for tikkun olam, for making the world better.

Leibel graduated from the University of Chicago, spent a year in Israel, then earned a Ph.D. in political science from Michigan State. He taught in the MIT political science department and later taught Jewish studies at Brandeis.

In 1975, Leibel left academia to found Moment Magazine together with Elie Wiesel. He envisioned it as a more stylish and literary alternative to Commentary, another magazine that concentrated on Jewish issues. Leibel thought that Commentary was dour, dull and ideologically out of step with most Jews after it swung politically rightward in the 1960s.

Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center in Washington, said that Moment Magazine became one of American Jewry’s most influential sources of Jewish ideas and made Leibel the most influential liberal ideologue in American Jewish life.

Leibel continued to serve as an editor of Moment for eleven years. When Leibel died last week, the editor and publisher of Moment, Nadine Epstein, said, “Leibel was a man of chesed who dedicated his life to the Jewish community, to the State of Israel and to the world. He never lost that abiding passion. He was a great man of letters and a true activist, a rare combination. Whatever he did, whether it was to start a magazine, or found Mazon and the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy, he gave his mind and his heart.”

The first of the two institutions Epstein mentioned was Mazon. Its full name is Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger.

At Leibel’s funeral last Sunday his daughter Jesse described the following conversation she had with her father. It happened during the period between 1983 and 1985 when the worst famine in a century was afflicting the people of today’s Eritrea and Ethiopia. That famine led to more than 400,000 deaths.

Jesse came to her father’s home for dinner. Before they could even sit down he told her, “I’ve had a great idea. I think we should impose a small tax on the food for simchas like Bar Mitzvah and wedding receptions and use the money to fight hunger.”

Jesse was amazed. It did seem like a great idea, but could they really do it?

They did.

As MAZON today tells its story, Leibel created MAZON to be a bridge between the relative abundance of the American Jewish community and the desperate need felt by millions of hungry people around the world.

MAZON began soliciting donations by encouraging American Jews to donate a portion of the cost of such life-cycle celebrations as weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and anniversaries. This was a modern interpretation of an ancient rabbinical tradition: do not begin a celebration until the community's poor and hungry are seated and fed.

Rabbis at synagogues all across the country responded by encouraging their congregants to support MAZON.

Today, MAZON has an extended family of nearly 1,000 synagogues and tens of thousands of individual donors, all of whom share Mazon's commitment to ending hunger.

And Mazon operates with great efficiency. It spends only five percent of its revenue on administration, and ten percent on fundraising. The remaining 85% all goes to programs. Those programs have received more than \$75,000,000 to fight hunger.

All of this for just one reason: Leibel noticed the problem of hunger, and was not satisfied to shake his head and move on. Instead, he acted.

The same instinct prompted Leibel ten years later to create the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy, known by its acronym NJCL.

In 1996 Bill Clinton was running for re-election. He proposed that everyone in America should be able to read by the end of third grade. He said that America should make that a national goal.

Leibel heard the speech. He didn't just think, "That's a good idea," and then turn to other matters. Rather, in typical fashion, he decided to act.

As NJCL tells the story, Leibel's first move was to check with the appropriate people in Washington to find out whether Clinton's proposal was serious. He learned that the Department of Education had started an effort to mobilize one million Americans as reading tutors of children from kindergarten to third grade.

So Leibel decided to establish NJCL. He saw it as a framework for mobilizing Jews as volunteer tutors.

His first step was to contact the offices of 17 major national Jewish agencies to invite their endorsement of the idea. They all agreed.

He then looked for funding. Among other support, he landed a major grant from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation.

The program started in the next school year right here in the Boston area. The JCRC and CJP determined that the program was needed and that the Jewish community was ready to respond. The JCRC then convened a meeting with representatives from virtually all Jewish organizations and many synagogues in the Boston metropolitan area. They approved the program with enthusiasm. It started in the city of Boston and then "rolled out" to other communities.

At last count, 47 communities across the country have created tutoring programs through NJCL. More than 12,000 volunteer tutors spend at least one hour a week working one-on-one with public school children in kindergarten through third grade.

One aspect that was not anticipated has been the appeal of this program to senior citizens. NJCL estimates that a quarter of all the tutors are older than 65. A significant number are retired teachers of reading, thrilled to be “back in harness.”

In each of the 47 communities where NJCL is active, the local coalition includes a great many Jewish organizations, sometimes as many as 65 and often the largest coalitional effort in the community’s history other than activity in favor of Israel.

As with Moment and then with Mazon, Leibel saw a need and did not look away. Instead, he saw a need and responded by creating NJCL as a response to meet that need.

I was curious what there was in Leibel’s upbringing that inspired him to live his life this way. I learned one answer at his funeral last Sunday. The following story told at the funeral reveals one source of Leibel’s lifelong passion for social justice.

Leibel’s father was an immigrant from what is now Moldavia. He had a long career as a teacher at Baltimore Hebrew College. At his farewell dinner, after the speeches honoring him, Leibel’s father responded by telling the following story. This is what he said:

“When I was a boy, the rebbe in our heder said to us one day,

‘Children, they say that very far away, there is a country called America, and I suppose that is so, for why would they lie about such a thing? And they say as well that in that far-away country called America, there is a city called Philadelphia, and I suppose that, too, is so. And they go on to say that in that city called Philadelphia in that country called America, there is a bell they call the Liberty Bell, and they say that on that bell are written words from our book. They say that it says on that Liberty Bell, “Proclaim liberty throughout the land and to all the inhabitants thereof.”

‘Frankly, I find that hard to believe. Why would they write our words on their bell?’

‘I have a favor to ask of you now. If it should happen when you grow up that you go to America, try to visit the place they call Philadelphia and see the bell. And if you do, please write and tell me whether it is true that they have inscribed our words on their bell. I would like to know such a thing.’

Leibel’s father continued,

“And, as it happened, I did come to America, and I did eventually go to Philadelphia, and I went see the bell. And, yes, indeed, there were the words, our words, on that bell. But the bell was cracked.

“You honor me tonight for my life as a teacher. I prefer to think of myself as a person who has tried to live his life as a bell mender.”

I learned also at Leibel’s funeral that the story of his father being a bell mender was a story repeated every year at the seder in the Fein family. At the end of that story whoever was telling it would say, “The bell was cracked. Liberty has not yet been proclaimed throughout our land. God knows that liberty has not yet been proclaimed to all the inhabitants thereof. It us up to us to join the International Union of Bell Menders, to mend the bell of liberty in order to fulfill its unfulfilled promise.”

What do we learn from the exemplary life and legacy of Leonard “Leibel” Fein?

That we should follow his example.

That his life requires that we remain sensitive, as he was, to recognizing the places where the bell is cracked, where liberty is lacking, where a need is going unmet. He saw that was true of the need for a liberal voice in Jewish life and the need to combat hunger and the need to promote the ability to read.

But remaining sensitive to the world's needs is not enough. Leibel taught us by his example that we must also be bell menders. We may not all have the skill and drive and creativity to create new organizations like Moment or Mazon or the NJCL. But we can find causes that move us to action and then we can join them and support them in order to take action collectively with others who are similarly moved.

When we are planning a simcha, we can honor the life of Leibel Fein by making a donation to Mazon equal to three percent or more of the cost of that simcha. And we can honor his life by supporting the National Jewish Coalition for Literacy with our donations and by volunteering our time to read with children.

The essence of Leibel's message to us can be summed up in the story told of the person who raged at God and cried out, "God! God! Can You not see how many are poor and hungry and lacking in shelter and suffering from disease? Why don't You do something?!"

And God responded, "I did do something. I sent you."

Leibel Fein, you inspired so many to acts of goodness. Thank you for your example. May you rest in peace.

And let us say, Amen.