

Wendell Roy Lynn's Eulogy

By Rabbi Hearshen

On September 11, just over a month ago, I called Wendell in the morning and asked him if he could come with me to help make sure we would have a minyan for a funeral. His response was, what time do you need me. He didn't pause to think about it, or to question why it was necessary. He just said yes. That was less than two months ago, and we stood right over there. As we drove home, we talked about nonsense. We talked about Israel and the conflict. We talked about the holidays that were coming up. We talked about ראש השנה / Rosh Hashana dinner at our house. We talked and talked. Man, I wish I just could have spent more time with him that day. Not even two months ago, he came here to the cemetery to help with one of the single greatest acts a Jew can do, and now here we are doing the same for him.

March 22, 2023 is a day I remember quite well. I had just finished a study session with Yedida Jassen. I had just learned of the sudden death of a congregant. I was dealing with being a son and a father and a husband and a rabbi and at noon I had an appointment with a new person I had never met before. Nicole had written: "his mom was Sephardic, just lost his job." I get so many of these on a regular basis. Everyone... everyone is given time to talk, and we spend time figuring out what needs to happen and how we can help. Wendell was different. He hadn't come to me looking for help, he came to me to talk. He sat down and smiled and asked questions about being Jewish and how it can be difficult. He told me he'd just lost his job. He had been working as a driver for a Drug and Alcohol treatment program and one day his boss called him in and told him he needed to accept Jesus and Wendell said he couldn't do that. The boss was persistent and said again and again that there was only one way to get to heaven and only one true faith and that Wendell needed to accept that. Wendell refused. A few days later he was informed that his role was no longer needed and he could look for work elsewhere. He asked me if he had done the right thing. I was dumbfounded. I was in awe. I was shocked and I was inspired. Immediately, Adam Kofinas and I set out to find a job for him and we did, at Canterbury Court.

That night, I called Carrie and asked her if we could have a "stranger" over for סדר / Seder and she asked me to explain a bit more. About a week later, Wendell called and told us he was in a bit of a bind as the shelter he'd been living in told him that he needed to find a new place to live because his time was up. It just so happened we had recently completed repairs to the basement apartment of one of our synagogue houses, so we told him he could move in. That's how we all came to know Wendell Roy Lynn. He came into our lives because he refused to forsake his birthright and his heritage. He came into our lives because he was searching, not for a physical home, but a spiritual one. He came into our lives not because he was scared, but because he was open.

One of the core features of a eulogy is to tell a person's biography and I find myself grieving that we can't do that very well today. I'm grieving that we know Wendell was born in Elijay on June 28, 1951, but we don't know to whom. We know he had a brother David, but we don't know much more than that. Wendell told us there were two Jewish families in Elijay growing up and that one was Ashkenazi and the other, his, was Sephardic. His father wasn't Jewish, but his mother was, and she raised Wendell as a Jew. That heritage is something that never left Wendell... not for a minute. We know Wendell struggled less with antisemitism than with Ashkenazi superiority complexes. We know at some point Wendell found his way to Tennessee to study and earned a degree. He would eventually also earn a certificate for operating power plants, nuclear power plants. We know he spent a great deal of time working as a contractor overseas in power plants. Wendell made it a point to send money home to help his dad over the years. This was important to him even if he and his dad didn't have the greatest relationship. I just wish we knew more to share, but we just don't have all of the relevant facts. Sometimes eulogies become too weighed down by the biography and not who the person was; so let's talk about Wendell, not as a story, but as a person.

Wendell's eyes had a spark. You know that twinkle he had in his eyes. He had the ability to have conversations with us without saying many words... his eyes could do the talking. His eyes remind me of a very important lesson from last week's פרשת: בראשית / Parasha: Bereshit. Wendell died during the week we were learning about the creation of the world and the creation of humanity. In the first chapters, we learn humankind was made בצלם אלקים / in the image of God. We know God is not physical and so the image we are made in cannot be our physical appearance. It means God's image in us is something spiritual more than physical; it's our soul. When we look into the eyes of another, we can see their soul. We can see who they are. Wendell's eyes told us about his soul. It was filled with care and love. It was filled with lightness and with support. Wendell's soul was

sweet and grateful. Wendell's soul was filled with convictions and dedication to his principles. Wendell taught all of us something so great that we must remember for the rest of our lives: we all have value and we all have potential. We all have the spark of the Divine inside us and we all have so much worth, just as Wendell did.

I think there's an even greater lesson to be gleamed from this week's פרשה נח/Parasha Noach. The portion tells us that נח / Noah was an איש צדיק, a righteous man, and תמים, flawless... בדורותיו... in his generation. Our people have argued over this simple פסוק/verse a great deal. The question is the word בדורותיו, in his generation. Does this mean he was only so great because his generation was so bad, or was he so great because he rose above that awfulness? Or was he great in and of himself? Was נח righteous and was he a good upright person? Wendell is the answer to this paradoxical question. Wendell was not a good person because of his situation. He was not a good person because nobody else was around to step up. Wendell was not a good person because of dumb luck or bad luck. Wendell was a good person because he was a good person. The tragedy of this statement is that he isn't here to hear us say it. If he were here, he would have been blushing and rejecting this assessment. You know that just as well as I do. Tragically, I am not sure Wendell saw the magic he was and I pray he has reached עולם הבא / the world to come and is able to have the clarity to better understand the man he actually was.

Wendell was the man who refused to accept the flaws of humanity, but rather he sought to do whatever he could to make us better. Wendell was the man who didn't understand that saying no was an option. Whatever was asked of him, he said yes. OVS benefited so greatly from his giving and his caring. He volunteered for everything and anything he could. He couldn't read Hebrew and yet there he was at every service, with his book open and doing his best. Above all, we need to recognize Wendell was a giver and never a taker. I gave Wendell cash once to get food and he ate a little and then found homeless people to give the rest of the cash to. Wendell would call me from time to time and ask how I was doing and then would say, "Rabbi, what can I do for you today?" He didn't want us to give him anything, he only wanted to give to us. I'm not sure I know the totality of why this was the case other than to say he cared about us just as much as we cared for him.

Life is not fair. It's true. It isn't, but at the same time life is beautiful. Wendell experienced the pitfalls of the truism that life isn't fair, but it never ruined him. Wendell was an honest, caring, and beautiful person who could have let the world be ruined for him, but instead he chose to invest himself into the world and into the community around him. Wendell never quit on himself and he never quit on us. Wendell taught all of us important lessons: forget the clothing but rather focus on the person in the clothes. Every person in the world is endowed with the beauty of being made in the Divine image. And Wendell did all this quietly by our sides and has left an incredible mark in all of us. I know none of us will ever be the same for having known him. Wendell Lynn was righteous man in his generation, and he would have been a righteous man in every generation because that was the man he was. Wendell Lynn was not the product of his circumstances but a product of his being a wonderful and caring person.

תהי נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים

May his soul be bound up in the bond of life and let us say: אמן