

January 2017 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

The close of 2016 was as difficult a time as any our congregational family has ever felt. With the passing of Max Gross, we lost a true friend. We count ourselves, however, among the lucky, because even though his physical presence has been snatched away, Max carries on in our collective memory. His contagious smile will continue to brighten our days without end.

On the day of Max's funeral, we welcomed more visitors into our building than ever before in JCNWJ history. Not only was the sanctuary itself standing-room-only, and not only were all three classrooms needed for the overflow, but there were so many friends and family who couldn't imagine being anywhere else that day that we had to use the hallway and even the front porch itself.

Even still, we know that some friends were unable to make it to the JCNWJ on December 20, which is why I have chosen to reprint the eulogy I offered.

May the memory of Maxwell David Gross be for a blessing.

Max Gross: The young man with a wicked sense of humor, and a smile to melt your heart. Over the nineteen years of his precious life, he melted more hearts than anyone could possibly count. A bowler, a baseball player, and swimmer, he never let physical challenges stand in the way of having fun.

For Max, life itself truly was a team sport. Such certainly was the case on the occasion of his becoming a bar mitzvah, right here, in this sacred sanctuary, almost six and a half years ago, in July of 2010. As he sat on his mother's lap that day, listening to her chant the ancient words of his Torah portion, Ekev, he couldn't help but beam with pride and gratitude. He was proud of himself, of course, but even more, he was proud that so many people loved him so much that they were willing to drop everything to help in any way they could as he took this holy rite of passage. To an outsider looking in, it may be confusing why so many people would want to take on the added work, but not to those who knew Max. To know Max was to love him. To know him was not only to want to be part of his life, but to be grateful for the opportunity. For the minions who helped Max become a bar mitzvah, it wasn't added work. It was a joy, and it was an honor.

I do not believe it was by accident that Max's bar mitzvah fell on the portion that it did, because when Moses commands us to circumcise our hearts, as he does in Parshat Ekev, he could just as easily have commanded that we try to shape our hearts in the image of Max's.

In discussing this odd phrase, Rabbi Lewis explained to Max and his guests as follows:

“We moderns think of the heart as a feeling place. The ancients thought of it as a thinking place, what you and I would call “the mind.” For our ancestors, feelings were felt in the body and thoughts were located in the heart. That means that you can think of the uncircumcised heart . . . as an unreceptive mind, a closed mind . . . a circumcised heart - is a heart that is wise, just and caring.” In essence, what Rabbi Lewis taught that day in 2010 is that a circumcised heart is one that has no room for prejudice, narrow-mindedness, or baseless hatred. A circumcised heart is one that is open to all people of all sorts.”

Can there be a better description of Max?

Like the Biblical Joseph, whom we meet in this week’s Torah portion, Max loved to be the center of attention. Unlike Joseph, however, there was never anything even remotely narcissistic about it. Max simply loved people, and was happiest when he was in the thick of things with others. When I think of Max, one of the first images that comes to mind is of him downstairs in the social hall, sitting in his wheelchair, scanning the room, and then making it clear that wherever the action was, that’s where he would like to be pushed. And, to be clear, Max was not one to take no for an answer either.

Max loved being talked to. Thankfully, this was never a problem, because Max had a magnetism like no one else. People were drawn to him instantaneously. It came to be a regular event that when he was in large crowds, people would simply approach him to say hello. Even people who had never met him would feel the pull. Max was a magnet. He just was.

What Max often wanted was a good joke. Well, “good” might actually be a bit of a stretch. His favorite joke? He had a few, but here’s one, just as an example: What’s a cat’s favorite color? Purrrrrrrple... That one never failed. It cracked him up every time!

To those who knew him, though, his sense of humor was not always so innocent. Sometimes it was more inopportune. Some might even say it bordered on sadistic. Just ask Heather about how Max broke into a full belly laugh that time she broke her arm. Or ask her about how Max would pass the time being perfectly happy when the two of them were home alone, only to launch into action when he would hear Karl or Marsha’s car enter the driveway. By the time one of his parents finally came through the door, he would be bawling on the outside -- but laughing on the inside. The little devil would get such a kick out of watching his sister try to weasel her way out of trouble with their parents regarding the cause of Max’s displeasure. It sounds mean, but if you knew Max, you couldn’t be angry, because really, there was nothing mean about it. He simply loved the commotion of it all. It’s no wonder that one of his

favorite pastimes was to watch TV game shows. The bells and whistles, the cheers, the excitement, the adrenaline... That was so much fun to Max.

Even more than talking, though, and even more than jokes, what Max loved more than anything, perhaps, was being sung to. He didn't care whether you were on tune or off. So long as you sang with feeling, that was a direct line to a Max smile – unless it was a sad song, in which case the smile might turn easily to tears. He was a sensitive boy who wanted more than anything for people to be happy, which is one of the reasons Hanukah will be so difficult this year. Because even though we celebrate the beautiful person who was Max, he can't help but be sad.

We will miss him, and we will long for his belly laugh – even with full knowledge that that belly laugh may well have been at our own expense.

Still though, we count ourselves among the lucky, because we in this room, each and every one of us, has had the experience of being on the receiving end of his smile as well. So we know... we know there was enough light in that goofy smile of his to kindle every Chanukah menorah on earth for years to come. And we are eternally grateful.

I've recited the name Maxwell Gross, Emanuel David ben Miriam Devorah, in the list of those to receive a prayer for healing, a *Mi Shaberach*, at every worship service we've conducted since my arrival at the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey. Rabbi Zamore read his name before that. And Rabbi Lewis before that. Max has been a fixture in this community for almost twenty years. It may be a selfish thought, but I'm thinking that as we now take Max off the *Mi Shaberach* list, perhaps we should replace his name with our own. Max no longer needs our collective prayers for healing in the face of [Pelizaeus Merzbacher Disease](#), PMD. He has found peace. But we do. We, the ones left behind, the ones who cry out in despair, it is we now who are in need of healing.

מי שברך אבותינו ואמותינו,
בקה, רחל, ולאהאברהם, יצחק, יעקוב, שרה, ר
הוא יברך אותנו הקדוש ברוך הוא ימלא רחמים עלינו.

*May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,
Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, bless and heal us. May the
Blessed Holy One be filled with compassion for us.*

Max was a happy kid, who grew up to become a happy young adult. With all the obvious challenges, Max never let that stop him. So long as he could be with people, whether old friends or brand new acquaintances, he was happy. I know, because I, unlike most of you, met Max only a year-and-a-half ago. I did not watch him grow up. When I met him, he was already grown. But that didn't stop me from loving him, because he did all the work for me. He smiled at me. He appreciated my presence. It sounds so simple, and perhaps it is, but it's also so terribly rare! Why can't we have

more Maxes in this world? Why is it so hard for people simply to appreciate the presence of others? Max may have had challenges, more than we can imagine, but when it came to basic humanity and decency, he was the real deal.

Perhaps his teacher and friend, Mike Weiner put it best when he spoke from this bima on the occasion of Max becoming a bar mitzvah:

Our world is filled with horror, with evil. It's filled with suffering, both seemingly deserved but more often – far more often – suffering that is wholly without explanation. What, then, to do? You can't ignore the horror, the pain in the world; it's naïve to try and, in the end, it's just not possible to accomplish. Another alternative? You can try to steel yourself to the pain; you can live a guarded life; you can live defensively, building up what we call “defense mechanisms.” You can try to get “tougher,” to “toughen up,” or “tough things out.”

Eikev, to me, suggests another possibility. What's wrong with approaching life – life with all of its pain, deserved and undeserved – with a circumcised heart? With a heart where, in the face of the suffering, we nonetheless cut away some of the thickness that we think might protect us? What's wrong with never forgetting “the joy and gladness and the abundance of everything” . . . ? Why can't we live with “unstuffed necks,” without the stubbornness that too often blinds us to that joy and gladness and abundance?

. . . We can't – no one can – ignore the realities of Max's condition and the tremendous burdens it has placed on Max and his family. We will receive no explanations today, no justifications, no matter how hard we pray here in this sanctuary, as to why such burdens were placed on this wonderful boy and this loving family. We are here today for a different reason.

I submit we are here today to celebrate how Max – and Marsha and Carl and Heather and all of the family – live life with an open heart; a heart with the thickness cut away; a heart, if you permit, that has been circumcised, a heart that is unprotected. Living that way leaves you vulnerable, for sure. But living that way, I submit, may be the only way to happiness.

Max and his family illuminate the lesson of *Eikev* for us all . . . Live with a circumcised, unprotected heart, no matter what pain comes your way. With that open heart and with that “unstiff” neck, revel in the “joy and gladness and abundance of everything.” Maybe you'll do it because you believe God through Moses commanded you to live that way. Maybe you'll do it because you are worried that God's curses will befall you if you don't. Or maybe you'll do it for any of a thousand other reasons. But just think, for a moment, of the smile on Max's face when he heard Marsha sing; anyone who has witnessed that has witnessed firsthand the blessings that surely flow from facing whatever life brings with that open, unprotected, circumcised heart.