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Wilmington, Delaware

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Robert Frits Kan

Reuven ben Frits v'Jeanne

September 18, 1930 – December 16, 2016

Robert Kan died when Jews were studying the Torah portion, taken from Genesis, called *Vayishlach*. Traditional Jews hold that, since there are no coincidences, the weekly Torah portion is connected in a deep and significant way with the person for whom we are mourning.

The first thing that Jacob does at the beginning of the Torah portion is dispatch scouts to reach out to his twice-wronged brother, Essau. Scouts – this Torah portion is looking good already. If Robert Kan were to profess a religion, it would have been scouting. I could easily see the biblical Jacob sending trustworthy Robert out to be a good scout.

The term the Torah uses for these men is not “scouts.” Rather it is “*melachim*.” This word can be translated as “messengers,” or “angels.” And for his wife and three children, Robert was nothing less than an angel – treasured, beloved, a blessing to their lives.

Robert Kan has much in common with the Torah portion’s protagonist, Jacob. Every Passover, we begin the narrative by referring to Jacob, with these words: “*Arami ovayd avi*,” “my father was an Aramean refugee.” Twice-over Jacob was a refugee. He fled ancient Canaan for fear of his life, and later, with family and possessions, he fled from Laban’s home, after becoming little more than an indentured servant.

Although Robert became much more than a refugee, his refugee experiences forever affected his life, and influences his family to this very day. Robert and the biblical Jacob will forever be linked

through their shared refugee experience. And as Fran says, refugees understand one another in a way that non-refugees cannot.

Robert was born on the 18th day of September 1930, in Amsterdam. He was the second child born to Fritz Willem Kan and Jeanne Dora Bloch. Robert has an older sister, Betsy Klein, who lives in the Boston area.

The Kans trace their family roots to The Netherlands for at least three generations, and before that, from Ashkenazic roots in Central Europe. I share that with you, because many Jews from The Netherlands, including Fran, actually trace their roots from The Netherlands back to Spain, through the terrible Expulsion of 1492, *HaGerush Sephard*.

In Dutch, the name “*kan*” means pitcher, and the Kan family was descended from Levites. In the ancient Jewish tradition, the Levites would take a pitcher of water, and bathe the hands and feet of the *Kohanim* before they blessed the people. This tradition is still maintained in Orthodox synagogues before the *Musaph* service during the three pilgrimage holy days, as well as the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Robert’s grandfather, Solomon Kan, established a textile and notion merchant business called Lehman & Company. Robert’s father, Frits, expanded the company by opening an office in the city of Batavia in the Dutch East Indies, today known as Jakarta, Indonesia. This early act of entrepreneurship would later allow the Kan family to escape the grip of the rising Nazi power.

Robert was an easy-going, independent child. The Kans lived in the Amsterdam Zuid neighborhood, where many of the homes were large and impressive, and the young Robert lacked for nothing. All that was to change just a few months before Robert’s tenth birthday. Nine years later,

Robert described what happened what happened to his family on May 10, 1940, the day the Nazis invaded The Netherlands.

FAMILY READER:

A friend of ours came over to our house and told us about the opportunity we had to leave the country. We had heard nothing, although the radio was on in our house all the time. Through the radio we heard all the latest reports on the fighting although it was happening almost in our laps. ... My father went to the office to see if he could salvage anything; he also went to the bank to get out the most money he could. He later went to the steamship lines to find out if our friend was right about the chance we had to leave the country on a boat. He was right.

It was May 11th when we actually found out for sure that we could go. On an hour's notice we packed. Unfortunately time did not allow us to take everything. In fact we only had with us as many trunks as could fit in one trip in our car. My mother, father, sister and myself were stuffed in our car, with an employee from my father's business, driving. Instructions were left with this man to say good-bye to the rest of our family; say(ing) goodbye to them ourselves would have been too painful.

In order to reach the boat on time and to avoid any unnecessary delay, we obtained a police pass to go through all traffic.

A long air-raid on the city, consisting of mainly of fighter planes, held the boat up for quite some time. The name of the boat was the "Johan de Witt" (named after a famous statesman in Dutch history). It was on dry dock and was called into service only upon hours' notice. People were standing on the pier with gold and jewels to be let on board.... We were on one of the two ships heading for the Indies. The second ship was in back of us. When we were well out of the locks of the harbor, about five miles away,

the other ship was blown up, right in the locks of the harbor. It was too dangerous for us to turn back to help the other ship...

RABBI CONTINUES

The family was able to catch a freighter from Indonesia to California by the fall of 1940. They created a new life for themselves with fellow Dutch Jewish refugees in Kew Gardens, in Queens, New York.

In Queens, Boy Scouts became Robert's lifeline, community, and extended family. They helped Robert become an American. He attended Friday night Scout meetings religiously, earned the highest ranking of Eagle Scout, and made many life-long friends. As an adult, making sure youth would have the same experiences that he had, Robert was honored with the Silver Beaver award.

Robert graduated high school in 1948 and continued his higher studies at Plattsburg College. With the advent of the Korean War, Robert left college and sought to join the army. He may have been ready for warfare but his eyes were not. He was deemed 4F. As Robert later said to Fran, "the United States Army judged that he was unfit to kill people."

Robert then enrolled in the economics program at Hofstra College on Long Island. He became the editor of the school newspaper, *The Chronicle*. He graduated in 1952 and got a job at Sperry Gyroscope, writing for their in-house newsletter.

Robert then enrolled in graduate studies at Columbia University in New York City. Before finishing, he took a job in the Assay Office of the Atomic Energy Commission and transferred to Washington, DC, beginning a career of more than 31 years working for the federal government. He would spend the next 20 years after that working as a Certified Financial Planner.

Although Robert moved to DC, his roots were with the Dutch immigrant community in Kew Gardens. In 1958, he asked Fran, who grew up in the same apartment building as he did, on a date. Within months, they were engaged.

Robert and Fran were married on November 16, 1958, in Larchmont, New York. The couple spent their honeymoon in Jamaica and then made their new life in Arlington, Virginia.

They had three daughters, Jeanette, Susan, and Eleanor, and five grandchildren. Their family and friends are here to share their memories.

May Robert's memory be for a blessing, zikaron l'baruch, may we do extraordinarily kind things in his name, and let us amen.

FAMILY MEMBER

We want to thank the nursing staff and aids at the Kutz Home and at Compassionate Care. Many of the people who cared for Dad were also immigrants. We hope you will join us in supporting the effort of HIAS Refugee Resettlement and our own Jewish Family Services of Delaware as we work together to help settle new refugee families in the year to come.