

Dr. Maurice Leibesman  
*Moshe ben Shimon v'Leah*  
January 1, 1933 - December 7, 2006

When 14 ½ year old Stephanie was choosing an unconventional hero as the subject for her first year high school writing assignment, she naturally chose her grandfather, Dr. Maurice Leibesman – who has been healing children and reassuring parents in our community for more than 40 years.

However Stephanie made her choice not only because of what her grandfather had accomplished but also because of the very real obstacles he has been able to overcome, from leaving his native Buenos Aires to start life anew in the United States, to his most recent battle with cancer. Maurice's triumph of the spirit won his granddaughter's admiration, and serves as an inspiration to all of us gathered here today.

In the week that Maurice passed, Jews all around the world were reading about the Jewish patriarch, Jacob, in their weekday and Sabbath service scripture readings from the Torah. Jacob had to leave his native land—fearing for his life; was swindled by his father-in-law, confronted at night by an angel, forced to face his brother, Essau and Essau's army, suffered news of the rape of his only daughter, Dina; coped with the murderous behavior by two of sons, Shimon and Levi; came to terms with the death of his beloved wife, Rachel and this week, will learn of the supposed death of his favorite son, Joseph.

Yet throughout all this adversity, Jacob holds on to his faith, holds to his family, and holds on to his people. In fact he emerges from adversity stronger: Jacob, Yaakov, the heel, the supplanter, is renamed Israel, Yisrael, the God wrestler. And we, the sacred remnant of Jews alive today, are known as b'nei Yisrael, children of Israel, children of God wrestlers.

Jacob: an unconventional hero. Maurice Leibesman: – *Leibesman - lover of humankind* – also an unconventional hero.

Maurice's parents were Zigmund and Luisa. They made their home in what was the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. Life had been good for the Jews under the old Emperor Franz Josef. But in the mid-20's, following World War One, the environment had turned increasingly anti-Semitic. Shortly after giving birth to their only daughter, Anita, in 1929, Zigmund and Luisa took their small family to Buenos Aires, Argentina, known affectionately as "*El Paris del Sur*" – the Paris of the South, to start their lives anew.

Maurice was born into the middle class Flores neighborhood of Buenos Aires on the first day of January, 1933. He had the benefit of a good Jewish education, attending daily *heder* religious classes, culminating in a bar mitzvah. He then developed his public speaking skills in the progressive, very-pro-Zionist *Shomer HaTsair* group and the Maccabbi Club – the Buenos Aires equivalent of the Wilmington Jewish Community Center. Maurice would remain a passionate friend and supporter of Israel all his life. In 1974, he and his lovely wife, Milka, spent a month in Israel, celebrating Passover with 500 people in Kibbutz Ha Tsa'arim in the southern Israeli town of Beersheva. Later, the Leibesman's would celebrate their youngest son, Jeffrey's bar mitzvah at the holy Western Wall, *hakotel*, in Jerusalem, below where the Holy Temple once stood.

Maurice had a wonderful secular education as well. He graduated in 1952 from the

prestigious Mariano Moreno High School, known for its wonderful teachers. Maurice himself, was an inspired and wonderful teacher. Just ask Maurice's cousin Julio. When little Julio was only four years old, Maurice took him aside one day and taught him how to write. Although chronologically the older sister, Anita, looked up to her baby brother Maurice, and adored him. Not only an accomplished teacher, but from an early age Maurice was also a brilliant writer and public speaker – he always had a beautiful mind.

Unlike the United States, where one first goes to an undergraduate program before specializing, in Argentina as in many other countries throughout the world, most high school graduates goes straight on to their specialization. So in 1952 Maurice entered the best medical school in Argentina: the University of Buenos Aires Medical School. From childhood, Maurice had told his mother, Luisa, that he wanted to be a pediatrician. He always loved and cared about children. I think it speaks to the kind of *mench*, fine human being, that Maurice was throughout his life.

It was hot summer night on February 26, 1953 when the young, 15 ½ year-old Milka of the Belgrano neighborhood of Buenos Aires first set her eyes on the handsome, dashing, mature, second year medical student, Maurice. Milka belonged to the Buenos Aires- equivalent of a Wilmington Jewish Community Center for teens from German-Jewish families. She and her friends would gather on hot nights to play ping-pong and talk. Milka had a girl friend who was dating a medical student. That student was Maurice's partner. The study partner was always slipping away from Maurice to meet his girlfriend. One day, Maurice asked, where are you going? The friend invited Maurice to tag along. Maurice was 20 at the time. He took his first look at Milka and said: "these are all kids!"

Two days later it was Milka's girl friends 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. The friend felt obligated to invite Maurice. On this particular occasion Milka chose to wear the gorgeous white dress from her *quincinera* - her debutante party. Well, Maurice had an entirely different take on Milka after that. Milka told me: "I liked him from the start. I never dated anyone else. He has been the only person in my life. He had a beautiful voice. He loved to imitate Al Jolson. He had a full head of hair: *medio-rubio* – light brown, classic features. In short: *absolutamente GUAPO!* And you should have seen him in uniform. Every Argentine man must serve in the army. So in 1954, Lieutenant Liebesman joined the Medical Corps of the Argentine Army. He wrote love letters to Milka every day of his maneuvers and she still had every letter, more than 50 years later.

You will never, ever meet a more romantic man than Maurice Liebesman. Every man in this room should be taking notes. For Milka's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, Maurice bought her a collection of love poems by Paul Geraudy, called *Tu y Yo*, You and I. On the inside cover Maurice inscribed the following blessing to Milka: *Una nube de felicidad para el cielo de tu vida* – "One cloud of happiness for the sky of your life." If you look through Milka and Maurice's most personal files, you will find receipts from drug stores, dates 40 and 50 years ago, where on the back Maurice has used each letter of Milka's name to pen short love poetry in her honor. Now you might think this is the behavior of a young man in love which would fade with the sobriety of years. NOT SO! All three of Maurice's children told me that they remember always hearing music in their home, and Maurice taking Milka in his arms and dancing with her in any room in the house without warning. The love he felt for his wife, for his children and grandchildren make Maurice a teacher to all of us.

Maurice and Milka dated for three years. One day, Milka's father – who adored Maurice – said "I'm sick and tired of constantly introducing you as my daughter's friend. (Hint, hint). Maurice did not want to marry Milka until he had graduated medical school, but his future father-in-law's request at least got the couple engaged. Milka received a simple *alianca*, a gold band and a gold bracelet called an *esclava*, to seal the arrangement. On May 14, 1960, ironically the same day as the Israeli Mossad agents apprehended the Nazi war criminal Adolph Eichman in one area of Buenos Aires, Maurice and Milka were being married in another Buenos Aires neighborhood, at the the Paseo Synagogue. They honeymooned at a resort frequented by newlyweds called Bariloche near the Andes. During their honeymoon, Bariloche experienced one of the largest earthquakes in this history of the region. It was very scary. As each of the honeymooners grabbed on to their mates out of fear, Maurice looked at Milka and told her: "I told you the earth would move when you married me."

Upon graduating medical school, Maurice felt his prospects would be enhanced with a residence in the United States. It must have been a very brave decision on Maurice's part to leave his home of more than 27 years and take his young wife and start life again in a new country. Maurice took a residency position at the Doctor's Hospital in Philadelphia. But it was too general. Maurice still had a passion for pediatric medicine. So within a short length of time, the Leibesman's moved again: this time to Delaware, where Maurice became one of four pediatric residents to serve right down the block at Delaware Hospital, what today we call Wilmington Hospital. Two of those original four residents are with us today to celebrate Maurice's memory and fine work.

I could read the long laundry list of honors and awards Dr. Leibesman garnered in his 40 years of medical service to this community: Past President of the Delaware Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics; Member of the Medical Society of Delaware, American College of Physician Executives; member and past chairman of the Bio-Ethics Committee of the Medical Center of Delaware, columnist for the advice column: "Ask Dr. Kid." But Dr. Leibesman embodied the word *humilde*, humble, and would not have wanted long lists of his accomplishments read to you. So instead let me tell you a story about gerbels.

One day, Dr. Leibesman received a call from a woman over the phone. She said, "my son cannot sleep. Every night he is up at two o'clock in the morning. What should I do?" Dr. Leibesman suggested: "well maybe you could give him a warm glass of milk, perhaps read him a comforting book before going to sleep." After two more weeks, the mother is still complaining - and is clearly getting a little cranky. So Dr. Leibesman asks the mother and son to come in. Dr. Leibesman centers totally on the child. "Johnny, why can't you sleep." Johnny looks straight at the good doctor and says: "it's because of the gerbel."

"What, Johnny?"

"Gerbel, doc."

"Please explain."

"Well, you see doctor, every night, I don't know what time, but every night, the gerbel gets on its exercise wheel in the case and it wakes me up."

The embarrassed Mother looked at Johnny, and shouted: "WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?!"

And Johnny replied: "well you never asked."

And that one story tells you everything about the success of Dr. Leibesman's practice. He

put his patients first. His was a child-centered practice. It was the key reason why he was so successful. He loved his patients and loved focusing on their needs. When his success catapulted him into the position of Medical Director of an HMO, he had to leave it after a few years because he missed clinical practice so much. He got so much *naches*, so much pleasure from his patients. He would keep them until they got married and then turn around and become the doctor to his patients' children. In the Jewish religion we like to say *l'dor va-dor*, from generation to generation, as way of expressing our hope for continuity. This phrase could have been on Dr. Leibesman's letter head – the credo of Dr. Leibesman's practice – *l'dor va-dor*.

Maurice Leibesman the doctor was a marvel, but Maurice Leibesman the father and grandfather was *marveloso*. Shortly after coming to Delaware Hospital, Debbie, who Maurice affectionately called *Debbicitala*, a hybrid Spanish-Yiddish term of endearment, was born in December 1961. As a girl she remembered putting her little feet on top of her daddy's feet to dance. And when she danced with her father, before 250 guests at her wedding to Jerry, there was not a dry eye in the room – including her own. She remembers her dad being so warm and compassionate. Not just great with the kids, but even with the family dog, Batuke (Portuguese for “frisky”). When Batuke accidentally overdosed on allergy pills, Maurice jumped into action with a shot of adreneline and saved the dog's life. Debbie remembers her dad as a passionate story teller. They would sit on the beach and together they would create chain stories. Maurice wrote many of his stories down, including the stories of others. Even as we speak, you can pick up the November issue of the Delaware Medical Journal and read Maurice's third installment on “Medical Stories and Myths: Ground Breaking Delaware Physicians,” this month featuring Dr. John Walter Mariner. He has given honor to other colleagues from Delaware's medical past, including Dr. Margaret Handy, who in 1918, became the first female pediatrician in our state.

Debbie and her husband, Jerry, have blessed Maurice with two lovely granddaughters: Stepahnie, 14 ½, who wrote her highschool paper in honor of her *abuelo*, and Danielle, 12. Debbie teaches Spanish right outside of Princeton.

Sidney, born in April 1964, was the first son born to Milka and Maurice. He remembers his dad coaching him in soccer back in the seventies, BEFORE soccer took off in the United States. But soccer was BIG in Argentina, and you cannot separate Maurice from his Argentine heritage. So Sidney was one of the early stars of the Brandywine YMCA Soccer League thanks to his dad and his passion for the sport. Maurice was a great teacher. Every time Sidney mastered a new skill, Maurice would give him a quarter, which I guess eventually paid for Sidney's fine legal education. Sidney married Susan, and together they blessed Milka and Maurice with a granddaughter, Allison, who is five.

Jeff, born in January 1966, has also followed in the legal profession. His favorite childhood memory of his father is one simple word: *babuchas*. It is Spanish slang for shoulders. When vacationing at the beach at Stoneharbor, a very young Jeff would look at his dad and demand *babuchas* which would get him lifted on to his father's shoulders, towering above the waves. Jeff went on to marry Michelle, and bless his parents with three children: Brian, 9 ½, Lauren, 7, and Zach, 4. In the spirit of *l'dor va'dor*, it is now these three children that demand *babuchas* from their daddy, Jeff.

Maurice was a doting grandfather and teacher to his six grandchildren. His favorite past time was playing doctor with them. Each of the children have sophisticated examination pads,

and they would call grandpa Maurice, the patient, into their office, and with the help of one of the cousins playing the role of nurse, take full histories down and give him their best medical advice. It would not be a surprise to me, if the second generation of Leibesman lawyers are totally replaced by a third generation of Leibesman doctors. Maurice seems to have done everything he could to stack the deck in this direction. Jewish doctors – it could be worse.

I have told you of Maurice the husband, the father, the grandfather, the doctor, but I have thus far failed to share with you Maurice, the artist. All throughout the Leibesman home you will see examples of Maurice's magnificent collages and oils. His first work of art dates back to 1960. Maurice had a laundry bag he used for cleaning his medical gowns. He had drawn a skyline of Philadelphia on it as seen from Milka and Maurice's one-bedroom apartment. One day, he was summoned by a man whose wife was in distress. Maurice correctly diagnosed that his wife was having a heart attack and that he must get her to the hospital immediately. That early diagnosis saved the woman's life. In gratitude, the man took the laundry bag, saw and appreciated the art, and returned it to Maurice – framed. And that began Maurice's artistic career. Some of the more memorable works to adorn the Leibesman's home include: *Blue Jean Quilt* ('03) (inspired by a trip to the Whitney Museum), *Adam and Eve* ('69), *Joie de Vivre*, *One to Ten* ('05), *Mechanical Man* ('84) and *Mechanical Cheese* ('76). Each of these collages was brought to life by Maurice's ability to see the extraordinary in the ordinary, and then bring it to life. His oils and still lives are quite wonderful as well.

I met Maurice a few days ago as he was struggling to leave this world for the next. He was clearly uncomfortable and because so many people in our community love Maurice and Milka, and their children, I was summoned to the family to be of assistance. I asked if I might perform the ancient Jewish practice of *Viddui*, which the Catholic tradition has adapted to Last Rights. In the Jewish tradition we pray for healing, which can just mean an end to pain, the assurance that any sins committed have now been forgiven, and that God awaits with open arms to take back His loved one. I spoke quietly to Maurice in the Spanish I learned as a boy growing up in Los Angeles. I came to give him love. But something extraordinary happened. Maurice grew focused, and gave me love. I could feel his love. In an instant I totally understood him – his soul was so giving. His lovely family gathered around me and together we chanted the credo of the Jewish people: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad* – Here O Israel the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One." His family reports to me that after that, there was no more suffering. Only calmness, clarity and peace. Within twenty four hours, as has been my experience in the past, Maurice slipped quietly away from this world to the next, where he is still continues to heal at God's side.

Maurice's Hebrew name was *Moshe*. In our tradition, we never just called Moses, Moses. But we had a title for him. He was called *Moshe Rebeynu*, Moses, our Teacher. Maurice's greatest gift to all of us was that he was the finest teacher one could every hope for. To young Anita and Julio in his childhood, to all the medical students at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, to his children, to his grandchildren, to his colleagues, to parents all throughout Delaware, even to me in the way he passed away – so calm, so full of love, still giving – Maurice will forever be *Moshe Rebeynu*, Moses our Teacher. May his memory be for a blessing and let us say, amen.