

# In Memoriam to Max J. Etra

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By Dr. Norman Lamm

Max Etra was more than an individual. He was an institution. He cut a large and unique figure in his community and in his society during the more than four score years that he inhabited this planet.

I knew him for more than thirty-five years, from the first day that I began my career in the rabbinate in this very building and in this very room. I learned quickly to appreciate the singularity of Max Etra, the last surviving member of that generation of a powerful family distinguished in the life of New York and American Jewry.

Perhaps a most appropriate, relevant, and timely way to describe Max Etra and his contributions to our community would be by referring to the introductory passage of the Haggadah. On the Seder night, we lift up the matzohs and we say: *"ha lahma anya."*

These words are usually translated as, "This is the bread of affliction," or poor man's bread. That could hardly be said about Max Etra. I prefer the alternative explanation given by the Sages: This is the bread *she'anim alav devarim harbeh*, over which many words are recited, the bread on which hangs a tale that bears repetition. And indeed, there is much to say, to tell and retell, about Max Etra.

This is the unleavened bread *di akhalu avhatana*, which our ancestors ate. It is an item which focuses us on our roots. It teaches us to appreciate our past, our origins.

Living in a generation of modernity and modernism, where the past is deprecated, the future is uncertain, and the present is ever evanescent, Max Etra knew who he was and where he came from. He was not one to derogate his progenitors, his family, his background.

Max was a loyal brother and brother-in-law, a doting uncle—he boasted of the fact that he practiced law with two nephews—but, above all, he was a good son. He took exemplary care of his mother. When she was widowed, he accepted upon himself every aspect of her care and comfort, travelling with her, and providing for all her needs. He considered no chore beneath his dignity. He also learned from her, fulfilling the Solomonic commandment, "Do not forsake the teaching of your mother." I remember casually suggesting to him, only a few years ago, that we do something to celebrate his 80th birthday. He recoiled, almost in pain, and said, "No way! My mother told me a long time ago that you don't reveal or celebrate

your birthdays, especially when you get older . . ."

Max was proud of his family, and they were proud of him. He became their "Etra"—a corruption of the original *Atarah*, "crown." He became the crown, the diadem, of the Etra family.

And even more than pride in his family and its Galician origins, he was a firm believer in tradition. The traditions of Judaism were dear and precious to him. He came to "daven" regularly, and he loved this shul. He was fierce in demanding respect for Jewish traditions and Jewi: h law.

His profound Jewishness expressed itself in his communal, charitable, philanthropic, and religious life. One could well divide his communal interest into two parts, parallel to the two expressions of invitations to join in the Passover feast: *Kol dikhfin yetei ve'yekhol*, "Let everyone who is hungry come and eat." This is an open invitation of universal dimensions—to the hungry and the needy of all people. The second expression is *Kol di'zrikh yetei ve'yifsa*, "Let all who are in need come and join us in the Passover Seder." Here the reference is to the specific Jewish dimension, symbolized by Passover.

Max Etra fulfilled his obligations in both respects. He was concerned with the poor and helped the needy, the lonely, and the sick. For many, many years he was a shining light in the leadership of Beth Israel Hospital, and he contributed to Federation for the same purpose.

And he was enormously dedicated to the Jewish dimension. He invited all to share at his Passover Seder. He cherished the Jewish people, Jewish faith, Jewish tradition, Jewish education—every aspect of Torah. That is why he was so active in Israel Bonds and UJA, and so fond of Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, of Ramaz, and especially—Yeshiva University.

Only last week, he was Guest of Honor at the Centennial Celebration that was initiated, conceived, and executed by the undergraduate students of Yeshiva University. It was *their* decision to honor him—and he was genuinely moved by the invitation and proud of the honor. The students summed up the importance of Max Etra in one line: "His contribution to Yeshiva University was monumental." Indeed, Max will need no engraved stone marker as his monument. Yeshiva University and its progress are his greatest monument.

He was a member of the Board of Trustees for over forty years, and its Chairman for

close to a quarter of a century, then becoming Chairman Emeritus. He liked to tell of the share he had in beginning the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. The late Dr. Belkin, whom he loved and revered, turned to a distinguished member of the community in the presence of Max Etra, and asked him for a major gift—a sum that is significant even by today's standards. The gentleman said he would do it only if someone else would take the lead and make a similar contribution first. Dr. Belkin looked at Max Etra in near despair and said, "What are we going to do now?" Max replied, "I will do it!"—without having the least notion of how he would be able to fulfill that obligation.

But Max's philanthropy was more than a matter of money. It was a *personal* commitment. He came to every event, every meeting, every celebration, every Commencement, of Yeshiva University. He considered our supporters and friends part of a larger family, and therefore made it his business to be present at every significant occasion in their lives, sad or happy. And in the early years, he travelled from city to city, spreading the good word about Yeshiva and Einstein.

He sought not only funds for Yeshiva University. He aspired too to make friends for us. He applied to Yeshiva what the Rabbis define as the means of applying the love of God: "To love God means to act in such a manner that people will love the God you worship."

In soliciting friends and strangers for Yeshiva, as well as for other causes, he went to considerable pains never to hurt the more modest donor, never to embarrass the one who could not give as much as he expected. He approached people with the utmost sensitivity—almost with what might be called a stylized graciousness.

The truth is that Max did not just work for causes that he cherished. He was married to them. He loved them, lived for them, believed in them. Yeshiva University, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun, Ramaz, Beth Israel Hospital, all the others—they gave him his meaning in life. They were as a family to him—with all the nuances of a complex family relationship, with all its ambivalences and intricacies. To these institutions and their leadership he was, as to one's family, a loving critic and a critical lover. And now we, his extended family, are his survivors and mourners.

We, the entire community, owe Max Etra so very much. Having passed away just five days before the Passover holiday, perhaps our special Kaddish for him should come in the form of the *Dayyenu* hymn. Let us paraphrase the *Dayyenu* for Max Etra:

If Max Etra had only been the kind of man who attracted little children to Torah with sweets—*Dayyenu*, it would have been enough.

If Max Etra had only been generous in financial support of so many causes—*Dayyenu*, that would have sufficed.

If Max Etra had only assumed a leadership role in various community organizations—*Dayyenu*.

If he had only been committed to us emotionally—*Dayyenu*.

If he had only been concerned with the sick and the hungry and lonely—*Dayyenu*.

If Max Etra had only been involved in synagogues and Day Schools, in Yeshiva University and all Jewish education, out of concern for the Jewish future and the future of the State of Israel—*Dayyenu*.

But he did all these things, and much more, and for this we pay him this last tribute—and of such tribute we can never say *Dayyenu*, that is enough for him.

I began this eulogy with the definition of *lahma anya* as the kind of bread over which much is recited. Permit me to conclude with the added sentence provided by that great commentator, Rashi.

Rashi adds: what is it that we recite over the matzoh?

"We chant the entire Hallel (the praise of God from the Psalms) to its conclusion, and we recite the Haggadah."

We here are *gomer et ha-Hallel*. We conclude (*gomer*) this last tribute to Max Etra, the last time he will be Guest of Honor, by praising him and hailing him for a life well and nobly spent; and we will recite the Haggadah of his profoundly significant contributions from generation to generation.

May his noble soul be bound up in the bond of immortal life.