



Rafael Arbisser

December 12, 1924 - June 18, 2018

Rafael I. (Raffi) Arbisser passed away Monday morning at the age of 93, having lived a fulfilling life as a devoted husband, father, grandfather and great grandfather and a Jewish educator who oversaw the education of thousands of students and served as a mentor and trusted counselor to dozens of them. Raffi was born in poverty in Warsaw, Poland in 1924 to an observant Jewish family, with two older sisters and an older brother. His family moved to Palestine as a young child with his father and older brother leaving shortly thereafter to make a living in the United States. When in his early teens, he stopped going to school full time and worked as an assistant at Davar, a Hebrew language Socialist newspaper.

Palestine was under a British mandate when Raffi was growing up. Jewish settlements were in frequent conflicts with neighboring Arabs and he participated in the Jewish defense militia, the Palmach. In his later years, he told about his work with the Palmach, including assisting Jews -- many of whom were escaping the Holocaust -- who were smuggled into Palestine in violation of British law.

In 1946, Raffi joined his father and brother in New York. Soon after arriving in the US, he met his wife, D'vorah Binstok, and they married in June 1948. Raffi and D'vorah supported their college educations and their family as congregational parochial school educators in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Youngstown, Ohio, and Bangor, Maine, before arriving in Kansas City, Missouri in 1951, where Raffi was the educational director at Congregation

Beth Shalom for 16 years. In 1967, he and the family moved to Houston, Texas, where Raffi served as educational director at Congregation Beth Yeshurun for 10 years.

Raffi was always brimming with ideas of how to instill a love of Judaism and Israel among his students and the broader community. In Kansas City, he established a Jewish day camp and oversaw the design and construction of a large school complex for the synagogue. In Houston, he continued innovations in Jewish education. He set up scholarship programs to send children to Jewish summer camps. He worked with Louis Kaplan to acquire one of the finest Judaica collections as the foundation for a museum. He developed programs around each of the major festivals to entice children to come to the synagogue. For example, he encouraged families to build sukkahs by arranging for a lumber yard to make sukkah kits, enlisting the youth organization to assist in building the sukkahs, and having the children take bus tours of the sukkahs.

Among Raffi's proudest achievements was the establishment of communal Israel youth pilgrimages. While occasionally high school students would travel to Israel as part of national groups, typically segmented along Jewish denominational lines, he envisioned building the local Jewish community so the students from separate congregations could meet, socialize, and share the experience of visiting Israel. He hoped the kids would fall in love with Israel, Judaism and each other, building stronger Jewish families and communities. Many other cities followed Raffi's lead and successfully implemented similar programs.

Although raised as a Socialist, Raffi became an ardent capitalist, investing every dollar he could in the stock market. His success as an investor enabled him to retire at age 55 and move back to his beloved Jerusalem, where he and D'vorah lived from 1977 until 1999. Even in retirement, however, Raffi remained intensely interested in Jewish education, working for many years on nurturing the Emery/Weiner School, a Jewish secondary school in Houston. Raffi's focus on education was manifested in his children and grandchildren.

He and D'vorah proudly drove around in their aging car with stickers from the many colleges, graduate and professional schools their descendents attended. Raffi and D'vorah actively participated in educating their grandchildren about Israel by hosting each of them for month-long visits at their apartment in Jerusalem. As grandparents they wanted to know and understand each grandchild, while nurturing their love for Israel.

Despite continental or even intercontinental separation, all family generations assembled at least twice annually for Passover and Thanksgiving. The family joked that attendance exceptions seemed limited to hospitalization or incarceration.

Raffi was an avid philatelist and casual numismatist, with extensive collections of Israeli stamps and coins that he loved to share with his grandchildren. Raffi was a masterful storyteller. He would also light up the room with a smile whenever anyone brought him kosher rotisserie duck, or any and all forms of chocolate.

Raffi is survived by his beloved wife and partner of 71 years, D'vorah, who he lovingly called "Ketzaleh" (Yiddish for "little cat"), sons Amir Arbisser (Lisa) and Aton Arbisser (Norma), son-in-law Charlie Shockey, grandchildren Micah Arbisser (Lisa), Nathan Shockey (Felicia Yong), Talya Arbisser (Joel Gluskin), Lily Arbisser, David Shockey (Mandi Peterson), Ariel Arbisser, Amelia Arbisser, and Ilana Arbisser, and three great grandchildren. Raffi was preceded in death by his parents, two sisters, a brother, and his daughter, Erie Arbisser Shockey.

The funeral will be held at 2:00pm on Thursday, June 21 at Congregation Beth Yeshurun, 4525 Beechnut Boulevard in Houston, Texas.

The family requests that contributions be made to the Raffi and D'vorah Arbisser Excellence Fund at the Kaplan Judaica Museum at Congregation Beth Yeshurun or to the Raffi and D'vorah Arbisser Scholarship Fund at the Emery/Weiner School at 9825 Stella Link Road in Houston, Texas.

Tribute Wall

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“ Dear Amir, Lisa, Talya, Ariel and the whole family. What a beautiful life lived. Raffi and my father share the same birthday. Wish I could have met such a wonderful man. Our thoughts are with each of you. Love Kelye and Steve Brown

Kelye and Steve Brown - July 03, 2018 at 07:57 PM