Mikey Butler: A Eulogy
by Norman Lamm January 27, 2004

What an amazing young man Mikey was! A truly unique individual, one of our most outstanding students, present and former, his life deserves to become a legend at Y.U.

He was a handsome, fair-skinned and fair-haired young fellow, engaging and polite, with a winning and almost ubiquitous smile, a man of innate dignity who carried life lightly yet seriously. Despite terrible disabilities, he communicated with friends and teachers far and near—indeed, the whole world—through his computer. Mikey loved people. He was an outstanding student, present and former, his life deserves to become a legend at Y.U. It seemed that he was subject to a strange seesaw relationship: The more his body was afflicted—eyes and ears failing to function, constant and debilitating air-pain, lungs diseased, heart threatened—the higher the level of righteousness that he attained; the more the disease battered his physical self, the more gracious and refined and dominant and pure his spiritual self became, and the more his heart shone with a special luminescence. He reminded me of the Torah’s description of Egypt’s failed policy of persecution of the Jewish people.

Mikey was blessed with extraordinary parents. Nina and Dan Butler too suffered without complaining. They taught him to cherish living every day—"To the very end of this world, take full advantage of his clear mind and sharp intellect, his big heart and his fabulous charm—one might almost say charisma. They taught him—and he taught them—the meaning of "loving kindness": not only to accept suffering with love, but suffering because one whom you love is in pain.

The Talmud (Yoma 35b) records a fascinating passage about excuses for not learning Torah:

Hence, all excuses are vitiating. The case of Hillel cuts the ground from under any excuse of poverty as a reason to neglect Torah, and so on.

To that I would add: "Mikey was a very sick young man all his life. But, paradoxically, he was one of healthiest people I ever met! His maturity was amazing. He was fun to be with. He never obsessed about illness. His attitude was robust, outgoing, optimistic. He never dwelled on death, even though the reaper was a daily presence; he never allowed that awful angel to spook him."
Mikey loved Y.U.; his whole family was a Y.U. family. When I gave him his BA diploma two years ago, the electric sense of joy was palpable; he was so very proud of it. And yet, he was a bit sorry; you see, he so loved school that he hated to graduate...His school spirit was infectious, and he was a natural and acknowledged student leader.

Yesterday I received a hand-written letter from Mikey’s cousin Menachem, written on Friday and delivered to me on Monday – just before I learned of his demise earlier that morning. I must read to you the last paragraph of that letter just to give you an inkling into his incredible character.

Bear in mind that I held “Dorm Talks” for many years but had not done so the last six months or so.

Finally, I spoke to my cousin Mikey Butler this week (on the internet) and I mentioned that you want to reinstate dorm-talks. Mikey asked if it would be possible for him to be involved with the process in one way or another. He mentioned that he would enjoy helping with the reinstitution of dorm talks, should his help be wanted.

I propose that all future Dorm Talks be known as the “Mikey Butler Dorm Talks” in his honor and in his memory.

So, in light of his healthy attitude it is not only true that Mikey was חכם בריאים! it is equally true that Mikey leaves us no escape route. We are all obligated to become selfless and involved in Torah, in communal work, in outreach, in encouraging the spread of חסד וProstitה. If he could do it, we must do it. This sweet, accommodating, helpful young man stands as a reproach to all of us – the sickly and the healthy, the poor and the rich, men and women, quick-witted or dull-witted. Maybe this is what they meant when they said: דורות ב/ioutilה נראים ويم, that the righteous are considered alive even after they are dead. Even after they are gone, their standards and their achievements remain a challenge to those still alive—and that means they live too.

Mikey had loads friends, great friends, legions of admirers. Ultimately, his greatest gift to us, one of the most important treasures of his legacy, what caused us so to admire him—is that he evoked in us what Abraham Lincoln called the “better angels our nature.” He brought out the best in us. We shall ever remember him – in our conduct and in our goals as well as in our memories.

In the Haftorah we read this past Shabbat, Shabbat Rosh Chodesh, Isaiah speaks to us in the Name of the Almighty, the unforgettable words: גאשא אתו איתל אמתי חכים כשם לא תנאך, “Even as a man who is comforted by his mother, so will I comfort you.”

May Mikey’s remarkable mother and father, his beloved siblings and family, find nani in his memory, proud that they raised such a very special and heroic son.