

A Word about Ben Schaeffer – Street Naming, Apr. 30, 2023

Ben Schaeffer is one of the few people that I've yelled at in my adult life. He was a common feature at EMJC – as the Yiddish expression goes, *er kumt tzum oyshpeiyn*, showing up regularly right at the end of services. Presumably, he davened somewhere else and then came to us for the simple kiddush we offered, where he would regularly badger some number of us about, usually, singles programming, though at times it would be to offer a political opinion on local politics or labor activism, or to share an article in a local paper that mentioned his political work or his activism or heroism (justly-earned) having to do with his job at the MTA. He could often be vexing and frustrating, able to take any conversation in a direction that addressed his particular *inyana d'yoma* ('issue' – again, usually singles programming). This went on for some years, over which he developed friendships and relationships with some in the community, and would provoke and exasperate others.

And then he contracted COVID and succumbed to the disease. This is what I wrote to my community on learning of his death:

Many in our community were shocked by the death of Ben Schaeffer, myself included. Without ignoring the fact that he could sometimes be controversial, he was one of the characters who made our community vibrant and interesting. His vociferous advocacy of programming for Jewish singles was a real contribution to the Jewish community; he was an ardent political activist; and he was a remarkably good listener who would often cede a point when he heard something new, a rare quality, especially for someone whose views were so strongly held. He was young, healthful (as far as I know), and filled with life-force. It is hard for me to wrap my mind around the fact that he was a victim of this brutal and indiscriminating disease. I think many of us feel this way. May his memory be for a blessing – the world is a poorer place for his absence.

Ben's passing was a lesson in the idea that each life is precious – that often we are not aware of the ways in which a person's presence enriches our lives, makes them more interesting and more colorful. Among his many good qualities, he was an engaging interlocutor, he cared deeply about important things, and unlike most people, he threw his hat in the ring, advocating for change and working doggedly to make it happen.

I'm not sure how Ben would have felt about this street naming – on the one hand, it would have elicited a visit from him with a torn-out article from the local paper, him pointing out the *kavod* (honor) that was being conferred upon him. On the other hand, for a guy who got around as much as he did, who was known by nearly every shul in Brooklyn (and maybe Manhattan too) there's an irony in his name being fixed in a one-block stretch. Still, it's a great honor, and well-deserved. I pray that his soul is at peace.