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Reconstructionist founder subject of video

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Lavy Becker, over his long life, was a rabbi, social worker, businessman and, most successfully, a community volunteer. He was a man of tremendous vitality and charisma, who "loved being in the limelight," in the words of his son, Hillel. Becker, who died in 2001 at 96, probably would have loved a new biographical video, *The Lovingkindness of Lavy* by Memoirs Productions, which was commissioned by his family.

Becker had the distinction of playing a founding role in three synagogues in Montreal, in three different streams of Judaism, but it is the Reconstructionist movement with which he is most closely associated, and he has been ranked among its top five pioneers. Becker was "a bit of an iconoclast," said Hillel, who is the main interviewee in the video.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Becker enthusiastically embraced this new branch of Judaism. He established and nurtured Montreal's Reconstructionist synagogue, Congregation Dorshei Emet, and served as its volunteer rabbi for many years before its current rabbi, Ron Aigen, was hired. Rabbi Aigen quoted Becker as saying he was attracted to Reconstructionism because he could attend its services "without squirming... it was intellectually honest, simple, down-to-earth, no pretensions."

Becker, who was born in New York, came to Montreal with his Russian immigrant parents as a toddler. It was an Orthodox home and, at just 17, Becker became the founding president of the Young Israel Synagogue. Later, he was founder of Congregation Beth-El, the first Conservative synagogue in Montreal to have mixed seating.

After graduating from McGill University (where he was on the gymnastics team), he went to a yeshiva in New York with the intention of becoming an Orthodox rabbi, but became attracted to the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary. One of his teachers was Mordechai Kaplan, who would become the founder of Reconstructionism.

Becker was a Conservative rabbi for only five years in the early 1930s in the United States. He then went into Jewish communal work, also in the U.S., before returning to Montreal to become executive director of the YM-YWHA.

His proudest work was after the war, when he spent a year in Germany helping displaced persons for the Joint Distribution Committee, an experience that had a profound effect upon him. After returning from Europe in 1947, Becker went into business with his two brothers, and his work on behalf of the Jewish community from then on was a volunteer.

One of his longest associations was with the World Jewish Congress, for whom he headed up its small communities commission. He traveled to 40 countries, creating ties with some of the remotest Jewish communities. He was one of the first Jewish leaders in Cuba after the revolution and started what became the annual tradition of Canadian Jewish Congress shipping matzah there at Passover. After 1967, he went several times to the Soviet Union, meeting refuseniks covertly. He also visited 30 small communities in Canada.

Outside the Jewish sphere, Becker was involved for many years with the Vanier Institute on the Family, started by Gov. Gen. Georges Vanier. He chaired an interfaith conference during Centennial Year in 1967.

An amusing anecdote in the video is about how, in this capacity, Becker met the Queen Mother at an interfaith service at Westminster Abbey that year. When introduced to the royal, he broke protocol by asking her if she had any message for her daughter, as he would be seeing Queen Elizabeth II the next day in Ottawa. Becker raced back to Canada to make sure that he was the first to greet the monarch when she got out of her limousine on Parliament Hill. A photo of him beside the Queen appeared on the front page of The New York Times the next day. The Queen broke with protocol herself when she autographed the back of the photo after Becker sent her a copy with that request.

Becker is portrayed as an extremely warm person. He is said to have loved everyone without discrimination. He was known as "the kissing rabbi," because he embraced everyone after services. He introduced the custom of members, while in their tallitot, putting their arms around each other.

"He was loved by everybody as a father figure," said Hillel. The Hebrew term "chesed," or "loving kindness," captured his life, he added. Becker summed up what had driven him by saying that he "strove for the happiness of the community as if it was for my individual well-being." In that pursuit, he found fulfillment.

Iris Wagner, executive producer of The Lovingkindness of Lavy, knew Becker all her life as a member of the Reconstructionist synagogue. She had proposed doing the video while Becker was still alive, but he was not up to it at that point, she said. The 45-minute video includes clips of an interview conducted by filmmakers Garry Beitel and Barry Lazar in 1996 for the 36th anniversary of the synagogue, as well as Becker speaking at the 1988 Negev dinner, which jointly honoured him and Hillel. Besides Hillel, the other interviewees include his daughter, Donnie Frank, and grandchildren Jeremy Becker and Debby Becker Newpol.

The Lovingkindness of Lavy can be borrowed from the Jewish Public Library. Copies have been donated to the CJC Archives, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the National Archives of Canada, which already has some of Becker's collection.