Rabbi Danny Allen, 69, lived to ‘serve the national Jewish project’

By JOHANNA R GINSBERG December 26, 2018

Rabbi Daniel Allen of West Orange — whose life and work reflected a passionate love of Israel and the Jewish people — passed away on Dec. 16 at the age of 69. The cause of death was amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease.

Throughout his career as a leader of Jewish philanthropy, Allen was devoted to efforts to strengthen the State of Israel and on behalf of the Jewish community. Up until the time of his death, he was consulting with the Atlanta-based Center for Israel Education, whose mission is to promote the concept that Israel is an essential element of modern Jewish history.

Among the leadership roles he held, Allen served as senior vice president of Jewish Federations of North America and twice as executive vice chair of United Israel Appeal, where he started in 1988 and which later became a JFNA subsidiary supporting humanitarian efforts in Israel.

His professional life, which began at Michigan State University Hillel, also included stints at ARZA, the Zionist arm of the Reform movement; Magen David Adom; Emory University Hillel; and the Jewish Federation of Greater Hartford.

“Danny was born to be a professional who served the national Jewish project,” said his brother, Rabbi Morris Allen, who lives in Mendota Heights, Minn., in a phone interview from Daniel’s home in West Orange. “That was his mission.”

Noah Allen, Daniel’s son, added that his father went to rabbinical school not because he had a theological calling, but “to have a level of influence in the Jewish community and an impact on the world, specifically as it relates to Israel.”

According to Morris, his upbringing in a family in which being part of the Jewish people was primary set his brother’s life’s trajectory, a path that was cemented by his time as a camper and counselor at Herzl Camp in Wisconsin. Daniel’s time there, said Morris,
“provided a vision of Jewish life as only camp can, and of what it means to be responsible for the Jewish future. Danny took that vision seriously.”

It was at camp in 1970 that Daniel Allen met Mary Lou Frishberg, who would become his wife. She told NJJN she knew about his life’s passion early on. While they were dating, he told her, “Israel will always be the most important thing to me.’ I married him anyway,” she said.

More than 350 people attended his funeral on Dec. 18 at Congregation B’nai Israel in Millburn, where he was a member. He was interred at Beth Israel Cemetery in Woodbridge.

“It was at the seminary in the 1970s, when Zionism was not fully championed by the Reform movement, that he expressed his passion for the State of Israel, Mary Lou said, by daring to bring the Israeli flag onto the bima during morning services to join the American flag already there. “Some of the faculty said it was an outrage,” she said. Dr. Alfred Gottschalk, then president of HUC, allowed him to display the flag. “That was Danny,” Mary Lou said. “He was totally devoted to the Jewish people, the State of Israel, and the Land of Israel.”
After his ALS diagnosis two years ago, Allen made aliyah and became an Israeli citizen, although he spent most of his time in West Orange. "It was not exactly the way we had always pictured it, but he was proud of it," said Mary Lou.

In addition to his wife of 46 years, Mary Lou (Frishberg), he is survived by his children, Noah (Rena), Rabbi Uri (Sari), and Sarah; four grandchildren, Doron, Aderet, Yedidyah, and Livya; his mother, Annie Allen; and his siblings, Dr. Joel (Debbie), Dr. Miriam Kluska (Avram), and Rabbi Morris (Dr. Phyllis Gorin).