



# Visionary optimist

**Dov Lautman 1936-2013**

**INDUSTRIALIST DOV LAUTMAN** died November 23 following a decade-long battle with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), also called Lou Gehrig's Disease. He was 77. He is survived by his son, Noam, and three grandchildren.

Lautman was diagnosed with ALS in 2003. The cause of this illness is mysterious; the nerves connecting the brain with the body's muscles die, and, lacking stimulation, the muscles wither and atrophy. There is no cure. Some 700-800 Israelis have ALS. British physicist Stephen Hawking was diagnosed with ALS when he was 21 and he is now over 70. But such longevity with ALS is extremely rare. Hawking appears to have a milder form of ALS.

Legendary American football coach Vince Lombardi liked to say, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." Few people fit this saying better than Lautman. Knowing he did not have long to live, he remained a dogged optimist to the end. He got going, in 2009, by launching the NGO *Hakol Hinuch* (Everything is Education), the Movement for the Advancement of Education in Israel, headed by current Education Minister Shai Piron.

Hakol Hinuch drafted a new educational policy and related legislation, led the battle to integrate Ethiopian children into public schools, battled cuts in the Education Ministry budget and sponsored research.

Lautman was born in Tel Aviv. He completed a B.Sc. degree at MIT, and, at the tender

age of 27, became CEO of Sabrina, a textile firm. With a French investor, he built a textile plant in Kiryat Shmona, the country's northernmost city. In 1975, he launched Delta Galil, an underwear and socks company with headquarters in Carmiel. As CEO and chairman of the board, Lautman led Delta to become one of the five leading global companies in this industry, employing 14,000 worldwide. Lautman served as head of the Manufacturers Association from 1986 to 1993. He sold many of his Delta Galil shares to his friend, fellow industrialist Isaac Dabah, in July 2007.

I had the privilege of working with Lautman and his senior Delta Galil management team in 2005, as a management educator. His office was remarkably modest and I recall noting Lautman's utter lack of ego, in a country where CEO egos rival Mt. Everest. At the time, China was rapidly dominating the textile industry. Lautman fought to keep Delta competitive by moving labor-intensive Delta plants from Israel to low-wage Egypt and Jordan. The move was controversial, but Lautman felt it would help cement the peace agreements with these countries, as well as help Delta survive in the face of Asian competition.

One of Lautman's protégés at Delta was Imad Telhami, an Israeli Arab from Usfiya, a brilliant manager who Lautman wanted to make CEO of Delta Galil. Opposition from his board and others foiled the appointment, and Telhami left to found Babcom, a highly successful start-up providing call center ser-





Dov Lautman at the Delta textile factory at Karmiel in 2007; Lautman led Delta to become one of the five leading global companies in the industry

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vices and software.

Telhami tells *The Jerusalem Report* that what he learned from Lautman was that “it is okay to seek business success and profit, in fact a necessary part of any business model. But it is equally essential to combine that business drive with a passionate social agenda – to do good in the world.”

“Of course Dov was a mentor of the first order, someone who knew the in and out of business. But he was much more – which is why he is loved by so many. He was above all else a human being, one who knew no difference between Arab and Jew. His humanity and deep care for people transcended race, color and religion. He embraced, he loved, he empowered.

“He accepted me for who I am at a time when the challenges were great, believed in me, was there for me, cherished my success. Like my real father who too loved people and never looked at their religion or race, he helped instill in me the same values that I hold dear. In that he was truly another father.”

**TELHAMI CONTINUES** that Lautman taught that the rewards for doing good “are great not only for those around you, but especially for you. Giving is even more pleasurable than taking. And Dov gave, and gave, and through what he left behind, will continue to give long after he has rested in peace.”

Just over a year ago, Lautman gave a talk to a group of students at the Kiryat Ono Academic Center. It would be his last. Confined to a wheelchair, with his breathing audibly labored, he said, “I’m an optimist. To be a CEO you have to be. If a prime minister is not an optimist, he cannot be a good leader. Finance ministers? They have to be pessimists. But you cannot be prime minister without a vision. If a prime minister is pessimistic, no one wants to work with them.

“My own vision is optimistic. I am disturbed by Israeli society, by the gaps in income and wealth that endanger our existence more than all the Iranians, Hamas and Hezbollah put together. We are last among 34 OECD [the group of developed countries] nations in edu-

cation, even without counting the ultra-Orthodox, and second from last in poverty. A child born in Ofakim gets only 60 percent in public spending compared to a child born in Ramat Aviv. A quarter of all boys who reach the age of 18 never learn math, science or English. A new law wants to make them all work. How can they work without math or English?”

“We are proud of our Nobel Prize winners. But they are from the generation who went to school in the 1940s and 1950s, when I was in elementary school. I went to a regular Tel Aviv school and two-thirds of my teachers had doctoral degrees. If only Israeli politicians would start to worry about Israeli society, ‘what must I do for the State of Israel,’ and not about themselves, their own careers. . . . but such politicians don’t exist.”

For years, Lautman offered to resign from all his business activities if appointed education minister. Regrettably, however, it never happened. Typically he took decisive action anyway.

In his Kiryat Ono talk, Lautman described the changes his NGO Hakol Hinuch fostered. “How do you make change happen? You work on a large scale. We organized a group of people to lobby the government. We drafted a law, The Law for Responsibility for Education. It calls for differential investment, so pupils in Ofakim or Yarka [a Druze village north of Acre] will get 40 per cent more than well-off kids in Ramat Aviv. The law will prevent discrimination in schools, to prevent principles from keeping out an Ethiopian student, for instance, just to improve matriculation scores. The law requires core studies in math and science, in order to get Ministry of Education funds, including yeshivas. If they wish, yeshivas can have such secular core studies in the afternoons.

“Money talks. We need to improve the quality of management in schools, the quality of principals. Karen Tal, principal of Bialik-Rogozin School in South Tel Aviv, took a neglected forgotten school and in 5-6 years went from 25 percent of students achieving matriculation to 90 per cent, even though many students are African migrants. School principals need the same abilities as the CEO of Delta Galil. . . . Finland can be our example. Finland went from near last in the OECD [36 developed nations] to first place, in just 6 years! The Finnish education minister told me our draft law is similar to Finland’s educational work plan.”

Parts of the Draft Law have been implemented, and Lautman’s Hakol Hinuch head, Rabbi Shai Piron, is now Minister of Education.

After Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated 18

years ago, Lautman became a founder of the Dor Shalem Doresh Shalom (A Whole Generation Demands Peace) movement. He was active in the Labor Party and supported former Labor leader Ehud Barak. He was awarded the Israel Prize for lifetime achievement in 2007.

Lautman’s wife, Rachel, died suddenly in 2008. The couple knew great tragedy. Their eldest child, Limor, died in her sleep when she was nine months old. One of their two sons, Adi, committed suicide in 1995, after his fiancée died of cancer. Their son, Noam, is active in Hakol Hinuch.

**JOURNALIST KARMIT** Guy wrote a biography of Lautman, aptly titled “Dov Lautman never gives up.” In it, Lautman speaks of how his illness first appeared in 2003. “It started with discomfort in the muscles of my right shoulder. I thought it was a passing inflammation,” he says. “But weeks went by and it did not go away but got worse. Then my left shoulder gave problems. I had trouble bending my fingers. Tests revealed I had ALS. I did not reveal my illness to my family for a while. To Rachel’s credit, she did not panic. . . . The life expectancy of those with ALS is only four or five more years. I’m lucky. I’ve lived nine years with it already.”

When asked by Haaretz journalist Ora Koren whether Guy’s biography summed up his life, Lautman said emphatically, “No! I have much more to give and to contribute!”

Lou Gehrig was a legendary baseball player who played for the New York Yankees. After the Mayo Clinic diagnosed his illness as ALS, Gehrig announced his retirement at a farewell ceremony at a packed Yankee Stadium in July 1939. He told his fans famously, “For the past two weeks, you’ve been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” Gehrig died of ALS in 1941.

Lautman had the same unbendable optimism as Gehrig. The people of Israel have been lucky to have had a visionary leader among us like Lautman, to show us how to face death with perpetual optimism, dignity and courage, to constantly battle to change the world despite a cruel and debilitating illness and personal tragedy.

At Lautman’s funeral, President Shimon Peres eulogized: “You did not surrender until your last breath. Your life was devoted to your people and your country, even at times of great personal distress.” ■

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