

Williams Abells

Ze'ev ben Shmuel HaKohen

Died January 5, 2000

Tevet 10 5761

On Friday when I heard the sad news that Bill had passed away, I was in the middle of studying the Torah portion that we would be reading the following day in the synagogue.

Vayigash, the second last portion in the book of Genesis, talks of the meeting between Judah, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and his brother Joseph. He is not aware that Joseph has survived being sold to slave traders and has now risen to a position of leadership in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. Judah asks Joseph not to hold back their father's favourite son Benjamin, while the rest of the brothers return to Canaan, as he fears that the loss of a second son will cause Jacob's death. Judah asks that he be kept imprisoned so that Benjamin could be free to go.

The word 'Vayigash', which can be translated as 'went up' opens the portion. There are three other places in the Torah where this word is used to describe three different kinds of actions. One time in preparation to do battle, another time to conciliate and the third time to pray. Our ancient rabbis suggested that the three are strangely related because men are usually ready for any one of the three. So was Judah when he 'went up'.

There are some interesting comparisons in this part of our Torah that can be used as we gather to honour Bill's memory and offer consolation to his family.

Although not the oldest, Judah assumed the role of leadership among his brothers. Earlier passages in the Torah recount how Judah rose to become a man of integrity, respected by all. Like Judah, Bill will also be remembered as a leader, a person who cared about family and honest beyond reproach. Interpreters of Judah's speech to Joseph call attention not only to that fact that it is the longest oration in Genesis but that Judah carefully calculates his arguments and even his tone of voice. His is not spontaneous presentation. He is pleading for the life of his brother and father. Therefore, he measures every word, every gesture, every inflection. One commentator suggests that Judah spoke with a pure clear logic, with every point supported by facts and impossible to refute. How similar to the way we will remember Bill with the distinctive resonance of his voice and the sincere expressions that led to his success in sales. So too in synagogue did his voice stand out whether in

prayer at his seat or when he accepted the honour, as a Kohen, to take the first aliyah as we would begin reading from the Torah.

We also read that when Joseph initially resisted his pleas, Judah began to speak angrily in a voice that resounded throughout Egypt. There is no shame in taking a stand. We saw this in Bill's life too as he stood up against fascism choosing to join the navy, willing, like Judah, to offer his own life so that others would live in freedom.

In future years when we continue to study this portion at the time of Bill's yahrzeit we will be reminded that throughout his life Bill was ready for the three different kinds of action described by the word Vayigash. He was ready to do battle against those who threaten our lives or against the afflictions that threaten our health. He was ready to conciliate as he used his skills to not only fashion a long and successful career in sales, but also as a person who gave of himself for the benefit of family and friends. And he was a man ready to pray as we saw when he joined Beth Shalom Synagogue within days of his arrival in Edmonton nearly 50 years ago. He was proud of his heritage as a Kohen, a descendant of the high priests, and he carried himself with the dignity and integrity that this honour demands.

We study Torah to learn how the actions and deeds of our ancestors not only created a faith that is seen as model of righteousness to people throughout the world, but still can affect us in every aspect of our lives today. So to do we recall the lives of people who through the way they lived their lives, serve as examples of the teachings of our Torah.

May we all be inspired to live lives filled with generosity, kindness and respect to others and a passion for making this world a better place. In this way we will ensure that the legacy of Bill Abells will continue to guide us, and generations still to come.

Tehi Nishmata Tzroorah Beetzror HaChaim

May his soul be bound up in the bonds of life.