

Eulogy for Harry Abofsky

YAACOV
Hershel ben ~~Abraham~~

Passed away June 18, 2000

15 Sivan 5760

This past Shabbat we read the portion called 'Naso' from the Torah. At Beth Shalom Synagogue we were also blessed to have Rebecca chant the Haftarah, a portion from one of the prophetic books of the bible that has a connection to the Torah reading.

Harry's health problems prevented him from attending services, but I know that he must have been proud when she told him how well she did, and how so many congregants came up to congratulate her following the service.

While life's circumstances prevented Harry from developing the same prayer skills and the devotion that Rebecca has to synagogue ritual, I know that the Jewish laws and moral codes passed on from God to our forefathers that we still follow today, influenced him, and how he conducted his business and personal affairs with others.

In fact part of the portion we read this past Shabbat may have subconsciously shaped Harry's long quest for material success for himself and his family.

Parsha Naso contains three of the best known verses in the Torah.

The priestly blessing, or Birkhat Kohanim contains the words:

Yevarechecha Adonai v'yishmarecha

Ya-air Adonai panav eilecha v'yecheuneka

Yee-sa Adonai panav eilecha ve-yashem lecha shalom

May the Lord bless you and keep you!

May the Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!

May the Lord bestow favour upon you and grant you peace!

The well known Torah scholar Nechama Leibowitz, of blessed memory, fuses several commentaries that together describe the meaning of this blessing.

In the first verse we learn that "bless you" refers to material goods. You shall prosper with abundance of possessions and wealth. "Keep you" is added so that we may be protected from the evils that such prosperity inevitably brings.

The second verse is commonly understood to refer to the spiritual blessing of insight into the Torah. The idea that our spiritual needs cannot be met until our material needs are fulfilled is ingratiated in our tradition.

Finally Leibowitz demonstrates that many commentators understand the final verse of the Priestly Benediction as combining both material and spiritual blessings.

Harry's life took a path that was a search for the material blessings that would lead to spiritual fulfilment for himself and his family.

I recently read the final drafts of the soon to be published history of the Jewish community of Edmonton and northern Alberta. Many of the stories and accompanying pictures were of the pioneers who came to the still rugged west to escape religious persecution in Eastern Europe and find the golden land that would offer freedom and security for their families. Talking with Harry's family yesterday made me realize that while I could only read about the exploits of those early settlers, I was privileged to know a man who actually shared many of the same wilderness adventures that paved the way for our modern way of life and our urban Jewish communities.

Harry Abofsky was born approximately 90 years ago in Russia. His mother died while giving birth to his youngest sister and shortly after his Bar Mitzvah he found himself being sent to Canada to be raised by an aunt in Winnipeg.

Arriving in a strange country, unable to speak English and torn away from everything familiar, led Harry to develop a desire to succeed so that he would no longer have to depend on others. He worked hard to establish himself, first in Winnipeg, where he developed a sense of humour and a reputation for kindness towards others that was one of the qualities that attracted Rebecca to him. Shortly after their marriage in 1940, Harry took his dreams north to establish himself as a pioneer entrepreneur.

His life could fill its own chapter in a history book of northern merchants. In Uranium City, Saskatchewan, Harry opened a clothing store that soon expanded to carry a full line of dry goods and then TV's and furniture. He established a trading post with the native Indians that saw him travelling by dog team over the winter ice and snow, or in summer by boat, on the river to Fort Chipewyan. At least once he was rescued by his dogs after his sled fell through the ice and on another occasion a passing barge saved him from being drowned when his boat capsized. He became one of the best known merchants in the area, even trying his hand at prospecting or putting up the necessary funds and supplies so that others could find their fortunes. Harry was adventurous, always reaching for the top, so that he could provide for his family. He wasn't afraid to break a few rules if it meant he could get the edge on a business deal or if it would help a friend.

He may not have made a lot of money but he gained a lot of respect. Rebecca kept busy teaching piano to hundreds of students in remote towns as well as in North Battleford, and together with their son Barry kept a flame of Yiddishkeit burning in the north.

Harry was an example to all of us that we should never give up on our dreams. Even into his eighties Harry returned to Uranium City to renew some of his connections and continue towards his goals of success and security.

While his health declined over the past few years, he was still able to indulge in his favourite activities of visiting friends and playing bridge. That is how he left us Sunday, with a hand full of playing cards together with Rebecca and close friends. So while Harry may not have been an outwardly religious man, we can see how his life, like the Priestly Benediction, underscores one of the fundamental premises of our tradition; the acknowledged relationship between material and spiritual well-being.

This teaching is reinforced in a well-known quote from Pirke Avot, the Ethics of Our Ancestors: *Ein kemach, ein Torah,...ein Torah, ein kemach*, "Without material possessions there is no Torah, without the spiritual fulfilment of the Torah, there is no sustenance. The acquisition of material wealth and spiritual enlightenment are only tools that we as Jews are commanded to use in a manner that brings us closer to God. This is the message of the priestly benediction and this is what brings us comfort as we know that Harry now lives in God's heavenly shelter after living a life inspired by ancient teachings, and a life devoted to the search for the material well-being that would let him find the peace to gain the spiritual well being we should all strive for.

Tehi nishmato tzroora beetzror hachaim

May his soul be bound up in the bond of life