

Issy Kettner    Itzchak ben Shraga Feivel v'Tzivvia

Passed away October 1, 1999    Tishrei 22, 5760

Issy left us peacefully on Friday night, minutes after we began celebrating Shabbat and the holiday of Shemini Atzeret. The timing was significant for those of us who knew him through his long association with Beth Shalom Synagogue. It was this past weekend when we celebrated both the conclusion and the beginning of the cycle of reading from our Torah. The Torah concludes with the death of Moses, who despite being the most significant figure in the history of the Jewish people, is given a eulogy of just a few simple words; "*Lo kam navi od b'Israel k'Moshe asher yadu Adonai panaim el panaim*". Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom Adonai has known face to face.

Moshe did not seek leadership. He questioned God as to why he should be chosen, but he accepted the challenge and became our greatest leader, a man of words, but a man whose actions spoke louder than his words, a man who led by example, a man who was loved and respected.

In our tradition we take inspiration from Moshe and all of our Torah heroes as we search for ways to make our lives meaningful. We also reflect on the lives of the men and women that we have known in our lifetime, to see living examples of people who have overcome adversity to become modern day examples for us.

Issy Kettner may not have been known as a community leader, yet his influence on those who do lead and on those who will lead will be felt for generations to come.

Issy was born 90 years ago in BEREZSTETCHKO, a small town on the Russian/Polish border. It was not a good time, or a good place to be a Jew, and the main goal of the residents was to get out, to join others who had escaped to a new life in North America. If living in constant fear and poverty was not enough, the lives of Issy and his two brothers and four sisters were burdened further with the loss of both parents when they were still young. Issy, who was the youngest child was raised by aunts and uncles and later older siblings as the family struggled for a better life. As was the case with so many Jewish families the older brothers left home for the new world where they worked hard and saved every penny so that they could send for the rest of the family.

Issy's new life began in 1927 when he spent what he called the longest two weeks of his life on a steamer to Halifax. He boarded a train to Winnipeg where he was reunited with his brothers and one sister. His remaining three sisters, stayed behind

in Europe and perished in the Holocaust.

Knowing that only through hard work would he succeed in his new country he immediately set out to find work and learn a new language. While taking night school classes in the evenings, he began his first job, collecting subscription premiums for Collier's Magazine.

He also found notoriety quickly as he was featured on the front page of the Winnipeg newspaper after knocking another man out in a fight. Having already experienced the pain of leaving his home due to anti-Semitism, he would not stand idly by when he heard derogatory remarks being said about Jews in his new country, and he took action with his own hands to defend his faith. Support came quickly from the Jewish community and his punishment was restricted to an overnight stay in jail.

His loyalty to his new home continued as he served Canada in the army during World War II. It was during his army years that he married his beloved Dora who he had met in Winnipeg before the war. She was living in Calgary where the ceremony took place and after the war they moved to Edmonton where she had found a job. Issy's first job in Edmonton was in a store owned by Harry Hiller, but soon with the help of cousins in the dry goods business he was able to open the Edmonton branch of Atlas Distributing.

His success in running his own company not only allowed him to provide a wonderful life for Dora and their daughter Carol, but to become a generous benefactor to his community. While Dora took a more active role in organizations such as Pioneer Women and National Council of Jewish Women, and ensured that Carol received her Hebrew education at Talmud Torah, Issy worked hard at the office, preferring to spend his lunches and leisure time at the Primrose Club, playing cards, as opposed to community meetings. The family were early members of Beth Shalom Synagogue where Carol remembers singing in the youth choir. Typically Issy never sat on the Board or sought any special honours but his interest and influence and synagogue affairs never waned.

Issy did have a passion in his life and that passion was fishing. He rarely ate the fish that he caught as he would give them away to family and friends but some of his happiest times were spent on the BC coast catching salmon or in northern Alberta lakes searching for Whitefish. Jerry Katz says that a fishing trip with Issy was an experience never to be forgotten. The day was filled with many stories that Issy told about his experiences, some of which were even repeatable. Ron recalls visits to Issy's favourite lodge at Stewart Island, B.C. Issy was easy to travel with he says, but you followed his rules. No matter who caught what, everybody shared, and

everyone went home with fish.

The fish that weren't given away were kept so that he could make his special gefilte fish, which along with pickles and potato latkes were the sum of his culinary expertise.

If you didn't know Issy well you might have been put off by his gruff exterior, but if you knew him you realized that inside was a heart of gold. If Issy liked you he loved you and he often expressed it through nicknames he gave friends like the *klainer* for Jerry Katz or the *groiser* for Bruce Elman. He never forgot the poverty of his youth and he was anxious to share his success with others. He would never let anyone pay a bill at a restaurant. He quietly gave money anonymously to be forwarded to needy people for turkey dinners at Thanksgiving.

Issy was proud of his adopted country. He loved Canada, calling it the best place to live in the world and he had little name for anyone who disagreed.

His travels weren't restricted to his favourite fishing spots or to meet with his partners and family in Montreal, as he was a regular in Radium Hot Springs with Dora, and Carol when she was younger, and later in Palm Springs where he and Dora spent much of the winter. Dora's death 19 years ago left a void in his life that could never be completely filled, but he channeled the tremendous love he had for family to his granddaughters, as you heard from Allison and Heather who spoke so lovingly of him just a few minutes ago. While Sharon's presence at this time is missed, we know Issy is proud of her as she follows the path of her sisters in studying in Israel, a country that he had a deep love for and visited himself on three occasions.

Issy has also showed interest in all his granddaughter's activities. The first time they went skiing in Banff, Issy rode the gondola at Sunshine, then ran through the snow in his street shoes to watch them take their first runs down the slopes. Their success as each pursues their graduate and post graduate degrees in some of the world's finest universities is a testament to the concern he showed for them and the inspiration he gave them.

Issy enjoyed good health for many years after he reduced his time at the office and then finally retired 15 years ago. He traveled to Scotland and Ireland when he was 80, continued to fish, including ice fishing in the winter and spent time in Palm Springs up to 6 years ago .

Issy was a proud man and the loss of his eyesight which began 10 years ago and his first stroke six years ago, which may have been a signal to others to slow down, only reinforced the determination he had to ensure that those around him enjoyed

better lives. With great reluctance he left his home to move in Canterbury Court but soon took it upon himself to get to know the Jewish residents there and help them out if they needed anything.

Despite his own health problems he would make the effort to visit friends if they were in the hospital and ultimately to show his respect by attending the funerals of those who passed away. Issy's loyalty to others was repaid in his later years not only by his family who were dedicated to caring for him, but also by friends like Bob and Peggy Johnson were part of his family at Atlas Distributing, and were there for Issy when ever he needed assistance.

Issy even took a shine to Ron and Carol's rambunctious dog, Sara, who would visit him at Canterbury. Only recently was it discovered that it wasn't Issy who was eating the copious amounts of arrowroot cookies that he asked for but it was Sara that was secretly receiving the treats.

Bruce Elman will always remember Issy's dedication to Beth Shalom. Issy never hesitated in calling Bruce if he felt that things weren't going as well as they should. He wanted the synagogue to succeed, to be a place where the religion he fought to preserve against oppressors when he was young, would flourish. He supported our synagogue with his attendance, sitting in his familiar seat in the back where he could greet everyone who walked in, with his moral support in turbulent times, and quietly but significantly with his financial support.

Issy will be missed. We need people like Issy to remind those of us who lead today, why it is so important that our dedication to the precepts of our people continue.

In the Yizkor memorial service that we recited in synagogue on Saturday, just hours after Issy left us, the following words were read.

"May we live unselfishly, in truth and peace, so that we will be remembered as a blessing, as we this day we lovingly remember those whose lives endure as a blessing."

I can think of no better way of honouring Issy, a loving father, grandfather and friend than to try to live our lives as he did, unselfish, generous, dedicated to the past, but determined to make a better future.

Yesterday we celebrated, Simchat Torah, a holiday where we rejoice in the words of our holy book as we begin a new cycle of study. We also begin a new life without the guidance of a man who inspired us to do better. We are fortunate to have the memories of his words and wisdom to inspire us as we continue on the path he laid before us

*Tehi nishmata tzroora Beetzror ha-chaim*