

Eulogy for Florence Levine Fruma bat Mayer Died January 15, 2000

Florence left us peacefully this past Shabbat. Learning more about her life from Aube and Diana, it struck me how perhaps the day of her passing gave her one more opportunity to teach us an important lesson. Last Shabbat we read the Torah portion Bo. It includes the last of the plagues which God forced upon Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to free the Hebrews from their bondage.

It also gives us the commandment from God to remember our Exodus from Egypt by retelling the story to our children each year at Passover.

We are commanded to eat matzo throughout the festival and when ^{our} ~~are~~ children ask why we are to say '*B'avoor zeh asah Adonai lee betzaiti me-Mitzrayim*, it is because of this that God acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.

For over 3000 years the Jewish people have kept this commandment. Each day in our prayer services we thank God for delivering us from slavery. The repetition of the Exodus story from generation to generation each Pesach has helped us to survive as a people through a history stained with oppression.

While the Torah has been our constant reminder of how we must appreciate our freedom and continue to offer thanks, each generation has also produced individuals whose life stories offer a reminder that the fight for freedom and a better life continues in our time.

Today we remember and honour one of those people - Florence Levine. She was born in to the turmoil and poverty that existed in Lithuania 94 years ago. With the arrival of World War I and the Russian Revolution, anti-Semitism increased as Jews were blamed for everything from the war to flu epidemics. Emigration to America was the dream that Florence's parents pursued for her and her two brothers and three sisters. Circumstances caused her to stay behind when her parents and some of her siblings left for the United States and by the time she was able to go, the quotas that had allowed the rest of her family in to the U.S. were full. She was not deterred by this turn of events and she agreed to enter Canada as a domestic, spending two years working for a family in Winnipeg. She was separated from her family but finally she was free from oppression.

After completing her obligations in Winnipeg Florence moved to Montreal to work in a clothing factory. It was here that she fell in love with the man whose job it was to train her in her new job. She married Meyer Levine in 1932 and they celebrated

60 years of marriage before he passed away in April of 1993. Meyer and Florence's life in Montreal echoed the stories we have read of the Jewish ghetto -the St. Urbain street area. They scratched out a living in the shmatte business, kept a roof over their heads, even if it meant sharing their suite for a while with another family, and enjoyed the colorful neighbourhood. With the arrival of their son Aube, the focus turned to him as they worked harder to ensure that he would have every opportunity to succeed in life.

Education was a priority and Aube was sent to the 'Folkschul' in Montreal where he learned Yiddish, Hebrew, English and French. At home Aube inherited both the Jewish religious traditions from his father and the strong union traditions that Florence and her family supported. *and humanistic*

In the mid fifties the instability of employment in Montreal clothing factories led Meyer to seek opportunities given him by friends who operated the White Stag factory in Edmonton. After a trial period, and seeing a better future for his family in the west, Meyer sent for Florence and Aube and in 1955 the family was reunited in Edmonton. Aube completed his education at the University of Alberta and Meyer and Florence became active members of the community.

Inspired by her strong Labour Zionist ideology, Florence joined Pioneer Women, now known as Na'amat, where she could put her passion for Israel to work. She was President of the Edmonton Pioneer Women Council and 30 years ago travelled to Israel as a convention delegate to see first hand the work of her organization. Her devotion to family also showed as she included Meyer and Aube in the trip and they toured the holy land together.

Together with her husband she worked hard and saved as much as she could so that the dream of their own house in a beautiful neighbourhood was finally realized. *There* she cooked traditional Jewish foods for her family and friends. *as* She and Meyer were members of Beth Israel Synagogue from the time they moved to Edmonton and she made sure that he had the kosher home that allowed him to be loyal to his faith. Her siblings also eventually found happiness in their communities and she and Meyer travelled often to the States to visit her growing extended family. *Shabbat were celebrated*

While Florence had no formal education, she was intelligent and well-read, even in her later years always interested in events taking place around the world. She even joined a book club at the University of Alberta where members would share their thoughts on the latest works of literature.

Florence

~~She~~ and Meyer were very active socially, with many friends, they played bridge and enjoyed attending the Symphony.

It might seem natural for a mother to discourage an only son from leaving to pursue opportunities far from home, but Florence perhaps remembering her own search for a better life when she was young, supported Aube when he left Edmonton to work overseas. After completing his B.Comm. Degree and C.A. designation in Edmonton, Aube spent 24 years in Switzerland working for Meyer's family there. But Aube remembers how close they stayed through weekly letters, and at least one annual visit to Edmonton, usually for Rosh Hashanah, kept the close family bonds strong. A new phase of Florence's life began in 1986, when Aube returned to Edmonton, met Diana and married in 1988. Meyer's passing in 1993 was a terrible blow, and both Aube and Diana feared that she would never recover from the sorrow that she felt.

Fortunately her focus turned to her grandchildren, Sara and Jeremiah, who's love for their grandmother brought immeasurable joy in her final years. Just a few weeks ago Florence was still well enough to attend the first piano recital that her grandchildren participated in. She beamed with joy as she witnessed what I'm sure she felt was the beginning of a successful entry in to the world of fine arts for both of them.

Over the past months Sara and Jeremiah, joined her at Canterbury Court for Shabbat services and although she will be unable to see them celebrate their Bat and Bar Mitzvahs she left us knowing that through their participation in the services they will carry on the religious traditions she fought to carry on. The strong family bond is evident in the poem that Sara wrote for her father after Florence passed away -

Dear Dad,

Don't be sad, nor be mad.

We're all connected in the great circle of life.

Your mother, Florence, was a very happy, caring lovable and don't forget huggable person !!!

You were the best son in the world in which she could possibly wish for.

You meant the world to her!!!

May she rest in peace with Meyer.

While her early years were not easy, and she worked hard to overcome many obstacles in her early years in Canada, we can feel comforted that Florence found happiness here in Edmonton. Here she found security, a life with a loving family, warm friends and material comfort.

Despite our sorrow at her loss we know that she leaves us ~~satisfied~~ ^{with the knowledge} that her early struggles resulted in a life for her family that may at times have seemed impossible.

This is why I believe that just as we must read and reread the stories from our Torah that inspire us and reinforce our faith in God, we must also share the stories of our parents and grandparents that have continued the traditions of our ancestors in continually seeking a better life for all of us so that we can continue to glorify his name.

May the memory of Florence Levine inspire us to work hard in our time for the growth and strength of our community in Edmonton, in Israel and throughout the world.

Tehi nishmata tzroora beztzor ha-chaim

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