

Eulogy for George Levine Yosef ben Avraham Itzchak haLevi

Died August 8, 1998

George had become quite a regular at the Beth Shalom morning minyan lately. In retrospect we might say that he was 'cramming for finals', but I think he had already built up enough credits over the past 85 years. While I could suggest that he enjoyed the traditional prayers or the words of torah, I think his main reason for coming was the opportunity to join the boys for a bagel after services. Here he regaled us with story after story about the early days in Edmonton, especially his travels as a salesman on the unpaved roads of northern Alberta. He told me about my great grandfather, a man I never knew, and of visits to my grandparents store in Bruderheim. He described an early Jewish community of store owners in almost every town in northeastern Alberta, that not only gave him soft drink orders but also hospitality including a room when heavy rains washed out the roads or a snowfall made them impassable.

The last time I saw George was Thursday morning. A young boy who was to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah on Shabbat had come with his parents and grandparents to put on his tefillin for the first time and to have an aliyah. Often George, as a Levi, is given the second aliyah but a friend of the young mans who is also a Levi was there so we gave the honour to him. I'm sure George didn't mind as he shared in the pride of the family watching as the boy took on his first responsibilities as a Jewish adult.

George Levine faced the responsibilities of life at an early age as he worked to help his mother support a family and a home. By the time he met his future wife Esther when he was 18, he was already holding a responsible position at Dominion Bottling, the Margolis family's soft drink plant. After marrying Esther he became a sales person, servicing the northeast Alberta area. After ten years on the road he probably tired of being away from home so much and he bought Teddy's Lunch, a popular restaurant on Jasper Avenue. He now slept at home every night but he often didn't get to bed till well after 2 a.m. after a full day of cooking meals and serving customers. Esther remembers it as being a hard life for him, working 7 days a week, with Sunday even busier than other days as the restaurant was crowded with members of nearby churches. While Esther worked in a retail store, at night she would do the bookkeeping for George.

But he persevered and made Teddy's an even more popular hangout. He loved to talk to the customers and exchange stories with his friends from the community that would drop in.

He did pull himself away from the restaurant for a couple of years, finding a friend to run it with Esther while he served in the Royal Canadian Navy from 1943 to the end of the war, seeing active duty on a frigate patrolling the Atlantic. He returned to Edmonton, continuing to run the restaurant until he sold it in 1949.

He then entered the printing business, which, with more reasonable hours, gave him more time to spend with his young children, David and Julie, and a chance to get involved in volunteer activities.

As you heard from his friend Don Milne, George had a real love for the scouting movement. He was president of the Edmonton Region of the Boy Scout Association as well as a member of the Canadian council. He traveled on behalf of the Scouts including a visit to Ottawa in 1961 where he was presented with the Silver Acorn, the second highest honour in Canadian Scouting, by then Governor General Georges Vanier. He was still an Honorary member of the Alberta Scouting Council.

He was active in the Jewish community too. In 1956 and 57 he was president of Edmonton Jewish Community Council. In 1961 he was honoured as Edmonton B'nai Brith's Jewish Citizen of the Year. In 1965 he chaired the United Jewish Appeal, and in those years also chaired at least two JNF Negev Dinners. Although an active member of Beth Shalom Synagogue he was able to decline invitations to sit on the Board. His interest in Talmud Torah was channeled through David and Julie who both attended the day school.

George also showed concern for the future of our city and sat as a member of the Social Planning Council.

David remembers that it was through his father's print shop that he first became acquainted with Darryl. They worked together on an event program for B'nai Brith Youth that was being printed by George, remained friends and eventually married.

George only knew one way to work and that was hard. Together with the stresses of business, volunteer organizations and a heavy smoking habit this led to a major heart attack in 1968.

Fortunately he was smart enough to listen to his doctors and he not only quit smoking but he sold his business and backed away from most of his extra duties.

When he recovered he went back to his favorite career, the restaurant business. This time however he operated a restaurant in a government building with shorter hours and fewer days but the opportunity to be his gregarious self as he greeted friends and made new ones.

He also started to travel more and he and Esther discovered the pleasures of the milder winters in Yuma, Arizona. Their time away increased each year and after George retired at age 65 they would spend the entire winter there, most recently in a large mobile home which they purchased. In fact you could say that George and Esther were residents of two cities as they developed many close friendships and became an important part of the community there. He loved to drive out to the farms in the area and pick up fresh cauliflower and oranges which he gave to his neighbours. Often on Friday nights he would attend Shabbat services, taking part in leading the service. A few years ago when Esther celebrated her 80th birthday he organized a surprise party for her, presenting her with a gold medallion he had specially made. George and Esther would have celebrated their 60th anniversary later this month.

George would drive down to Yuma until a few years ago when David was able to convince him that it would be safer to fly. Still needing a car there, he went out and bought a used but still fancy white Buick. He loved the car so much that he couldn't part with it and he drove it back to Edmonton, where he love to drive it around the city showing off.

The apartment on 100th avenue overlooking the River valley was a perfect home for the warm months in Edmonton. George walked along Victoria promenade daily, meeting friends and making new ones. He never passed up the opportunity to make conversation with a stranger. Just recently he befriended a recent immigrant to Canada who didn't know anyone in the Jewish community. George took him to the Jewish Drop-in Centre so that he could meet more people.

Another friend remembers seeing George immersed in the hot pool in his apartment block, singing and whistling happily. Perhaps he was reminiscing about his younger days spent with friends in the steam baths in the basement of the Gibson Block.

And just like in Yuma, George loves to shop for others and made sure that he bought some fresh Taber corn that was passed on to Steven and Toby.

George has not only been blessed with the marriages of both David and Julie at Beth Shalom, but also the reward of six grandchildren who loved him, Steven and Shari, Rachel, Gary Rebecca and Adam. A few years ago George was crushed by the loss of his grandson Gary in a tragic accident, but he was also blessed with happy occasions, the recent marriage of Steven and Toby and just 10 days ago the Bar Mitzvah of his late brother Harry's grandson, Hart.

I was told of George's passing just before services began this past Shabbat. I thought about him throughout the service trying to balance my sorrow over the loss of a friend and an important member of the community while at the same time sharing the joy of welcoming a new adult to our fold at a Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

This past Shabbat, we read the portion, Vaetchanan, which tells of Moshe, who knows that he will die before he can enter the promised land, repeating the words of the Ten Commandments and the Shema to the children of Israel. He reminds them that only by obeying the commandments and the words of the Shema will they be able to keep the land which God is giving them. Moshe does this unselfishly knowing that he will not share in the bounty of the new land.

George Levine, who passed from this world on this auspicious Shabbat is perhaps sending us a reminder too. Those of us in a younger generation also have to remember God's words and pass them on to our children if we want to ensure that the covenant given to us at Sinai by God continues to future generations. If we don't, the dedication and hard work that people like George Levine have put in to this community will be for nought.

May his life be an inspiration to us continue our efforts to make this community a better place.