

Eulogy for Irene Shapiro     Ahuva bat Shmuel

Died March 5,1999

This past Shabbat our usual joy was diminished by the sudden loss of Irene Shapiro, and the effect her passing had on her mother, family and friends.

The portion we read on Shabbat, Ki Tissa, begins with the command from God to Moshe to take a census of the Jewish people. This was done by having each participant give half a twenty shekel coin to represent him in the count, with the proceeds going towards the tabernacle. Our rabbis have come up with many responses to the question of why half a coin was collected instead of a whole coin. One explanation connects the similarity between the word shekel and the Hebrew word, 'yishkol' which means 'to weigh.' The Torah is hinting that we should weigh our actions to be sure that both our bodies and our souls are allotted the attention that they need. For just as there are two parts to the shekel-one given to the tabernacle and one kept for us- so are there two parts to each of us, the spiritual and the physical. This necessitates a give and take. We must use our physical side to assist us in our spiritual accomplishments, and sometimes we must allow our spiritual side to be involved in necessary physical activities. We must therefore balance our time and efforts, stressing the spiritual, but allowing the physical the attention that it needs. By doing this, the entire balancing process is deemed holy, because it enables us to most productively manage ourselves, ultimately providing us with more opportunities to be involved in spiritual activities.

Perhaps a simpler explanation is that by donating half of a coin and keeping the other half ourselves we keep a connection with the community. No person is complete unless he joins with others for as long as we are in isolation, each of us is only half of our full potential.

Speaking with Raia and other members of Irene's family and her friends I realize that Irene recognized this need to be a contributing part of a community, something not always easy when you leave your family to establish a home elsewhere, but something Irene accomplished.

Without exception Irene was described to me as someone who was a loyal friend, who touched the lives of everyone who came in contact with her. It was these friends who meant so much to her, who gave their love in return at the times of her life when she needed it most.

Raia will always have fond memories of Irene's accomplishments, at Talmud Torah, Ross Sheppard, and the University of Alberta where she completed her first degree.

Irene and her brother David, of blessed memory, grew up in a home with loving parents who would do anything for their children. Her father Sam, is remembered as a gentle and affectionate man, demonstrative in his love, who was always ready with a hug and a kiss. Irene had a love for horses and every Sunday he would take her out horseback riding. The family shared holidays to Mazatlan and Puerto Vallarta and a six week trip throughout Europe. Irene was incredibly popular with her friends, someone you wanted to get to know and to be around. She was active in Young Judaea and elected as BBYO sweetheart.

Recognizing that their daughter was also an insightful and aware individual, Sam and Raia encouraged her to travel on her own and she enjoyed back packing through Israel with friends and later working on a kibbutz.

Her educational accomplishments continued as she earned her masters in Sociology from the University of Toronto and stayed on with that institution in a professional capacity. But she had the insight to know that she could do more and she studied law at Osgoode Hall in Toronto and went on to a successful career as a lawyer.

Although deciding to settle in Toronto, she remained close to her family and friends at home. She loved her cousins and always remembered their birthdays, celebrated at their weddings and took sincere pleasure in the birth of new members of her extended family. She would come back to Edmonton for the holidays, returning the love that her parents had given her growing up.

These celebrations were tempered by tragedies in her life that would overwhelm even the strongest person. The loss of her brother David, 22 years ago at the age of 28, and then ten years ago, the illness which claimed the life of her father, whom she adored, contributed to a sense of despair from which she never recovered.

But despite her pain she continued to give to others. Her sparkle, her cleverness, her keen sense of humour and her loyalty to friends, continued to shine through.

She took a special interest in the lives of Leah and Zahari Yoffe, who emigrated from Russia to Edmonton and later Toronto. Leah told me over the phone that she will always remember Irene as a very good friend, a warm person, who took care of them, even helping Zahari complete school so that they could have a good life in their new country.

Through the mail and over the phone Raia, remained close with her *Inchke*. She had been making plans to travel to Toronto to see her. She will be comforted by the knowledge that her daughter loved her. She will carry in her heart the words Irene used when she closed her letters to her, "*Zein Gezundt, Klayne*", Be well little one.

Speaking with Irene's cousin and life long friend, Shelley this morning, she remarked that while as a community we share the pain of this tragic loss with Raia, we are also left with incredibly good memories of Irene that we must give thanks for.

I had the opportunity to re read the eulogy that was delivered at Sam's funeral. In it Irene is quoted as saying that when her brother died, she and her father went on long walks together and he told her how he was finding comfort through his religion. Sam believed that David's death was 'beshert', that it was meant to happen. While Sam turned to Judaism for guidance, he also did not forget the essence of our faith by giving to charity and performing acts of kindness in David's name.

This is how we too must respond as a community. We must take our half a shekel and combine it with those of others to make it meaningful.

In *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of Our Fathers, our sages compared this world to a corridor- a place of preparation- before entering the palace that is the next world. Our entire lifetime is a temporary stopover for us to acquire as many merits as we can to apply later towards our permanent status in the World To Come.

Irene has completed a life of accomplishments, of caring for others, of making this world a better place. Even in death she continues to give us the opportunity to pursue our spiritual activities, which for some is the study of Torah, for others carrying out the commandments of the Torah, to comfort those who mourn, to give charity, to honour your family.

Let Irene's memory stir us to better living, to kind words, to just and noble deeds and lofty ideals, so that when the time comes for others to remember us, we may have left the world better than we found it. Thus shall life become a song to immortality; thus shall life be master over death.