

# Hesped for Helen H. Sarna

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When I started thinking about what to say about my Savta, I wasn't sure exactly what approach to take. Do I speak for myself and my own personal relationship with my Savta? Should I try to speak for my sister and my three cousins about what it meant to have the most loving, sincere, and kind-hearted grandmother imaginable? Or perhaps I should go a bit broader and speak as one of the many children growing up in this and other communities who got to enjoy having Savta act as the communal grandmother, taking in any child who was lucky enough to cross her radar screen. I could even step back all the way and talk about all of the people whose lives she touched in other ways, who have then crossed paths with me in one way or another and told me wonderful stories about what my Savta did for them. (Having the last name Sarna leads to a lot of conversations beginning "Are you related to..." and then hearing a story about how someone read a book or sat through a class, but when the question is "Are you related to Helen Sarna?" the stories are always much more personal and touching.)

The more I thought about what angle to take, the more I realized that, while I could focus in on any one of these aspects, and they are all stories that should be told, what I really think about when I remember my Savta are the memories that we shared. My Savta loved to relive moments of her past with the people with whom she experienced those moments. I can't in every case claim to remember what it was about these memories that excited her enough to bring them up so frequently, but what makes them important to me is that I know how much she enjoyed reliving them. In a sense, the strongest memories I have of my Savta are really her memories of me, some of which have probably been improved in a true grandmotherly fashion. I would like to share a couple of these this morning.

One of these memories took place when I was about 3.5 years old. I think it may actually have happened the day Leah was born. I had slept at Saba and Savta's house the night before and Savta drove me to daycare in the morning. The daycare I went to is called Lemberg and it is on the Brandeis campus. Savta certainly knew her way around Brandeis fairly well, since she worked at the American Jewish Historical Society when it was at Brandeis and both her husband and her son taught there. Nonetheless, that morning when we arrived at the entrance to Brandeis where you have the choice of going left or right along the road that encircles the campus, she asked me, her 3.5 year old grandson, which way she should go. Now, I knew more or less how to get to Lemberg, but I certainly didn't know my right from left and I couldn't let Savta know that, so I decided to take my chances and go with left. Lemberg is to the right. What most people would do in a situation where they know one thing to be true and a 3.5 year old tells them otherwise is to tell the kid he's wrong and go with what you know. Savta didn't see it that way. Through her deep understanding of how to relate to young children, she knew that if she followed my advice and made it memorable, not only would it help me learn my right and left, but it would make me feel respected and important in her eyes, which is not a feeling that many adults will give to a 3.5 year old. And so we went for a scenic tour of the Brandeis campus, with me continuing to give directions, despite the fact that I no longer knew where we were, but at least I started getting my left and right straight. Savta loved to tell this story any time the topic of someone in my family getting lost came up (which admittedly is pretty frequent). Of course she would preface it by boasting that her grandson at age 3 was already giving her driving directions.

Another memory she loved to tell took place soon after she and my Saba had moved to Florida. Savta had to come up to Boston for a few days and then she and I flew down to Florida together, just the two of us. We decided to preboard, because Savta knew I loved going on airplanes, so she decided to declare herself old for the day so that I could have as much time on the plane as possible. As we were sitting in our seats watching the other preboarders, an old man in a wheelchair got on the plane and was being helped into a seat. I then made a comment to Savta, "Old people are like babies." As I

proceeded to qualify my statement, Savta burst out laughing and gave me a huge hug. We then had an in-depth discussion on the ways in which it was true and not true. As Savta got older, she never failed to joke to me about how my claim was coming true. I think we ended up sharing a connection as a result, because she had the joy of helping me grow out of my baby stage and I helped her grow into hers. She pushed my stroller; I pushed her wheelchair. She held my hand as I learned to walk; I held her hand when she started having trouble walking. She forced me to take my medicine; I brought hers to her, where she took it quite happily. Savta was someone who would almost never allow anyone to inconvenience themselves on her account, but she seemed to make an exception when it came to letting me return the favor of when she helped me through my baby stage by helping her through hers. Perhaps this was just because she knew that I enjoyed helping her, but I think she mostly liked having excuses to tell this story.

There are many more of these types of moments and I hope that they will all flood back to me as we spend time remembering Savta over the shiva and afterward. You could often tell when Savta was in a situation where she thought one of these memorable moments might take place. There was always a gleam in her eye and a radiance emanating from her when she saw that this was potentially a moment to relive over and over again. I remember, for example, when she and Saba were being honored by their shul in Boca, the photos of that event capture only a small fraction of the sheer joy that Savta was spreading to the world that day. What were the memories that Savta talked about from that day after all was said and done? It was not that hundreds of people had come together to honor her and her husband, but rather, it was how she had taken Leah to the hairdresser that morning and Leah had come back with the most beautiful hair style with a flower in it that matched her dress for the event. The memories that Savta favored were usually the ones that involved bringing simple joy to other people, and if it involved her grandchildren it was an added bonus.

The strongest memory I have of my Savta, however, is not one that she ever talked about, and yet, I think it is purest image of the person Savta was. This is a memory of virtually every time we sat at the same table for a meal. It either happened when we had both sat down again after washing netilat yadayim, or sometimes just in the middle of the meal when the adults were having some boring conversation. Savta would stare into my eyes and put on the most sincere, loving, all-encompassing smile imaginable and mouth the words "I love you" across the table to me. Unfortunately, for much of my life I was too cool to respond to that in any way. Knowing how well my Savta understood children, I have no doubt that she understood exactly what was going through my mind at the time, so I don't worry for a second that she thought I didn't love her back, but it does pain me to think about the pure joy I could have given her by the simple act of mouthing the words "I love you too" back across the table, and yet I never did it. Now I have lost my chance, but nonetheless I feel I should say it: "Savta, I love you too."