

HELEN SARNA – HESPED

BY: DAVID E.Y. SARNA

We are here today both to celebrate the life of my Mother, Helen Sarna, Chaya Hadassah bas Ha-Rav Elisha Horowitz, *aleha hashalom*, and also to mourn her passing. My Mother was a little bit more than four months younger than my Father, Prof. Nahum Sarna, z"l, and they were inseparable from when she was 16 until my Father's passing in 2005, a span of 67 years.

A *Chasidische tochter*, the daughter of a Hassidic rabbi, my Mother grew up in London's Jewish community, the descendant of very distinguished lineage on both sides. Her Father, Rabbi Elisha Horowitz, who died tragically of esophageal cancer when she was nine, was descended from the *Shloh Hakodosh*, the *Shnei Luchos Ha-Bris*, Rabbi Yishaya Horowitz, who flourished in the 16th-17th centuries. Her Mother, Rachel Leah Horowitz, was a direct descendant of Rabbi Yehezkel Landau, the great 18th century rabbi of Prague, author of the *Nodah BeYehudah*. My grandparents on my mother's side were first cousins.

Somewhat unusually for those days, my Mother and my Father made their own *shidduch*. She was Hasidic and from Galician background; he was Modern Orthodox and from Polish background. They lived in different sections of London. They met at a Torah V'Avodah function, the British forerunner to B'nai Akiba, a religious Zionist youth organization. In my Mother's Chasidic world, secular education for boys as well as any sort of advanced education for girls was "*pas nisht*" – lo mekubal, - unacceptable. In fact, my Mother was the only one of my grandmother's nine children (boys and girls) to even graduate from high school. My Father's family, of course, cherished education for boys as well as girls; his sister, Ruth Sarna Royde, was the first woman graduate of Jews' College, London; she went on to found the well-known Bais Ya'akov Seminary in Manchester, now run by her son..

My parents dated for a long time – World War II intervened – and during the war, in common with most young people in London, my Mother was evacuated to the countryside and forced to live in a Christian home. I recently learned from my Aunt Edie that my grandmother's house in London was bombed during the blitz. And nevertheless, my grandmother hastened to retrieve my mother from the countryside, lest she get too friendly with one of the young non-Jewish men there. She need not have worried. My mother and father continued their romance from afar, and as soon as my Father felt that he could support my Mother, he wanted to marry her. One thing stood in the way, however. My Father was horrified to discover that my Mother did not know Hebrew. He insisted that this deficiency be remedied before they could marry. Thus began her second love affair, with Hebrew language, and literature and Hebrew books, a love affair that was to continue for over fifty years..

The young couple married in 1947, on March 23rd – the same day, incidentally, that Rachel and I were married 28 years later. At the time of their wedding, my Father

had newly received *semicha*, Rabbinic ordination, and was teaching at the University of London. My Mother, meanwhile, worked as a book-keeper in an accounting firm.

The siren call of religious Zionism beckoned my parents to Israel in 1949, the year I was born, and a few years after my Mother's beloved elder sister, Edith, settled in Kibbutz Lavi in the Lower Galilee. But with the Hebrew University closed and its campus on Mount Scopus in Arab territory, my Father's options were limited. And so, once again, my parents pulled up stakes, and in 1951 moved to Philadelphia where my Father pursued his Ph.D. at Dropsie College (now part of the University of Pennsylvania), which was then the leading post-graduate institution in the world for pursuing an academic career in Bible and Semitic languages. To help make ends meet, my Father taught in Hebrew School and the high school of Gratz College, and my Mother worked as a teacher's aid in a Har Zion's Hebrew School. She even did a stint in Camp Ramah in the Poconos, running the canteen, where she discovered to her amazement that Americans drink their soda chilled, an even with ice, rather than at room temperature as she was accustomed to in England.

Jonathan was born in 1955, and in 1957, the family moved once again, to New York, where my Father was appointed librarian and Assistant Professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Ever the dutiful wife, my Mother once again needed to pull up stakes, move, make new friends, and start over. In New York, my Mother was shocked to discover something utterly unknown in Stamford Hill in London, and not much known in Philadelphia either: educated women – with graduate degrees, no less. My Mother felt embarrassed and inferior to have only completed high school (secondary school, as she called it), and so when Jonathan entered first grade at Ramaz School in New York, in 1960, my Mother, at age 37, went back to school. Sitting in class with students much younger than herself, she earned a BA from Columbia and a BHL from the Jewish Theological Seminary in the institution's famous Combined Program, now known as List College. At graduation, she proudly took home the History Prize. She then continued to study at Columbia, in its school of Library Science, pursuing a Masters in Library Science.

But once again, in 1965, my Father's career intervened, and once again it was given priority. Abba was appointed an Associate Professor of Near Eastern & Judaic Studies at Brandeis, and my parents yet again picked up stakes and moved to Brookline, to Russell Street. Imma transferred to Simmons College, losing some credits in the process. Simmons was then very strict about attendance, and that year, all of the Fall Jewish holidays fell on weekdays. Of course, my Mother refused to even think of attending school on *yom tov*, and Simmons adamantly refused to waive its mandatory attendance rule. In the end, Imma was forced to repeat a course or two, for which she never forgave Simmons. She refused to ever participate in any of their alumni activities or to give them even a penny.

Shortly after graduation, Imma joined the Hebrew College Library as Assistant Librarian, where she worked for twenty-five years with Dr. Maurice Tuchman, reorganizing and building up one of the great Jewish libraries in this community. She

retired in 1990. Two years later, upon the untimely death of Dr. Nathan Kaganoff, the librarian of the American Jewish Historical Society, Imma stepped in as acting librarian of that library, a position she held until she and my Father retired to Florida. Though her health had started to fail, she assisted Florida Atlantic University in getting its Judaica collection organized and properly cataloged, setting them on the right path.

Upon my Father's passing, Imma accepted Jonathan and Ruth's gracious invitation to return to Newton, which she considered her real home. She became part of their household. Jonathan, Ruth, their children, Aaron and Leah, and Helena, her dedicated and faithful aid, deserve and merit a special blessing from the Almighty for the loving care that they extended to my Mother in her last years.

From the very abbreviated history that I have related, a few characteristics stand out. My Mother was a true *eshet chayil*, a woman of valor, and she was a very traditional and classical "*ezer kenegdo*," she was the love of my Father's life, his constant companion, and his devoted helpmate. She was his closest advisor, his secretary, and the general manager of his home. Though she had a strong personality, she subjugated her will to that of my Father's. Until she became ill in later life, my Father neither knew nor needed to know anything about the operation of the home, about shopping, cooking, or cleaning. Besides holding down a responsible and important job, Imma managed their affairs, leaving Abba free of most responsibilities so he could dedicate his life to Tanach scholarship. She took enormous pride in his achievements.

There were other dimensions to my Mother as well. She loved children and especially small children, and they intuitively responded to her. She also loved to do *chesed*, volunteering at Rofeh, the life-saving organization founded by the Bostoner Rebbe, as well as initiating and heading up the Chesed Committee of Shaarei Tefillah, the shul she had helped to found. She was a model of the truly liberated woman – not a "feminist," a movement she rejected, but a woman who managed in many ways to have it all: a wonderful life with her husband for 58 years, a career where she helped generations of students and scholars with their research, a wide circle of friends, and many *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds.

Tehe Nishmata Tserura Be-tsrer Ha-Hayim.