

HESPED FOR HELEN SARNA

Jonathan D. Sarna

About two and a half years ago, Ruth and I took my Mother to visit the new *matzevah*, the tombstone of my Father, alav hashalom. My Father had designed his own *matzevah*, with an appropriate biblical passage, So Ruth, who called my Mother Ima and always treated her like a beloved daughter, asked my Mother what *pasuk*, what biblical passage, she might want on her *matzevah* someday. Without even pausing for a moment, Ima responded “*Em ha-banim s’mecha*,” a line from Psalm 113 (many will know it from the Hallel prayer), which means, in my Father’s translation, “a happy mother of children.”

Every word in that *pasuk* is appropriate to my Mother life.

As David has explained, my Mother’s life would not, at first glance, seem so very happy. Her Father died when she was nine. She was often teased in her non-Jewish school and on the street in London. Later, she had trouble bearing children, suffering several painful miscarriages. For the first twenty years of her married life, while Abba was a student and a young professor, she and my father lived in genteel poverty, counting every penny. And more recently, for the past decade or so, her health has steadily deteriorated, reducing her both physically and mentally.

But Ima never, ever complained. Indeed, although we thought that she had much to complain about, she never uttered so much one complaining word during the entire period that she lived with us. She suffered the indignities of old age in silence, and always professed to be, as she put it, “fine.” She expressed deep gratitude to her caregivers, most recently Helena who has been so very devoted to her, and my Mother was above all else happy with her lot. She was proud of her husband, her children, and her grandchildren. *Em ha-banim s’mecha*.

There is another appropriate aspect to the *pasuk* that my Mother chose for her *matzevah*, and that is its focus on relationships (*em habanim*). My Mother loved seeing people, talking to people, helping people. She was extremely close to her own Mother, and although they were separated for most of their lives they corresponded weekly: my Mother writing in English, my grandmother responding in Yiddish. She was also very close to her sister, Edie; they spoke, in recent years, several times a week. But for the most part, my Mother, who had no extended family in America, developed friendships. As David observed, she always had a marvelous relationship with young children. After we left home, she served as surrogate grandmother to the young children of Sha’arei Tefillah. She, of course, loved her own grandchildren, and typically when they came to visit her in Florida she not only entertained them herself, she also found youngsters from the neighborhood for them to play with. Nothing was more important to her than forging relationships, and making other people happy.

During her quarter-century at the Hebrew College, my Mother herself developed relationships with hundreds of students, helping some with their homework and others

with their personal problems and their love lives. Through the years, I have met any number of alumni who expressed indebtedness to my Mother for her sage advice and warm friendship. Some stayed in touch with her long after they had graduated.

Later, my Mother developed very close relationships with her neighbors on Green Park and her kehillah at Shaarei Tefillah. She knew their parents, their children, their sorrows, their joys. She remembered to ask the right questions when she met people, and if she learned that some chessed was needed, she provided it. She was a regular for years at the old age home, visiting friends and the parents of friends, and she performed many acts of chessed privately, without anybody knowing. On one occasion, when she was already in her sixties, she quietly scrubbed the house of one of our members who was sitting shiva; she knew that they needed the house cleaned for Pessach. On another occasion, she spent hours in the hospital translating for a Hasidic couple who knew no English. If my Mother was happy to the end, perhaps it was because *Torat Hesed al leshonah*. She was suffused with the Torah of righteousness, often caring more about others than about herself.

My Mother never stopped learning. As David mentioned, she went to college, for the first time, at the age of 37 and then went on for a graduate degree. She continued to take courses at the Hebrew College throughout her career there. At the age of fifty, when she moved to Newton, she decided that she needed to learn how to drive. Many, including my late Father, tried to dissuade her, but with a little help from me and a lot of encouragement and help from her devoted friend, June Fox, she passed the driving test. Being able to drive actually made a great difference in her life for the next twenty-five years.

In Florida, after she retired, my Mother continued to learn new things. She took numerous courses, joined a reading group, and at one point, she decided to take a class in Talmud, a subject that she had never had an opportunity to study. This caused something of a stir among some members of the congregation there – apparently no woman had ever taken a shul Talmud class before – but the teacher was thrilled, and my Mother quieted the critics by joining the women *Tillim zoggers*, the women who recited Psalms, as well. Even when she moved back here to Newton in her old age my Mother tried to resume her studies. Thanks to Dr. Dickman she was able to read again, after several years of not reading, and for a full year she read omnivorously. Then, sadly, her eyesight failed and she moved to books-on-tape. Almost to the end, she and Helena made regular trips to the Newton Public Library. Happiness for my Mother was very much tied in with books and with learning.

My Mother, as I said, wanted to be remembered as “a happy mother of children,” *em ha-banim smecha*. In doing so, she invoked a Psalm – Psalm 113 -- that is a totally selfless Psalm, a Psalm of pure praise of God; a Psalm that asks for nothing in return. The Psalm speaks of raising the poor from the dust, of lifting up the needy, and of mingling the needy with the *nedivim*, the most honored members of the community. It is a Psalm of joy, a Psalm of hope, a Psalm that looks forward to a better day and a better world.

My Mother, in her lifetime, not only recited this Psalm, in many ways, she lived it.

Tehe nishmata tsrurah betsrer hahayim.