

Divrei Hespod for Mrs. Helen Sarna z'l
22 Kislev, 5769 -- December 19, 2008
By Rabbi Benjamin J. Samuels

תהלים פרק טו

א מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד יְהוָה מִיִּגְוֹר בְּאֶהְלֶךָ מִיִּשְׁכֵּן בְּתֵר קִדְשֶׁךָ: ב הוֹלֵךְ תָּמִים וּפְעֵל
צֶדֶק וְדֹבֵר אֱמֻת בְּלִבּוֹ: ג לֹא־דָגַל | עַל־לִשְׁנוֹ לֹא־עָשָׂה לְרַעְהוּ רָעָה וְחִרְפָּה
לֹא־נָשָׂא עַל־קִרְבוֹ: ד נִבְזָה | בְּעֵינָיו נִמְאָס וְאֶת־יְרֵאֵי יְהוָה יַכְבֵּד נִשְׁבַּע לְהִרְע
וְלֹא יָמַר: ה בְּסִפּוֹ | לֹא־תָנוּ בְּנִשְׁדָּ וְשָׁחַד עַל־נֶקִי לֹא־לָקַח עֲשֵׂה אֱלֹה לֹא יִמוּט
לְעוֹלָם:

Tehillim Chapter 15

1. A Psalm of David. Lord, who shall abide in your tent? Who shall dwell in your holy mountain? 2. He who walks uprightly, and does what is right, and speaks the truth in his heart. 3. He who does not slander with his tongue, nor does evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor. 4. In whose eyes a vile person is despised; but he honors those who fear the Lord. He who swears to his own hurt, and does not change. 5. He who does not put out his money at interest, nor takes a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things shall never be moved.

We gather together this morning to honor the memory of our longtime friend and teacher, Mrs. Helen Sarna z”l, Maras Chaya Hadassah bat R’ Alter Elisha, one of nine children of Reb Alter Elisha and Rachel Leah, beloved wife of the late Professor Nahum Sarna z”l, beloved mother and mother-in-law of David and Rachel and Jonathan and Ruth. Beloved grandmother of David and Rachel’s children Jake, Leora and Shira, and of Jonathan and Ruth’s children Aaron and Leah; beloved sister and sister-in-law of Edith and Shalom Ma’agan of Kibbutz Lavi.

We gather to honor her memory and to say goodbye as her *neschama* ascends on high this *erev Shabbos*.

We began with Tehillim 15 which commences with a question?:

“Who may sojourn, O Lord, in your tent? Who is allowed into your holy abode?”

Helen’s late husband, our beloved teacher, Prof. Nahum Sarna, z”l, called this Tehillim a “Liturgy of Entrance.” By what merit do we gain access to

the eternal bundle of life – the *Tzror HaChayim*, by what measure do we deem our lives to have been of merit?

The Tehillim proceeds to outline 11 principles, the first three of which make up the first *pasuk* following the initial question.

Holekh Tamim -- One who walks without blame,

u-foel tzedek -- does what is righteous,

vedover emet bilvavo -- and speaks the truth from the heart.

Prof. Sarna once wrote regarding this verse: “The passage from birth to death is viewed as a journey along a path that must be followed without deviation, that is with integrity, devoid of moral blemish.

Those who knew Helen, whether in her youth, her prime of life, or like me, in her last years, know that this verse describes the journey of Helen, her consistent path, and her kind and compassionate integrity.

Holekh tamim – Helen, I am told, was always a woman of abundant energy, always moving, always walking. It was appropriate that when her strength began to fail her and she was unable to walk herself that her children arranged for her to be walked everywhere. These past 3.5 years nary a Shabbat passed without Helen arriving in Shul, even on rainy days. And I know the family is grateful to Helena, Helen’s care giver, for her great dedication. Throughout her life, however, Helen’s energy was not an empty energy, but full of purpose – full of *ufoel tzedek* of doing acts of kindness and compassion, acts of chesed. We will hear how Helen was a great model of Chesed and taught many in our community how to provide chesed.

Vedover emet bilvavo – and she spoke the truth from her heart. She was by nature an inquisitive woman whose pursuit of knowledge and love of books led her to seek a career as a Judaica librarian. I think of her holding and reading her books, and I think of all of the books written by her husband, sons and daughter-in-laws on the shelf just opposite her bed. Helen was a wonderful conversationalist, and even when she lost the ability to speak, she listened, and I have many recollections of speaking to her at Kiddush as she sat in her wheel chair with closed eyes, only to be surprised by a smile or a few words of acknowledgment.

Unfortunately for me, I only knew a glimpse of this energetic, righteous, intellectually vivacious woman, but we will hear more about the fullness of her life from her sons David and Jonathan, and grandson, Aaron Sarna,

representing all of the grandchildren, as well as from a good friend Sheila Mondshein.

And so let us hear her story and understand the life and principles of a woman who personifies the closing verse: one who does these things shall never falter.

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In closing I would just publicly acknowledge the great models of *kibbud 'em* exemplified by Helen's children and echo David's words especially recognizing Jonathan and Ruth in whose home Helen resided in comfort and dignity these past 3.5 years. As Jonathan said, these years were a gift, a gift of extra life, but also a gift of the love and respect of all her children for their extraordinary mother.