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Congregation Beth Shalom
Wilmington, DE
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Howard Barton
Heshel ben Moshe v'Chana
October 26, 1932 - November 18, 2006

Yesterday, during Shabbat services at Congregation Beth Shalom, we celebrated a bat mitzvah. The young lady focused her sermon on comparing the death of the patriarch, Abraham, in the Torah reading with the death of King David in the Haftarah reading. Abraham's death, the young lady concluded, was a good death because he remained vital and vigorous until the very end, while King David's death was a sad death, because in his last years he was impotent and disconnected from those around him.

Having spent time with Howard just a little over a week ago, as I helped him make his transition from this world to the next through the Jewish ceremony of "Vidui," I can tell you that Howard's passing was much more in keeping with Abraham's last days. He lit his Chelesa apartment up with his smile, accepted my love openly, and even managed to devour two scrambled eggs and compliment the cook.

There was something very special about Howard Barton. Our tradition holds that only the most righteous of people die on the holy Sabbath, and so the fact that Howard passed on Saturday morning says something deep about what type of man he was.

Howard was the eldest of three children. His siblings, Barry and Bonnie, are with us today. He loved them very much and there wasn't anything he would not do for them. During his most recent bout with cancer, they were both dutiful visitors to his hospital bedside. Howard had a very challenging childhood. Born on October 26, 1932, he spent his childhood growing up in depression-era Brooklyn. A graduate of Lincoln High School, his fine scientific mind could have easily taken him into the medical profession. But support was not available. Instead he entered Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point and studied engineering. He would then enter the United States Navy in the early fifties, where he served his country with distinction.

In 1954, Howard and his future wife, Naomi, were fixed up by their moms, who worked in the same office. On their first date, Howard asked Naomi if she could cook. She answered yes. Howard said "good," and asked her to boil him a cup of water for tea. She passed the test. Then it was off to see the wonderful film, "Sabrina," and they well, they clicked. This coming February would have marked Naomi and Howard's 50th wedding anniversary.

When Howard married Naomi, he also got an extended family in the bargain. Naomi's parents treated Howard like a son, and he reciprocated in kind. Naomi's only brother, Ronnie, who is with us today, was so dutiful during Howard's hospitalization. He brought joy and comfort to his brother-in-law during his regular visits. He was like another brother to Howard.

Navy life brought Howard and Naomi to some far-flung places, like Virginia. In 1959, their first child, Diane, was born. But Howard was almost immediately sent off on a ship by the Navy, and missed Diane's first years of life. In later years, Diane would bring her father such

pride, such “naches”, from her work as a distinguished doctor of internal medicine. She changed so many people’s lives for the better through her work and research. Her untimely death in August 2005, after a long bout with cancer, was a severe blow to Howard and the entire family.

Suzy was born in 1961. Now off the ship, Howard reveled in being a dad. He was the one who was up with Suzy is she needed a bottle in the middle of the night. He loved to take his kids to the beach, to jump the waves. When the Barton’s lived in Queens, the beach was just across the street. When the Barton’s moved to New Jersey, Howard would wake the girls early on the weekend, get them into their swimsuits, and promised to have them in the water by breakfast time. Howard was spontaneous and fun-loving.

Suzy married Stuart, and together they blessed Howard with three extraordinary grandchildren: Nicky, Jake and Sam. It was not the big accomplishments which really thrilled Howard but rather the small, day-to-day, unremarkable things their grandchildren did which inspired such joy in both Howard and Naomi.

David was born in 1964. Both he and Suzy had the adventure of a lifetime when Howard moved the family to Holland for almost two years, as part of his work for Royal Dutch Shell, as a project engineer. Howard made sure his children had the chance to travel throughout Europe as part of their education. David’s relationship blossomed with his dad in later life, as they would swap stories. About ten years ago, when Naomi and Howard moved to Florida, David got to lavish his dad with the respect he deserved. David opened up David Barton Gym in Miami, and nothing gave David more joy than making sure his mom and dad, were treated like royalty during their visits to the gym.

David married Suzanne and they blessed Howard with a wonderful grandson, Bailey. This past August, David, Suzanne and Bailey joined Naomi and Howard on a wonderful two-week trip to Italy, focusing on Venice, Rome and Florence. There was lots of laughter, music and good food for them all to enjoy. For Bailey, in particular, it was an experience which I daresay he will never forget – a time to really bond with his grandpa.

It was one month after the Italy trip, in September, that Howard was diagnosed with cancer. It spread rapidly and he passed barely two months after the original diagnosis. The fact that he did not suffer for long with the cancer, is indeed a blessing. Looking back on the biblical Abraham’s life, we can say also of Howard, that his life was tremendously rich and fulfilling.

This week’s Torah portion was called “Hayye Sarah”, the Life of Sarah, and it is to Naomi, and memories of her Grandma Sarah to which I wish to turn for closure. Naomi, you have dedicated every waking hour to caring for your Howard. You seem to be, by definition, a giver. So I summon the memory of Grandma Sarah, one of the most important women in your life, Naomi. You, now need to be Grandma Sarah to Nicky, to Jake, to Sam, and to Bailey. These grandchildren, these remarkable grandchildren, need you to be fully present and engaged in their lives. Howard would expect no less from you.

May Howard’s memory be for a blessing. May we learn from his example to overcome adversity, to embrace life to its fullest, and appreciate all the we have. *Zichrona l’vracha* - may Howard’s memory be for a blessing.