

Gerson Blatnick

Gershon ben Yehezkel v'Esther

1918 – 2010

This week Jews all throughout the world are reading from the Torah portion, B'ha-a-lot-cha, from the Book of Numbers. The *sedra* opens with Aaron, being commanded to light the *menorah* on a daily basis. The *Midrash* says that G-d chose Aaron for this task because at the close of last week's portion, all the prosperous chieftains from the 12 tribes gave elaborate gift offerings to dedicate the Tabernacle and Aaron felt left out because he was not a man of means. G-d felt compassion for Aaron, recognized his unique talents, and gave him this special *kuvud*, honor, of lighting the menorah.

I felt this story was a nice way of thinking of Gerson, of blessed memory, for several reasons. First and foremost, for this family, Gerson, as husband, father, father-in-law, and grandfather, was constantly lighting his loved one's lives up with his wisdom and advice. We talk about causing "enlightenment," from the word "light," and Gerson was always enlightening his loved ones when they came to him, seeking his perspective. One of the grandchildren said that his grandfather always had the right answer for his question.

Second, it is said of Aaron, when he died, the people mourned his passing even more than that of his famous brother, Moses. Aaron was a man of the people. People came to him, not only with their sacrifices, but more importantly, with their problems that generated their need to bring sacrifices in the first place. Like Aaron, Gerson was also highly respected. In fact last night Maris said of her father: “some people demand respect, my father commanded respect.” That is to say, Gerson never needed to ask people to respect him, just by his behavior, just by the way he carried himself, he commanded respect. Gerson’s CPA, Sol Fink, of blessed memory, said that the finest compliment he could give to Gerson as that he was a “gentleman,” and in his eyes, there can be no higher compliment than that.

And finally, in the Torah, Aaron and Gershon are *mishpucha*. Gershon, son of Moses, was Aaron’s nephew. So maybe all these similarities between the biblical Aaron and the Gershon we come to honor today are not coincidences. Perhaps, being that they are family – this is all *bershert*.

Gerson probably developed his work ethic from his parents, Esther and Charles, who married back in Winitzer, Russia and then stowed away aboard a boat for America. Once they got to Philadelphia, they became something like

indentured servants to wealthy family members who had already settled here. They worked and worked and worked, quietly saving where they could so they could set off on their own. Esther and Charles were determined to speak and write English as soon as possible, saving Yiddish, or perhaps Russian, for occasional private exchanges between them, when English did not quite capture their feelings in the moment.

I understand that Esther was a doting mother, preparing each of her three boys, Jack, Nathan and Gerson the dinners of their choice. We are blessed to have Jack with us today, may G-d preserve him for many years to come, in good health.

Gerson internalized his parents' work ethic and made it his own, working three jobs during the day and toiling for eight years to earn his engineering degree from Drexel University – what a tribute to his parents' hard work. And Gerson, by his own example, has inspired both his children and grandchildren – with daughters graduating the University of Pittsburgh and Penn, respectively, with Beth-Ann going on to earn a law degree at Penn's Law School, an MBA at Wharton School of Business, and passing her CPA on her first go-around. We say *l'dor va-dor*, from generation to generation – Gerson's grandchildren have

honored their grandfather's example with not one, not two, but three doctorates, two with MA's on top of the doctorates, and an M.A. Gerson's parents set the standard for hardwork, Gerson took it to the next level, and like the Biblical Aaron in this week's portion, he spread his light to his daughters and grandchildren.

I am afraid I am making Gerson sound like a larger-than-life Biblical High Priest, so I think Faye, to whom he was married to in a loving relationship for more than 65 years, would have me share with you how they first met.

Faye lived in Atlantic City, and different Philadelphia synagogues would host dances in order to get young Jewish people together, I am sure with the hope that they would fall in love and marry. Gerson's brother, Jack, needed Gerson to drive his car and he was short a fellow for a group he was putting together to go to the dance to meet up with some girls. Gerson had no interest in going but Jack was persuasive....as I said, he needed the car. So they are sitting down, listening to the band, and behind Gerson, Faye is seated, talking away. Gerson turns around and tells her to "shut up." Faye is taken aback and she turns to someone, maybe Jack, and says, "he's SO rude!" So Gerson hears that... he was SUPPOSED to hear that, and he turns back around, and says, "will you PLEASE shut up?" Faye said that was better and so she did. Later that evening, while

they were dancing, I guess Faye forgave him, she asked him his name, and Gerson answered “Gus.” Faye said that’s not your name....what’s your REAL name? I was named Fariel Lorraine, but they call me Faye. So Gus said, “I’m Gerson,” and Faye said well then THAT’S what I will call you.

And what became of Fariel Lorraine? ... Faye – but if Gerson called her Fariel Lorraine, she knew she was in trouble.

They dated for 1 ½ years and then Gerson was drafted – earning the rank of Sergeant and serving in England during World War II. They were married in a Philadelphia synagogue upon his return. I asked Faye the secret of their 65 years together, hoping it might help their grandchildren as they enter into marriages. Gerson made only one request of Faye. He said, no matter what, “always stand by my side.” It worked both ways, because Gerson also always stood by Faye’s side. At a GE Convention held in honor of 300 of its vendors, men who all brought girl friends along, the CEO turned to Gerson and asked him, who was his lady friend? Gerson answered this lady friend is my wife. The CEO asked quietly, why did you bring your WIFE? And Gerson answered, “I never go anywhere without my desert!” Faye told me that Gerson was her knight in shining honor, riding a white horse.” Recently, Gerson pulled Faye close to him and said that as

the end drew closer, he did not want Faye by his side at Roosevelt Memorial Park for a very long time. Gerson said that her family needed a lot of his advice up in heaven and that he would be far too busy helping them to spend any time with her. So Faye might as well continue to enjoy her life on earth for a good while longer while he deals with all the problems up in heaven and once he gets the family all straightened out, then she can join him. We all hope Faye follows Gerson's advice.

Well Gerson and Faye were blessed with two extraordinary daughters, Maris and Beth-Ann. You heard of the daughter's academic achievements, Beth-Ann wowing us all! Maris, in addition to graduating Pittsburgh, blessed Gerson by marrying Michael, and giving him the son he never had. And Michael honored his father-in-law, who felt more like a father than a father-in-law, by learning the Essbar Equipment Company from the bottom up, and kept it in the family. They were both engineers and shared so much in common.

Together, Maris and Michael have blessed Gerson with three extraordinary grandchildren, Jaimie, married to Jordan, Chad, Blake, married to Marjorie, and Brett, married to Nancy. In time I am sure there will be great-grandchildren as well, and I would not be surprised if the first one is not named in Gerson's

memory. We hope, that in addition to the name, that great grandchild, and all the ones to follow, will be raised in Gerson's Jewish faith and continue his passion for hard work and for higher education.

May the light which the high priest, Aaron, lights at the beginning of this week's Torah portion, shine through Gerson's wonderful life and may that light be passed down *la'dor va-dor*, from generation to generation, and let us say *amen*.