

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

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Albert Bortnick

Abba Avraham ben Shmuel u' Batya

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Albert Bortnick passed away when Jews throughout the world were reading the third Torah portion from the Book of Exodus, called *Parshat Bo*. It deals with the last three plagues which afflicted Pharaoh and his people, culminating in the Death of the First Born. It also deals with the Israelites' preparation to leave Egypt – their home for the past 400 years. We seldom take time to register how devastating it must have been for Pharaoh to lose his first-born son, a scene replayed in every Egyptian home unmarked by blood on their lintels. True we take a bit of wine from our glass at the seder table as we recount the plagues. But I do not think we deeply try to understand their loss. Six years ago, Al lost his beloved Marcia, and frankly, his life has never been the same. And even though we tried to fill his life with dance recitals and all the doings of his family, I think we could not fully understand his loss. And although Al didn't live in his Cherry Hill home for 400 years – I still think, like our ancient Israelite ancestors, it was so terribly difficult for him to leave the home he loved and start fresh at Maris Grove. So I think, in many ways, this Torah portion comes to help us appreciate Al's last years, and perhaps understand him and appreciate his bravery afresh.

But rather than concentrating on the end of his life, let's begin at the beginning. Albert Bortnick was the third child to bless the lives of Russian-born Samuel and Polish-born Bessie Bortnick, who created a loving, Orthodox, Jewish home in the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood of Philadelphia. Al's oldest sibling, Pauline, and always called "Mickey," is with us this afternoon and we are so glad she is here. Al was especially close to the middle Bortnick child, Sarah, known as "Connie." When Connie was dating boys she would take Al along. If things were going well, Al would lay low.

But if the boy was a dud, Connie would pull Al out of the shadows and say that she was babysitting him, in order to give the unwanted the boy the slip. Although, much later in life, Al and his wife, Marcia, would name their youngest child, Constance, for an "Uncle Charles" on Marcia's side of the family, I know it was no coincidence that Constance's nickname would always be "Connie," a loving tribute to the beloved sister who died too young.

Tragedy was something Al knew something about from an early age. His father, Samuel, was a hard working wall paper hanger during the Depression. The family had very little. So imagine the blow when Sam died when Al was just twelve years old? Bessie came to rely on her baby boy as the "man" of the house. While other kids worked jobs for spending money, any money Al earned went to ensure his family's survival. He was already earning money for the family by age 14, with a job behind the soda fountain and at the cashier of the pharmacy, located at Broad and Gerrard Avenues, all for a whopping dollar-an-hour. He preferred the wages of his deli job on weekends which brought in a respectable \$65

from Friday through Sunday. When he wasn't working at the Pharmacy or the Deli, he was babysitting his older sister, Mickey's children. So that left no time for extra-curricular activities in school.

Al graduated high school in 1954, at the age of 17. It took five years, but eventually Al felt like he should become more social. So he lost some weight, took dance lessons at Arthur Murray Dance Studios, and then his cousin Ann was prepared to take the highly-presentable Al Bortnick to the local B'nai Brith Young Adults Group. It was September 1959. Now I have two sources of what happened next. According to Marcia:

Al came to one of our meetings. Al always tells people that I saw a good-looking guy and ran to meet him. Contrary to what he says, I went over to say hello just to make a new member feel welcome.

According to Al:

Everyone was cordial. There was one girl that stood out in the crowd. She was the only one dressed in a very smart outfit. Her hair was beautifully styled and best of all, she had enormous blue eyes.

She came over to me and said, "Welcome to B'nai Birth. My name is Marcia Marinoff." I wanted to befriend her. I offered to drive her home.

My car was parked in front of my apartment, just a few doors away. It was my very first car, and I had it for just one or two weeks. Marcia told me where she lived. I drove around for a very long time, because my sense of directions was poor. I was lost. Marcia thought I did that to spend more time with her. Finally I had to admit that I was hopelessly lost. I'm so glad that happened. It gave us a lot of time to chat and get to know each other.

So, I know you are wondering what Marcia thought of all of this. She later wrote:

By the second time I met Al (so already that's a good sign), I realized what a great person he was. He was very warm, thoughtful, and caring. He really listened when I spoke. It didn't hurt that he was so cute. I loved his dimples, and he was a fantastic dancer. (See, we knew those Arthur Murray lessons would pay off in dividends).

Now, you are wondering what happened next. We turn back to Al:

Our BBYO group was very active socially. We went bowling every Sunday and then out for burgers or ice cream afterwards. Someone told me that Abe Gorman always picked up Marcia for social events. Abe was one of the guys I was very friendly with. I asked Abe if he was serious about Marcia. He said that he just picked her up all of the time, because she had no car. I asked him if he would mind if I did that from now on. He said, "not at all." He DID say that she wasn't very warm or affectionate. He said he never kissed her.

*From then on, I always picked up Marcia. We went everywhere together. I loved being with her, and I loved being with her Mom, Dad, and little brother, Kenny. I did have to tell Abe, "I found Marcia very affectionate, and that I kissed her **often**."*

Meeting and falling in love with Marcia was the best thing I could have ever done.

Marcia remembers:

Al made quite a hit with my family. However when we dated, Kenny would sit between us on the sofa and say: "If you give me a quarter, I'll leave."

Al quickly made a lot of friends. I really fell for him. So did every other girl. I was the lucky one, and we became engaged in February 1961.

Marcia would later amend that detail with this account of how Al proposed:

On January 30, 1961, Al and I met in town after work, and went to my house for dinner. A typical evening. However, I didn't know that at lunchtime, Al had picked up the engagement ring he planned to give me on Valentine's Day, just two weeks away. He knew it would a very big surprise since, although we had spoken about getting married, I never thought he could afford a ring.

Meanwhile, the ring was burning a hole in Al's pocket, and before dinner he said he needed to speak to me alone. The only place you could be alone in our apartment was in my parents' bedroom. Al sounded so serious that I thought he wanted to break up with me.

When Al realized that I was upset, he quickly proposed. The ring was beautiful, but what made it so special was the fact that Al had worked weekends to be able to afford it.

What a relief to learn that he was not breaking up! What joy! What a surprise!

And I will tell you an extra detail about that engagement ring. As the years went by, and Al became more successful, he wanted to embellish the ring as a sign of his affection for his wife. But Marcia would have none of it. She cherished the ring just the way it was, just the way Al had presented it to her on that late January evening back in 1961.

Marcia and Al were married on November 26, 1961 at The Wynne, a very popular Philadelphia catering hall. The couple honeymooned at the famous Concord Resort in the Catskills.

Then Al and Marcia made their first home in Wissahickon Gardens in Philadelphia. Be it in their Philadelphia home, or later in their upscale, Cherry Hill home, the young Bortnick's loved to entertain. They were known for their parties. In fact two days ago, Connie posted the following on Facebook: "my dad is with my mom again, where he has wanted to be for a long time now. I'm going to miss him so much. But I like to imagine him and my mom in heaven, hosting a dinner party complete with all the china and crystal that he loved so much."

Al was always the party planner – in fact he may have liked the planning more than the actual party itself. He was so excited about planning their 50th wedding anniversary together. They didn't quite make it but they sure came close. What accounted for the success of their 49 year marriage? Well, Marcia was Al's true love. She always looked elegant for him – her clothes just so, her hair just so. He was so appreciative of his wife. And his kids said that their mom was endlessly patient. And that combination of patience and appreciation was the magic of their marriage.

Al worked very hard to make a good life for his family. He started as a book keeper for Northern Metal. Then he became a Controller for E.J. Spangler envelopes and then for Plymouth Paper. And then he did something most extraordinary. To better himself he continued his higher education, and while his kids were growing up, by age 40, he had earned his BA in Accounting from the Philadelphia School of Textiles and Sciences.

While the kids were in Hebrew School at Knesset Israel in Elkins Park, Al would find an open classroom and study in one of the open classrooms. He obviously saw education as a pathway for self-improvement.

Aside from being a wonderful husband, Al was also a wonderful father. The first of his children to enter the world was Steve, back in 1963. Although Steve didn't think his father was so wonderful when he moved them from Philadelphia, where he had so many friends, to suburban Cherry Hill, New Jersey. But Al encouraged Steve to make new friends, the way Al had made new friends decades earlier, by joining the local BBYO.

And guess what else Steve did at BBYO? Like father, like son. Steve met his future wife, Judy, also at BBYO. They would go on to bless Marcia and Al with two grandchildren, Laura and Andrew.

Steve remembers a life changing conversation he had with his dad. Steve was asking his dad what the word "priorities" meant. Al explained it meant what you value most. Al said, for him, it was Family First, then Work Second. Then Al turned to a young Steve, and asked him, "what are YOUR priorities?" Steve thought for a moment, and then said, "Friends First." And Al looked at him, and said, "no, son, Family First." And that was always Al's overarching, MOST important value: Family First Always. And Steve also preserved his father's bathtub singing of "The Little Green Frog" for when he became a dad 30 years later. And Steve's wife, Judy, remembers Al always being very warm, caring and generous. She knew him since she was 15. He was always interested in what she was doing, and spent a lot of time talking to her. She remembers, when Steve proposed, Al presented her with an extravagant, bejeweled cocktail ring because he was so happy with the match.

And as a Poppie, Al could not have been more wonderful. Together with Marcia, he would encourage Steve and Judy to go off on dates, from the NY Opera to South Street Sea Port, so they could babysit the kids. These were truly "hands-on" grandparents.

Next to enter the Bortnick home was Brian, back in 1967. He remembers his father taking him, as a kid, to see R-rated horror films, from *The Exorcise* to *The Omen*. Although by today's standards this might not seem like good parenting, Brian LOVED watching these films with his dad in the movie

theatre. He also remembers a tough conversation when Brian, who loved drawing, declared to his father, his intention to become a commercial artist. And practical Al, took Brian aside and told him frankly, that being a commercial artist would be a very difficult way to make a living – better you should go into business. So what did Brian do? He got his BA in Business Administration and was successful. But thank God Brian didn't completely give up on art. For his hobby, Brian is a brilliant, and much sought-after photographer.

I will remember the beautiful photos Brian took for his brother-in-law, Gary's parents' 60th renewal of vows, wedding anniversary. I officiated and I remember what a truly great job Brian did in capturing the moment.

Brian, and his wife, Patricia, who was always treated like a daughter by Al, blessed Marcia and Al with becoming grandparents four times over, with the births of Michael, Olivia, and the twins: Ava and Jessica. I know they must miss their Poppie very much. I must share with you that during one of Al's legendary babysitting sessions, Al suffered a stroke. And it was granddaughter Olivia's quick thinking to get help that most probably saved her Poppie's life. Well done Olivia.

Connie, the baby of the family, came on the scene in 1972. She remembers in Law School, she had really hit a rough patch. Lots of things had gone wrong. Her dad came to the rescue by leasing her a car. And then horrors of horrors. Connie accidentally backed that car into a pole. She was petrified to tell her father after all the expense he had gone to in order to get that car for her. But much to her surprise, her father was so supportive, so understanding. He told her that the most important thing was that SHE was okay. "After all," Al said, "a car, is only a car. As long as you're fine, that's all that matters." Connie remembers that THAT moment forever changed her relationship with her father.

She also remembers the moment she told her parents she had met Gary on a skiing trip. They weren't so impressed. But when they actually met him, and saw how doting and caring he was of their daughter, they fell in love with him. In fact, sometimes Connie thought they liked Gary better than they liked her, and she threatened to tell what is now commonly called "fake news" or "alternative facts" about Gary, just to calm down their enthusiasm a little. Gary said Al, in particular, always treated him more like a son than a son-in-law. And as they prepared for their wedding, Connie could see that her dad seemed left out. So she brought him with her as she tried on wedding dresses. And his favorite part of Connie and Gary's wedding may have been that extended Viennese dessert table. Al always liked his sweets.

My children and the Lipson children used to do everything together during the majority of our 13 years together. Which means I got to witness, first hand, how supportive Al was of his grandchildren, Samantha and Brandon.

From Samantha's jazz, hip-hop, lyrical and ballet recitals all the way up at Immaculata College for Kicks Academy of Dance to Brandon's amazing ice shows at the Wilmington Skating Club, Al never missed anything. He was the most present and supportive Poppie EVER!

Six years ago, I personally watched Al's heart break when I officiated at the funeral of his beloved Marcia. Like those brave Israelites who left Egypt after 400 years, with the help of his children, Al left his huge home in Cherry Hill, to make a new life for himself at Maris Grove – not the Promised Land, but never-the-less a beautiful place to live out one's remaining years. I think it was incredibly brave of Al to make this move but it was so hard. With the Lipson's living so close, plus the love and attention of his sons, Steve and Brian, and their wives and children, every body tried to make Al very comfortable in his new environment. But let's be honest, Al never got over the death of his wife.

We pray that they are together again, up in heaven, with their fine crystal and china throwing their legendary parties. May Al's memory be for a blessing, and let us say *amen*.