

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

January 19, 2010

Congregation Beth Shalom

Wilmington, DE

Joseph Byer

Yosef ben Menachem v'Chaya

February 2 (March 11?) 1914 – January 16, 2010

Our tradition teaches us that the righteous among us pass away on the *heilige shabbos*, the Holy Sabbath, so *kol va'homer*, all the more so, would the righteous among the righteous pass away on a Sabbath that coincided with *Rosh Hodesh*, the celebration of the New Month. Joe Byer represented that sacred remnant of Jews in our Conservative synagogues. Jews who were born in pre-Holocaust Europe, educated in yeshivas, emigrated to Palestine and trained and fought with the Hagannah, the predecessor of Israel's IDF, only to find their way to these shores, enriching our Conservative synagogues with their intelligence, wisdom, experience and linkages to our sacred past that went up in smoke during the years 1939 to 1945. And it is no small matter that Joe died in a hospital room not even a quarter mile from our sanctuary, during the singing of the Shabbat *Shacharit* service – because there was no other place that made Joe happier than singing the Shabbat service in this sanctuary at the top of his lungs.

And it is no small matter that Joe passed away on the Shabbat when we were reading *Parashat Va'era* from the Book of Exodus. The story features Moses, a Moses who claimed to be slow of speech and slow of tongue, taking on a belligerent Pharaoh, demanding “let my people go!” For the five years that I was blessed to serve as Joe’s rabbi, he claimed to be blind and deaf, and yet like our Moses who claimed to be a poor orator, for a blind man Joe saw more than most fully-sighted men saw, and for a deaf man, heard far more than men blessed with perfect hearing. Joe had the commanding force of a Moses, sometimes the anger of a Moses, the authority of a Moses, and had Joe gotten his way, the lifespan of Moses. In fact, passing away just two weeks shy of his 96th birthday, there were many of us who thought Joe might just match Moses in length of years. But of all the comparisons I might make between Joe and Moses, the one which is really the most important was the title we gave to Moses, *Moshe Rebeynu*, Moses, our Teacher. Because when all was said and done, for more than six decades, both formally in our Hebrew School, and informally in the sanctuary and at Kiddush lunch, Joe served as our teacher. Through his stories, his corrections – especially of the clergy, his humor and his infectious love of life,

Joe served as our teacher, *Joseph Rebeynu*, and it is in this role that he will be most sorely missed.

Joe was one of nine children born to Chaya Levy and Menachem Dovid Byer in the village of Rozhanka, in what was then Poland and what is now Belarus, on February 2, 1914, although other documents argue for March 11th (which I would prefer as then we would have shared the same birthday). Thanks to either his leaving Poland before the Holocaust or his longevity, Joe outlived all his other siblings: Alex, Taybe, Chana, Henya, Sarah, Israel, Morris, and Pesha. Joe's father, Menachem Dovid, was a lumber merchant, and according to Joe, would cut the timber in the forest of Turya, near Rozhanka, and ship it through the Niemen river to Gdansk, then called Danzig, on the Baltic Sea. He would also transport his lumber via train. Among the byproducts of lumber Menachem Dovid produced was turpentine. It was a trade which dated back centuries, working hand-in-hand with local Russian aristocracy, called Boyars, and the name Byer, is thought to have been a derivation of Boyar. Although if Joe Byer ever began to act like aristocracy, his beloved Millie would bring him back to reality by calling him "you peasant from Rozhanka!"

They may have been peasants, or at least painfully poor, but the majority of those 543 Jews who lived among the 777 residents in pre-Holocaust Rozhanka, loved scholarship. I mean think of it, there were only four streets and a couple of alleyways in all of Rozhanka, yet there were not one, but two Beit Midrashes, and when they burned down in 1927, the Jewish townspeople, with some help from their *landsleit* who made it to America, rebuilt one big Beit Midrash which was bigger than the two former Beit Midrashes combined. I share this with you because it helps put Joe's love of Jewish scholarship into some sort of perspective. The affection for the place can be summed up in the poem, "Mayn Shtetele Rozshanke," which, thanks to David Byer, I found in a Yiddish translation of a history of Joe's village. The poet writes: *O mein shtetele Rozshanke Ikh zeh dich itst bulter vi amol* -- Oh, my dear little town. Roshanke, I see you now more clearly than then. When you enter my thoughts, you awaken countless longings.... *O, mein shtetele, mein heymele Kein oremkeit hot nit gefelt.* Oh, my dear little town, my dear little home. No poverty did we lack, I shall never forget you. I always long for you, my home... Now I see the old Bes Medresh. Also the new one close by. Youngsters used to "learn" there. Their voices can yet be clearly heard... *Tseshtert is alts vos iz geven.* Destroyed is everything that was. In our

hometown Roshanke. We remember and tie-up everything. Together with our hearts and thoughts.....*Nechome* (be comforted).

Living on the edge of empires, on a river called the Neman in Polish, *die Memel* in German, it is no wonder Joe spoke Yiddish, Polish, Russian, German, Czech, Slovak, Hebrew – both biblical and modern, later Arabic, English, and later still, French and Spanish, because by this time, Joe was on a roll. He was at first cheder trained, but showing an aptitude for Jewish studies, he originally trained for rabbinic studies in the Beit Midrash. But Joe longed for a sophisticated secular education and so he made application to the Warsaw Technical Institute. But there were quotas, and Joe was a Jew. So he picked himself up, and made application to the Haifa Technical Institute, now known as *Ha Technion*, the MIT of Israel. Joe was accepted and his sister, Chana was already there, so in 1934, at the age of 20, Joe put Europe behind him. His parents died before the Holocaust, but during the Holocaust, several of his brothers and sisters, and their children did perish, and as you gathered from the poem, Roshanke, after the war, was completely emptied of its majority Jewish population.

Joe always loved Haifa. It was his dream, even in his advanced stages of cancer, with his body failing, his dream was to return to Haifa, and die there. And

if it had been within the reach of his children to honor that request, that is what would have happened. Perhaps living on a river as a child, Joe always loved living by water. So Haifa has a special claim on his heartstrings, just as deep sea fishing would in later life. Joe, at first, thrived at the Haifa Technical Institute. But then, with his parents' passing, funds dried up, and Joe started working on the Haifa docks. He fell into abject poverty, surviving for a year on herring. Then the British offered him a job working in the Palestinian Police, in the Arab sector. These policing skills would later make him Rabbi Kraft's secret weapon in his Beth Shalom Hebrew School, but I am getting ahead of myself. Joe worked underground with the nascent Hagannah, and perhaps also worked with the more clandestine and violent Irgun. Joe always had a deep love for Menachem Begin, the leader of the Irgun in Israel's pre-state period.

During World War II, Joe, still in love with the water, worked with the British, ferrying German prisoners of war, from North Africa to Australia. The ship he was supposed to serve on got stuck in the Suez Canal, so the luxury steamer, the HMS Queen Elizabeth, was refitted for war duty. Later, when Joe needed to obtain work at upscale Catskills resorts as a waiter, he listed his service on the Queen Elizabeth, not specifying the nature of his work aboard ship. It was during

a stopover in Australia, that Joe fell in love and proposed to a Jewish girl from Sydney. They corresponded and when Joe came back to Sydney, after delivering another boat full of POWs, he discovered that his beloved had lost patience and married another. Joe was heartbroken. It was one of many hardships Joe had to endure, including later learning of the death of so many of his family during the *Shoah*.

While serving on a freighter, Joe jumped ship in Hoboken, New Jersey. He was caught and given the option to be deported back to Palestine or move to Canada. One of Joe's sisters, Taybe, had survived Auschwitz and settled in Montreal, where she had created a stocking factory, so Joe took the Canada option. From Canada, he was able to get a visa and return to New Jersey.

In nearby Newark, Joe found a position in an orphanage, where he was the live-in sports maven, bar mitzvah tutor, prayer-leader, and all-around mench and role model to these young children. After attending a lecture by the great Jewish American humorist Sam Levenson with his friend Moshe Borstein in Manhattan, Joe and Moshe attended a dance in the Union Park Gardens. They spotted two cute girls. Moshe made his move first and asked one of the girls to dance. Joe was attracted to the other girl – a five foot, six inch brunette with brown eyes.

Joe said Millie danced fairly good. Of himself, Joe said he danced VERY good, be it waltz, shimmy or tango. Following the dance, Joe made a date with Milly, and one date led to another. Be it the theatre or ice skating, the two of them thoroughly enjoyed each other's company.

I would not have wanted to be in that room when Millie broke the news to her father, that she was about to marry a Hebrew teacher/sports pro who lived and worked in an orphanage. Millie's dad had been a boxer. Poor Joe. Now a cab driver, Millie's dad may have wanted more for her daughter. Well, hopefully it was with Millie's father's blessing that the two of them were married on April 10, 1949, in Newark. Joe said that both the Reform and Orthodox rabbis performed the ceremony, a testimony to Joe's great involvement in the local rabbinical council in Newark, but the ceremony was held in the local Conservative synagogue. With pride Joe will tell you that he has ALWAYS been a Conservative Jew.

Knowing that, as a married man, he would have to better his position and playing on his strong connections within the Conservative Movement, Joe attended two interviews for Hebrew education positions being conducted at the Jewish Theological Seminary (or what some of us Conservative rabbis refer to us

“the Mother Ship.”) Joe was to interview first with Rabbi Schnitzer of Millburn, New Jersey and then with Rabbi Jacob Kraft in Wilmington, Delaware. At the last moment, Rabbi Kraft changed the appointment time ahead of the Millburn appointment, and that’s how the Byer’s came to Wilmington. Joe said that during the interview he spoke a better Hebrew than Rabbi Kraft. During Joe’s interview with Philip Cohen, the Beth Shalom president at that time, he was asked to tell a little about himself. In passing, Joe dropped the fact that he had served as a policeman in Palestine. Mr. Cohen hired him on the spot. It turns out that the Hebrew School was desperate for a good, strong disciplinarian. Joe would serve as Beth Shalom’s Hebrew school for more than 30 years, and is an institution here.

Joe was both beloved and feared in his position as the only man on staff. One of his former students told me that he hated to go to Hebrew School, but Mr. Byer found a way of making him feel better by creating a special Most Improved Student award for him. Another one of Mr. Byer’s students told me that she lived in fear of him, with his dreaded stop watch which he used to time how fast his students could get through the recitation of Hebrew prayers without making a mistake. That student never forgave him but she admitted, sheepishly, that to

this day, decades later, she could still lead the entire Shabbat service in her sleep! I know that many of you will undoubtedly have your own Mr. Byer stories to share. During the three nights of *shiva*, scheduled for tonight, tomorrow night and Thursday night, all at 7 p.m., and all here at Beth Shalom, I am requesting that each *shiva* leader make time for you to share your own stories before the final *Mourner's Kaddish*, in order to help each of you process your grief, and to talk about Joe. Because nothing would give Joe greater pleasure than you talking about him.

Joe attended the University of Delaware, where he graduated with a BS in business administration. He did this while teaching at the Hebrew school, which included preparing bar mitzvah candidates, conducting Junior Congregation, substitute teaching in the Wilmington Public Schools, and during the summers, alternately working as a waiter in the Catskills and slinging hamburgers at the old JCC campsite concession at the Sellars' Estate, next to what would become the Kutz Home. He would later put that business degree to good use, acquiring also a real estate license, and beginning a long and joyous 40-year career working for Stoltz Realty, first under Archie Stoltz, of blessed memory, and then working for his son, Jack, and later Keith. Joe loved people and he loved selling them homes.

David, Joe's first child, was born in 1950. He wondered, at the age of 15, why when visiting Israel for the first time, his father was given red carpet-treatment. In later life, as David learned more about his father's involvement with both the Hagannah and Irgun, the special treatment from that first visit began to make more sense. David also couldn't get over how many people knew his dad during that and subsequent visits, with people shouting the endearment, Yossela, to him from all corners. The same was true in Delaware. From his work in the Hebrew school to his real estate career to his larger-than-life personality, who didn't know Joe Byer?

Despite juggling three jobs, his father was always the first one up in the morning, made sure his kids had breakfast, a packed lunch, and were on time for school. David said his father was enthusiastic and had a zest and love of life, and always put his heart into everything. Together with his wife Alison, David blessed his father with two wonderful granddaughters, Maurisa and Rebekah. Both made him proud with their Albert Einstein Academy education, which Joe helped support. Joe especially appreciated Maurisa's visits at Manor Care, and even in his physically compromised state, loved grilling Maurisa on her recent travels. And Joe had a very special relationship with Rebekah, from her early childhood

beginnings of being rather cool on her grandpa to eventually winning her affections and walking hand-in-hand. David credits his dad for instilling in him a sense of duty and responsibility which he attributes to his father, who inspired by example.

Carol, Joe's second child, was born in 1956. As a child, she used to accompany her dad to his bar mitzvah lessons, and as a result, to this day she cannot get the Haftarah blessings out of her head, and when she sang lullabies to her own children, they were always to the music of the Haftarah blessings. She, like David, loved her father's *matzah brie*, which were made more impressive by the multiple flips he could do with it in the frying pan. Unlike other men of his time, Joe was just as comfortable in the kitchen as Millie. In fact sometimes they would get into culinary arguments...especially over Millie's soups, which Joe would secretly add salt to behind her back, only to get her wrath in return. Together with Bruce, Carol blessed her father with two beautiful grandchildren, Lauren and Josh. They called Joe PopPop, and they especially enjoyed making handmade cards for him during his illnesses. They are taking his passing particularly hard. When Carol looks back at all the gifts her father gave her, she

credits her father for her love of Judaism. And Carol, and her family, are loyal members of Temple Sinai in Dresher, Pennsylvania.

Joe and Millie's 57 years together were full and rich...and often exciting. It seems that Millie had a bit of a temper but Joe reassured me that making up made it all worthwhile. At Beth Shalom, I would often watch Millie reign Joe in during services. I think Joe enjoyed pushing Millie's buttons. It was a form of mutual intellectual, and for Millie, physical exercise. As a couple, they reminded me a little of Golde and Tevye from "Fiddler on the Roof" – particularly when Golde would deliver lines like "you could die from such a man!" But you know, based on the song "Do You Love Me," that despite the tongue lashings Tevye received from Golde, they truly loved each other. I know the same was true for Millie and Joe.

In later years, they continued to grow in their marriage as they pursued the study of the French language, as well as other classes at the Academy for Life Long Learning. They were constantly intellectually bettering themselves, in a way, forever young. How hard it was for Joe when Millie passed in August 2006. I had the honor of officiating at her funeral along with then Hazzan Horowitz, who shared my love and admiration for her. Joe continued to be a fixture at Beth

Shalom, but there were many transitions. As his vision and hearing began to fail, there was first the move from his Wilmington home of many years to Ingleside, where he made some very special friends, one of whom composed a poem for him in honor of Joe's 95th birthday on this bimah, with Governor Jack Markell presiding with me on the bimah, along with a beautiful letter from Vice President Joe Biden, who Joe, Byer that is, had insisted be invited to this 95th birthday bash.

And then, as Joe's cancer progressed, there was his stint at Manor Care. Even there, we tried to make him feel at home, with many visits and his room filled with dozens of home-made cards created by our Hebrew School children, few who had actually met Mr. Byer, and none who had ever been taught by him, but all who had been told what a dedicated teacher he had been in our Hebrew School for well over forty years. Among his last visitors at Manor Care, were my own two young daughters, Ariella and Shira. Despite his illness, Joe still took them into his arms from his wheelchair, and greeted each girl by name with hugs and love.

I met Joe in March of 2004. I was interviewing to be the new rabbi of Congregation Beth Shalom. During the open question-and-answer period in the Social Hall, Joe stood up, and pointing a finger in my direction, asked, with fire in

his voice: “if you are the rabbi, are you going to take congregants away during Shabbat services leaving the rest of us to fend for ourselves while you go teach a class?” Now I had no idea what this elderly gentleman was referring to, but as members of the search committee, afraid that I was going to be scared off tried to shhhh Joe (an impossible task), I quickly reassured him that I would never do such a thing. Rabbi Satlow, the culprit in this story, later told me never to make jokes at Joe’s expense, the way he had done regarding Joe’s past police experience and how he used it in the Hebrew School. In fact, Joe was very comfortable making jokes at his own expense, as long as HE was the one making the jokes.

It was very easy for me to give Joe the respect and attention he deserved. From the start, I knew what a precious resource Joe was to this synagogue, both in what he represented as a sacred thread with a European Jewish past that is gone forever, and for his own sake, as a fun, loving, man, a shameless flirt in the Siegel JCC Fitness Center with the trainers, especially Diane, as well as the life of the JCC Senior Lounge, where Karen Ballard was a favorite of his – he was always attracted to the good-looking women. It is ironic and sad that Joe had to wait so long to get into the Kutz Home, and when he finally got a room, on the very first day that he moved in and I greeted him with song and blessing, Joe was rushed to

Wilmington Hospital, for the first of two visits that would end in his passing this past Shabbat. I was sure to recite the ancient Viddui prayer before his passing, and I felt he waited for me to return from my Rabbinic Retreat before his passing.

Joe gave more than half of his life to this synagogue, from a Hebrew teacher behind a desk to one of the Jews in the pews. When Millie died I first put out the challenge that fans of the Byers step up and create a special fund within the Capital Campaign to have a special place in the synagogue dedicated to her memory. Nothing came of the suggestion. But now, with Joe's passing, and with our Capital Completion Campaign in need of, well, completion, I hope that you who have gathered here today, in addition to the myriads of others who have been touched by Joe and could not make it today, might band together and honor Joe's children's desire, as well as my own, that funds be raised to create a permanent space of significance that we can dedicate to the memories of both Millie and Joe Byer. The cemetery is, of course, a time-honored place to remember our dearly departed, but Mille, and especially Joe, were so much a part of the life of this synagogue, that it seems right that the living and vibrant Judaism we practice here at Beth Shalom should be the place where Jews for generations to come will see the names of Millie and especially Joe Byer, giving us

opportunities to share stories about this Moses of our day, this *mench*, this learned lover of Judaism – this lover of life!

When I think of Joe in times to come, it will not be marked by his declining health, loss of vision or hearing. No. The Joe I will remember was one who loved to sing with me, be it in shul, at Christiana Hospital, at Manor Care or even, finally at the Kutz Home. And among all the songs he liked to sing with me as I strummed away at my guitar, his favorite would always be *Oseh Shalom*, the quintessential Hebrew prayer for peace. And among his favorite singers at Beth Shalom, was Meredith Weiss, who he affectionately called, his little hazzanit, his little cantor. And so as Meredith sings this familiar song, I cannot help but thinking that Joe is singing along. *Zichrona l'vracha*, may his memory be for a blessing.