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August 23, 2006
Congregation Beth Shalom
Wilmington, DE

Mildred "Millie" Byer
Malka bat Tzvi v'Leah
October 3, 1921 - August 22, 2006

It was with *lev malei*, a full heart, that Hazzan Horwitz chose to sing *Ayshet Hayil*, A Woman of Valor, in honor of Millie. He wanted to pick the most beautiful arrangement he could find to express his love and appreciation of her through music. Selected from the 31st chapter of the Book of Proverbs, our tradition attributes *Ayshet Hayil* to none other than King Solomon himself. Among the most memorable words of this tribute to women are: "A good wife who can find? She is precious far beyond rubies. Her husband trusts in her, and he shall lack nothing thereby." Among Millie's last words to her beloved husband were: "Don't worry Joe, I'm going to get out of here so I can come home and take care of you." Hazzan Horwitz could not have chosen a more fitting musical tribute for Millie.

This Shabbat's Fourth Haftarah of Consolation opens with these words: "*Anochi, anochi hu minchemchem*" "I, I am He who comforts you!" Authored some 2,500 years ago by the prophet Isaiah to comfort our ancestors pinned down in Babylonian captivity following the fall of Jerusalem, across the seas and across the millennia these words bring us comfort as we try to find the right words to pay tribute to a remarkable woman.

In my Introduction to Judaism course, I have commented upon the dilemma Orthodox Judaism finds itself in. In determining difficult Jewish legal questions, many Orthodox Jews would rely on the *gedolim*, the great rabbis of their generation. With the deaths of such Torah giants as Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik and the Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, many of the *gedolim* – the great ones -- are gone, and not easily replaced. I feel here at Congregation Beth Shalom, with the death of Leah Kraft, and not even a year later, the death of Millie Byer, I feel we at Beth Shalom have lost our *gedolim* as well.

The story of our *ayshet hayil*, our great one, begins 84 years ago, in New York City, when Lithuania-born Lena and Bessarabia-born Harry Hirsch welcomed their second daughter, Mildred, into the world on October 3, 1921. Millie had an older sister, Esther, of blessed memory, and a younger brother, Arthur, who is with us today. Early childhood was hard for Millie. The Depression hit when she was only nine years old. As a girl she used to pick up coal from passing trains and bring it home so they should not be too cold in winter. Millie's mother, who grew up and absorbed the sights and sounds of Paris, lovingly passed on that love of French culture to Millie. She would, in turn, pass down that appreciation of French culture throughout the generations. Her son remembers Millie leading him in a rousing version of *Le Marseilles* this past July 14 for Bastille Day, and gently teaching *Alouatta* to her grandchildren. Her father, Hirsch, by contrast, was a rough man by all accounts. At one point he made his living as a boxer. It must have been challenging for Millie having a father like Harry. Millie would struggle to reconcile the differences between her mother and father's vastly different parenting styles when

she would be blessed with children of her own.

From her Depression-era childhood in the Bronx, Millie was determined to better herself. Towards this end she enrolled in Commercial High Schools of Manhattan, where she studied stenography. When World War Two broke out, Millie – a passionate American patriot throughout her life – joined the Women’s Army Corps, which she served for three years. At the end of the war she got a job working for HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. It was while working at HIAS that she met Joe.

Joe’s story is very long and complicated. It involves Polish, Russian, German, Yiddish – and lots of Hebrew. It involves a White Russian shtetl called Roszanka, Bylostok, a co-ed rabbinical school, Vilna, Haifa, life aboard a ship, and finally an orphanage in Newark, New Jersey, where Joe 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 ask. 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 throughly 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. If you forgot, 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, New Jersey. 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 (for whom this sanctuary is named) 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.

So at the age of 26, Millie found herself married and living in Wilmington. Using her secretarial skills, she got a job working for the Executive Office of the Planning and Zoning Department for the State of Delaware. She would work there for ten years, and later for another

five years for the State Court, based in New Castle.

Millie gave birth to her first child, David, in 1950. David said he was a naughty kid growing up, and Millie did everything she could to reign him in – but not with much success. She forced him to go to Camp Ramah but he would skip the Torah study in favor of the basket ball court. But David would go on to become President of the Junior Congregation, but he claims his father rigged the election in his favor. Among David's fondest childhood memories were trips to visit Millie's parents. He particularly remembers his mother's potato latkas. David said they simply melted in your mouth and made Chanukah the most anticipated of all the holidays on the Jewish calendar. David would later marry Alison, and in 1990 bless Millie with her first granddaughter Maurisa. In tribute for the great love she had for her grandmother, Maurisa decided to take her grandmother's Hebrew name, Malka, for herself. She refuses to take off the Malka necklace she wears around her neck. Millie became a grandmother again when Rebekah was born in 1993. Both girls remember being taught nursery rhymes and French songs by their Grandma Millie. Both granddaughters attended Albert Einstein Academy with the encouragement and support of their Grandpa Joe and Grandma Millie. As I speak, they are currently on their way home from England, and will join us for the shiva services in the evenings that follow.

Carol, Millie's second child was born in 1956. She loved her mother dearly. She felt that her Millie was very thoughtful. Millie loved her family more than life itself. Carol remembers that her mother, who did not grow up in a Jewishly observant home, kept Shabbos, and made all the Jewish holidays beautiful in the home. Her cooking was extraordinary – a real “ballebusta.” She made a Jewish apple cake to die for. Carol brought great joy to both her parents through her active involvement and leadership in Camp Ramah where she was a madricha, USY, and study in Israel. Carol married Bruce, and in 2000 blessed Millie with more grandchildren: twins Lauren and Joshua. Carol believes that her mother passed on her special artistic talents to Lauren, who has excelled in art at an early age.

Both David and Carol said that Millie's cooking was severely affected by Joe's health needs in later years. When the doctor said that Joe could not eat any fats, Millie stopped using schmaltz. In addition, Millie would only cook the leanest of meats. Just like the Woman of Valor from the Book of Proverbs, Carol believes that Joe has lived to be a strong 92 year-old in large part because of the special care and effort Millie put into taking care of Joe, and seeing to his dietary needs,

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 reassures me that making up made it all worthwhile. They traveled the world together, but nothing gave Joe and Millie as much pleasure as their multiple trips to Israel. It was during one trip in 1966 that Millie decided to enroll in the wonderful Ulpan Akiba program (where I, too, studied in preparation for rabbinical school), in Netanya. Millie took to the Hebrew language the way a fish takes to water. She would be forever changed by that experience. When I met her two years ago she, like Joe, took special delight in speaking to me in Hebrew, *rak b'ivrit*. It was Millie's way of making a special connection with a fellow Jew.

From that Israel experience, she would return to the United States and enroll in Gratz College, where she would pursue Jewish studies for the next five years. David, Carol, Joe and I all agree that Millie loved her Judaism, drew great strength from it, and was an inspiration for others. So many congregants have come up to me, with lovely Millie stories over these past two

days since her death. In fact, upon learning of her death, the Capital Campaign of Congregation Beth Shalom, which is endeavoring to raise nine million dollars to build, renovate and endow this building for future generations, unanimously voted to dedicate one of the classrooms in loving memory of Millie and in honor of Joe Byer. This would provide former students of Joe and Millie a unique opportunity to do something to express their love, while communicating to the Byer family the great esteem with which Millie and Joe are held in the Congregation Beth Shalom community, and in the greater Jewish Wilmington community at large.

In later years, Millie pursued the study of the French language with Joe, as well as other classes at the Academy for Life Long Learning. But Millie was especially drawn to the art classes. Her works in charcoal and water color gave her great pleasure. Millie also loved to read, from all kinds of books to the New York Times.

Strong, tough, humorous, incredibly kind, an iron will to live – moral, all these are words which have been used to describe Millie. It is the description of moral which I would like to emphasize. These week's Torah portion, *Shofetim*, commands: “*tsedek, tsedek tirdof*” “justice, justice thou shalt pursue.” If Millie found something to be immoral, not only would she speak up, she would more than likely write a letter to the editor of the News Journal. She was not passive in her morality, she was an active crusader for what she thought was right.

Millie had a very strong impact on my life. Whenever she was in the hospital I would endeavor to visit her. I went in to each visit thinking what could I do to lighten Millie's load. But with the twinkle in her eye, and her own kind words of appreciation and praise for me, I was the one who always left Millie's hospital room improved. More than anything, Millie taught me NOT to take simple things for granted. For the two years that I have been Millie's rabbi, I have always seen her escorted by her small, portable oxygen canister on wheels. It was both the most intrusive and yet the most necessary of companions. Millie had to struggle for each breath of air. That which we take for granted, was for Millie, a purposeful, determined action. Just as God breathed life into Adam HaRishon, infusing him with the breath of life, so Millie struggled to relive that experience breath after breath after breath.

Millie has taught all of us not to take anything, breathing, not to take anything for granted. In her life she touched many people. Our synagogue community is so much better for having had her in our midst. She was truly, in many ways, an *ayshet hayil* and today we say good bye to one of the *gedolim*, one of the greats. *Zichrona l'vracha* -- May her memory be for a blessing, and let us say, amen.