

Seymour Cohen

*Shmuel ben Yoel*

July 26, 1925 – April 3, 2011

This week, Jews all around the world are reading from the Torah portion called *Metzora*, from the Book of Leviticus. On the surface, the text seems to be addressing issues of a biblical malady called by the modern name, “leprosy,” but in its Torah description, *tsara’at* could not have had anything to do with the modern day affliction, Hansen’s Disease. The Ancient Rabbis, looking for a moral reason for this affliction, decided that people would get this disease if they performed the sin of *l’shon ha ra*, gossip. The Rabbis held that gossiping was the worst of sins because not one, but three people were injured in the process: the person being gossiped about, the person spreading the gossip, and the person hearing the gossip. And unlike other sins, there was no way of truly making amends for this sin, because one could never really control the spread of gossip once it started.

And what does any of this have to do with Seymour Cohen? It has EVERYTHING to do with Seymour Cohen because according to his wife, Donna,

Seymour NEVER gossiped. He was a man who truly valued other people, he only had good to say about others – to put it in plain English, he was a *mench*.

Seymour was the third son born to Joel and Fannie Cohen, originally from Russia. They came to Wilmington because they were told that the streets were paved with gold. They found they were not. Still, the Cohen's were rich with family. First there was Edward, then Sidney, and then on July 26, 1925, Joel and Fannie were blessed with a wonderful surprise addition to the family with the birth of Seymour. He was always close to his older brothers, and later in 1945 the three Cohen brothers banded together to purchase Harris Jewelers. They eventually acquired other stores. Seymour served as president of Harris Jewelers for 40 years until he retired in 2009. Two stores are currently owned by Seymour's nephew, Ronald. Not just Ronald, but all of Seymour's nephews and nieces were more like sons and daughters to him, so strong was his love for his brothers and his brothers' children.

Perhaps not typical for Jews of his time, Seymour was a tackle at P.S. du Pont High School, and he was voted the most outstanding athlete in the January class of 1943. He was nicknamed "Murph," because the other outstanding football players were all good Irish Catholic boys. Seymour even attended a

Christmas Eve Mass to fit in with his teammates. It is unclear if any of his fellow athletes attended High Holy Day services at Congregation Beth Shalom, where Seymour, with his Baynard Boulevard address, belonged as a life member.

After high school, Seymour attended the University of Delaware under an accelerated program and hoped to become a mechanical engineer and a foot ball star, but World War Two intervened. He entered the United States Army where he unfortunately contracted a rare lung disease at Officers Training School in Texas. As a result he spent a long 13 months at Walter Reed Hospital recovering.

At war's end, in 1946, Seymour married his high school sweetheart, the beautiful Nancy Keil, at Congregation Beth Shalom. The Keil name has a long history with Congregation Beth Shalom, and we still count Louis and Barbara Keil of Columbus, Ohio as our members, and we are thinking of them this morning. Nancy worshipped Seymour and they had a wonderful marriage of 27 years, which sadly came to an end with Nan's death in 1972. They were blessed with two children, Jane and James. Tragedy struck Seymour when his beloved Jimmy died in 1975, just three years after his wife's death. We are blessed to have Jane with us this morning.

When you are happily married it is difficult to be alone. This was true for Seymour. Yet In December 1973, Donna Martone was not looking to be married again. Once was enough, thank you. But when her friend's pediatrician, David Levitsky said he had two friends he wanted Donna to meet: a widower and a divorcee, she said she was open. Thank God the widower called first. From the very beginning of the relationship, Donna loved Seymour. He was real, he was honest, he valued people, he was principled, and yes, he was gorgeous. Seymour took her to Newton Square on their first date, so they could have a little privacy, away from the peering eyes of Jewish Wilmingtonians. I have learned in my seven years of service at Congregation Beth Shalom that there ARE no secrets in Jewish Wilmington. Everything is revealed in the kosher section at Shoprite, especially on Fridays, before Shabbat.

Seymour and Donna were married in the Congregation Beth Shalom Cain Chapel on September 3, 1974. Among the chuppah holders were Charlie Keil and Seymour's brother, Sidney, who kept the chuppah swaying throughout the ceremony presided over by Rabbi David Geffen. Seymour was a wonderful stepfather to her son, William Bundesen, Jr., until his tragic death in 2006. Not only was Seymour a rock for Donna at this tragic time, with the ability to truly

empathize, but so was Seymour's daughter, Jane, who became a best friend to Donna from that moment to this, giving Donna the support and friendship she needed to get through this difficult time in her life.

Donna says that her life with Seymour, despite this loss, was joyful, filled with trips to golf resorts like Greenbriar and Homestead in West Virginia, to Barbados with good friends including Beth Shalom congregants, the Stargatt's, and further afield to places like Italy, Scotland and England. Seymour and Donna split their time between Wilmington and Florida, where they enjoyed 36 ½ happy years together.

Seymour was active in the Jewish community. He served on the boards of his beloved Congregation Beth Shalom and the Jewish Federation of Delaware, working tirelessly with the United Jewish Campaign, and he was also a member of B'nai Brith.

His interests also went beyond the Jewish community, serving as a member of the Order of Elks, Brandywine Country Club, and Janothan's Landing Golf Club in Jupiter, Florida. Seymour had happy memories of a charity testimonial he organized for his high school coach, Jack Warner. Seymour loved to play golf, was

an excellent bridge player – honored as a Life Master for more than 50 years, and he loved playing gin with the boys in both Wilmington and Jupiter.

Most important, he was a devoted “Poppy” to William, Nora, and Sandra. To his grandchildren and to his nieces and nephews, Seymour has served this next generation well, not only by his unbounded love for them, but also by his good example. As we remember the wisdom of this week’s Torah portion, we remember that although the gossip, the moral leper, was much to be avoided, people like Seymour, who loved and valued people, who never had a bad word to say about anyone, to their face or behind their back, these were the types of people the Rabbis cherished. May Seymour’s example and his memory be for a blessing, *zichrona l’vracha*, and let us say, *amen*.