

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

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Congregation Beth Shalom

Wilmington, DE

Renée Gail Covin

Rachel bat Matatياهو v'Chanah

March 7, 1933 – January 12, 2017

The week Renée Covin passed away, Jews all throughout the world were reading the last Torah portion in the Book of Genesis, *Vayehi*. It deals with the deaths of both Jacob, and ultimately of Joseph, and so it feels as if the entire Jewish people have been mourning along with us. Within the sadness of the deathbed scene between Jacob and his children, there is a poignant commentary offered by the 18th century Sephardic biblical commentator, *Or HaChayim* that I found so fitting to Renée's life. Before Jacob launches into his blessing for each of his children, the text says that Jacob blessed Joseph, but then Jacob immediately proceeds to bless Joseph's children, Menashe and Ephraim. The *Or HaChayim* asks, where is Joseph's blessing? And the answer he gives is that Jacob's ongoing presence in Joseph's life for the past 17 years in Egypt is Jacob's unspoken blessing to Joseph. And when I think of Renée's last seven years here in the Brandywine Valley helping Marla with her children, and earlier in her life, when she helped Cindy with her children, when I think of Renée's support and love for Jerry for the past 64 ½ years – like the patriarch Jacob, Renée's passionate, engaged presence was her unspoken blessing to those she loved so dearly.

Renée was born on March 7, 1933, in Chicago. She was the second of three children born to Ann and Matthew Seskind. Renée's older brother, Irle, was not well enough to be with us today. But he is represented by his son, Scott, and we are so grateful to have him with us today. We are also grateful to have Renée's younger sister, Sheila, with us this afternoon, and we offer her our deepest condolences on the loss of her sister.

I would be remiss if I did not share that in childhood, some of Renée's most loving memories was of her Grandma Dora, who referred lovingly to her granddaughter, as "*tchotkela*," (best translated from the Yiddish as "endearing precious little collectable" – the type of thing you might display in your breakfront or bric-a-brac shelf). This memory was so endearing that when Renée became a grandmother herself, she referred to each of her grandchildren as "*tchotkela*" as well. And Renée preserved her Grandma Dora's name in the middle name she gave to her only son, Jordan Dale.

Renée was very self-sufficient in her youth, and held jobs from a very early age, as well as assumed many responsibilities in her home. Her life-long quality of determination dates back to this earliest time in her life. She attended South Shore High School in Chicago, and it was in her 16th year that she met the man who she was destined to marry. She and her girlfriend, Lorraine Siegen, were set up on a double blind date with Alan Babinder and Jerry Covin. Lorraine was matched with Jerry, and Renée was matched with Alan. But when they actually met on that warm spring day in 1949 under the lamppost at Jackson Park, behind the Rosenwald Museum, the two couples swapped at the moment of meeting. And I am happy to report that Lorraine and Alan have been happily married for years – so it all worked out for the best.

Jerry remembers Renée being quite beautiful. She was wearing a cardigan and over it, a tight yellow sweater. And the first words out of Jerry's mouth to Renée were, "why don't you take off that sweater?" I know that sounds a little risqué but Jerry insists that it was really warm, and he just wanted her to be comfortable.

Jerry was in his third year at the University of Illinois at the time, and he didn't really have a lot of spending money for dating. But the young couple paid their fifty cents and enjoyed evenings filled with dancing at O'Henry's, with a live band. And then there was Yonker's, downtown, where they could get a chicken dinner for seventy-five cents.

I recently saw a stunning black-and-white photo of Renée, with Jerry, in her beautiful dress for her Senior Prom back in June 1950. And you won't be surprised that before going to the Prom, Renée stopped by her Grandma Dora's first, so she could check out the dress for herself. Jerry was smitten with Renée. She was lovely, inside and out. Let's start with outside first. Jerry describes Renée as a brown-eyed brunette with lovely dark, curly hair, and a great figure. She was lovely inside because she was young, vivacious, forthright and ever-so honest – which was refreshing for Jerry, who came from a very reserved family. I imagine it must have been heartbreaking for the couple when Renée's father, Matthew, moved the Seskind family was to Southern California, to pursue a mortgage business opportunity, in the spring of 1950, following Renée's graduation from high school.

For the next year, Jerry and Renée corresponded. During that year, Renée dated a lot. Jerry – not at all. He had met his *bershert* and he was no longer interested in other girls. Renée did return to Chicago the following summer for a visit. During that visit the young couple imagined that one day they might get married. On February 14, 1952, after sending her flowers to her Southern California home, Jerry proposed to Renée on the phone. They were married on June 21, 1952, in Chicago, in the home of older brother Irle's in-laws. I have seen the family wedding picture. The only people smiling in the photo was the young bride and groom. It turned both families disapproved. The Seskind's disapproved because Jerry was so poor – he was working towards his MD and PhD at the University of Wisconsin at the time. And the Covin's disapproved because they felt Renée and married life would be a distraction for this aspiring grad student. Neither family contributed to the wedding – it was such a frugal wedding, that some caring well-wisher suggested that the couple should just elope and be done with it. After the wedding Jerry and Renée took a train and a bus for a two-day honeymoon at Oakton Manor in Wisconsin, known then as the "Catskills of the Midwest," before Jerry had to return to his studies at the University of Wisconsin.

Renée went to secretary school to help support the young couple. The plan was for Renée to work as a secretary for the next seven years while Jerry completed his PhD and MD. How does the saying go in Yiddish? *Der mentsh trakht un Got lakht* – *Man plans and God laughs*. Ten months and two weeks after Jerry smashed the glass under the *chuppah*, Renée gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, Cindy. So much for that secretary income. They were so poor.

How poor were they? They were SO poor that they lived in an attic apartment where Renée had to use a broom to shew away bats from baby Cindy's cradle. Jerry likes to say they weren't poor, rather, they were "temporarily without funds." Jerry changed his academic plans, and graduated with an MA in Pharmacology from the University of Wisconsin in 1953.

Then the three of them moved out to Southern California, to be closer to Renée's family. Jerry also had family in the area. As Jerry picked up his PhD from USC in 1955, graduated USC medical school in 1958, and then continued with a four-year orthopedic residency – Renée spent a lot of time home, alone, raising not only Cindy, but also Jordon, who came along in 1956, and Marla who rounded out the family in 1959. In 1958, with no down payment, Renée and Jerry bought their first home, in Canoga Park, across the street from Renée's brother, Irle. During all that time, none of the family helped the struggling couple financially, and Renée became a master of all things you could create with ground beef. Renée was so resourceful in those early years, that she claims she made Cindy's clothing out of curtains and sheets – kind of like that scene from *Went With the Wind*, when Carol Burnett – as Scarlett O'Hara, comes down that staircase wearing the velvet curtains, with the curtain rod still attached.

During those years, Renée scrimped and saved, but never complained. In fact when the couple looked back at those economically hard times, they considered it among the most wonderful years of their lives. It was the time when they were building their beautiful family.

And in 1973, it was finally Renée's turn. She announced to Jerry that she always had a dream of pursuing a college education. So Jerry traded in her station wagon for a two-seater Porsche and a collection of fetching cashmere sweaters, and Renée began life as an undergrad at Valley College. From there she went on to CSUN where she picked her MA in Psychology and then earned her certification and license as a Marriage and Family Therapist. It is particularly poignant that during this time, her middle child, Jordan, who was fighting Hodgkin's-Lymphoma, encouraged her mother to stay the course, even as he was undergoing treatment.

When Jerry looks back at his 64 ½ years of marriage he noted that while he always strived to be a people pleaser, Renée would hit them right between the eyes, and then they would end up loving her, and weren't always so crazy about him. She was passionate and giving to the people she loved, but she was selective for whom she would bestow that love – but it started with her husband, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren – for whom she was nothing less than a mamma bear protecting her cubs. Their long-lasting marriage was built on a foundation of love, passion, respect, deep commitment and loyalty, shared values and goals, the notion that the sum total, that is their family, was greater than the individual parts – and they simply adored each other.

From 1997 through 2012, they covered more than 150,000 miles together in an RV, from Alaska to Newfoundland, to every out-of-the-way place in North America. Jerry told me that in retirement, he was addressing a sort of wanderlust, not that all who wander are lost, to quote JRR Tolkien. And Renée willingly went along for the ride, saying she could easily be Trailer Trash or the Queen of the Nile. She could just as easily camp in the woods, or in designer clothes, stay at the Ritz Carleton. By Jerry's side, Renée learned how to scuba dive and how to ski – and loved it all. They traveled the world, from Australia to Hawaii, from Mexico to almost every country in Europe, to multiple visits to their beloved Israel. I was blessed to take Jerry and Renée on their last trip to Israel, along with Congregation Beth Shalom back in 2009, which included their son-in-law, Ross, take his first *aliyah* to the Torah in the ruins of a first-century synagogue in the Galilee. And I particularly remember brave Renée, whose feet

and legs were swollen, insisting that Jerry wrap them in ace bandages so she could hike up Masada with her grandchildren, Jordan and Ethan, because she was not going to let them have that experience without her.

The scuba diving, the camping, the skiing, the RV adventures, and yes, even the hike up Masada in less-than-ideal circumstances, it can all, perhaps, be attributed to the same motivation – Renée Covin was NOT going to miss out on ANYTHING. And all those adventures were experienced at Jerry's side.

Throughout Jerry and Renée's home there are about 18 different framed poems, which Jerry wrote to mark key moments in their lives. Jerry asked that I share this last poem, the most difficult one to write, with you at this time. It is called *My Last Adieu*:

Now, this will be my last and final Adieu,
To my everlasting love, Renée with *L'Accent Aigu*.

And now I have quite a dilemma to ponder,
When my one true love goes off into the yonder.

How does an agnostic or atheist deal,
When this final event in life becomes real?

The Big Bang created the particles of which we are composed,
They return to the critical mass when our life is deposited.

As a scientist, I agonize as to what will remain,
Of the energy, the affection, the joy and the pain,
That consumed my life with an infinite love,
For the person who now I hope shall still be somewhere above.

I just have to resign myself that there is no solution,
That my current dilemma will have no resolution.

I have to aspire that my rational expression,
Is superseded by concepts beyond my comprehension.

I may even try to pray that though I may not know how, where or when;
But that somewhere or somehow we shall be together again.

In looking back, Jerry said: “Renée was honest, loyal, loving – she gave me a wonderful life.” And most precious of all was the family she gave him.

As you have heard, the first member of that family was Cindy, born in 1953. Cindy is sure it was her mother who gave her those “good-looking” genes. Her mom was described as “prettier than Liz Taylor.” Since Renée was a young mother, and looked a good ten years younger than her actual age, Cindy and Renée were often mistaken for sisters.

Renée always thought that Cindy was smart, despite the fact that she did not test well. So if there were class divisions from A to D, Cindy often found herself, based on test scores, placed in the C class. That’s when Renée would spring into action, going to the school and advocating for her daughter, to make sure she got the academically challenging experiences which she deserved.

Cindy said that her mom created the home where all of her friends wanted to hang out. After Jerry and Renée attended a session at Brandeis-Bardin Institute, a very special Southern California Jewish camp, they heeded founder Shlomo Bardin’s advice, and starting in the mid-sixties, the Covin’s made Shabbat the centerpiece of their family life.

The kids were allowed to go out on Friday night, but they had to spend Shabbat dinner at home. But they could invite whoever they wanted. And Renée was always ready for the friends – no number too high. Cindy remembers during her undergraduate studies at UCLA, she could bring her friends from the Westside of LA all the way through the Sepulveda Pass and into the Valley for Shabbat dinner – and her friends loved to come.

From Renée’s brisket to her kugel, from her chopped liver to her chicken soup, *cholent* to crumb chicken – Cindy’s college friends couldn’t get enough of her mother’s cooking.

Upon hearing this, I innocently suggested to Jerry, Cindy and Marla that they print up some of Renée’s recipes and have them available at *shiva* as keepsakes to perpetuate her cooking. No one was quite sure how to break it to me, but they had to explain that this would NOT be honoring Renée’s wishes. Renée prided

herself in making the very best chopped liver, the very best kugel, the world's BEST brisket, and if she started giving out her recipes then she would lose her exclusive edge as world's best.

Renée was also interested in making sure she got the credit. If she gave a particularly good piece of advice to her daughters, she would say, "see, I TOLD you! Give me the credit." And nothing gave her daughters more pleasure than telling Renée, "yes, Mom, YOU get the credit!"

And Renée needed to be a part of every conversation. If the girls ever asked their mom if they could just speak to Dad, Renée would ask, "why?!" Renée could hear conversations half way across the house ... she could hear everything. In fact, in my last visit with Renée, I was originally going to meet just with Marla and catch her up on all the doings around Congregation Beth Shalom. And Marla suggested that we move the meeting to her mother's bedside because nothing would give her mother greater pleasure than to be in on what was going on. Marla was so right. Renée relished every detail, every observation. Never mind the misheberach prayer and blessing, Renée wanted to know what was going on. It was actually a lot of fun.

When I asked, what did Cindy learn from her mother, she said "my mom's ability to survive through the most painful experiences with an incredible life force." For seven years, from 1981 – 88, she fought to save her son from cancer, and she never faltered. Renée was an incredible help in the raising of Cindy's three children, Jonathan, born in 1981, Stefan, born in 1987, and Sabrina, born in 1988. You will be hearing from all three of Cindy's children, Renée's *tchochkelas*, in just a few minutes.

Jordan was Renée's second child, born in 1956. Renée was his rock, his support. Jordan struggled in school, and Renée was his motivator and tended to his emotional well-being in a way no one else could.

She inspired his confidence and encouraged him to follow his passion. That eventually led to his becoming an environmental ecologist and becoming a good steward to protect the earth. And as Renée encouraged Jordan, Jordan was sure

to encourage his mother to pursue her MA in Psychology, even during his own chemo and treatment. Together, Renée explored every type of treatment, traditional and alternative, for Jordan's Hodgkin's-Lymphoma, from Norman Cousins' laugh therapy – Renée actually got them an appointment with Norman Cousins himself, to acupuncture to Zen. She moved to Omaha, Nebraska during Jordan's bone marrow stem cell treatment and would never leave her son's side unless there was someone to relieve her.

After Jordan's death in 1988, at the young age of 32, both Jerry and Renée did everything they could do to preserve Jordan's legacy, from climbing the mountains he so dearly loved in Montana, to creating the Jordan Covin Travel Scholarship, housed at San Diego State University, for students to attend scientific meetings who would normally not have the funds. For many years, Jerry and Renée would go to San Diego and personally meet the students each year who merited the scholarship named for their son. And Jordan lives on in the name of Marla and Ross' eldest son.

Renée and Jordan both succumbed to cancer. But being a strong believer in the Afterlife, I would like to believe, and take comfort in the idea, that beloved mother and beloved son are, at last, eternally united.

Marla was born in 1959. She remembers her teen age years as being a little volatile with her mom – her older siblings were off to college and her mom was in college, too. Marla may have been a little neglected. But as Marla became an adult, and as she became a mom, Renée's and Marla's interests aligned and they became inseparable. Renée and Jerry bought the first unit in Garnet Valley's Belmont over-55 residential community back in 2003. True, they had first proposed by the house right across the street from Ross and Marla in Clayton Meadows, but Ross thought having his in-laws right across the street might be a little TOO close. So instead they compromised and the Covin's moved in right around the corner in the next neighborhood. And that way Renée got to be the most amazing grandmother not once, but TWICE! First for Cindy's kids until they grew up and flew the coop, and then after retiring to Colorado, the Covin's moved out to Pennsylvania, where she could be an amazing grandmother AGAIN, for

Jordan and Ethan. We will be hearing from Jordan and Ethan in just a moment – Renée’s other *tchochkela’s*.

Renée has given Marla the best advice on how to raise kids – how to protect them and how to be there for them. Renée would always begin by saying to Marla, “I don’t want to tell you what to do but...” Once Jerry said to Renée, “can’t you just let something go by without giving a comment?” And Renée replied, “you have NO idea how many times I bite my tongue!” Marla called her mother “her conscience.” Renée was always honest, always responsible, and ALWAYS present.

Ross, also valued Renée’s honesty. Sometimes Ross would ask Renée, “can I come over for a cup of coffee to talk to you?” She was critical, she was honest, and he always valued her input. He may not have always liked what she had to say, but he always valued her for her honesty. Above all, she believed in the importance of talking about difficult things. It was Renée’s ability to make such a beautiful home for Shabbat that first attracted Ross to the beauty of Judaism. Shabbat dinner has long since been a staple in both the Cooper and Covin homes.

After one of life’s many challenges, Marla would often turn to Renée and ask, “is everything going to be fine, Mom?” And Renée would answer reassuringly, “everything will be fine.” Losing her best friend is going to be one of Marla’s biggest challenges. As her loving community here at Congregation Beth Shalom, now it is our collective job to stand in for Renée, and saying lovingly to Marla, “everything will be fine.”

As we say farewell to Renée, may we keep in mind that 18th century commentator, Or HaChayim, who reminded us that Jacob’s greatest blessing to Joseph was his being present. In the days to come, may we remember that perhaps Renée’s greatest gift was HER ability to be fully present, first and foremost for Jerry, then her children, then her grandchildren, most recently for her great-grandchildren, Camden, Natalie, and Vanessa, and for those that were blessed to call her their friend. In Renée’s memory, may we endeavor to be more

present for our family and friends, too. *Zichrona l'bracha* – may her memory be for a blessing and let us amen.