

Tillie (Greenstein) Epstein

Tova bat Yitzhak v'Chai Sara

January 9, 1923 – September 9, 2009

As we gather here to remember Tillie Epstein on the week where we prepare for Rosh Ha Shana, known also as Yom Ha Zikaron, the Day of Remembering, there are two different texts that come to mind. One soberly reflects on the circumstances surrounding her death, the other focuses more joyfully on how she lived her life.

Of her death, the literature around the High Holy Days warns us: “a person can do *teshuva*, repentance, up until the very end of their life, but not one moment afterwards, so do *teshuva* now!” The shock regarding the speed with which Tillie passed took our collective breath away. If Tillie had shown any signs of serious illness, her devoted daughter Judy would have never attempted a 22-hour airplane journey from here to France. And yet the speed with which Tillie passed sends a wake-up call to us, which is as loud and shrill as the shofar itself, our moral alarm clock. Tillie teaches us not to put anything off for tomorrow. Time is a luxury none of us can truly count on. So at this season of repentance, Tillie’s death is demanding of us that if we are in conflict with a friend or family member and we think we will put it right next week, don’t wait. Reconcile as soon as this service is over. And of course, any seasoned married couple will tell you, don’t go to bed on an argument. Certainly, Irv, Tillie’s husband of 69 years, could attest to this.

Tillie’s life reflects the advice offered by Moses’ in this past Shabbat’s extended Torah readings, *Nitzvaim* and *Vayelech*:

“I call upon heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. B’harta b’hayim. Choose Life!”

The 1st century sage, Hillel, taught us that all Torah can be reduced to the phrase: “that which you find hateful do not do unto others – all the rest is commentary.” But I would argue that if you had to reduce all of Judaism to one phrase, it would be the Torah command: “choose life!” And I would argue that despite some dark patches, Tillie’s memorable sense of humor, her quick wit, her unexpected come backs, all argue that this woman knew how to “choose life.” And of course it is that life we come to celebrate today.

Tillie was the youngest daughter born to Sophia and Isaac Greenstein, originally from Minsk, Russia. Her sisters, Rose and Dorothy I believe, have now been reunited with their baby sister. Tille was born into an Orthodox home in Camden, New Jersey. Sophia was so religious and knowledgeable that stories are told that when the local minyan needed a tenth, they grabbed Sophia. She must have been the Yentl of her day. She was so kosher that most you could hope she would eat in your home was a baked potato and a *glassela* tea. The

Greenstein's made their living selling hats, and long before Tillie met her future husband, a very young Irving Epstein was ushered into the Greenstein's store in order to purchase his very first chapeau.

Tillie's father, Isaac, died at a very early age. Tillie was only six at the time, so this loss was especially difficult for her. As a result, Sophia had to work very hard to both run their store and raise three girls on her own. Sophia would later pass on this ability to single-handedly run a store to her daughter, Tillie. As a result of Sophia's long hours running the store, Dorothy, the middle sister, and Tillie became extraordinarily close. It was a deep friendship that lasted right into adulthood, as both sisters raised their own children, and their friendship would eventually take them to the Jersey shore during weekdays in the summer. As both their husbands made a living back in the sweltering heat inland, and as their children played, the sisters would spend hours together talking, laughing and enjoying each other's company. The family remembers that whenever Aunt Dorothy and Tillie would light candles together for any of the Jewish holidays, and how appropriate is this memory, with Erev Rosh Hashana only four days away, they would start crying. It was almost Pavlovian. Candles would light, they would cry. They were very religious in many ways, and having their collective family around them at times like these was among their greatest shared joys.

So it wasn't too long after that fateful purchase of a hat that Tillie Epstein actually met Irving Greenstein. Both teens attended the Workmen's Circle shul of Camden for their Jewish education. The Workmen's Circle, with its emphasis on good socialist values like social justice, which I am sure would include universal health care in the current national debate, did not stress the rituals of the Orthodox home Tillie grew up in. Irv claims it was the influence of his father that got the Epstein's to send Tillie to the Workmen's Circle. Irv told me, with a laugh, when it came to observance, "we ruined her." Hardly. Tille is part of a four-generation Congregation Beth Shalom family, which has included not only her and her husband, but both her children, and for a time, even her grand and great grandchildren – and I think they'll eventually be back, and perhaps in even greater numbers.

Tillie graduated from Camden High School in 1944. She was voted "the wittiest girl in the class" – but she would remind us that it SHOULD have been "the wittiest and PRETTIEST girl in the class." Her entire family agreed that she had the most unbelievable sense of humor and was as sharp as a tack. Irv told me she had a quip for every discussion, no matter how complex. At their last anniversary, their 61st, they toasted for 40 more years together, to which Tillie added, "and I STILL haven't made up my mind about him." As family members tried to think up examples of her hysterically funny sense of humor, they realized that they couldn't repeat most of it to me, and even if they could, *nisht helfen*, it wouldn't help, because I could have never repeated this stuff in *shul*.

From high school, following in sister Dorothy's footsteps, Tillie went directly into nursing at the Jewish Hospital in Philadelphia. Today we know it as the Albert Einstein Medical Center. Dorothy was the nurse of the Delivery Room and she paved the way for her sister, Tillie, who absolutely excelled academically at this state-of-the-art teaching hospital. At this time Irv was

attending Temple, which he told me is different than “going to temple,” and he noted that Tillie had a long string of boyfriends after her. None the less, during breaks from rehearsals during Irv’s college productions, Tillie would come over from the Jewish hospital and spend time with him. Things got more serious when Irv took Tillie to his graduation party, featuring the Jimmy Dorsey Band, but even then, Tillie danced with all of Irv’s male friends. Tillie tried to make good. She told Irv: “you’re a lousy dancer but a great singer.”

Since 1940, when Irv and Tillie began spending more time together, Irv started writing songs for Tillie. The first was a parody based on a song by Oscar Hammerstein called “Wild Flower.” Every birthday, every anniversary, Tillie would receive a freshly written song by Irv. In time, he would branch out and write songs for each of their children’s and grandchildren’s birthdays and celebrations. Tillie would edit these songs, Irv generously accepting all her changes, and then when Irv would sing these songs, Tillie, who now knew them so well, would stand behind Irv and mouth them all – she couldn’t help herself.

Well it was war time. Irv entered the army and had won a relatively secure job stateside. However he was stolen by a First Sergeant in need of a corresponding secretary. So on November 20, 1943, Tillie and Irv were married in a very humble ceremony in the study of the most Orthodox rabbi in Camden, Rabbi Naphtali Riff. They had an abbreviated honeymoon in New York. Irv remembers fondly having a meal at the Waldorf Astoria with Tillie. He was in uniform and Frank Sinatra, who they would see again, was performing. They were ushered to the table closest to Sinatra, and at the end of the meal there was no bill. Not for a man in uniform. Yet Tillie was not so impressed. They were sitting really close to Sinatra and Tillie could get a really good look at his face. It was pock-marked. Tillie turned to Irv and said, “he may be able to sing, but he’s a *mee-as*” – Yiddish for ugly. You go, Tillie!

And before he knew it, Irv was shipped off to France, as a supply sergeant. It was on his way back from the front lines along the Red Ball Highway, that his jeep hit a landmine and rolled over on top of him. He was sent to Wallawalla, Washington, where he was not doing well. Tillie flew out, and using advanced nursing techniques she had mastered at the Jewish hospital, which were light years beyond the U.S. Army, she patiently nursed him back to health. He was able to get a 30-day furlough and since they were already on the West Coast, they took a much deserved belated honeymoon in sunny, southern California. There, with Irv in uniform, they were able to attend the radio broadcasts of the greats of their day, like Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby. At one point, like right out of an old “I Love Lucy” episode, Irv told Tillie, “I think I see Ingmar Berman, but I’m not sure. I don’t know if I should get her autograph in case it’s not her.” Tillie, with typical Tillie humor, clean humor which I can safely repeat in shul, advised him: “so go get her autograph. Bring it back here. We’ll read it. If it says ‘Ingmar Berman’ then you’ll find out.”

After receiving a military discharge, Irv and Tillie returned to New Jersey where in 1946, Irv opened the Apparel Shop in Maple Shade, New Jersey. As a husband and wife team, they would run that store for 40 years. They sold socks, underwear, sportswear. The store was a legend. Irv said he takes credit for inventing the first side-walk sale. Irv said he had terrible

taste. He never picked the things that would sell. So when it was time to clear inventory he would take all his losers and put them out on the sidewalk at incredibly low prices to get rid of them. This would all come to an end when Tillie entered the business and became the buyer for the store. Irv told me that Tillie had such incredible taste and such a sense for what the public wanted that other traveling salesmen would show their wares to Tillie first, she would tell the vendors what would sell and what wouldn't, and based on her advice, that's how they reorganized their merchandise before going out on the road. As Irv would leave the business from time to time, to try out other ventures, Tillie would, like her mother Sophia in the family hat shop of her childhood, run the business on her own. In fact, Tillie ran the business so well it freed Irv up to follow his passion for community service, where he served on the Board of Beth El, as Treasurer of the Jewish Federation of Cherry Hill, and as the President of the Jewish Community Center of Cherry Hill. And what a good example he set, as his daughter, Judy would later go on to serve in the same capacity as President of the JCC of Wilmington.

All of Irv's and Tillie's children went on to work in that family store. First there was Judy, born in 1946. We appreciate both the shock and great efforts she and Allan took to turn around the minute they landed in Paris, and to get back here as quickly as possible. Judy was the best seller in the store, or was it her baby brother? She would go on to marry Alan Levy, bless Tillie with two incredible granddaughters, Rachel and Andrea, who in turn would go on to bless her with three incredible great-grandchildren: Rachel's Jacob and Sam and Andrea's Gabriel. As of this fall, all three great grandchildren will have begun their Jewish education at the Wilmington JCC, ensuring a continuity of commitment to Yiddishkeit, which Tillie learned from her very religious mother, Sophia.

Ira was born in 1951. He was the best folder in the store. When Ira folded a shirt you couldn't tell if it had ever been taken out of the box – he was THAT good! With Marsha he blessed Tillie with two wonderful grandsons: Jordan and Ben, and with Elizabeth he blessed Tillie with three additional wonderful grandchildren: Ethan, Aiden and Olivia.

Phil, the baby, arrived in 1954. He claims that he was the first of his siblings to actually get paid minimum wage at the store, and he credited his time in the store for his perfection of the spelling of the word "socks", which, as a very young baseball fan he thought was spelled "s-o-x," but which he later learned, as he filled out his first sales slip, was actually spelled "s-o-c-k-s." Together with Barbara, they blessed Tillie with two wonderful grandchildren, Rachel and Daniel.

Judy, Ira and Phil worked together to write down some memories and observations, which Phil will be sharing with us. And then, Rachel Abrams, representing the next generation, will share some observations of her own. There were great childhood stories, like Tillie's Texas Tommies and grilled cheese sandwiches, ugly corrective shoes she forced Phil to wear, many laughs, but better you should hear these stories directly from those who experienced Tillie first hand, as either a mother or a grandmother.

So for now, I will end as I begun. I will one last time mention how startling and shocking all of us found her sudden death. But I would caution, aside from the obvious lesson of never taking life for granted and settling any family arguments immediately, I would ask that you not let her sudden death overshadow her life, especially her memorable sense of humor. Tillie could not help the way she died. But she could help the way she lived. Let her be remembered by her wit and sense of fun. Which brings me once again to that most memorable of quotes from this past Shabbat's Torah portion: "*b'harta b'hayim! Choose Life!*" With her 69 years of marriage, a perfect complement to Irv, lovingly mouthing the words to his songs, letting rip some unrepeatable line of humor, loving her extraordinary family, Tillie, for the most part, always chose life, and in honoring her memory as we prepare to enter the Day of Remembering, Yom Ha Zikaron, we would do well to follow her example. So if I hear any of you laughing in the sanctuary of Congregation Beth Shalom this weekend for Rosh Hashana, I promise not to shh you as I know you are simply following my suggestion, and remembering one of Tillie's jokes. May her memory be for a blessing and bring you joy and laughter whenever you think of her, and let us say *amen*.