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Chaya bat Baruch u'Bracha
October 6, 1961 – March 9, 2010

This week, Jews all around the world have been reading from *Parashat Vayahkel*, the penultimate Torah portion from the Book of Exodus. The Torah portion details the execution of architectural plans to create the Tabernacle, the first central place for monotheistic worship in Western Civilization. The world, *Vehakhel*, literally means to “create a community. “ Moses creates a community by joining generous people, *nadiv lev*, literally generous hearts, as well as those who are *chacham lev*, wise hearts, those who have skills, and together these two groups of Jews create a portable Mount Sinai, so God can always dwell among the people.

This Torah portion seems so well suited for Debbie. With her kind and generous heart, she was part of a very loving community in Bryn Mawr, where her neighbors knew they could always drop off their children in times of trouble. And this same, loving community has rallied around Debbie, and George, Jessica, and especially 10 year-old Nikki, creating safe places for her to find sanctuary, during the last throes of Debbie’s lung cancer. There is no doubt in my mind that the love and care that Debbie’s friends showed her was a reflection of the love and

care Debbie gave to her friends during her years of good health. This Torah portion is all about creating community and Debbie through her loving heart, knew how to do this.

It is very hard for me to speak about Debbie in the past tense. She was only one year older than I am. From my visit with her by bedside at Bryn Mawr Hospital last week to say *Viddui*, the Jewish version of a last confession, I found her to be funny, kind, she gave me good reviews of my matching tie and *kippah*, bright, and very proud of her Jewish knowledge. I felt that this was a person who I could have easily counted as a friend, not someone that I would be saying goodbye to, just as I was saying hello. So speaking about Debbie in the past tense make no sense to me at all. But I do not know how else to tell her story, but I wanted to go on record as telling you that it feels all wrong.

So Debbie was born on October 6, 1961, right here in Wilmington. She went to Congregation Beth Shalom for Hebrew school. She probably recited her first Hebrew prayers publically on this bima. She had her bat mitzvah in this synagogue at a time when girls were not yet having bat mitzvahs, but her parents Bruce and Barbara shared with me that their daughter was very driven. When she got in her head to do something, she just went ahead and did it. She was also

married to George Feldman on this bimah. So it seems more than appropriate that I should be praising her on this same bima, and that we should be saying goodbye to her in the sanctuary where she grew up. Debbie would not have had it any other way.

Debbie was an active child, be it chasing the family dog, Cokie, of blessed memory, around the house in order to retrieve her cowboy hat or taking ballet in her Danskins, or performing “Go You Chicken Fat Go” for her parents in a first grade presentation.

Being six years older, Linda’s job as big sister was to take care of her baby sister. As they grew older, they became closer. Because their respective children were born a month apart, they experienced motherhood together, and as a result, all the first cousins: Linda and Larry’s kids, Ben, Zachary, Dan and Kim’s kids, Jacob and Sydney, and Debbie and George’s kids, Jessica and Nicole are incredibly close. We are all counting on that closeness to help Jessica and Nikki get through this nightmare. Linda, who are will be hearing from in a little while, told me how incredibly quiet, gentle and generous her sister was. She was always giving blood. Like the children of Israel who gave too much in the creation of the ancient desert Tabernacle, Debbie was always giving, always giving, not just

material things, but also her time and her love. When Linda's son, Ben, needed thyroid surgery, Linda told her sister not to shlep from Pennsylvania down to Maryland. But Debbie ignored her sister and she made the trip anyways, and Linda was so grateful. Having her sister by her side made Linda's ordeal more bearable.

Linda's husband, Larry, shared with me how incredibly fortunate he was to get to know Debbie during a Stargatt family trip to Mexico. He said that this pre-bat mitzvah age Debbie was such a pleasure and that these memories, although now so long ago, always stayed with him.

Linda and Larry's son, Ben and his wife, Cindy, are expecting, please God, their first child. As a loving nephew and niece, they are painfully aware that their Aunt Debbie did not get to reach her full potential. They understand that their aunt's life, in some ways, represents unfinished business. And so they have already decided to give their future daughter Debbie's Hebrew name, Chaya, which means "life." By making this generous gesture, a Debby-like gesture, it is the young couple's hope that their daughter will, in part, extend Debbie's years and continue the work and life that her great aunt had begun. It is my prediction and my hope that Ben and Cindy's baby will be a source of great blessing, comfort

and hope to the family – may her years be many and filled with joy, health and happiness.

Dan, Debbie only brother, said it was hard to be in a home with all girls – and a middle child at that! They often played together as children. And Debbie was so trusting. Even when Dan held his toy bazooka to her mouth, she did not flinch. Even when he pulled the trigger, yes he actually pulled the trigger, he can't believe he actually pulled the trigger, she did not flinch. And I have been asked to tell you that the accident did not leave any scars.

Dan's wife, Kim, said that her sister-in-law was not a brilliant cook but she made such an effort, she really tried. One year Debbie tried her hand at latkas and they came out totally green (but, then again, so have mine, so I don't see what the problem is). At any rate, the family learned to bring food over to Debbie and she would heat it up and everyone always had a good time. Kim added, there is no doubt that Debbie was a great shopper, she knew exactly what would look good on her friends and family. Kim was happy to wear any of Debbie's hand-me-downs, from shoes to handbags. Kim told me that Debbie was a very giving friend, and she had such a love, such a real love for all her friends and family.

George, Debbie's husband, said that his wife was everything to him, partner, lover, friend. Aside from his life-saving genetic research, George is a dentist providing dental care to those members of our society stricken with AIDS. With Debbie's big and loving heart, George's work was in many ways an extension of Debbie's values. Debbie went from Friends School to George Washington University to Wiedener Law School, and she was a member of the Pennsylvania Bar. She put law aside to focus on George and her two beloved daughters, Jessica and Nikki. But had Debbie gone on to practice law, it would have probably been for a free legal aid society, fighting for those without legal representation. In fact George told me that Debbie was very interested in Health Care Reform Law in order to make Health Care more accessible for those in need, as well as a project using DNA to help clear those who had been wrongly accused of a crime who sat on death row. George said that Debbie poured her caring soul into seeking out the very best education for their daughter, Nikki, making sure that she found a school that brought out the best in her daughter. Debbie was above all, a powerful advocate for her family.

Debbie's fight against lung cancer began in July of this past year. Debbie was not a cigarette smoker, which makes her lung cancer that much more of a

mystery. Even from her sick bed, she raised the spirits of others. A few weeks ago, a God squad, consisting of two nuns and two Chassidic rabbis in black coats and hats made the rounds. When they came to Debbie's room, Debbie knew it was the Jewish holiday of Purim, and she wished the two Chassid's a *chag sameach*, Hebrew for "a happy holiday." Well she caught the two rabbis by surprise and they were so happy by this unexpected infusion of *Yiddiskheit* that they reportedly started dancing for joy.

Like the ancient Israelites in this week's Torah portion, first and foremost, Debbie was a giver. Her close friends in Bryn Mawr as well as her family have so benefitted from Debbie's loving, giving nature. I, too, during my visit with her just this past week, walked away uplifted by her kindness and generosity of spirit. Before entering her room, Debbie's big sister, Linda, warned me that, based on her declining health, that Debbie probably would not interact with me. So when I entered the room I had lowered my expectations of an interactive visit. Instead, to both Linda's surprise and my own, Debbie came right into focus, was kind, engaging and in every way a delight. I will always remember her like that. And it is my special prayer for the family, that they, too, remember her like that. Because, you see, Debbie could not control getting her cancer, which dominated

the last eight months of her life. But her illness should not define her, that would be a terrible injustice for someone who was so kind and giving. So my prayer to all of you is that you, in time, will see past the illness and let all those loving memories define how you think of this *ayesht chayil*, this Woman of Valor ... *zichrona l'vracha*, may her memory be for a blessing, and let us all say *amen*.