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Congregation Beth Shalom

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Wilmington, DE

Ralph Friedberg  
*Raphael ben Moshe u'Freydel Leah*  
October 19, 1927 – September 15, 2019

Ralph Friedberg died during the week when Jews all around the world were reading from the Torah portion called *Ki Tavo*, towards the very end of the Book of Deuteronomy. Among the most memorable words in this *parasha* are the first words of liturgy in Western Civilization: “*Arami oved avi...My Father was a wandering Aramean.*” It’s memorable because these same exact words are found in the *Maggid* or story-telling part of the Passover Haggadah, which we read from at the *Pesach seder* each year. In its original context, this is the rags-to-riches story every Israelite farmer was supposed to recite before the High Priest when bringing his first fruit to the Temple in Jerusalem. It’s all about the back story.

The same is true for Ralph. By learning his backstory which I am about to share, you get a sense how he ended up being such a wonderful *mench*. In a way, for Ralph, past is prologue, so let’s begin at the very beginning, and by the end I will have you all saying, “oh, well no wonder.”

Ralph was born on October 19, 1927, in Mahanoy City, Pennsylvania, to Frances and Morris Friedberg -- both from Lithuanian, and who escaped pogroms and poverty along with 2.4 million fellow Jews between the years 1881 – 1924.

I wondered how a pair of nice Jewish Litvoks ended up 38 miles southwest of Wilkes-Barre, PA. The answer is ... coal. Mahanoy City is in coal country. No, it wasn't that the Friedberg's became coal miners. Rather, someone needed to clothe those coal miners – and that was a job for the extended Friedberg family. When Ralph was all of six, the family dress business burned to the ground and the Friedberg's were forced to move to Glenside, PA, where they rented a modest apartment atop a local pharmacy.

While Ralph's family may not have been rich financially, they were rich in terms of the love they had for one another. Ralph was the baby, with sister Kay 16 years his elder, Marion 15 years his elder, and Frank, 13 years his elder. All the sibs went on in life to become successful in the medical field: a doctor, a psychologist and a nurse – all healers. And here's what you need to know in terms of my whole Ki Tavo biblical introduction – all three siblings and parents ADORED baby Ralph. He could do no wrong and he was just so loved. A child who knows their loved unconditionally grows up to love others unconditionally.

And as you will soon learn, EVERYONE loved Ralph – from his wife, to his kids, grandkids – even the staff at the Siegel Jewish Community Center – EVERYONE loved Ralph, because Ralph loved all of them! Everything after that is mere detail.

Ralph grew up in a loving home and the family business was clothing – important when we get to Ralph’s World War Two years. With siblings so much older than he, in many ways Ralph grew up with all the attention of an only child because by the time the family moved to Glenside, Frank, the youngest, of the original three Friedberg’s, was already 19. Ralph had a good Jewish and secular education. He became a bar mitzvah at the synagogue in Cheltenham, a suburb of Philadelphia. And he attended Abbington High School, another suburb of Philly, where very tall, athletic Ralph played on the school’s basketball team. He graduated in 1945.

Ralph would have gone straight on to university but it was war time. At the tender age of just 18, Ralph was drafted into the United States Army. Fortunately the year was 1945, and with the dropping of two nuclear bombs over Japan in August of that year, the war was quickly coming to an end.

Those bombs may have saved Ralph's life, because without the decisive victory, there is no doubt Ralph would have been sent into combat in the Pacific Theatre of Operation, which claimed many American lives. Instead, Ralph was based out of Ft. Lee, Virginia.

I am holding an extraordinary decommission letter from Ralph's commanding officer, Captain Andrew Aines, from the Footwear Section of the Army – who knew there was a Footwear Section? Both long-time family friend Rabbi Peter Grumbacher and I were so impressed with this letter of heartfelt gratitude for Ralph's service that I had to share it with you. Dated 16 April 1947, Captain Aines writes:

*Dear Sergeant Friedberg,*

*It is with a genuine feeling of regret that we bid you good luck and farewell on your departure from the Quartermaster Board and the service of the United States Army. In this statement not only the Footwear Section, but the entire organization wholeheartedly joins. You will be missed.*

*Of your contribution to the research and development of footwear and handwear for the Army, only praise can be forthcoming.*

*Your steady, careful devotion to duty, your conscientious management of personnel assigned to your care, these will be missed.*

*Your self-discipline and dignity, integrity and intelligent appraisal and handling of your many duties never went unnoticed by your associates.*

*It has been an honor and a privilege to serve with you. The entire Quartermaster Board joins in wishing you the best of luck in any future endeavors.*

Wow! Who knew the United States Army wrote letters like that?! I love the letter because it gives you a glimpse into what type of men Ralph was as a 20 year-old, and also shows how Ralph took his experiences with the family clothing business and turned into an expression of patriotic service to his country. The letter helps explain the military honors you will later witness at graveside prior to the conclusion of the Jewish service.

Fresh from his military service in 1947, Ralph used the G.I. Bill to attend Temple University in Philadelphia. It always warms a rabbi's heart when he hears of a young Jewish man attending temple regularly. But instead of an annual membership assessment, this Temple generated a BA in Business for Ralph in 1951.

Upon graduation from Temple, Ralph went to work as a salesman for Publickers Industries, a liquor distributorship located in Center City Philadelphia. It was in this line of work that Ralph met Elaine's first cousin, Paul Kramer, who owned Park Distributing. Paul had asked Elaine what she was looking for in a husband, and she answered "tall, dark and handsome." Since Ralph fit the bill, Paul made the introduction.

When Ralph pursued the lead, and called Elaine up for their first date, she answered, "I can't, I have to wash my hair." Thank God Ralph was not put off, and thank God, Elaine had only two set days each week where she washed her hair. So Ralph proposed a new date which worked. And so, beginning in October 1955, in about this season, they began courting: movies, dinners and dancing in Collegeville, PA. The movies, dinners and dancing had their intended effect. On Purim of 1956, Ralph and Elaine were engaged. Almost nine months to the day, on June 16, 1956, the young couple were married at Congregation Emanuel in Philadelphia, on West Oak Lane, in North-ish Philadelphia. The couple honeymooned at the famous Concord Hotel in the Catskills. For those of you too young to get what it means to honeymoon in the Catskills I refer you to the movie, *Dirty Dancing*.

And if you are, how can this be, too young to understand the *Dirty Dancing* reference, I refer you to episodes four to six of *The Amazing Mrs. Maisel*, set in the summer of 1959 –by far my favorite part of the series to date – except for the scenes when the rabbi is appalled.

From their Catskills Honeymoon, the young couple made their first home in Abbingdon, PA. After a year and a half, Paul Kramer, that famous first cousin who made the match between Elaine and Ralph, now wooed Ralph away from his current place of work, in order to join the family business, Park Distributing, in Wilmington. Ralph and Elaine moved into Monroe Park. You might know it as Greenville Place, on the corner of Routes 52 and 141. Back then, that was the place to which all the young Jewish couples moved. Because Elaine had a teaching position up in the Philadelphia suburbs, she would come and join Ralph down at Monroe Place on the weekends. Elaine speculated that perhaps the neighbors thought she was a “kept woman.” I’m not sure, but I think that’s like the movie, *Pretty Woman*. Of course, Elaine was very pregnant with their first child at the time – so really only God truly knows what the neighbors thought.

Bob, Elaine and Ralph’s eldest, was born in 1958. Together with his wife, Bev, they blessed Ralph with three grandchildren: Brett, Michelle, and Lauren.

Brett and his wife, Katherine, are due to give birth to what would have been Ralph's great-grandson. Bev said that her father-in-law treated her more like a daughter than a daughter-in-law. Bob will be addressing you in just a moment.

Debbie was born in 1961. Together with her husband, Jerome Nachlis, they blessed Ralph with two grandsons, Josh and Aaron. Aaron shared with me how special he felt to be holding his grandfather's hand just as he passed away. Jerome told me that you would never find a more fair, moral man than his father-in-law, and that he was so trusted by his family, that when he did speak up, his word was law. Like his sister-in-law, Bev, Jerome felt Ralph was as close to him as any biological parent would have been. Debbie will be addressing you in just a moment.

Kathy was a surprise. A very pleasant surprise. She came along in 1963, the same year that the Friedberg's moved to their home of 55 years on Lori Lane, not too far from the Kutz Home. Together with her husband, Seth Bloom, they blessed Ralph with two grandchildren, Adam and Rachel. And Adam and his wife, Rae, are expecting what would have been Ralph's first great-grandchild in October. Both Seth and Ralph have been in and out of the hospital a lot as of late.



The toll on Kathy has been challenging, and that's an understatement. But Ralph felt a very special bond with his son-in-law, telling him: "you're on my team Seth."

Kathy will be speaking to you in just a moment.

What was the secret of Ralph and Elaine's 63 years of marriage together? Clearly, it was humor. They both had a great, no an awesome sense of humor – especially Ralph. Ralph and Elaine had inside jokes, that would keep them laughing for years. Ralph would just shout things like "Gratz is closed" to family friend Jody, or "run faster" to family friend Zari, and the family would be left in stitches. In addition to all the laughter, Kathy told me that Ralph was a good sport.

If I were to tell you what Ralph's most important value was, I would go back to the beginning of the sermon and my reference to "My Father was a wandering Aramean." In other words, you have to remember how a person started their life. And Ralph started his life in a loving family that adored him. Therefore, it's no wonder that family was his most important value. The wonderful annual family trips Elaine's father started, were maintained by Ralph and Elaine. There were family trips to Nova Scotia to Montreal to Norfolk to Disneyworld in Florida -- And don't forget the cruises.

These family trips started with Bob, Debbie and Kathy. Later their spouses and their kids were included too. The family vacation was an annual summer institution. Ralph's last gesture of love of family was his request to have his cousin, Danny Friedberg, aka Freebo's song, *Standing Ovation*, played at his funeral. You heard the song as you walked into the sanctuary this afternoon.

Second to the value of family was Bob's innate sense of generosity. After raising to the rank of President of Park Distributors, Ralph used his income to help any and every charity who solicited him. He loved to pour his generosity of time into the Siegel JCC, where everyone on staff love and adored him, because Ralph had a magnetic personality. People were literally drawn to him. I experienced Ralph's generosity of spirit first-hand when I was paired up as his tennis partner at the JCC Sports Classic. My tennis game is, to be generous, erratic at best. Bob's game is as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar. He suffered both my constant yelling of "*oy gevalt*" and my returns sailing past the base line with a spirit of generosity and patience.

He was eclectic and filled with life – from the aforementioned tennis to a love of bowling. He was a proud member of the B'nai Brith Bowling League, and met all sorts of mainstays of the Jewish community, like Jeff Stape at the bowling lanes long before Kathy and Seth discovered Caryl and Jeff.

Finally his laughter was absolutely contagious, and he had what can only be described as an **amazing** sense of humor.

When we think of the beginning of this week's Torah portion, with the ancient Israelite farmer recalling his impoverished past and how far he has come at harvest time, we recall Ralph and his beginning as an absolutely loved child. With that feeling of love, he endowed everyone he met with a similar sense of love. In Ralph's memory may we work harder to be appreciative of the families we each come from, and from a position of love and gratitude, may we work harder to be loving and kind to others – injecting humor whenever possible. Then we can truly say, may Ralph Friedberg's memory be for a blessing, *zikaron l'baruch*, and we can all answer with a heartfelt *amen*.