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Congregation Beth Shalom
Wilmington, DE
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Hanna Goldstrom Greenbaum
Chana bat Laib u'Frayda
May 26, 1918 - April 3, 2005

In our search to find guidance in times of trouble and confusion, traditional Jews, like Hanna Greenbaum, would turn to the weekly Torah portion for guidance. This week's Torah portion, taken from the Book of Leviticus, is called "Tazria" and describes the ritual of purification and reintegrating of the recovered...leper. Oi vey, leprosy. How can leprosy teach us anything about the righteous life of Hanna Greenbaum?

I am not the first rabbi to face this homiletic challenge. Almost two thousand years ago, the rabbis living in the Galilee who would go on to write their biblical commentaries, called Midrash, faced a similar challenge. They scoured the Torah to find any other references to leprosy which might guide them in their interpretations. In the twelfth chapter of the Book of Numbers they found what they were looking for. Miriam, Moses' brother, speaks poorly of his brother's choice of wife behind his back. As a punishment, God strikes her with the disease of "tsara'at", leprosy. The rabbis read that story back into this week's Torah portion and concluded that the malady of leprosy is a Divine response to the sin of "l'shon ha' ra", of speaking badly about other people. The rabbis went so far as to say that "metsorah", the Hebrew word for a leper, is really an abbreviation for the three Hebrew words: "motsi" "shem" "ra", one who brings forth a bad reputation about another. This week's Torah portion coupled with next week's parasha, is really about avoiding the sin about speaking poorly about others at all costs.

What does this lesson have to do with Hanna Greenbaum? EVERYTHING! Hanna could have written these Midrashim herself. As her children, friends and those who in the community can attest, this woman NEVER had a bad word to say about ANYBODY. This theme ran through the kind words of praise you have heard from Hanna's son-in-law, Jeff; daughter Judy, brother, Al; son-in-law Hal, representing both himself and Hanna's daughter, Harriet, as well as Hanna's dear son, David. All will attest that Hanna was absolutely meticulous in her humane treatment of her fellow human being -- in both word and deed.

This is an observation shared by some of the leading Jewish leaders of the Wilmington community who have gathered today in order to show their respect and admiration for Hanna. I was told that Rabbi Sandy Dressin of Adas Kodesh referred to Hanna as a "Tsadika", a "tsadekes", a righteous woman. Rabbi Dressin, who as a distinguished military chaplain in the service of our country, had been stationed in Heidelberg, used this experience to help form a strong connection between himself and Hanna, between the rabbi and the tsadekes. Rabbi Huni Vogel of Chabad, through a connection between his dear wife and Hanna's friend, created a deep bond between him and his family, and as a result, Hanna was invited to every major simcha in the Vogel family. Our own Hazzan Michael Horwitz has recounted to me how wonderful Hanna made him feel every time he came to see her on a pastoral visit to the Kutz Home. Think about it.

Here is the hazzan whose chief goal is to bring joy to others, and what was Hanna's goal? The same.

With a name like Hanna, should we really be surprised at the deep spiritual nature of this woman who we have come to praise. In the Haftarah for the First Day of Rosh Hashana, taken from the First Book of Samuel, we first read about Hanna. Her method of praying was so deeply spiritual that nobody in Biblical times had ever seen anything like it. Eli, the High Priest, was so confused, he thought that Hanna was actually intoxicated. It turns out that Hanna was intoxicated with God. Hanna becomes our role model when we try to find God through our prayers. How appropriate that Hanna Greenbaum's son-in-law, Jeff, reads this Haftarah for us every Rosh Hashana, and how wonderfully prophetic were Hanna's dear parents Louis and Frieda, when they chose this name for their only daughter.

I wish to close by sharing with you my last memory of Hanna Greenbaum. It occurred one week before Hanna's passing, on Sunday, March 27. Hanna had suffered a major stroke, it looked as if Hanna only had a few hours with us, and Jeff and Judy summoned me to her bedside to utter the appropriate prayers. I turned to the Viddui, the final confession, and uttered it on behalf of Hanna, in both Hebrew and English. Then Hanna's daughter-in-law, Laureine, asked if there was perhaps another song or blessing I might chant. Judy shared with us that her father, Walter, had always referred to his beloved wife Hanna as his Ayshet Hayil, his Woman of Valor. This accolade, more than any other, had always been a source of great pride and satisfaction for Hanna.

So I thought it would be appropriate for me to sing this ancient song of praise for Hanna. Now you need to know that up to this point in her bed at the Kutz Home, Hanna had been absolutely unresponsive, much as she had been in the hours after her stroke. Who would have expected anything more? Even during the Viddui, even during the final Shema which Jeff, Judy, David and Laureine joined in chanting with me, Hanna remained unresponsive. Yet, as I began the stirring melody of the Woman of Valor, and actually uttered Walter's words of praise, "Ayshet Hayil", Hanna miraculously came alive, her eyes opened, and with a serene smile she took in all of her loved ones around her. It was a moment which I, and I dare say her loved ones, will never forget.

So I close my words of praise, with Walter's words of praise, taken originally from the Book of Proverbs, attributed to King Solomon, "Ayshet Hayil."