

Lillian Levine Kemper

Lilah Mikayla bat Moshe v'Chana

September 12, 1932 – August 23, 2009

I often turn to the Torah portion of the week for insights into describing a person's life. I do not look at it as happenstance as to the Torah passages that correspond with the week in which a Jew passes away. And so in turning to *Parashat Ki Tetzei*, from the Book of Deuteronomy, I was confronted with a virtual almanac of miscellaneous Jewish laws. Amid these seemingly random laws are the following which caught my attention: you shalt not muzzle an ox while sowing your field; you shall not harness an ox and a donkey together; you shall help your enemy raise its fallen donkey under its load; you shall return your enemy's donkey; and you shall shew away a mother bird before taking either its eggs or its children. Now it is no surprise that these animal-related laws would catch my eye – after all my wife is a veterinarian. But what on earth do these laws have to do with Lillian Kemper, whose life we come to remember and honor this afternoon?! When I met with her girls, they never let on that Lillian had a pet or had a particular affection for animals.

Bare with me. These laws, taken as an aggregate, are related to the Jewish principal of *t Saar baalei hayim* – preventing cruelty to animals. The great 12th century rabbi, Maimonides said we should pursue these laws because God wanted us to be kind to animals. But the 13th century rabbi, Nachmanides, said that his colleague got it all wrong. The point of these laws was not because God wanted us to be kind to animals for their own sake, but rather, animals were like training wheels for human beings. If you really took the time to consider the feelings of a mother bird by shewing it away before taking either her children or her eggs, *kol v' Homer*, all the more so, imagine the type of compassion you would develop for caring about your fellow human being. And THAT brings us directly to Lillian. Because consistently, be it her grandsons at UD, her friend of 50 years, or her daughters, they all said Lillian was the best friend, the best family member a person could hope for. She was constantly there for her fellow human being. Without taking care of animals, she learned every lesson about human kindness that Nachmanides would have hoped for by caring for all God's creatures, great and small – borrowing from that most famous of all British veterinarians, James Herriot. Lillian was the closest thing to a saint, and I was blessed to have known

and served her for the entirety of my five years of service as a rabbi in Wilmington.

Lillian was born on September 13, 1932, right here in Wilmington, Delaware. She was the middle child born to Morris and Anna Levin. Her older brother, Bobby Levin, is with us today, and we will be returning to his and Sally's home for shiva tonight at 8 p.m. Lillian was pre-deceased by her half-brother, Nathan, of blessed memory. Morris owned a grocery store on Vandever Avenue, which you get to if you keep going south on Route 202. It was the Depression Years, so having a grocery store means you didn't starve. The family belonged to the Orthodox Adas Kodesch, so Lillian never had a bat mitzvah or confirmation. By the time of her death, she would have supported all the major synagogues in Wilmington, having been raised at Adas Kodesch, raising her own children at Congregation Beth Emeth, and spending her twilight years with me at Congregation Beth Shalom. Like most Jews of her day, she graduated from P.S. DuPont High School, graduating in 1950. Her childhood memories include piling into her cousins, the Sach's car (we are pleased to have congregants Marv and Harriet Sachs with us today) and traveling to Atlantic City for summer fun. She belonged to the Jewish sorority, Sigma Phi Sigma, where she met her life-long

friends, including Joan Levithan, who flew all the way from Florida to be with us, Esther Levin, of blessed memory, Lucille Glick Sopinsky, and Sally Cirkin, who would go on to marry Lillian's brother, Bobby, and become a Levine.

Lillian kept her friends for life. Among her dearest friends, is Jo Kessler, who is joined here today by her husband, Al, and her two boys. Their birthdays were two days apart, Jo on the 11th of September and Lillian on the 13th, and for more than 40 years they would take each other out on their special day to a great restaurant, strictly private, no one else allowed. Although their friendship goes back 50 years, it was when Jo got Lillian her job working for New Castle County, where they could take lunch together every day, that their friendship truly blossomed. Jo's boys saw Lillian as their family and there was nothing that Lillian would not do for the Kessler's – from making the kugel for the break fast after Yom Kippur, to being the first to visit at the hospital to the much-appreciated cheese pies she used to cook for Steve on New Year's Day during the football games. While Jo was at Shipley Manor during the past 11 months of declining health, Jo would be there four to five times per week, and every day while she was at Wilmington Hospital. Jo showed that her deep loving friendship with Lillian worked in both directions.

But the love of Lillian's life was Jerry Kemper. At the time, six years past high school graduation, Lillian was working partially for her father at the grocery store and partially for a collections agency. Lillian was supposed to have met Jerry earlier, but he stood her up on a date with other friends to Atlantic City – some lame excuse about car trouble. It was Memorial Day 1956. Lillian went with the Jewish Community Center of Wilmington on an international student exchange adventure to meet with the *yidden* of the Jewish Community Center in far-away Vineland, New Jersey, at a picnic – what Jews won't go through to meet fellow Jews! Lillian was a brown-eyed brunette, very quiet, very pretty, a skinny little thing. Well she must have made some impression on Jerry Kemper because only four months later, on October 6, 1956, they were married! I understand there were many love letters between the couple during those four months of courting, but Jerry wrote more! They were married at the Kent Manor Inn. It was a much smaller wedding than Lillian would have liked. If her father had let her, Lillian would have invited the world, because she knew and liked so many people. They honeymooned at Lake George, New York, a place they would return to time and again, on family vacations. Lillian and Jerry were a wonderful team. Together they open and ran Annette's Luncheonette on Market Street. Tragically, after

only 11 years of marriage, heart disease took Jerry from Lillian. And yet she continued to care for Jerry's infirmed mother for the next 20 years, highlighting Lillian's sense of loyalty, dedication and family responsibility. Jerry was the best of husbands and no other man could ever measure up to the standard Jerry had set. To her dying day Lillian wore the simple gold band Jerry gave her on her wedding day.

Andrea, the eldest of the two Kemper kids, was born in 1957. She remembers, as a single mother, Lillian always worked very hard juggling multiple jobs, to make sure there was a roof over their heads and food on the table. She worked for the Sears Catalog and at Hamby Middle School, in the cafeteria. It was, as you already heard, due to her girlfriend, Jo, that she came to work for New Castle County. Andrea said it was a hard life for her mom. She survived breast cancer twice in addition to the hardships of work. But she still had time to cook and bake, and even commit her recipes to typed out cards, sometimes in copies. Among Andrea's favorite dishes of her mom, was a chicken, rice and vegetable dish impossible to replicate, as well as a more festive Confetti Jello Mold, consisting of multiple layers of multi-colored jellos brought together in such

a way that each slice looks like a beautiful mosaic when cut. The girls will try to have the recipe available for you to take home after shiva tonight.

Andrea's relationship with her mother blossomed in adulthood, when the two of them worked for Allergy Associates, that is, when they started working for our beloved Dr. Leonard Seltzer. His wife, Judy, and their boys, Larry and my colleague, Bruce, were far, far more than an employee and his family – they were Lillian, Andrea and Merrill's family. Bruce has traveled from his pulpit to be with us this afternoon to show his love and respect.

Andrea's greatest gift to her mother, Lillian, was the birth of her only child, Jennifer Leigh, born in 1981. Jennifer had a very special relationship with her Mom-Mom, in part, because she was the first grandchild. Jennifer could always bring Lillian's spirits up, with her hugs and effervescent personality. Jennifer would take Lillian to the University of Delaware, to meet all her friends. And Lillian was so happy for and proud of her granddaughter. She was happy that Jennifer had met Angelo, a young man that Lillian would later unofficially adopt as a grandson and proud that Jennifer graduated the University of Delaware.

After 24 years together, in 2004, their relationship came to a tragic end when Jennifer was killed in a freak automobile accident. Lillian never fully

recovered emotionally from this tragedy but when I moved to Wilmington, also in 2004, Lillian and I began a wonderful relationship together to help her cope with this loss. Lillian would attend my Healing Services at Jewish Family Services Healing Center. She would attend Friday evening Kabbalat Shabbat regularly, with the Kessler's, and later she let me come into her new home at Shipley Manor, to sing to her and play guitar. She was so tolerant and so very appreciative of my impromptu concerts. I would like to think that Jennifer Leigh and her Mom-Mom are now rejoined in heaven, once again bringing joy to one another.

Merril, Lillian's second daughter, was born in 1961. She shared with me stories of all the weekend trips she would arrange for her and Andrea to visit cousins in New Jersey and New York. Family was always so important to Lillian and she passed on those values, as well as the importance of education to both Merrill and to Andrea. Merrill had a favorite dessert of her mom's as well. It was called Strawberry Pretzels, and it consisted of a bottom crust composed of crushed pretzels, with a middle filling of sweet cream cheese, and a top layer of strawberries. Again, Merrill, like her sister, Andrea, will try to ensure that you get

copies of the recipe over at Uncle Bobby and Aunt Sally's home in Chalfonte tonight after shiva services.

Merril's special gift to her mother was Lillian's two grandsons, Kerry, almost 21 and Bryan, 19 – both students and roommates at the University of Delaware. Lillian prioritized college education and to have all three grandchildren enrolled or having graduated the University of Delaware, was an ever-present source of pride and joy for Lillian. Kerry sat with his Mom-Mom, holding her hand, all day on the Sunday that she passed away. Kerry said of his and his brother, Bryan's relationship with Lillian, that whatever we needed, she always there for us. Her most important teaching was "health was always more important than money." He added, that for his Mom-Mom, "it was NEVER about having luxuries or extravagances, it was always about family and friends. " She was proud of her grandchildren's academic excellence and how quickly they had matured into young men. She made both Kerry and Bryan both feel very special, and would take them out individually on special dates as they were growing up.

So, as I said, I came into Lillian's life just after Jennifer died. I soon became "Lillian's Rabbi Beals," and I have remained that to this day. It is not that I am not equally available to other congregants, it is just that Lillian had rather exclusive

claims on me. As much as I tried to bring her joy with my pre-Shabbat concerts at Shipley Manor, she would make me feel wonderful about my singing and guitar playing. Before her Shipley Manor Days which dominated the last 11 months of her life, she was a regular Friday evening attendant at Shabbat services, and she always gave me such a lift. Her fall in our sanctuary at the beginning of Kabbalat Shabbat services, which Dr. Seltzer later explained was due to an undiagnosed stroke, was a blow to all of us. Watching the Lillian we came to know and love slowly slip away from us was hard to witness so we come to this moment, today, with very mixed emotions. We will miss her terribly but we are, in some ways, relieved that up in heaven, she has been restored to her former self, surrounded by her loved ones, especially her beloved Jennifer Leigh.

Our Torah portion discusses kindness to animals. Some of our medieval rabbis understood kindness to animals as a pathway to kindness to fellow human beings. I know officially that the K in Lillian's name stood for Kemper, but to all that knew her, the K stood for kindness. It was that kindness that inspired her to constantly feed the custodians and other workers at her apartment complex off Namaan's Road, with cold drinks always in the fridge waiting for them. It was that signature kindness that led her grandchildren, her friends of 50 years and her

daughters to all say unanimously, “Lillian was always there for us.” And it was that kindness that I experienced first hand, five years ago as a brand new rabbi to Wilmington, that gave me the confidence to help me do my work. Lillian did not preach kindness, rather, she practiced kindness, she LIVED kindness. May her memory be for a blessing, *zichrona l’vracha*, and let us all say, *amen*.