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Josephine Taub Kessler
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Josephine Kessler, affectionately known to all as “Jo,” passed away when Jews all throughout the world were studying from the Torah portion called, *Bo*, from the second book of the Torah, the Book of Exodus. The Torah portion details preparations for the first Passover seder in history. But more relevant to Jo, the *parasha* describes how Moses, a Jewish shepherd, takes on the most powerful man in the world, Pharaoh, and brings him down to size by speaking truth to power. Jo Kessler was nothing short of being a Moses for OUR day. She certainly knew how to speak truth to power. In fact, talk to any of her family, her sons, her daughters-in-law, her grandchildren, her friends, even her rabbi and cantor -- we will all tell you the same thing: Jo Kessler told you exactly what she thought. She did not mince her words. She did not try to sugarcoat it. Jo was honest and she wasn't afraid to tell you. Her not being afraid reminds me so much of Moses in the Court of Pharaoh.

Here was Pharaoh, a dictator, a master of intimidation, from his high ceiling palace to the magicians, to his head dress – yet Moses refused to be intimidated, Moses refused to be afraid. And I have always respected that same bravery, that same courage of her convictions found in our Jo.

So what was the source of Jo's bravery – her outspoken nature, her moxy? The source of her *chutzpah* is a four letter word and I will spell it to you slowly: T – A – U – B ! Taub was Jo's maiden name, and the six siblings who came before Jo all created an environment which would help Jo become Jo. Her parents, Samuel and Mary, created an entire army of siblings for Jo: in order there was: Sadie, Bill, Henry, Ann, Lil and Bea. All but brother Henry had what Jo's kids called the “Taub temper.” And Jo's older son, Alan, says he has it too, and he passed it down to his daughter, Stacy. Alan isn't sure if its nature or nurture, but he thinks it's in the

Taub genes. Science may never unravel the mystery completely. These six children who came before baby Jo played the roles of siblings, mentors, second mother and best friends to Jo, depending on their respective mood and what any given situation called for.

The seven Taub children and their parents lived in a very large, four-story home at 101 Chelsea Avenue, three blocks from the Boardwalk, in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The family was moderately comfortable until the family patriarch, Samuel, a roofer by profession, took a terrible fall, and was confined to a lifetime of pain in a wheelchair, and a shortened life span.

The Taub's took their Judaism seriously. Their home was a kosher home. Alas in those days, it was not common to give the girls a proper Jewish education. So at age 50, right here on the bimah of Congregation Beth Shalom, under the guidance of Rabbi David Geffen and Rabbi Emeritus Jacob Kraft, Jo Kessler finally had her bat mitzvah! Jo always had a very special respect and affection for both Rabbi Kraft and his wife, Leah. She loved them very much.

Jo graduated from Atlantic City High School in 1944. She had many friends in school and belonged to many organizations, like True Sisters, a Jewish sorority. She held on to many girl friends from this part of her life. She particularly held Betty Lissak in great affection. But I want to tell you about the person she held the greatest affection for more than 70 years.

Enter Al Kessler. He had dropped out of his pre-med program at Susquehanna College after the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and joined the United States Air Force in 1942. He came home a hero in 1945 – although Al said anyone who survived World War Two was automatically a hero. His friends made him a wonderful Welcome Home party. And one of the young people invited to the party was an 18-year old svelt, brown-eyed brunette name Josephine Taub – who knew how to hold her own in a conversation, imagine that. World War Two veteran Al Kessler took an immediate liking to Jo. Of all the girls who attended his welcome home party that night, it was Jo Taub who Al invited to the movies the following week. They went to the Colonial Theatre. It's no longer standing but it was one of the grand

movie houses of Atlantic City in its day. Their courtship included many trips to Atlantic City's famed Steel Pier, where they caught all sorts of acts, as well as rides. For a young couple in love, the Boardwalk offered all sorts of diversions.

But Al's greatest adventure was seeking the approval of Jo's six over-protective siblings. He said: "it was like I got out of World War Two only to get into World War Three." But when he asked for his future mother-in-law, Mary's permission to marry her daughter, he got the thumbs up.

Of course it didn't hurt that he worked for his family-owned Lewin's Deli, supplier to many of the major casinos in Atlantic City as well as the jockeys at the Atlantic City Racetrack. At least Mary Taub knew that her daughter Josephine would never go hungry – the same reason why Golda approved of the match between Tseitl and the Butcher Lazar Wolf in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Because Jo's father, Samuel, was confined to a wheelchair, Jo and Al were married in the Taub family home, on June 20, 1948. This June would have marked their 67th wedding anniversary. The young newlyweds honeymooned in the Catskills at Grossinger's Resort. Such greats like David Daniel Kaminsky, sorry, Danny Kaye, and Mendel Berlinger, sorry, Milton Berle, had already made the Catskills THE place for young newlyweds to spend their honeymoon. During the summer which Al and Jo went up to Grossinger's, Eddie Cantor was just about to discover Eddie Fisher, and give him his big break.

From the Catskills, the young Kessler's traveled south, right past Atlantic City and the Taub family home, to make a new life for themselves in Washington, DC. They lived in North East D.C., and Al worked for the Transit System while Jo worked as a secretary to John Russell Young, President of the Board of Commissioners for the District of Columbia.

But the move to DC would not stick. In those days there were no bridges to get out of DC, only ferries. So for Jo to go home and see her Taub siblings in Atlantic City took the better part of an entire day. While Al loved DC, Jo hated it. So what do you think happened? If you guessed that the Kessler's moved – you'd be correct. They did not move all the way back to Atlantic City, but

rather to Wilmington, Delaware. By 1952, when Jo and Al moved, Jo's siblings Lil and Henry were already living in Wilmington, and for Jo – her FAMILY was always her number one value. I will point out that Al DID have his own family living in the DC area, but they weren't Taub's. Enough said.

But before they moved to Wilmington, back in 1950, Jo gave birth to her first child, Alan. You will hear from Alan in just a little while. He remembers that as a child, his mother was tough, demanding, maintained a "take no prisoners" approach to mother hood. And he also knew she loved her family fiercely. His favorite dishes growing up were Jo's spaghetti, her home-made French fries, her amazing Hungarian stew, and for dessert, either her chocolate cake or her chocolate chip cookies. So amazing were her chocolate chip cookies, that even most recently when she was ill, she still managed to produce a batch for her granddaughter Stacy.

During Alan's childhood, his father spent many days and nights working for Bendhime's Shoe Store, first as a salesman, and then as the sales manager. During his late night Wednesday's, as a special treat, Jo would take young Alan out for hamburgers and French fries as the Post House, at 40th and Market Streets, and this was among Alan's favorite early mother-son activities. He would later go on to study law at the University of Maryland, and Jo couldn't have been prouder.

Alan would go on to marry Gail, and together they would bless Jo and Al with three wonderful grandchildren, Anastasia, who everybody calls Stacy, Mark and Dan. Stacy would marry G.L., that's Gian Luigi, and together they would bless Jo and Al with two amazing great grandchildren, Valentina and Luca. As hard as Jo was on her sons, she was easy on her grandchildren who could do no wrong. And when she was blessed with great grandchildren Jo felt like she got the chance to relive being a grandmother, a MomMom, all over again. In fact her last words to her daughter-in-law Gail were, "did Valentina have a good 7th birthday party?" Stacy, representing all four grandchildren, will be addressing you in just a little while.

Steven, Jo's second son, was born in 1954. Before I go on, I need to tell you, as Jo's rabbi, she had nothing but the nicest things to say about her sons. She felt they were attentive,

loyal, would do anything for her and Al. I think that's important to state because both boys told me how hard Jo had been on them, but based on what Jo said about them to others, you would have never known. I think this was Jo's way. Steve remembers not speaking to his mother for a whole week in childhood. It seems that there had been rumors of some kids getting tics. So when Steve went to the barber for his haircut, Jo had given the man instructions that he should give him an extreme crew cut. This was bad because the fashion of the day was Beatles, not Marines, and Steve was embarrassed to say the least. But, thank God, hair grows back.

All of Steven's friends lived near P.S. DuPont. And all of his friends played sports with him in the area bordering his neighborhood. The custom was, when it was time for dinner, each boy's mom would call out to him. Well Steven's mother was blessed to have the loudest voice of all the mothers in the neighborhood. And when Jo called Steven in for dinner rumor had it that she could be heard as far away as Newark. Steven also told me that his mother, Jo, was always there for him. She took a part time job in the Greenville Elementary School Cafeteria as a monitor.

She took this particular job because she could be at home when Steven left for school, zip on over to Greenville Elementary, and still be back at home before Steven was dismissed from PS DuPont.

Barbara met Steven back in 1979 when they were dating. She described Jo as a "strong-willed but loving personality." She was never malicious, never cruel – but she sure told you what was on her mind. Jo eventually cut her some slack. She even shared her recipe for white cake with white icing, and even her chopped liver, which Barbara improved upon with the addition of cognac and black pepper – which was met with Jo's praise. Best of all, Barbara and Steven blessed Al and Jo with a grandson, Brian.

Brian shared with me that when he moved into the City of Wilmington for his job with Bank of America, he became incredibly close to his grandparents, visiting them multiple times per week in their apartment at Park Plaza. And nothing gave Jo greater pleasure than seeing her Brian spread out on her sofa, chilling, feet up. Jo said, with pleasure, "he feels at home." Alan and Steve shared with me that if they were caught with their feet on their mom's sofa it

would have been a different story. So disappointed was Jo when Brian took a job in DC, that she would tell him, “the couch is vacant.”

Brian shared that from his MomMom he learned the number one value of “blatant honesty.” And like his MomMom, he, too, never developed a filter.

After Al retired at age 65, Jo and Al were able to truly enjoy so many things together. They had a subscription to the Play House at the Hotel which gave them so much pleasure. Of course there was the time when Jo took young 5-year-old Brian to the Play House for a production of “Peter Pan.” Jo was dressed up to the nines, and was so excited for Brian. Okay, so that didn’t work out so well, but other than that, the Playhouse was magical. And there were special meals at the House of Beef, the Green Room at the Hotel, Fibi’s way out on Lancaster Avenue, more recently, Harry’s, and always the old reliable Hollywood Grill where Jewish Wilmington dines.

And how Al and Jo have enjoyed their friends – Sally and Bobby Levin, James and Gerry Blume, her devotion to Rabbi and Leah Kraft, Roz Brenner, and in my day, I remember how very devoted Al and especially Jo was to Lillian Kemperer and Mutzi Bellack. Both those deaths were devastating to Jo – it was if she had lost two sisters. You really could not hope for a better friend in Jo Kessler. She was fiercely loyal and devoted.

As her rabbi, I need to tell you how devoted she was to Congregation Beth Shalom. Her boys told me that after her home at Park Plaza, she spent most of her time at the shul, and it only got stronger in her old age. I knew her as the most devoted of volunteers. In fact, so devoted was Jo to the synagogue that when we had our annual December holiday luncheon for the Beth Shalom paid staff, Jo ALWAYS came along because she spent as much time working in the office as the paid staff. She felt so comfortable at Beth Shalom – the way her grandson Brian must have felt on that couch. I benefitted greatly by her presence. When she was not well enough to come to shul, I had our synagogue secretary Pat set my alarm for a reoccurring appointment at 10 o’clock a.m. on Thursday mornings to call Jo for my weekly morning check-in. Although it only took a moment, I kept the appointment even when I was visiting my own elderly parents in Southern California. I later heard that this particular phone call was

especially meaningful to her as I was on vacation caring for my own parents. Al said he never heard the end of it. Jo's response taught me that we should never take for granted how important a small gesture of consideration can be for those on the receiving-end. Jo inspires me to want to be more considerate of my congregants, especially the ones who used to come to shul often but are no longer able.

Just as a Moses only comes along once in history, I would have to say the same of Josephine Taub Kessler. Any of us who knew her were impacted by her, and cannot help but smile when we think of her – her impact was tremendous. She was our captain, our general, our boss, our Moses. *Zichrona l'bracha* – may her memory be for a blessing, and let us say *amen*.