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Congregation Beth Shalom
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Charles (Chuck) Klein
Zeesie Haskel ben Hora Leb u'Freida
March 21, 1926 - September 7, 2006

For me, one of the most haunting pieces of liturgy during the High Holy Days is the *Unetane tokef* prayer with its haunting question: “who will live and who will die.” We hear the words in Hebrew *me yamut?* and we let it wash right over us. Yet we really do not know if any one of us will be here next Rosh Hashana. And we do not know which if any of our loved ones will be here next Rosh Hashana. Charles Klein’s shocking and tragic death last Thursday afternoon teaches each of us that we must never take our loved ones for granted. That we must never go to sleep on an argument. That we must be sparing with our criticisms, our judgements, our anger – because we simply do not know the length of our days.

Chuck’s passing calls to mind the *midrash* regarding the death of our patriarch Jacob. In the Book of Genesis, Jacob is described as being ill prior to his death. Before Jacob’s time, the Hebrew scripture never described anyone as being ill as a prelude to death. So the ancient rabbis comment that Jacob prayed for illness so that he would have enough time to call his children together and share his wisdom with them and prepare them for his passing.

Chuck was not given this grace period, and neither were we. Perhaps this, above all, makes his passing so difficult. But allow me to offer these two initial thoughts. First, based on my conversations with Naomi, the children and the grandkids, it seems very clear to me that Chuck, affectionately, Pop Pop, did not leave anything undone. His loved ones knew exactly

what he thought of them, and it seems clear to me that they, in turn, did a very good job of letting him know what they thought of him. You will not find a better example of mutual love and admiration anywhere than the love Chuck felt for his family and vice versa. Second, it is not fair for Chuck that his sudden death should overshadow the eighty years he spent crafting a life well-lived. And so, with your permission, it is that magnificent life that I wish to celebrate with you now.

Charles Klein was the first child born to Harry and Frida Klein on March 21, 1926, right here in Wilmington. His birth made the front page of the local Journal Every Evening newspaper. Under the article, his mother Frida added the caption: “here is my little breath of spring” because Charlie was born on the first day of spring. His sister, Elva, often referred to their parents as having been a mixed marriage because Harry was a Litvok and Frida was a Galliciana. Elva said you couldn’t have hoped for a more wonderful big brother, although she often introduced Charlie as her baby brother just to confuse people. She said what made Charlie so wonderful was that he would never say no to her. Elva remembered one childhood story where her brother was trying to build a wooden model airplane. But Elva kept asking him: “could I have a little bit of glue, could I have a little bit of wood,” and the model airplane never got built. When Elva was older, and now playing french horn in the local junior high, Charlie came all the way down from university to hear her play. At the end of the performance he came up to his sister and said: “I could hear your french horn and it was the sweetest sound above all the other instruments.” Elva then had to admit: “I was scared to death and I never played a note.” The story demonstrates not only Charlie’s love for music, but also the life-long devotion he had for his sister. That love extended to Elva’s children: Ron, Sue, Phyllis and Marcy, as well as their children: Jacob, Monica, Zachary,

Sammy and Hayley. As each of these children celebrated their respective bar or bat mitzvah, you could rest assured it was always Uncle Charlie who made the motzi blessing over the challah to begin the meal. Many of his nephews and nieces traveled from California and up from Winston Salem, North Carolina to support their family at this time of need.

Charlie and Elva grew up in a loving home that embraced Jewish tradition. Out of respect for his grandparents, Charlie had his bar mitzvah at the old Orthodox Chesed Shel Emeth synagogue, at 3rd and Shipley, but Charlie was most at home right here at Congregation Beth Shalom, where he was confirmed. In fact if you have a chance after the services you can go around the corner to our Education Wing, and somewhere in the early 1930's, you will see Charlie's Confirmation Class photo. I think it is the year right before the class photo with dear Irv Morris, who was a boyhood friend of Chuck's (he was always Charlie to his family and Chuck to his friends...and Dr. Klein to most of Wilmington). His whole social life revolved around Beth Shalom. This was the time of the Beth Shalom annual musical, where Charlie and his sister used to join many others to perform in the musical extravaganzas which were take-offs on Gilbert and Sullivan operettas.

When Charlie wasn't performing in the Beth Shalom productions or being confirmed, he was attending P.S. DuPont High School, where he graduated in 1943. During this time he also earned the ranking of Eagle Scout. He went on to attend the University of Delaware and then Temple University Dental School, which he graduated from in 1948.

Naomi met Charlie in 1947 at a Blue Mountain Summer Camp in the Poconos. I will note that this was a Jewish summer camp, and studies show that one of the best ways to keep your kids Jewish is to send them to Jewish summer camp, as this story will prove. Naomi and Charlie were

both counselors. It was after getting the kids to sleep, early on in the summer, that these two 21 year-olds met in the camp social hall. Naomi was working on a New York Times crossword puzzle and Charlie came up to offer assistance. Smooth move Charlie. Naomi found him to be cute, with brown eyes, and hard to believe it now: black hair. He was tall back then, not compared to his grandchildren Randy and Hannah, but tall back in 1947 when they did not make Jewish kids as tall as they do today. Naomi was a Jewish girl from Philly. There seems to be a pattern I have observed of Wilmington Jewish boys, back in the 40's, of casting their eyes on these Jewish Philadelphia girls and then bringing them back to Wilmington as their brides. These former Philadelphia girls have a name for this Wilmington Jewish tradition. They call it: "marrying up." And just to clarify, it is the Wilmington boys who are marrying up, not vice versa. But I suppose you all knew that.

In April 1948, not even one year after meeting, Naomi and Charlie were married in Naomi's parents' home by the rabbi of the German Town Jewish Center. Naomi said that through their 58 years of marriage, Charlie was the best companion one could ever hope for. They did everything together. They liked the same plays, the same movies, the same musical performances. They had the same taste which made things so enjoyable for the two of them. I asked Naomi if she had ever worked with Charlie in his practice. She said, no, that was the boundary line. She let other family members, from Elva on down, take their turns working with Charlie in the clinic. Her job was to feed the family members dinner after they were done at the clinic – this was their form of payment, which speaks well of Naomi's cooking.

After their marriage, Naomi and Charlie traveled to Norfolk, Virginia, where Charlie served in the Navy. It was the Navy that helped put Charlie through dental school and in return

Charlie served on the navy base in Norfolk. Naomi said those were golden times. Life on the base was fun.

In 1950 they moved back to Wilmington and Charlie opened up his dental practice on Philadelphia Pike in the Penny Hill neighborhood, where he would serve Wilmingtonians for the next 40 years. In this capacity, as well as in his position as charter member and past president of the Brandywine Rotary Club, he made many lifelong friends who respected both his work and his bedside manner, which was always kind and reassuring.

Naomi and Charlie's social life revolved around the Jewish Federation, including Federation dinners, the Young Adults division, and support of Israel. In fact Charlie was a past president of Jewish Family Services. Naomi still vividly remembers her and Charlie's first of four trips to Israel. It was back in 1967, just two weeks after the Six Day War. There were places where even the tour guide had never visited before because they had been in Jordanian hands and they had to be careful of unexploded mines. Throughout their lives support of Israel has always been central in Naomi and Charlie's life. Much of their fundraising and support were done with fellow friends from Beth Shalom.

In later years, Naomi and Charlie traveled further afield, including Paris, Rome, South America, even Iceland. But no where else gave Charlie greater joy than Long Beach Island, New Jersey, where they would return to year after year. The only destinations which rivaled Long Beach Island, were the trips Naomi and Charlie would make to attend family simchas. Nothing gave the couple greater joy than witnessing these life cycle celebrations.

Naomi and Charlie have four children, who Charlie would take great pains to tell you are extraordinary. The first to be born was Debbie in 1949. She told me that as a little girl, she

would wait outside for her dad to come home from work. And there he would be in his white dental shirt. He was so happy to see her, so full of life, energy, love, silliness and goodness that she knew, she knew that her daddy was God. Everything anyone ever told her about a benevolent God, her father delivered. It must have been rough for Debbie's husband Jan to have God as a father-in-law. As a parent, Charlie never raised his voice. Debbie said her father had an old world charm, kind of like the male leads in those classic old movies. They simply don't make people like that anymore. Her dad was extremely funny, witty and gracious. Charlie gave his daughter, Debbie, a reverence for the power of kindness in a brutish world. Debbie said he affected an enormous amount of people. He was attentive, caring and thoughtful – a true gentleman. She described his as a “sublimely decent man, endlessly kind.” And one last note: if Charlie heard himself described this way, he would have said “come off it” and quickly leave the room. In all of this kindness there was absolutely no ego. If you were ever looking for a role model, you needn't look any further than Debbie's daddy.

Lisa was born in 1951. Charlie would have wasted no time in telling you that she already earned her doctorate by the age of 25 and teaches engineering at Rutgers. Lisa said everything her father's children did gave him naches, such pride. Whatever the kids did was the greatest, everything was the greatest. And for her father, every day was a joy. Lisa brought her dad great joy in her marriage to Tim, and the birth of Charlie's granddaughter, Martha.

Martha said that her Pop Pop was so good. When he would give her baths, he would refer to the bath mat outside the tub as the magic carpet, capable of whisking them off to exotic places. Her Pop Pop was also her knight in shining armor. Whenever she would get locked in the bathroom, afraid that she was “done for,” he would come and save her. He didn't tell her off, he

didn't try to give her instructions through the door on what to do, he would simply come in and save her. Martha also admired how her grandfather not only was a wonderful grandfather to her, but also to economically disadvantaged children in Wilmington. His work for Creative Grandparenting, where he could mentor kids gave him such joy – these children really touched his soul. When Tim's dad passed away, Charlie became a surrogate grandfather to all of Martha's cousins as well.

Wendy, Naomi and Charlie's third child, was born in 1955. She remembers that her dad never lost the wonder of being a kid. She remembers going as a family to see the Western, "How the West Was Won." At the end of the film, all six of them piled into the Falcon Convertible. Stimulated by the movie, Charlie pretended the car was bucking bronco and drove it over the raised medium strip, shouting "yee haw, yee haw." Wendy observed that her dad never had a better time than when he was with his kids. If you were to ask Charlie Klein what he did, he would not answer "dentist." Rather, he would say: "I'm a dad." That's what he did. This was so revolutionary. Remember we are talking the fifty's. Back then men defined themselves almost exclusively by their professions. Many men still do. Yet, for Charlie, being a dad, and later a grandfather, were his professions. Wendy's gift to her father was the gift of music. Charlie loved jazz and music from the 40's. On the piano he could play the music of such giants as Porter and Gershwin. He would later derive much joy singing with the Academy for Life Long Learning Chorus. Wendy graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music, playing flute. Charlie loved to come and watch Wendy play, he loved applauding her and watching others applaud her as well. Wendy continued to give her dad naches though her marriage to Alan, and by providing him with wonderful grandchildren Maggie, Saul, Noah and Jeremy. Wendy will be addressing

you in her own words in a few minutes.

David was the baby in the family, born in 1959 -- the first and only boy. He remembers that, in childhood, his father never missed a parent conference. He would call the teachers and have the conferences moved to Wednesdays, his surgery day, so he could be sure to attend. His dad joined the Mt. Pleasant School Board just so that he could have the pride and joy of handing his children their diplomas when they graduated high school – that’s the way his children saw it. David’s favorite times with his dad were when he would play guitar and his dad would play piano as his mom, Naomi did the dishes. These jam sessions were precious to David. Later, when David’s video production business was in the same building as Charlie’s dental practice, he used to love his almost daily lunch dates with his father. Most of all, Charlie loved putting his children to bed. David said his father was a wonderful role model and he has tried to emulate his father’s parenting style, as he and his lovely wife, Sue, have raised their own children, Ricky and Hannah.

It is Ricky who is responsible for Charlie being called Pop Pop. I think the story goes that Charlie was supposed to be called Pop. But Ricky started saying Pop and he couldn’t stop himself: pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop, pop. In time it was reduced to Pop Pop. Ricky observed that normally grandparents differ from parents. But Ricky did not find this to be true with his Pop Pop. Charlie the dentist, Charlie the father, Charlie the grandfather – they were all the same guy, the same face. He was there for everyone. He was consistent. Nothing touched Naomi and Charlie more than when Ricky returned from his trip to India, he asked his grandparents if he could throw an Indian dinner party in their home. Ricky, whose graduating from Middlebury College next June, says he wants to emulate his grandfather in every way, in every way but stature (Ricky is 6 foot three inches!) Ricky will be addressing you in his own words.

Ricky's sister Hannah said that when her classmate heard of her grandfather's death, she started to cry and couldn't stop. Many of the grandkids' friends came to see Charlie as their grandfather too. Her friends would say "your Pop Pop is the most amazing man I've ever met." He had pictures of his grandkids every where. Most memorable for Hannah, was her Pop Pop's ability to tell the same story over and over and over again. Not that anyone minded. Fourteen years ago, Hannah was standing next to a player piano as people were ringing a bell raising money for the Salvation Army. Hannah started dancing and dancing. A man was so impressed with the dancing that he dropped a fifty dollar bill into the Salvation Army bucket. This happened fourteen years ago but Charlie continued to tell the story. Hannah will be sharing some more thoughts in her own words in just a moment.

Charlie spoke about all the grandchildren as if they were the most amazing people in the world. And in turn, all the grandchildren loved to visit their grandparents' home in North Hills. Naomi said what joy it gave her and Charlie to pick up the grandchildren from day care on Wednesday afternoons and have grandchildren's day at their home.

Earlier I told you how Jacob, our biblical patriarch, prayed for illness, so he would have a chance to tell his children and grandchildren what he thought of them. Although Charlie's death was sudden, neither he nor his children and grandchildren left anything undone. All were clear of the great love they had for one another. But as we sit in services this High Holy Days, and hear the words of the Unetane tokef, and contemplate who will live and who will die, let us use Charlie Klein's wonderful example as our own inspiration to let our loved ones know now how we felt about them. Let us not put off for tomorrow what we can say today. Charlie Klein's life speaks for the immediacy and necessity to express love. May his memory be for a blessing, and may you

all be inscribed in the book of life in this new year, and let us say, amen.