

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

Wilmington, DE

May 20, 2007

Sarah L. (Schwartz) Leeman

Sarah bat Moshe v'Rachel

March 8, 1918 – May 17, 2007

This past week, Jews in every synagogue throughout the world began reading from the penultimate book of the Torah, the Book of Numbers, *Sefer Bemidbar*. And as Jews were opening this new book of the Torah, Sarah Leeman was completing the last chapter of her life. She passed away this past Thursday, May 17, in Wilmington, at the age of 89. Sarah had much in common with this book of the Torah. The Book of Numbers is essentially about traveling, about journeys. Not just any journey, but rather the journeys of the Israelite people. Thirty-eight of the 40 years of dessert travel are documented in this book of the Torah. In the big picture, we come today to celebrate the life journey of Sarah Leeman. But more than that, Sarah loved to travel and did so at a time when it was not common for single women to travel alone. She certainly passed down that love of travel to her beloved niece Dina, who along with her husband Alan, leave this Tuesday to explore the Jewish community of Prague, with its famous

New-Old Synagogue and its famous golem, who according to legend, lies resting in the upper story geniza. I cannot help thinking that Sarah's spirit might come along for the ride, for as we gather at the grave to bury Sarah, we are lying her body at rest but her spirit, her soul, that which made Sarah... Sarah will, according to our belief, continue to thrive and influence us for good.

Sarah was the fourth of the six Schwartz children born to Morris and Rose, originally of Bialystok. She was born in New York on March 8, 1918, and was raised in Brooklyn. Morris was a hardworking plumber, her home was a poor one, a loving one, and an observant one. Her family was, and remains, through the friendship of the children born to the Schwartz children, a close-knit one. Of those six Schwartz children, only the baby, Eleanor, now 85 and residing in Florida, is still with us. She could not be with us today, but she is represented here by her son Michael, and his wonderful life partner, Lienda, who made the almost two-hour round trip from north east Maryland to the Kutz Home here in Wilmington, almost every day during the last months of Sarah's life. What a tribute to the bonds of family whose foundations were set in that Brooklyn home some 80 years ago. By all accounts, Sarah was a very good sister. As teens the four sisters would ride the subway, and with little blue and white boxes in hand,

go up and down the cars raising money for the Jewish National Fund. Like her biblical namesake in the Torah, Sarah remained committed to the State of Israel and Jewish causes all throughout her life. And all throughout her life, she remained committed to her three sisters. In later years, all four of them moved to West Palm Beach, Florida – Brooklyn south -- where they never lived more than a ten-minute drive from one another.

After graduating from James Madison High School in Brooklyn, Sarah began work as a secretary and bookkeeper. These were the Depression Years and life was hard. Having a job was a real blessing. She also devoted herself to Zionist youth groups in the years preceding the founding of the State of Israel. When the United States was attacked at Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941, plunging this country into World War Two, Sarah did her part by joining the Women's Army Core in 1943. Beginning in 1937, Sarah worked tirelessly over the course of eight years in night school to earn her Bachelor's of Arts degree from Brooklyn College in 1945. That degree was a testimony to her tenacity and commitment to education. Sarah, herself, worked briefly in the field of education and even wrote and illustrated a children's book as part of that experience.

Beginning in the late 1940's and 50's, Sarah continued her education by committing to extensive travels throughout the world, including an extended stay with her brother and his family in Israel and then on to Europe. Dina remembers, as a niece, she along with her cousins, was always the recipient of wonderful gifts upon her return. Most memorable to Dina were the marionettes and the exotic decorative dolls she would give her which resembled the people Aunt Sarah met during her travels. As I said earlier, these trips must have really made an impression on a young Dina. Dina, who in later years has become a world traveler in her own right, and who, as an ardent Zionist and life-long Hadassah member, has always made Israel chief among her tourist destinations.

In 1961, Sarah Schwartz met Bernie Leeman. We have Bernie's mother and Sarah's aunt to thank for making the *shidduch* between these two young available Jews, both in their mid-40's. Bernie, then a real estate appraiser for the City of New York, saw in Sarah a beautiful woman, intelligent, warm, generous and social. They were married the following year, in 1962, and made their home in Brooklyn. They joined the Kane Street Synagogue where they were known for their generosity and volunteerism. The members would eventually honor the couple with a special dinner to thank them for everything they had done for the

synagogue. The Conservative Movement rabbi of the synagogue, a colleague of mine, sends special regards to all of us gathered here this afternoon.

Like the Matriarch Sarah, Sarah Leeman did everything she could to better the Jewish people, giving generously to UJA and Hadassah, along with countless other charities. Once a girlfriend asked her to go shopping, it was December, and Sarah said she couldn't because she was too busy writing checks to charities. In her married life, she followed the teaching of the sage Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am ONLY for myself, what am I? And if not now, *im matai, when?!"* Along with her selfless giving to others, Sarah really enjoyed her life. I recently saw a photograph of Sarah, dressed in a grass hula skirt posed next to Bernie, dressed as a big kahuna, with the inscription, *Hawaii 1985*. The couple loved to travel and they loved to dress up.

For years, Bernie and Sarah would make their annual pilgrimage from Brooklyn down to Florida. On the trip south and once again on the trip north the Leeman's would always spend time with the Lipschultz family who had moved to Wilmington in 1989. Before that, when Dina and Alan and the kids lived in Connecticut, Uncle Bernie and Aunt Sarah would volunteer to take each Lipschultz child individually, for sleep-aways at their home. Between the sleepaways and

the seasonal Wilmington pitstops, Dina became increasingly close to her Aunt Sarah. So it should come of no surprise that when Aunt Sarah and Bernie's health began to fail, the three Florida sisters had a meeting and together, asked Dina if she would intervene in the care of their beloved Sarah and her husband. Now you should know that Sarah was beloved by all 11 of her nieces and nephews. But three of them were living in Israel, and all of them except Dina and her two siblings, were busy taking care of aging parents of their own. So because of situation and closeness, Dina became responsible for Sarah and Bernie's legal, economic and most important, medical care. At first, Dina and Alan fulfilled their new responsibilities with frequent trips to and from Florida. But as their needs intensified, Dina decided to move them to the Kutz Home, where she could afford her aunt and uncle the best in care in a warm and loving Jewish environment. Uncle Bernie continues to call the Kutz Home his home. We once again salute nephew Michael and especially his life partner, Lienda, for the love and care they showed Aunt Sarah and Uncle Bernie, through their almost daily visits to the Kutz home during their stay there. We know what comfort these regular visits must have given Sarah's sister, Eleanor, who was physically unable to make these visits herself.

And so as we open the Book of Numbers and study the travels of the Israelite people on their way to the Promised Land, Sarah's earthly travels have now come to an end. She has arrived at the Promised Land. Like her Biblical namesake, Sarah will continue to influence the rest of us by her long-term commitment to the Jewish people through her charitable giving and especially to the State of Israel. We will also be inspired by her dedication to her synagogue, her love of family, and her love of life. May we continue her causes through our own charitable giving, and may we dedicate ourselves to life-long learning through travel and curiosity in the world around us. Then, Sarah's memory truly will be for a blessing, and to that we can say *amen*.