

Diane (Foreman) Levin
Devorah Simcha bat Lazar v'Sarah
February 22, 1933 – July 6, 2008

Perhaps the most memorable and defining moment in Moses' long and illustrious career is the moment when he summons the Israelites together, right before his death and declares:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. *Uvacharta ba'chayim CHOOSE LIFE!*" (Deuteronomy 30:19) No other phrase, in my opinion, best summarizes Judaism than that two-word command: "choose life!" Diane Levin may not have been the most observant Jew you will have ever met, but in the way she lived her life, particularly the last three years when, according to the most reliable medical predictions, she should have already passed away, Diane Levin chose life! She understood, perhaps better than most, the Talmudic observation that when we die and go before our Maker, God will hold us in account for all the blessings He put before us that we did NOT partake of. Diane Levin knew how to choose life right up until the very end, and it is that life we have gathered to celebrate this morning.

Diane was the second of four children born to Louis and Shirley Foreman of Philadelphia, on February 22, 1933. Diane's remaining three siblings: Marilyn, Darrell and Stewart, their spouses Anita and Barbara, siblings-in-law Richard and Marilyn, as well nieces and nephews Lisa, Marla, Jack, Lauren, Greg, Abbe, Vicki and Ben, are all with us this morning, and we will actually hear from one of Diane's nieces, Lisa, a little later this morning. Diane and her family grew up in the Jewish neighborhood called Strawberry Mansion and belonged to the neighborhood Orthodox synagogue, Kerm Israel Congregation, where Diane's grandfather, Max Foreman, served as the *shul* sexton. All the major Jewish holidays of her youth were spent in celebration at the home of her Grandma Ethel and Grandpa Max, who embraced Jewish observance. Under one roof lived not only Diane and her three siblings, but much of the Sussman family, including her mother's parents and various aunties. It was from this early childhood environment that love of *mishpacha*, family, was inculcated as Diane's most important life-long value. There was almost nothing that Diane would not do for the sake of family togetherness. And to this day, Diane's children remain very close with their cousins, thanks to these early years in Strawberry Mansion.

Diane was the junior member of a set of twins – Marilyn was the senior member and thus had the privilege of calling the shots for both of them in their childhood. I saw an early black and white photo of the two of them, and much to the confusion of their teachers I'm sure, their mother, Shirley, used to dress them identically, down to the matching ribbons in their hair. They both loved to sing, any time, any where, and just about anything you might have heard on the Hit Parade radio program the previous Saturday night. They were adored by their teachers at Olney High School, where they graduated in 1951. Younger brother, Darrell,

said that thanks to his twin sisters' sterling reputation, they paved the way for him to get past these same teachers with a less than sterling reputation. Diane and Darrell were particularly close. Of course there was that time when Darrell splashed milk in Diane's face to go with the chocolate Tasty Cake she had stolen from him – he claims she never forgave him. But in later life she did allow Darrell to become her financial advisor and confidante, so it all worked out in the end.

After graduation, twin sisters Marilyn and Diane went to work for the Liquor Control Board which licensed the sale of alcohol in the State of Pennsylvania. Serving as receptionist/secretaries for the Board, they shared one job between them, using their identical features to trade off working and no one was ever the wiser.

In 1952, thanks to cousin Francine, Diane met the grocer's son, Harry Levin, on a blind date. Cousin Francine was dating Harry's older brother, Sidney at the time. Sorry to say, it was not such a good first date. Diane saw herself as the Fancy Philadelphia girl, and she took one look at this hick Jewish boy from Wilmington, and decided to order half the entrees from the menu – and then didn't eat them. Diane, in truth came from a poor family, where it was said her that her dad, in order to rub two nickels together, had to borrow one. And yet Diane saw herself as Queen Elizabeth's idol. Her siblings said that she must have come from the rich neighbors across the street. In truth, Diane carried herself like a lady. It is thought she learned it from one of her grandparents' borders, a Mr. Hamolin, who used to come down to breakfast each morning in a formal shirt, tie and jacket.

Although the first date did not go well, still Harry Levin was taken with the lady-like graces of Diane. Back in Wilmington, every girl fell for Harry so when Diane Foreman of Strawberry Mansion, Philadelphia did not – Harry was up for the challenge. He would have to wait six months. And it was worth the wait. Diane was as gorgeous as ever. Harry lived over a grocery store and Diane was royalty. On this next date it was kismet – they clicked! He adored her. And Diane saw in Harry an amazingly intelligent man and she saw something else too – untapped potential. Six months later, on September 6, 1952, they were married. It was a marriage that would last 34 years, until Harry's untimely death due to kidney disease, in 1987. Harry protected Diane, and Diane dressed Harry. They were complete opposites. And as complete opposites they complemented and completed each other. Together Harry and Diane were whole. The secret of their marital success rested in the fact that Harry, from the word "go," placed Diane up on a pedestal, and frankly, Diane liked it up there. And Diane never stopped believing in Harry's potential, and it was that belief in Harry that helped fuel the success of the Happy Harry chain of stores that would eventually cover Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland.

But married life did not begin with Happy Harry's. It began with Harry working for his father, Sam's grocery store at Shallcross and Scott Streets. The young couple moved into Lancaster Court, on Lancaster Avenue, across from the Pathmark. Life was difficult. A disagreement between father and son led to Harry leaving the grocery store and striking out on

his own, selling insurance during the week, and spray paint on the weekends. Alas, relations between father and son were never the same.

Diane gave birth to Alan in 1954. From an early age, Diane practiced the values of family togetherness she had learned from her own childhood. She would insist that Alan accompany his father on weekends selling spray paint at hardware stores, so that father and son would have time together. She also helped Alan develop a sense of independence and self-reliance from an early age. For example, Diane would have Alan make his own breakfast in the morning. Of course it could be that Diane just liked to sleep in during the early morning hours. And that led to a two-year old Alan wandering over to the neighbors, coming into their kitchen, and announcing that his mother was dead. And then Diane was no longer able to sleep in.

Alan remembers that when his parents opened the first Happy Harry's, in 1962, at Veale and Silverside Roads, it was a huge shot in the dark, no one knew if it would succeed. There was only Diane and Harry running the store. But even back then, Diane insisted that they have dinner as a family, and they would eat at the very end of the back of the store, with the three Levin's taking turns running the register when a customer came in. Or sometimes they would go over to one of the few Jewish delis in town, Gamiel's, for dinner, which was right next to the store. The point was that Diane insisted on family time, no matter how busy they were, no matter how hard they had to work in those early years.

In her youth, Diane and her twin, Marilyn would go clothes shopping. Marilyn would buy for quantity. Diane would buy only one dress, but it had to be the very best one, and there was a lot of fuss taken before settling on the right one, and then Diane was meticulous in its care, wrapping and rewrapping it in tissue paper between uses. She passed on this care of clothing and grooming to her son, Alan, who was her son in so many ways. Although in youth Alan was a handful, swinging from chandeliers, with uncontrollable energy, as he matured, his relationship with his mother grew stronger and stronger. And there was always visits to Alan's godmother Aunt Renee if he became more than Diane could handle. Those visits always seemed to whip Alan into shape.

Alan and Ellen married in 1981. At first Ellen was terribly intimidated by her mother-in-law, who always dressed perfectly, always had a perfectly run home – funny how such a petite, frail woman could be so intimidating. But as Ellen grew in her own confidence, her relationship with Diane also matured and blossomed. In time, Diane would become a Nana to Ellen and Alan's three boys: Andrew, Daniel and Jason. Where there were no family trips to speak of in Alan's youth, Diane would accompany her grandchildren on trips to Africa and Hawaii, as well as Broadway shows – and even treated one of them to a drumset which is still played.

In 1984, history nearly repeated itself when -- just as Harry had left his father, Sam's grocery store, Alan left Happy Harry's over a fundamental disagreement with his father. But unlike Harry's split with his father, Sam, which was never resolved, Harry and Alan were blessed to have Diane – Diane the glue who always put family first, who knew how to keep the family together. Father and son stayed close, and in 1986 Alan rejoined the company and kept Happy

Harry's going after his father passed away the following year. Alan will be addressing you in a little while.

Where Alan and Diane were alike, Carol, Diane's second child, born in 1957, could not have been more different. Where Diane was insistent on just the right clothes, just the right make up, always royalty – Carol was more content in comfortable clothes and could not be bothered with makeup. In Carol's youth, Diane was plagued with bad health so she was not as present as she would have liked. But as Carol entered her teen years and Diane grew stronger, they built a strong and enduring relationship – Carol even put on make up from time to time, and Diane learned to ease up -- they met in the middle. Carol will be expressing her love for her mother through song in just a little while.

Diane was an engaged Nana to Carol's children Harry, Ruthie and Sammi. There was a trip to London and Paris, New York City trips, and Ruthie still has the horse, Scribbling, which Diane bought for her bat mitzvah. Harry will be speaking to you on behalf of all the grandchildren in a little while. Before Diane had to go back into the hospital, it was important to her that she go with Ruthie to buy a unique pair of riding boots as a special graduation gift. It wasn't so much the buying of the boots that was important to Diane, but having the quality time with Ruthie in selecting the boots that mattered most.

Diane loved her family – all her family. Although Alan did not remember vacations, he did remember frequent trips up Route 202 in the days before the highway, to visit the Sussman's and the Foreman's. Diane spread that love to all her family, and in later years, a more mellow Diane would actually get down on the floor and play with her brother's grandchildren and then it dawned on her – the secret of raising children – “you've got to play with them!”

Diane loved life! From a Philadelphia girl who went reluctantly down to the sticks of Wilmington to make her new home – Diane came to love the Wilmington community. She came to love not just the Jewish community, Congregation Beth Shalom where she made her spiritual home, not just the Jewish Federation of Delaware and the Kutz Home, Jewish organizations which she supported, by the entire Wilmington community: the arts, education, and health issues. For example, she and Harry established the Delaware Kidney Fund, in order to restore dignity to those patients suffering with kidney disease while trying to make ends meet.

Diane loved life! She loved her golf, her bridge games, her social life, her friends, she loved travel. She loved everything life had to offer. She had a very special relationship with her husband's half-brother, Richard and his wife, Marilyn, whom she counted among her best friends, as she did her brother Darrell's wife, Anita. When she needed to, Diane could be the life preserver of the family, but she managed to give help without meddling. Her favorite question was: “are you happy?” “are you happy?” She just wanted you to be happy. Maybe that's how Happy Harry's got its name.

The last two men in her life were doctors John Glick, one of the leading oncologists in the nation, and John Hansen-Flashen, one of the leading pulmonologists in the nation, both working out of Penn. They were both so impressed by her courage, her resilience, her love of life. After a death sentence three years ago, these doctors found a way of helping Diane regain life. Among the adventures of these past three years was Diane's once-in-a-lifetime cruise to Vietnam. When she succumbed this week to lung disease she died as she lived, on her own terms, independent, with dignity.

When Moses turns to the Jewish people and tells him, on his death bed, that behold, I put before you life and death, blessing and curse, Moses is stating the most important Jewish principle of free will. In other words, you can not choose the cards you are dealt, but you can choose how to play your hand. Moses exclaims: Choose Life! More than 3,000 years later, Diane heard the command loud and clear. For these past 75 years, and most remarkably for these last three years in particular, Diane has vigorously and passionately chosen life. We would be wise to follow her lead. *Zichrona l'vracha*.

May her memory be for a blessing.