

Rabbi Michael S. Beals

November 30, 2009

Eleanor Bonder Niederhauser

*Elisheva bat Moshe v'Sarah*

April 4, 1919 – November 26, 2009

Eleanor Bonder Niederhauser passed away in the week when Jews all around the world were reading the Torah portion called, *Vayeitsei*, taken from the Book of Genesis. The biblical story deals with the trials and tribulations of our patriarch, Jacob. We learn how Jacob had to flee from his parents' home in Canaan because his brother, Esau, had vowed to kill him. We watch Jacob fall in love at first sight with Rachel, only to be burdened with seven years of labor at no pay in order to marry her. We stand under the chuppah, the wedding canopy, with Jacob, only to watch him get swindled by his father-in-law, Laban, who switches his older daughter, Leah, for his younger daughter, Rachel, all in order to squeeze another seven years of free labor out of Jacob. Upon completing fourteen years of free labor, plus another additional six years, we escape in the dead of the night with Jacob, his wives, his concubines, and his 12 children, only to be overtaken by an angry Laban, and then, at the last minute, to be saved by God. And Jacob still faces an uncertain future as he prepares to meet his brother

Esau, after their 20 years' separation, hoping and praying that in the intervening years, his brother's desire for vengeance has cooled.

So I say to you, that I could not think of a more appropriate Torah portion for Eleanor to leave this world for the next. For like our patriarch, Jacob, Eleanor has also faced a series of life-changing challenges. She was forced to go back to work and become a bread winner after her first husband, Rob Bonder, suffered a catastrophic heart attack. She faced a second challenge when her husband, Rob, passed away, leaving her to fend for herself and two children, as a single mother in her late forties. She faced a third challenge when she had to bury her second husband, Don Niederhauser, and a fourth challenge when she lost her leg to diabetes, and had to accept the help of care givers in order to maintain her independent life style. Like our patriarch, Jacob, any one of these challenges could have finished her off. But perhaps taking a cue from Jacob, Eleanor chose to rise above each of these challenges, becoming stronger each time, in her resolve to continue, to put the bad behind her, and to embrace whatever life had to offer. Jacob lived to the ripe old age of 147, and at age 90, Eleanor almost matched him. Both the biblical Jacob and the modern day Eleanor can serve as inspirations to us as we learn to overcome our own challenges.

Eleanor was the youngest of three children born to Max and Sara Kaplan of Brooklyn, New York. Eleanor's two older siblings, Blanche and Al have long since passed away. The Kaplan family grew up in Port Washington on Long Island, in New York. Max ran a newspaper and candy store, which also offered bicycles for sale. Max Kaplan's customers were loyal, and as a result, the Kaplan's weathered the Depression very well, in comparison to other families. Eleanor graduated high school in Port Washington, in 1937, and continued her education at New York University, taking classes in psychology. She must have served as a role model for her daughter, Paula, who would later go on to attend the same school, earning her MA in Clinical Social Work. Regarding such stories, we like to say in Hebrew, *l'dor va-dor*, from generation to generation. Eleanor's early intellectually curiosity to explore the interior lives of people was played out in her daughter, who would go on to make her career in this field, helping others.

Eleanor went to work at the Empire State Building, presumably doing secretarial work. During this time period she had a boyfriend, a boyfriend she would go out with for five years. But things were to get complicated.

One of Eleanor's relatives introduced her to Robert Abraham Bonder. They began a long distance writing relationship which would span all of World War

Two. From his work in the Judge Advocate's Office in the U.S. Army Air Corp, Rob's letters created quite a fire in Eleanor's heart. So much so that when the war was over and Rob came home, Eleanor dumped her boy friend of five years for this newly -minted Jewish war veteran. Rob left the family home in New York to join his brothers in their furniture business down in Wilmington, Delaware, and brought his young bride, Eleanor, with him.

In 1948, Rob and Eleanor were happy to welcome the first addition to the Bonder family, baby Paula. She remembers her mom always being there for her in childhood. Paula played clarinet for the Wilmington All-City Orchestra and Eleanor never missed a rehearsal or a concert. Of all the dishes Eleanor cooked, Paula's favorite was her mom's spaghetti and meatballs. And of all the things that Eleanor taught her, the one that really stuck was "don't judge a person by what you see, rather it's the inside that counts." What a great thing to teach to someone who would go on to practice clinical psychology. Almost two thousand years before Eleanor Bonder Niederhauser, the ancient rabbis who wrote *Pirkei Avot, the Wisdom of the Fathers*, wrote: "al tistakel b'kan-kan, don't judge the wine flask by its outer finery, but rather by the wine contained inside."

Rather than me speaking for Paula, I have the opportunity of letting Paula speak for herself. Thanks to the loving care of her sister-in-law, Denice, Paula shared her thoughts of Eleanor in a beautiful memory book created for Eleanor's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. So the words I am about to share, I am happy to tell you, Eleanor already heard, already read, already knew by heart. Paula writes:

*It was a late evening in the summer following my freshman year in college and I was home talking with my Mom. Hank (Paula's husband) was upstairs sleeping and we were downstairs in the living room contemplating why she always referred to my Dad as "Daddy" when she was speaking with Hank or me about him. Just then the phone rang and I knew in my heart that my Father had died.*

*As requested we went to the hospital only to find that there had been a black-out and so we climbed up in the stairwell to the floor where my Father was staying. We waited, sitting on chairs in a row like ducks, waiting to be shot, for someone to tell us if my Dad was alive or had died.*

*Life had changed forever. I was scared, not knowing how we could go on.*

*Years later I'd ask my Mom how she managed to take care of us by herself. She would tell me a story about being at Temple and seeing a woman who had*

*lost her husband and who looked like she had “fallen apart.” Mommy said that she vowed that this would never happen to her; she would “stay in control.” And, “in control,” she stayed.*

*It seemed like she didn’t miss a beat. She worked full time, our home was always nice, neat and clean, we had lots of good food to eat, clean clothes to wear and she even found time to bake. Life went on. Mommy even drove Hank and me down to Florida to visit our Grandparents where she met and dated “Harry” while Hank and I had to stay home with Grandma and Grandpa, watching Lawrence Welk on TV.*

*She found a way to keep things in order on the outside, no matter how she was feeling on the inside. There have been times (and I admit this sheepishly) that I’ve felt some scorn for how unemotional my Mom can be but I have come to realize that this was an important part of keeping it all together so that the three of us could survive.*

*The point I am trying so hard to get to is that I have always wondered and considered with awe, how she managed that all by herself. (I know I wasn’t much help), managed the physical aspects of a job and home, along with the emotional*

*trauma of losing her husband and responsibility of taking care of two kids who had lost their Father, on her own.*

*For the record, and for you, Mom, I want you to know that I have admired you for many things but especially for this. I am not sure I could rise to the occasion as you did. And, I am so grateful to you for all the courage, dedication and hard work it must have taken to get us through those hard years all by yourself.*

*Anyway, my 90-year-old Mom who is still literally beautiful, I do admire you, I am deeply grateful to you and I love you with all my heart.*

Here ends the words of Paula. I might add that Paula went on to marry Wayne Frost, and bless Eleanor with two grandchildren. Bryan was a special blessing as he was Eleanor's grandchild. And Amanda will forever be remembered for having conflating the honorific, MomMom with Eleanor to fashion an original creation and title: "Mom-Mom-Anor." And Bryan and his wife blessed Eleanor with her very first great grandson, one-and-a-half-year-old Alex.

So as you learned in Paula's letter, things were tough for Eleanor. But before their father's death, in the early 1960's, Rob had undergone a terrible

heart attack. As a result, Eleanor had to give up being a stay-at-home mom, and get a job. She became a secretary for DuPont, moving herself up through the ranks, serving as an Executive Secretary to some of the company's most powerful leaders. Alas, there was no more time to attend school functions, like her son's tennis matches.

Hank was born in 1954. Although he did not have his mother's company at his school events, he also remembers his mom being an incredible cook and baker. Among his favorite dishes was Eleanor's blintzes and pot roast, not to mention her sour cream coffee cakes, chocolate candy, rugelach-like delicacies called "bowlers." As I did for Paula, I would like to defer to Hank himself, who wrote a beautiful love letter for his mother's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, which Eleanor savored. He writes:

*I can't remember 90 years (or even the 55 years I can somewhat attest to) in a single memory. So I am opting instead to celebrate 90 years of loving and caring with some examples of how MomMom has shown her love and affection of our family.*

***Raising kids*** – MomMom was the quintessential Mom, juggling kids, home and work. She was the one who kept the house in order, made dinners and



*cleaned, cleaned, cleaned. When I was very young and MomMom told me she had worked in the Empire State Building earlier in her life, all I could think to ask her was how she managed to wash all those windows. We were raised with strictness but kindness, and many, many lectures (Paula used to number them).*

***Open-mindedness*** – MomMom accepts change with calm and grace. As life has changed for MomMom she has embraced changes that she liked and faced up to one she did not. Good or bad, there was always a smile and a chuckle. As my generation moved through the “hippy years,” she accepted my long hair and beard (yes there were more lectures and threats of not bringing me home from the airport). She also accepted Denice into the family freely and openly (loved her from Day 1). MomMom’s role model of handling change gave me the basics for my career, which has been all about managing change for large companies. Who knew that how you were raised by a Jewish Mom could contribute to organizational change.

***Putting up with our faults (as only a Mom would do)*** – I will not enumerate all my faults that MomMom put up with (since my kids may read this), but whatever the situation, she showed more love and caring than criticism. But, of course, there were the lectures.

**Generosity** – college, Christmas, Puerto Rico, Disney .... However, the generosity was balanced with encouragement to become independent. For example, my college budget was so strict that I wrote letters home (Denice found them in a box) begging for an extra \$25. This strictness and encouragement along with MomMom's ceaseless hard work taught me the work ethic that has advanced me in my career.

**Compromise** – Living at home with MomMom and PopPop for most of my teenage years showed me how two people in love do not have to agree on everything to get along. My favorite compromise was the Christmas turkey/stuffing battle where the family was split on who made the better. So, the compromise they came up with to keep the family from going ballistic was to actually cook 2 turkey and separate stuffing. Of course, there were then arguments about cooking temperatures and time.

**Listening with kindness** – MomMom has this uncanny ability to just listen to our problems and show empathy and concern without being judgmental. There have been many opportunities for both Denice and me to talk through stuff with MomMom and we always feel better afterward. More lectures, but always with

*love. Side note – who was the invisible person in the kitchen MomMom was always talking to ??*

***Lectures** – lectures are love. They are sharing experience, knowledge and advice with the people you most care about. WOW – MomMom must love us an awful lot!*

***Happy Birthday MomMom. We all love you very much!***

I was so moved by the writing of both Paul and Hank, and so touched that their mother got to hear and read their words of praise, that I thought it best just to present their words to you, unedited. And special praise must to Hank's wife, Denice, who took these words, as well as the words of other family members and artistically presented these sentiments in the *Live, Laugh and Love Memory Book* which she presented to her mother-in-law for her recent 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Of her mother-in-law, Denice wrote: "thanks for being a mom to me and showing me what it means to be strong and courageous. You rock, Mom-Mom!!" She looked up to Eleanor as a role model. Wayne, Paula's husband, also commented that Eleanor treated him more like a son than a son-in-law.

Together, Hank and Denice blessed Eleanor with three grandchildren, Bobby, Melissa and Emily. Bobby had the distinct honor of making his grandmother the Treasurer of HungryTime.com, the company he started while attending Cornell up in Ithaca. We think MomMom is still getting HungryTime.Com mail.

Melissa has a special relationship with her MomMom. She was the one in the family who spoke to Eleanor every day for “MomMom check-up’s.” Melissa loved to this special *mitzvah* and Eleanor would so look forward to these phone calls, whether they lasted a minute or an hour. Melissa’s consistency and care is worthy of praise.

Of all the memories she has of her MomMom, the most special for Emily is the great distance her MomMom traveled, from Wilmington up to Pearl River, New York, already bound to a wheelchair, to celebrate her Sweet 16 Party with her. Emily was especially touched that her Mom Mom stayed for the entire party even though it must have been tiring for her.

After Bob Bonder passed away In 1967, Eleanor was blessed to find love again in the person of her boss at DuPont, Don Neiderhauser. He was caring and attentive. Hank was a teen at the time, and he instantly bonded with Don over

nightly suppers at Lundies, of blessed memory, the only kosher deli in Wilmington at the time. Don and Eleanor married in 1969, and Eleanor was instantly blessed with three additional children: John, Steve and Carol. In time they would bless Eleanor with six additional grandchildren, bringing Eleanor much joy.

During her first marriage, Rob and Eleanor used to take their children to Fenwick Island during the summers. That was the full extent of their travels. But now with Don, the entire world opened up before Eleanor. Together, they traveled the world: from Egypt to China. Yet nothing gave Eleanor as much pleasure as the penthouse beach resort they had in Ocean City which served as the gathering place for the entire family, and there Eleanor used to cook up feasts for extended family – oh how she loved the holiday season.

It seems so unfair that Eleanor was faced with the task of burying another husband when her beloved Don passed away in 1997. Their home at Philadelphia Pike and Silverside now seemed too big to manage in alone, but Eleanor fiercely guarded her independence. So she moved into an apartment on Society Drive in Claymont. In 2004 she suffered another loss, this time her leg due to the onslaught of diabetes. Now with the help of loving caregivers Eleanor maintained her independence, vowing never to go into a nursing home. We are especially

indebted to the wonderful care provided by Cynthia, as well as a team of other select companions, who helped Eleanor when she was in greatest need.

Judaism was very important to Eleanor, even though she was not a religiously observant Jew. She ensured that her son, Hank, had a fine Jewish education at Congregation Beth Shalom, resulting in his become a bar mitzvah at the age of 13 – a life cycle event that both his mother and father were able to enjoy. His father, Rob, died shortly thereafter. Paula was married to Hank by Congregation Beth Shalom's long-serving and legendary spiritual leader, Rabbi Jacob Kraft. And Judaism continues to be very important in Paula's life. I met Eleanor a couple of years ago. It was a very rainy day and I was determined to meet this very generous soul who kept sending checks to Congregation Beth Shalom but who had not stepped foot in the synagogue during my tenure. I was determined to meet her and thank her in person. When I rang her Society Drive door bell she warned me that she was in her night gown and not really in a position to entertain. I was rather insistent, in part because I had schlepped all that way in the rain and as her building was undergoing construction, it had been quite a feat to actually find the entrance and doorbell to the building. Also, I was concerned about squandering the opportunity to meet her in case another

opportunity would not come along. I have to tell you, that was quite a lovely night gown she was wearing. She looked like royalty in her robe and she seemed so happy for the visit, and so proud of her children and grandchildren, whose photographs adorned her lovely home.

Eleanor passed away on our national day of thanksgiving. How thankful am I for the fact that all of Eleanor's loved ones told her in beautifully-written words how much they loved her and why they loved her, while she was still alive and able to appreciate these words. We normally wait until it is far too late to praise our loved ones, at funerals during eulogies. Thanks to Denice's vision and talent, we all have been given a wonderful lesson, not exactly a lecture, but a lesson through example of how vitally important it is to praise our loved ones while they are still alive and not after they have died.

And from Eleanor herself, we learn the wisdom first imparted by our biblical patriarch, Jacob, the star of last week's Torah portion. We cannot control the adversities that rise up to challenge us, but we CAN control our responses to those challenges. Like Jacob, Eleanor taught us how to maintain our dignity and our composure in the face of adversity and to fight on to live another day. May Eleanor's life serve as a blessing to each of us, and let us say *amen*.