

Pearlia Brenner Palmer

*Peryl bat Shlomo v'Simcha*

April 15, 1925 - February 26, 2012

We always look to the Torah portion in which a person has passed to find some sort of insight into the life of the person to whom we wish to honor. This week's Torah portion is called *Tetzaveh* and addresses the role and investiture of Aaron and his sons as *kohanim*, ministering priests in the tabernacle. A small but interesting note: this *parasha* is the only one in the last four books of the Torah in which Moses neither is named nor is speaking. Some rabbis explained it as Moses' generosity and humility to step aside and allow the spotlight to fall solely on his brother, Aaron and his priestly functions. This same sense of humility and putting other's first reminded me so much of Pearlia that it was worth sharing this Torah-based rabbinic insight with you. Yet, like Moses, Pearlia had plenty to brag about if that had been her nature: from teaching special needs children, to music, the arts, sports and volunteering, Pearlia was a lover of life and was able to share that love with others, enriching the lives of so many. But Pearlia did not do any of this for the *kavod*, for the honor. Rather she did these things because she was an eternal learner and a force for good.

Pearlia was the second of three girls born to Sam and Jenny Averbach, on April 13, 1925, in Portland, Maine. Her father was a natural entrepreneur. Rumor has it he created the first vending machine, but never got credit for it. What he did get credit for was helping establish the first ski trains which took Bostoners up to New Hampshire for skiing. Working side by side, with his wife and three daughters, they prepared food for these train rides, as well as any other events going on, they even followed the rodeos... after all, as it is written in *Pirkei Avot*: "*ain kemach, ain Torah ... without flour there is no Torah.*" Pearlia was very close with her older sister, Sylvia, may she rest in peace, and her

younger sister, Norma, who is still, thank God, with us. Family has always been the most important of Pearlia's values, beginning with the family she was born into.

By age eight, Pearlia and her family had moved from Portland down to Brookline, Massachusetts. Sam wanted to give his wife and girls a nice life in a real house. Even though he could not afford to buy, he rented a lovely home on Verndale Street. Pearlia attended Devotion School and later graduated from Brookline High School. Her favorite book in her youth was *The Secret Garden*. She loved to ski, to listen to classical music and was a great help to her parents. Upon high school graduation in 1943, she did what so many girls had to do in wartime; she followed Rosie the Riveter, and went to work in a factory.

In 1944, while attending a dance at a resort called Banner Lodge and chaperoned by her older sister, Pearlia met a handsome Warrant Officer named Stanley Brenner. What did Stanley see when he cast his eyes on Pearlia? He saw a stunning, long-legged beauty. Pearlia was a swimmer and she always looked great in a bathing suit. Her beauty was natural and she did not need to do much to enhance it. And what did Pearlia see in this US Army officer?: A man with a wonderful sense of humor and who was also a romantic. During an outing to Tanglewood to hear the Philadelphia Orchestra, Pearlia and Stanley were passing notes to each other. Stanley writes: "What would you like for an engagement gift?" Pearlia writes: "A ring. Stanley writes: "Not possible." But in fact this poor orphan boy, against all odds, had in fact already bought the ring and presented it to her later that evening. They were married in 1945. At the Justice of the Peace, they had to come up with two dollars for the license. Stanley pulled out his one dollar bill, and then turned to Pearlia and said, "Okay, I put up my dollar, now you put up yours." I promise you, he was joking, and it was this sense of humor that added so much to their marriage of 36 years.

The happy couple moved to the suburbs of Philadelphia to start their new life together. Of the many blessings Pearlia bestowed upon Stanley during their marriage, the most precious gifts were Susan, born in 1946, followed by Joyce in 1947, and finally Steven, in 1952. Steven would go on to marry Charlene, and bless Pearlia with two grandchildren, Stuart and Gregory. Through Susan's memories, I hope to also do honor to Joyce and Steven's memories as well.

Susan remembers her mother always being very unselfish, always seeing the good in others. As Susan complained about some teacher who deserved her contempt, her mother was quick to utter that often-repeated truism: "if you don't have something good to say about someone, better you shouldn't say anything at all." Her mother was the perfect homemaker. There was her old standby: ketchup, with cottage cheese and elbow noodles, and perhaps even more memorable, her menu at Jewish holidays: mandelbread, carrot tsimmes, brisket, roasted chicken. For their birthdays, each of her children got to pick out their favorite cake for their mother to bake for them. For Susan, that was a no-brainer: chocolate cake with chocolate icing. And who could forget those Shabbat dinners or Sunday morning breakfasts?!

And Susan remembered the most wonderful family trips with her mom and dad – from Old Orchard Beach in Maine to the bungalow on Lake Champlain in Vermont. And it just wasn't only about their immediate family. There were no such things as mere "in-laws." Stanley's sisters either lived in their home or just next door. And these sister-in-laws were far more like sisters to Pearlia. So those extended family get-togethers were really something, especially with Stanley's side of the family, and Pearlia's home was often the central meeting place.

During these years, Pearlia was a wonderful volunteer, from her work with the Mt. Airy Jewish Community Center to her efforts for B'nai Brith. And she used those volunteer opportunities at the

synagogue to take lots of Jewish Adult Education classes, which foreshadowed what happened next. You see, what was truly remarkable was what happened when her children left the house. You know how Moses changed careers, and at age 80 went from being a shepherd to leading the Jewish people to freedom? Well this story is kind of like that. Now in her early forties, with her kids out of the house, Pearlia went back to university. She applied and was accepted to Temple University. She earned her BS in Education and even advanced to MA classes. She taught for the School for the Blind, as well as special education for Wadsworth Academy in Philadelphia. And she continued teaching for the rest of her life, even serving as a substitute teacher at the Garnet Valley School District, until she was 85 years old! Pearlia also served as a Mentor to children with special challenges, including an ESL student.

Not only was Pearlia a wonderful teacher, she was also a wonderful student. From Yiddish to Music and Art, to the full range of classes at the Academy for Life Long Learning, everything and anything interested in Pearlia. And it wasn't only her mind that stayed active: it was her body as well. From tap dance to line dance, to swimming and golf, Pearlia was a whizz of activity. She took the command from Deuteronomy, *b'charta b'chayim*, choose life, quite literally, and has served as an inspiration to us all of what is possible.

I might add that it was during one particular round of golf, back in 1983, that Pearlia found love again. It was about a year after Stanley's death. She was now 57, and rounding out her foursome was a gentleman named Milton Palmer. Pearlia was just as lovely as she was when love found her the first time. Milton pursued her and one year later, they were married. To have found love once in today's day and age is something special. To have found love yet again after the death of her first husband, was truly a miracle. Pearlia not only found a husband to share her life with, but she also inherited a whole new wonderful family to add to her original family. Pearlia and Milton enjoyed 23 happy years together until his passing in 2006.

We have seen some of Pearlia's finest qualities through her daughter, Susan's eyes. There are other perspectives to consider as well. In 1967, Susan married Jeff, and he felt that from the get-go he was treated more as a son, than a son-in-law. In the 50 years that they have known each other, they have never had an argument. And in 1968, Pearlia became a grandmother for the first time, at the young age of 43. Her first granddaughter, Elisa, had a special place in her heart. Elisa called her Gram, and she remembers trips to Atlantic City, to the circus, where no expense was spared, from souvenirs to junk food. Pearlia wanted to broaden Elisa's world. So Elisa's first dinner theatre experience, *Westside Story*, was arranged by Gram. Elisa's first opera experience, *Carmen*, was arranged by Gram. Elisa's first full-blown musical, *Man of La Mancha*, was arranged by Gram. Later, upon graduation, Gram took Elisa to England, and those memories are still fresh: Bath, Stonehenge, the art festival, ALL the palaces, and of course London.

Later, when Elisa married Bret, Bret's experiences were not unlike that of Elisa's father. Rather than made to feel like a grandson-in-law, Pearlia made Bret feel like a biological grandson. And how Pearlia loved Bret. Because of his wonderful sense of humor, he reminded her of her beloved Stanley. Together, Elisa and Bret blessed Pearlia with two great-granchildren, who affectionately called her GiGi. She loved to listen to her Jake play the piano, Cole the guitar. They loved playing shuffleboard with their Gigi, or ping pong or cards or Scrabble. They specially enjoyed the pleasures of swimming with her, even in the dead of winter, in the indoor pool at Maris Grove.

In 1971, Susan and Jeff blessed Pearlia with a second grandchild, Deborah. Only three years Elisa's junior, she shared many of the same happy memories of their Gram, and was so happy to experience the pride of her grandmother when she graduated from Georgetown Law School. Earlier in her life, Deborah remembered sharing with her Gram hikes and picnics in Valley Green Park, and trips to the Philadelphia Zoo. Her special trip with Gram was to China, Hong Kong, and Thailand back in 1996.

Highlights included seeing the life-size terracotta soldiers of Xian (SHEE-on), walking the Great Wall, and gazing upon foreboding Thiamin Square. And together, as a united family, they went to Greece and Jamaica, as well as frequented closer locales, such as the Eastern Shore of Maryland, to partake in the annual Golf Cart Parade. One year, in responding to the parade them of moments in history, the family decided to celebrate Woodstock, and Pearlia dressed as a hippy with the sign, "Make Love, Not War." Quite a challenge explaining this to the great grandchildren in an age-appropriate way.

Gram had a special place in her heart for Deborah's husband, David. He, like her Stanley, was a romantic. Gram loved the care and consideration David showed her granddaughter. Together David and Deborah blessed Pearlia with two great-grandchildren, Bennett and Carter. They loved to have their GiGi listen to them play the piano, and they were particularly fond of her blue berry muffins.

I began talking about Pearlia in terms of the Torah portion, which stressed Moses' modesty and consideration for his family over himself, as marked by his absence in this week's *parasha*, devoted to Aaron. Pearlia was a very generous gift giver to these wonderful four great grandchildren, but she was insistent that the gifts had to be meaningful, not about her, but about the recipients. She was selfless, always putting other before herself. Even her choice to move to Maris Grove, with its multiple layers of health care to respond to her cancer, was a desire, on Pearlia's part, not to be a burden on her children or grandchildren. And her last three and one half years at Maris Grove were really special, and she did so much with these last years, from painting to substitute teaching.

As we look to our next major set of holidays, the back shelves of our local Shoprite, already filled with special seasonal Manishevitz products, tells us Passover is on the way. And as the Komins, Morris and Ross families gather around the *seder* table, they will surely be thinking of their Gram, their Gigi, when they get to the *Dayenu*, Pearlia's absolute favorite song. *Dayenu* means "it is sufficient," "it is

enough.” It is what we say when we come to the end. And so I say *Dayenu*, but not without adding that Pearlia, by the way she has lived her life, has taught us all so many important life lessons, from carrying ourselves with dignity, to committing ourselves to be life-long learners, to constantly be open to remaking ourselves at any age, and to be open to love at any age, and finally, to enjoying life to its fullest. *Zichrona l’vracha* – May Pearlia’s memory be for a blessing, and let us all say *amen*.