

**Johanna (Joan) David Ryder**  
*Hannah bat Hanoch HaLevi u' Batya*  
September 13, 1923 - December 29, 2004

Joan Ryder left this world for the next during the week where Jews all around the world are reading from the beginning of the second book of the Bible, *Parshat Shemot*. I believe that there is an extraordinary link between the Torah portion in which a person passes and the person themselves...and Joan's remarkable personality strengthens my belief.

In the beginning chapters of Exodus we meet a most impressive woman, Miriam – sister to Aaron and Moses, and one of only two women in the entire Hebrew scripture to hold the Hebrew title, *neviah*, or female prophet. Miriam exhibits extraordinary bravery by following her baby brother's progress down the Nile River into Pharaoh's court. Then Miriam actually approaches Pharaoh's daughter, *Batya*, who, by the way, shared the same name with Joan Ryder's mother, and suggests that Miriam's mother, Yoheved, serve as the baby's wet nurse. Yet the rabbi's of the 1,800 year-old Biblical commentary, called Midrash, imagine Miriam as a very outspoken woman, even as a child.

When Pharaoh decrees the death of all the Israelite male children, Midrash records that Miriam's father, Amram, decreed that all Israelite husbands should divorce their wives, preventing any more children from being born. Then the rabbis describe how plain-speaking Miriam takes on her father and tells him that he is worse than Pharaoh. For Pharaoh was only condemning half the future Jewish population to death, but by Amram's actions, all the future Jewish children, boys and girls would be condemned to death. Upon hearing his daughter's challenge, he quickly reversed himself and ordered all Jewish husbands to remarry their wives and produce children. Of course one of those children is Moses...and the rest is history.

Extraordinary bravery describes not only biblical Miriam, of whom we read about this week in the Torah, but Joan Ryder whose loss we mourn today, surrounded by her loved ones and friends. I mean how else can we describe the life of a woman who watches the comfortable Middle Class life she knew in Berlin destroyed before her very eyes, survive the painful, forced separation of her family on a stupid technicality, her internment in that hell-hole called Auschwitz, then after the war, her desire to marry and start a family, and then travel across a continent and an ocean to a new country, learn a new language and adopt an entirely new way of life that in no way resembles the life she knew back in Berlin. My friends there is no other word that comes to mind other than bravery -- extraordinary bravery.

Plain-spoken, pulling no punches, not afraid to tell it as it is describes not only biblical Miriam, of whom we read about this week in the Torah, but Joan Ryder whose loss we mourn today. If Joan hadn't seen you for a while, and you had put on a few pounds, you could rest assured that she would tell you you'd gained weight. In her beautiful eulogy, Myrna described her mother as being "social and outspoken which didn't come as a surprise to those of you who knew her". Like Miriam in the Torah, Joan also used these qualities as a community leader. As the School Board President of the Estell Manor School District – Estell Manor being geographically, the second largest city in New Jersey, claiming approximately 60 square miles, she used her plain speaking to improve the lives of the students in her municipality, including moving children from one high school to another to cut down on their daily commute and to improve the level of their education.

Myrna shared a unique perspective of her mother – the perspective of a daughter. I would like to widen that perspective by sharing perspectives from one of Joan's sons-in-law, and particularly, her grandchildren, in order to enrich our understanding of what a unique woman was Joan Ryder. Particularly touching was the feelings expressed by Joan's son-in-law, Michael, who perhaps had one of the closest relationships with Joan. This is an extraordinary thing for a son-in-law to say. But what makes Michael's sentiments so powerful was the great distances Michael traveled, from not being a member of the Jewish faith, to embracing Judaism, and from not being accepted by Joan to coming into Joan's closest confidences. And I might note, that Joan chose to embrace Michael BEFORE Michael chose to embrace Judaism. I know this must have meant a lot to Joan's daughter, Sandy.

I had the privilege of speaking to some of Joan's grandchildren and I would like to reflect some of their perspectives. Both Rebecca, affectionately Becca, and Jessie both remember fondly their grandmother's fruit salad – consisting of not one, but two different types of melons, a can of cherries, canned pineapple and canned mandarin oranges. Jessie swears it always tasted like there were more fruit than those in her concoction, and the juice from this fruit salad was something truly remarkable to behold. And speaking of juice, Rebecca remembers her grandma's blueberry soup, consisting solely of grinded up fresh blue berries, cooked and then cooled, perfect for a hot summer's day. Her grandchildren, Noah and Rachel were very fond of her chicken soup, and no one liked her egg cakes, a specialty for Passover.

With all the references to Miriam, it is not surprising that Joan made Passover seders memorable. At the end of the meal, she would always save a little afikomen, the last morsel of matzah from the meal, from year to year, so you would always have something in your food pantry. Having survived Auschwitz, where food was so scarce for the Jewish prisoners, this tradition must have had special significance within the Ryder home.

Jessie remembers two life lessons her Grandma Joan taught her in her childhood. Somewhere back in the third or fourth grade, Jessie was working on a school project researching those cute, penguin-like creatures called Puffins (not to be confused with the cereal by the same name). Many times Jessie wanted to get up and take a break and her grandma would not let her until she finished her project. At the time, Jessie thought her grandma was being extraordinary tough, and this was certainly not a pleasant experience in the moment. And yet to this very day, so many years later, Jessie still remembers the experience and the lesson of how important it is to get your work done, even if you don't feel like it.

Jessie's other experience is somewhat more recent. Upon returning from a life-changing trip to Israel, Jessie became more religiously observant, keeping the rather demanding laws of the Sabbath. Grandma Joan pulled Jessie aside and told her: "remember to always respect your parents. Even in your pursuit of observing Jewish law, it should still be done in such a way so that your Jewish observance does not come at the cost of showing disrespect to your parents, and their way of life." If only more Yeshivas in Israel, that take less observant Jewish teens and turn them on to Jewish observance would teach Grandma Joan's important concept of Shalom Bayit, so many unnecessary hurt feelings and fights could be avoided – all in the name of "halacha."

When Joan's liver disease was discovered, I cannot tell you how the grand children, independent of each other, thought about donating part of their own livers, if it would bring their grandmother back to health. Such devotion speaks much not only about these extraordinary grandchildren: Rachel, Rebecca, Noah and Jessie, it also says volumes about their Grandma Joan, and the love and devotion she inspired in her daughters, her sons-in-law, and her grandchildren.

As we read about the Biblical Miriam in tomorrow morning's Torah reading, may be inspired by her example, and may we also be inspired by Joan Ryder's example -- two extraordinary women: *Zichrona l'vracha* – may her memory be for a blessing.