

Lillian Epstein Sobel     *Leah bat Noah v'Devorah*     July 27, 1917 - March 6,

2011

In the Shabbat leading up to Lillian Sobel's passing, it was no coincidence that her fellow Jews all around the world, were chanting from the last Torah portion from the Book of Exodus, called *Pekudei*. The *parasha* opens with Moses making a complete accounting of all the precious and even average materials that were donated by the Children of Israel in the building and erecting of the biblical *mishkan*, the first centralized place of worship for our people. From the age of 18 until shortly before her death some 75 years later, at the wonderful age of 93, Lillian, like *Moshe Rebeynu*, was a meticulous bookkeeper. Now why would Moses need to be so particular about his bookkeeping? The Rabbis of blessed memory, answered, because Moses needed to show that handling other people's money is a sacred trust, that in all things we must be transparent and honest, and that no one is above being accountable, not even Moses, God's-hand-selected leader. And I believe, that these same rabbinic understandings helped inspire Lillian in her much sought-after bookkeeping skills. In the end all we have is a

*shem tov*, a good reputation, and there is no doubt in my mind, nor in the minds, of those gathered here this morning, that Lillian had a *shem tov*.

Lillian was the youngest of five daughters born to Nathan and Dora Epstein, originally from Poland. In fact Nathan and Dora's eldest child, Netta, was also born in Poland. Then Nathan made his way to Philadelphia, where he originally found employment as a carpenter, and in time earned enough money to end for his wife and daughter. Netta was followed by Esther, then the twins, Rosie and Joan, and finally Lilly. It is no wonder that family, *mishpucha*, was always Lillian's number one value. With Lillian's passing, the last of the Epstein girls has passed from this world to the next, and I would like to think there is a wonderful family reunion going on up there, even as we join together as a family in Philadelphia. I know that many of the Epstein daughter's children are representing their respective mothers this morning, including Nettie's Albert, Esther's Diane, Rosie's William, and Joan's Sondra. This all speaks to the most important question Lillian ever posed to her boys: "did you call your cousins?" And if the answer was no, *oi-va-voi!*

This closeness of family was literally by design. After the war, Noah became a builder. On one street alone, he built 25 houses. At one end of the

street was Tanta Joan's house. At the other end was Tanta Rosie's house. And in the middle of the block was Tanta Esther's house. But it gets better. About one mile away, on Castor Avenue, Noah build two stores for each of his daughters, one for their husband's to run businesses out of, with spacious apartments on the top floor, the other to rent out. So Nettie's husband, Lou, the pharmacist, ran a drug store, while Esther's husband, Harry ran a shoe store, while in time, Lillian's husband, another Harry, would successfully run Sobel's appliance store. The Epstein's ran a kosher home, and everyone belonged to the Orthodox Congregation B'nai Yitzhak.

Lillian attended Barton Elementary and graduated from Olney High School in 1939. Photos from the era of many smiling fellow high school students suggest that Lillian was very popular. Among her many friends from that era was Harry Sobel. We are not quite sure when they became more than just friends. But with her beautiful dark hair, they called her "darkie" because of it, her rich brown eyes, petite figure, outgoing personality, and piano playing skills, it was clear to Harry that Lillian Epstein was a catch. The year after she graduated, Harry and Lillian would marry, and it was a love affair that would last some 43 years, until Harry's death in 1983.

Following high school, Lillian went to work for Henry Mailman, at Burkholme Department Store. She did everything for him, from selling to balancing his books. With Harry's permission, Lillian also made music with Henry, Henry on violin and Lillian on piano. She would continue working for Henry through 1947.

Meanwhile, with the birth of Ed in 1945, Lillian balanced bookkeeping with burping, with burping trumping. Ed remembers that his mother put his education as her number one value, after family of course. She would make sure he completed his homework; he needed to make a complete accounting of what he learned that day in school. And it obviously paid off. Ed was the first Sobel to go on to college, and he fulfilled every Jewish mother's dream by becoming a doctor, specializing in family medicine. Of all the dishes that his mother cooked, the one which Ed has the fondest memories for was his mother's gefilte fish, and I am afraid she took her recipe with her to *Ha Olam Ha Ba*, where perhaps Moses is dining on it as we speak. Ed would go fishing for the carp, then it would be filleted and frozen. And then as each major Jewish holiday approached, Ed would grind the carp and white fish, Ed's dad would turn them into balls, and Ed's mother would do the cooking. This was a major operation because enough gefilte

fish would need to be produced to feed each of the five sisters, plus their husbands, plus their children. It was very common for the entire family to gather for shared meals, even outside the major Jewish holidays.

In time, Ed would fall in love and marry Anita, who claims, as her sister-in-law, Andrea would also claim, that Lillian treated them more like daughters than like daughters-in-law, and they both had a loving relationship with her. Anita and Ed would bless Lillian with two granddaughters, Dara and Jaimie, who referred to her as Mom-Mom. And they, with the help of husbands Dan and Chris, would make Lillian a great-grandmother four times over, with the births of Jackson, Aja, Alec and Edan. The fact that both granddaughters were also college grads added another dimension of *naches* to Lillian, who took pleasure in her grand children's academic achievements.

Seven years after Ed came on the scene, Lillian gave birth to her second son, Norman, in 1952. He was always very, very close to his mother. In fact he cannot remember a time in his life when they argued. She knew how he felt and he knew how she felt. So close were they that Norm could not bear separating from her to go to school. So Lillian would plant herself outside Norm's kindergarten class room, and dangle her pocketbook in front of the door, so Norm

would know that his mother was still there, even if he couldn't see her. When Norm was in the third grade, and well over his separation anxiety, Lillian went to work with her husband, Harry, at Sobel's Appliance store, and continued working there until he closed the Castor Avenue store in 1964. But her bookkeeping skills were in such demand that she continued, first back at the department store for Henry Mailman, then for Orleans, one of the biggest builders in Philadelphia, and finally for Greenhill Cemetery, where she worked until 1984. But she continued bookkeeping informally all the way until a few months ago. And like Moses in the Torah, she was absolutely meticulous, keeping double ledgers to ensure accuracy.

Norm, like his brother, made medicine the family business, after college, distinguishing himself in hospital administration. In time, Norm would marry Andrea, who as I mentioned earlier, saw Lillian as a second mother. Together they would bless Lillian with two granddaughters, Rachel, married to Nick, and Alissa.

Starting with Harry, family was everything to Lillian. They were love birds throughout their 43 years together, enjoying traveling, as a family up and down the East Coast, and as a couple – their trip to Israel being the highlight of their lives. They also had a set of dear friends, including Dr. Alvin Nissenbaum,

affectionately Nissy, a confirmed bachelor, who shared with Harry and Lillian, a love of opera. Sponsored by the Settlement Music School, the three of them would partake in organized trips to New York City to attend Metropolitan Opera House productions, sometimes combined with Broadway shows. Nissy ran his podiatrist office on the top floor of one of the shops Lillian's father had built on Castor Avenue. After Harry's death in 1983, Nissy and Lillian continued a platonic friendship for many years, centering on their shared love of music. In 1984, Lillian moved out of the house her father built in favor of a condominium, where she made a whole new set of friends, but dearest among them all was Miriam. Lillian took Miriam's death very hard. Lillian's last seven years were spent at Foorward Manor, where she was blessed with the continued friendship of her *machatunim*, Anita's parents the Gorenstein's. After the passing of Anita's father, whose 11<sup>th</sup> month anniversary we will remember later this evening, Anita's mother took special responsibility to keep an eye on Lillian and keep the Foorward Manor staff on their toes. Even among the Foorward Manor residents, outgoing Lillian made friends, with fellow residents Naomi, Rosie and Lillian making quite a formidable threesome. And earlier, Lillian along with Harry, kept a lovely friendship with their other set of *machatunim*, Andrea's parents, with whom they shared an apartment

in Margate, where Lillian, the sun goddess, used to like to soak up the healing comforting rays of the sun.

I would be remiss if I did not share a few words about Lillian's favorite charity, Fight for Sight. She would go to bars on Friday night, after payday and solicit donations among unsuspecting drinkers. This coupled with her tactic of sending cute, elementary school-aged Norm, donning his Fight for Sight sash, to banks, also on pay day, made Lillian, year-after-year the most successful Fight for Sight fundraiser, entitling her to a special annual dinner where she was recognized for her accomplishment

As we celebrate 93 years of Lillian's life, we must put behind us the Alzheimer's Disease which she coped with over the past ten years, and instead, focus on this meticulous bookkeeper, who always favored hard work, above that, the continuing higher education for her children, and above that, and most important of all, family, a value first taught to her by her parents, who instilled it in all their children. In Lillian's memory, may we, too strive to be meticulous in all our endeavors, and also stress valuing our families above all else, and in that way, Lillian Epstein Sobel's memory will be for a blessing, *zichrona l'vracha*, and let us say *amen*.



