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Congregation Beth Shalom

April 25, 2019
Wilmington, DE

Joseph Sommers
Yoseph ben Moshe u'Belima
February 18, 1926 – April 21, 2019

This week Jews all around the world are focused on the miraculous story of Passover. It's interesting because Jewish studies have shown that no matter how assimilated Jews become, the celebration of the Passover seder is one of the very last ritual practices to go – because it doesn't only celebrate Jewish history, Passover ALSO celebrates FAMILY, specifically the coming together of family in celebration. How appropriate that we bid Joseph Sommers farewell during Passover, because of all of Joseph's important values – MISHPACHA, FAMILY, was his most cherished value. Everything that made Joseph proud and happy, involved helping his family.

Maybe that love of family was born out of the fact that Joseph himself was born into a large Jewish family on February 18, 1926, to Austrian-born Morris and Bertha Sommers. Joseph was the youngest of six Sommers siblings, who included Herman, Harry, Miriam, AnnaRae and Freda.

Of the six, we are blessed to that AnnaRae and Freda are still alive. While AnnaRae is in a nursing home, there is a possibility that 102 year-old sister Freda might be with us today. And of course, we are blessed with the presence of those Sommers nephews and nieces who could make it to Wilmington this afternoon to represent their parents.

The Sommers family was on the move, going from a farm in Maryland, to New Jersey, and eventually settling in Atlantic City, where Morris and Bertha ran a grocery store. Joseph was afforded a good Jewish education --- the tallit with which he was presented at his bar mitzvah is still lovingly preserved by the children. Joe graduated Atlantic City High School in 1944. In his yearbook, under his picture he has the quote: "Don't call me Tyrone." It seems that as a teen, Joe had the good looks of leading man/heart throb Tyrone Power, famous for such swashbucklers as *The Mark of Zorro*, *Prince of Foxes*, and *The Black Rose*.

Out of a sense of patriotism, immediately following high school graduation, Joe enlisted in the United States Navy. He served both in Texas and at Pensacola Air Station in Florida. By the time he was discharged in 1946, he had earned the ranking of Aviation Machinist Mate.

In the summer of 1946, on an Atlantic City Beach, a lovely Selma Reiser, vacationing from Southwest Philadelphia caught the eye of young Joe. The way Joe remembers it, Selma was the only woman on the beach that day wearing a distinctive two-piece black bathing suit. And tall, hazel-eyed Joe, with his full head of black hair, also caught the eye of young 18-year old Selma. They courted for about a year between Joe's home in Atlantic City, and her home in Philadelphia.

There is one memorable photograph from their courtship with the young couple dressed in formal attire at the fashionable Latin Casino of Philadelphia, featuring stars like Harry Belafonte, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis, among others.

Joe and Selma were married at a catering hall in Philadelphia, on October 30, 1949. By the time Selma passed in July 2018, the couple had been married more than 69 years. Their first cousin, Alfred Reiser, and his band, provided the entertainment. Selma had packed her honeymoon wardrobe for Florida, but the couple inexplicably ended up honeymooning in Canada instead.

Following the honeymoon, the couple made their first home in Margate, New Jersey. Joes' family, as you might recall, lived there. Joe was able to go into his family's wholesale plumbing and business supply company. In time, Joe would break off and create his own business, called Coast Plumbing and Heating.

In 1950, Selma and Joe were blessed with their first child, Alan. He remembers fondly wanting to go to work with his dad. It seems the warehouse and storerooms had a certain allure. Once Alan got lost in a sea of bathtubs. Money was tight growing up. That made the time his father surprised him, at around age eight or nine, with his very first red Schwinn bicycle was ever so sweet. Alan would go on to become a cardiologist, giving Joe the right to say those four prized words every Jewish parent dreams of saying: "my son the doctor." Alan would go on to marry Nancy. She had great relationship with Joe. Nancy viewed Joe more of a father than a father-in-law, owing to Joe's abounding love of family. We miss Nancy today, and wish her a *refuah shleyma*, a complete recovery, from her fractured back surgery.

In 1954, Selma and Joe were blessed with the birth of their only daughter, Robin. She remembers how much her dad loved to build things, including a white picket fence to define their Atlantic City property, and a very heavy picnic table. Robin also remembers how helpful her dad was to her mom, who served as President of the AMC – American Medical Center, and their fight to cure cancer. Together Joe and Selma put on a large Carnival fundraiser to support AMC's efforts. Robin also remembers, in her youth, how very patient her father was in trying to teach her the metric center, and how to measure pints and quarts – she never got it quite right, and still has a cheat sheet in her kitchen. Joe was so proud of Robin's nursing career.

During one of Robin's 3-11 shifts, I-95 was closed down due to a 40-car pile up in a sleet storm, which Robin was stuck in. Joe was so worried. It was before cel phones. Despite the shutdown, Joe went out to look for her. Joe was always concerned for Robin's safety. He wanted her in the safest of cars, including her latest sturdy SUV, which Joe helped her pick out. Joe closed many of his conversations to her with: "you take care of yourself, be careful."

Robin would bless her parents with two wonderful grandchildren: Ashley and Jeffrey. Ashley is unable to be with us today as she is visiting her husband, Dr. Douglas Robertson's parents, in far-away Scotland. However, she did want us to share these words:

I'm so sorry. I wish I could be there. He was a real father to me. He was absolutely my dad. And I remember him and MomMom lifting me over the waves as a kid. And the time we went biking on the boardwalk early in the morning, just him and me. And he said my doing Irish Studies was fine because he remembered when the Jewish mayor of Dublin visited and there were green kippahs with harps on them – and I didn't believe him until I went to the Jewish museum in Dublin and saw one!

I would be remiss if I didn't ALSO share that Ashley and Doug blessed Selma and Joe with two GREAT grandchildren: Eloise and Cartiona (Catrina), who attend the local Jewish Sunday school in Birmingham, ensuring the continued practice of Judaism in the family.

Like his Uncle Alan, Robin's son, Jeffrey, also remembers getting a brand new bike from his PopPop, but it was a Huffy, NOT a Schwinn. Jeffrey remembers his PopPop being a wonderful problem solver.

His PopPop helped him find his apartment while attending the University of Delaware, and he wrote to then Congressman Mike Castle to get hospital fees waived for expensive rabies shots due to the bat infestation in the aforementioned apartment – no wonder Jeffrey works for ABC News – Jeffrey has had a very newsworthy life.

At age 80, with notebook in hand, Joe went with his grandson, Jeffrey, to help him scout out an apartment in Manhattan – with Joe easily transferring Subway lines. Jeffrey said his PopPop was his ULTIMATE problem solver.

Robin is joined today with her life partner, Ellis Schlossenberg. He remembers the same banter with Joe. Joe would ask Ellis: “What’s new in Maryland?’ And Ellis would always answer, “The same thing that’s new in Delaware.” Joe treated Ellis like family, always asking after his knee. As Joe’s memory began to slip, Ellis was so surprised that one day Joe even asked Ellis after his son. Ellis said this all goes to show what a caring and thoughtful man Joe was.

Bill, Joe and Selma’s youngest child, was born in 1956. As a neurologist, he, too afforded his father the great pleasure of being able to say “my son the doctor.”

Bill remembers while as a student at Duke, his father Joe was eager to get a red Cutless down to him. In his eagerness, Joe got pulled over for speeding and had to go and pay up before the magistrate in Dinwitty, Virginia. That car ride culminated in a first dinner meeting with Bill's girlfriend, Kathy, who would go on to become his wife.

Kathy and Bill blessed Selma and Joe with grandchildren three times over. Joe already knew that granddaughter, Katie, was well on her way to graduating medical school from Jefferson, and prepared a special gift for her in anticipation of this wonderful accomplishment.

Grandson Andrew remembers wonderful family holiday meals together. He was appreciative for his PopPop's old black shoes, so he could hold on to his waiter's job at Stonegate.

And Grandson Will remembers playing piano for his PopPop at the Kutz Home, which was Joe's final place of residence starting in March 2018.

Aside from his delicious coleslaw, potato salad, and his assist with the scrumptious brisket, above all Joe will be remembered for his affability – he could chat anyone up at the local grocery stores, and knew how to effectively wield coupons.

Joe will also be remembered for his caring nature, his worth ethic and above all, his love of family. As we continue our celebration of our family centered Passover celebration, we are reminded that family is so central in the Jewish faith – and family was so central in Joe’s life too – family was Joe’s overriding most important value. And his children and grandchildren provided him with a constant source of pride of family. May we be inspired by Joe’s memory to always put our family first and in doing so we can truly say of Joe: *zikaron l’baruch* – “May his memory be for a blessing,” and let us say *amen*.