

Rabbi Michael S. Beals
Congregation Beth Shalom
Wilmington, DE
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Jack Spinner
Yaakov ben Shimon v'Sabrina
January 5, 1920 - August 15, 2005
(for Louisa)

Kabayd et-aveecha v'et eemecha...Honor thy father and your mother. This is the fifth and most central commandment of the Ten Commandments. This commandment is central to the Torah portion, *Va-Etchanan*, found in the final book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, that Jews throughout the world are reading this week. This commandment is central to creating a life of *shalom bayit*, domestic tranquility. And most significantly, this commandment is central to the life of Jack Spinner, *zichona l'vrachca*, of blessed memory, whose life we come to celebrate this morning.

If this fifth commandment of honoring one's parents is so central to all things we will discuss this morning, then obviously we must start Jack's story with that of his parents, Samuel and especially, Sabrina, Spinner. They were both born and married in Sambor, Galicia, in what was then part of Emperor Franz Josef's Austrian-Hungarian Empire. It is said that Sabrina's father was a contractor to the Emperor himself and this may have given young Sabrina a sense of high social station and elegance, a trait she internalized and preserved, even after her family became impoverished. More importantly, it was a trait she lovingly passed down to her Eastern European-born daughters, Margaret, Helen and Lil, as well as those born later in Toronto, Gladys (who is still living in Toronto) and Edythe, and most important to our story, it was a trait she passed down to her last child, her only son, Jack, her beloved *Yankel*, born on the 5th day of January, 1920, in Toronto.

Sabrina was not only elegant and royal, she was also a strict disciplinarian with a good throwing arm. In his youth, Jack was well aware of the cookie jar with the false bottom. Towards the top of the cookie jar rested the burnt cookies, available to Jack and his sisters. In the false bottom of the jar lay the good cookies, available to guests. One day Jack learned how to steal the good cookies from the false bottom, and when his mother spied him running away with his ill-gotten goods, she threw her broom at him, which hit its mark, right in the middle of Jack's back.

Jack grew up in an observant home in the Jewish neighborhood in Toronto. Aside from his secular studies, Jack went to *cheder*, and had a bar mitzvah. In later life, Jack would apply all that he had learned in Hebrew school to fulfilling the fifth commandment of the Torah, of honoring one's parents. For almost a full year, Jack would become a dedicated member of the morning minyan of Congregation Beth Shalom as he honored his mother, daily, by saying the Mourner's Kaddish for her. But I am getting far ahead of myself.

He also grew up in an extremely poor home. Jack's father, Samuel, was a *schnieder*, a remarkably gifted, but poor tailor. Things got economically worse for the family when Sam left the family, forcing Jack and his sisters to all quickly get jobs to help make ends meet. Jack had just finished the ninth grade, and his father's exit marked the end of his formal education, although Jack would spend a lifetime perfecting his mind and pursuing a variety of topics through his

reading.

Jack contributed to the family's economic well-being by becoming a page boy, a deliverer of messages, for the guests of the upscale Royal York Hotel in downtown Toronto. One of the guests he tended to was none other than the famous movie star, Mary Pickford. The story goes that Miss Pickford said to the young Jack: "You're not impressed with me, are you?" To which Jack replied: "No, I'm not." Jack had clearly internalized the sense of elegance and station which his mother Sabrina, had taught him (she did more than just throw a broom at him in his childhood). It wasn't as if Jack thought he was better than Miss Pickford. It is just that, despite his economic situation, Sabrina taught her son that he could hold his own with the best of them. And from this position of security, Jack treated everyone, the movie star guest to the cleaning woman at the Royal York, with equality. By preserving this trait throughout his life time, Jack, in a way was holding on to the Fifth Commandment of honoring one's parents, as this was such an important part of his mother's teaching.

Of course this sense of elegance came at a price. As Jack brought his hard-earned salary at the Royal York, mostly in tips, home to his mother, his mother would immediately turn around and spend it on fine clothing for his five sisters. When Jack protested, his mother explained that the Spinner girls must look their best if they are going to fetch good husbands. Sabrina also impressed upon a young Jack the importance of honesty, which would also feature strongly in Jack's adult life in business. One day Jack came home with a twenty dollar tip from an extremely generous guest of the York Hotel (that must have been some message Jack had delivered). Sabrina took the twenty dollar tip into her hands with fear and trepidation, asking Jack, in horror, what had he done to get it. Jack assured his honest mother that it was received through honest means. Alas, one could only hold on to the job of page boy at the Royal York for as long as one fit into the page boy uniform. And Jack eventually grew out of the uniform and thus out of the position.

From this point on, we must temporarily leave the Torah text from Deuteronomy behind, and turn back our Biblical metaphors to the first book of the Torah, Genesis, and to the story of *Yaakov*, for whom Jack derives his name. *Yaakov* was a wanderer, and through his wanderings, *Yaakov* prospered financially, intellectually, and even found a wife. All this is true for Jack. When he outgrew the page boy uniform, Jack became a wanderer of sorts. His journeys would eventually lead him from Toronto all the way to Wilmington, Delaware, but again, I get ahead of myself.

Jack's brother-in-law was Harry Kaye, who owned one of the finest trouser manufacturing stores in all of Canada. At age 18, Jack was given the sales territory of the Canadian Maritime Provinces of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick as well as the State of Maine. It wasn't such an honor. This region produced the worst sales in the business. Jack applied himself to the task. He took his copy of *Down and Bradstreet* and looked up every men's clothing store in the book in his sales territory, and Jack, like his Biblical counterpart, went "awandering", armed with Harry Kaye's trousers. But Jack was armed with more than just a great product. Jack went on his journeys armed with diligence, a great work ethic, a wonderful smile, a winning personality, and a virtual encyclopedia of jokes. In short, through his efforts, Jack took Harry Kaye's loss-leading territory, and turned it into his brother-in-law's top money-making sales territory for the business.

Harry Kaye must have dreaded the outbreak of World War Two. Jack was drafted. His great personality and business skills landed him in a procurement position for the Canadian Armed

services, and these skills saved his life. For every time Jack's commanding officer received an order for Jack to go overseas to fight, the commander would first send Jack on leave so he could not receive the order sending him overseas to a possible death in Europe. In this way, the Commander preserved the best procurement officer he ever had, and Jack, through his value to the Commander, preserved his life.

Jack briefly returned to his brother-in-law's firm at the end of the war, in 1945. But Jack's real goal was to go with an army buddy to California and start his life anew. Who knows, maybe he would have become one of my congregants in my first *shul* in Los Angeles. But first Jack went to visit his oldest sister, Margaret and her husband, Solly, in Wilmington. They owned a combination luncheonette and liquor store on Poplar Street and Second in the old Jewish neighborhood here. During Jack's visit, Margaret's husband unexpectedly died. Margaret was in an awful situation. So Jack put his California plans on hold and helped his sister run the business. And of course, under Jack, the business thrived and his plans to go out West, well they were just relegated to that Beach Boys song, "California Dreamin'".

As early as 1947, Bernice Seeherman wanted to fix up her girlfriend, Jean with Jack Spinner. But for some reason it would take eight years for this blind date to take place. (But as it took fourteen years for the Biblical *Yaakov* to marry his beloved Rachel, Jack was still ahead by six years). Jack had gone up to the Big Apple, New York City, with his little black book in hand. When the girl he was supposed to meet was not available, he moved on to the next name in the book. It was the name of Bernice Seeherman's girlfriend, Jean. So Jack called. But he did not get Jean. Instead he got Jean's dad, Nathan. It could have meant disaster. Would Jack move on to the next name in his little black book.? He might have, but he didn't because Nathan was so nice on the phone. So Jack called back.

Jean and Jack's first date took place on a Monday evening, just after Thanksgiving 1955. It began with dinner at the elegant Drake Hotel followed by a movie. I deliberately use the word elegant to describe the hotel, because that was Jean's first impression of Jack. The elegance which Sabrina had instilled in all her children, radiated in Jack. As Jean said, "Jack had presence." He was very dapper in his suit, his coat tails majestically flowing in the wind, donning a fashionable fedora. The movie, by the way, was called "Love and Marriage," starring Frank Sinatra. And here's the kicker: Jack didn't like Frank Sinatra movies, which makes you wonder why Jack chose that movie, doesn't it? The famous song from that movie, "Love and Marriage," would eventually become Jean and Jack's song.

The next weekend, Jack invited Jean down to the big Jewish Federation Dinner Dance in Wilmington. She stayed with her girlfriend, Bernice, who was so pleased in the direction this courtship was progressing. There is nothing as pleasing to a Jewish woman as successfully playing the role of Yenta the Matchmaker. Jean would make subsequent trips down to Wilmington, staying with Jack's sister, Margaret. And Jack would make plenty of trips up to New York City too. Jean found Jack so loving, so devoted...but honestly, how long can you keep up a long-distance relationship?

So on New Year's Day, 1956, while enjoying breakfast at the Tip Top Club in New York City, Jack looked across the table and said those three life-changing words to Jean: "I need you." Now Jack had a cold when he said those three memorable words to Jean, and she felt kind of sorry for him. But it was, of course, more than pity that led Jean to accept Jack's plea for life-long companionship. They were married in May 1956 at one of the most memorable weddings anyone every experienced. Jean had been recommended the perfect place in New York City for a

wedding by a friend; a “magnificent Temple” was how it was described. But much to Jean’s surprise it wasn’t a Jewish temple, it was a Masonic Temple. But it was magnificent. Just before the ceremony, the lights darkened. Then a spotlight lit only Jean in a breath-taking wedding gown. I am told you must really see the wedding pictures some time. The dress was so gorgeous that unlike most saved wedding gowns that are never used again, Jean’s niece actually did use it for her own wedding.

Jean and Jack made their home in Wilmington. Michelle, their lovely first-born daughter, came along the following year in 1957. She will be sharing with you wonderful stories of her father in just a moment. Let me just share one story about her and her father from her teenage years. This was the time of her brother’s bar mitzvah. At that time, Congregation Beth Shalom, which Jack and Jean had joined immediately after their wedding in 1956, did not allow girls to have a bat mitzvah. They did not even allow girls to come to the Torah for an aliyah blessing. Well, Michelle said she was not attending her brother’s bar mitzvah unless she had an aliyah. And what Michelle remembers most fondly is that her father, Jack, supported her in her teenage, feminist rebellion. And you know what? With Jack’s fatherly support, Michelle was the first girl to have an aliyah at Congregation Beth Shalom. After that, under the enlightened leadership of the blessed Rabbi Jacob Kraft, women having this honor became the established policy at Beth Shalom. And today in our most sacred of prayers, the Amida, we also add the names of our matriarchs, Sara, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah...and it all started with Michelle’s aliyah, and Jack’s support.

Equal treatment. It began with Mary Pickford noting that Jack wasn’t too impressed with her. Why? Because Jack treated everyone as equals. Equal treatment. Michelle gets an aliyah. When Jean’s brother got all that money from his bar mitzvah, Jack added the equal amount to Michelle’s savings account as well. Equal treatment. Jack was determined to treat his children with an equal amount of love and care. He applied this sense of equality to his business life, he applied it to his family life as well.

Well we have alluded to Michelle’s brother twice now. He has a name. Stuart was born in 1959. In childhood, Stuart’s favorite moments were those spent with his father. At this time, Jack had already moved on from the family liquor business to selling cars. Stuart loved to accompany his father from one dealership to another throughout Southern Pennsylvania, watching his father shmooze, engaging with all sorts of people, treating them all wonderfully. Everyone wanted to hear what was Jack’s joke of the week. When he was older, Stuart actually helped his dad drive the cars back to the lot. And in this capacity, Stuart got to see sides of his dad no one else in the family saw, like the time Jack used a string of profanity on the phone with a disreputable gentleman which I cannot possibly repeat in *shul*. At the end of the call, Jack looked up mischievously at his son and said: “I bet ya didn’t know your father could talk like that.” And of course Stuart didn’t because at home, Jack was always the perfect gentleman, Jean would have it no other way.

Jack never stopped being a kid at heart, and he had such a love for children. One wouldn’t be surprised to be at a mall, and having turned your back on Jack talking with a child for just one moment, turning back around and seeing the child offering Jack a lick of his ice cream cone. What a joy it must have been for him to watch Stuart fall in love and marry Nora, and then in 1999, welcoming his first and only grandchild, Louisa into his life. Nothing gave Jack greater joy than chasing Louisa around the house, playing hide-and-go-seek with her, just being with her. Stuart will always remember, the look of amazement in his father’s face, as he turned to him, and

said: “She’s lovely.”

I can tell in the way Michelle and Stuart have spoken of their father that the Fifth Commandment, “Honor thy Father and Mother,” is something that Jack managed to pass on to his children. I wouldn’t be surprised to see Stuart coming regularly to Morning Minyan to say Kaddish for his father, just as Jack had done for his mother at the same minyan many years earlier. And it is to Stuart that I turn to now for a final, loving observation. Stuart said that his father grew up in poverty, met a lot of *ganevim* in the rough-and-tumble of business life, but that though it all, his father, Jack, believed that at their core, all people were basically good, and that smart people could actually use their intellect to make the world a better place for all. Jack was not naive yet he was never cynical. To the end he always loved people, and he always had a joke at the ready to make them laugh and that is how we will remember him. *Zichrona l’vracha*, may his memory be for a blessing.