

George Heller – Shlomo Zalman ben Yaakov v'Gitel Chaya  
Eulogy by Rabbi Nathaniel Ezray, 24 April 2013

“Keep going no matter what!”

“Anything is possible!”

“Hold onto hope!”

“Education is the one thing that no one can ever take away from you.”

“It isn't over until it's over!”

These are just a few of the many lessons George Heller left etched in our hearts. They etched in our hearts not because he said them, but because he lived them with such integrity.

George Heller was truly an extraordinary man – a man who exuded kindness and compassion. He touched so many lives. When you were with George, you felt how deeply and genuinely he cared for you. He let you know you were appreciated as a unique individual. He lived life with joy and optimism – cherishing each day he spent on this earth. He was a master story-teller, imparting wisdom with every story he wove. He was meticulous – when facing any situation he would think it through, and then execute it. He left a legacy of resilience, determination, perseverance and love. Sitting with his family, and listening to his wife, his cousins, his children and grandchildren each share how deeply he touched them with love that was unique to them, was one of the most inspiring things I have ever experienced. George was a rare gem and will be missed.

In Psalm 1, we read that God cherishes the way of the righteous – *ki yodeah Adonai derech tzakim*. And in describing the righteous man, the text says *v'haya k'etz*

*shatul al palgei mayim, asher piryo yiten b'ito. He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives.* I love the metaphor of George as a beautiful tree bearing fruit, providing shade and comfort and life that will continue to live on far past this day.

What is the fruit that George has born? His wisdom; his values; his gutte neshama; his love. Everyone has a story of being touched by his love. His cousin Judy shared how George helped you make decisions about college education when you arrived in the United States in 1958. His advice and loving changed your life. His cousin Vera shared that George would be the only person who had the memories of her as a child and would share them. He told you stories about your father who you never knew because he was killed in the war. He knew you needed memories and he gave them to you. And you shared how his home was always open. For many years, his mother and Iby's parents all lived with the four children. It was a home bound together by intergenerational love. Iby shared how loving George was with her mother – you marveled then and still marvel now how he was there for her in every way, giving tender love – helping her with whatever she needed. George was a man who would say she'he'che'yanu when a grandchild would visit, he was so happy to be together as family. His legacy of love is the shade which gives us comfort and the leaves of the deeply rooted tree which give us oxygen.

A piece of George's story was his experiences in the Holocaust. But George was not a victim. In fact, when he began to talk about the Holocaust more openly about 15 years ago, it was because he knew the story needed to be told – so that we would never forget. And he shared the story with so many people, all who were touched so deeply.

When he taught about his experiences, it was through the lens of lessons learned. As he came to understand those lessons more deeply, the message touched us even more profoundly.

Some of these lessons emerged from the experiences he had as a young man growing up in Hungary. He was trained in the family printing business and always had a love of books and learning. He grew up in a family full of love and speaks with sadness about losing his brother, sister and father during the war. His education gave him an anchor to lean upon and build upon as he rebuilt his life. Language was always important to him and he was proficient in 6 languages. He would talk to students about his experiences and say, “After the war I had nothing, absolutely nothing in a strange world – all I needed was my education. “ And that love of learning served him well as he received degrees here in America from Temple University and MIT. George was a voracious reader and would get books about whatever topic interested him – ranging from psychology to communication to science to the all-important book on how to meet a wife.

It’s a sweet story. Apparently in those days people would go up to the roof of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y to sunbathe. Iby was up there, being very sophisticated as she did the New York Times puzzle. She asked if someone had a pencil and George did. He noticed the nuance of her enunciation and asked if she was Hungarian. “No,” she replied, “I’m an American.” He was taken by her, and asked for her number and called her. One of their first dates was a picnic in Central Park where George spread a newspaper to sit on so he wouldn’t get his suit dirty. Little did he know that spreading the paper out like that would cause a policeman to give him a ticket for littering. It has been 60 years of love and

devotion between Iby and George. Whenever we think of either of you individually, it is always as a couple – dignified, strong, full of love. You’re a beautiful couple – and created a beautiful life devoted to each other and to family.

George and Iby’s children, Karen, Steve, Leslie and Neil were blessed with parents made you feel treasured every day and treated each of you as individuals. Each of you shared stories of how your dad made you his unique priority as kids – whether it be camping with Karen, Indian guide events or a game of catch with Neil, martial arts with Steven, or holding Leslie for hours at a time to help her get over being shy and frightened – your dad made you feel loved and treasured.

He gave each of you individualized education. Leslie remembers the M and Ms that she received for math games, and Neil remembers potato chips as rewards for speech and diction practice. And while things were individualized, clearly each of you understood the importance of math and computers – as do your children.

Everything George did was for the family. For a period of time living in Poughkeepsie, his company moved to a site an hour away. Rather than uproot and move his family, George commuted every day, even though he didn’t like driving – rain or sun or snow. He thought the situation through – had emergency supplies in the car, and a warm blanket in case he ever got stuck. He did what he had to do so the family would not have to move. When his boss shared concerns that George might not make it to work if there was a bad snowstorm, he didn’t realize the work ethic and determination that defined George. One particularly bad snow storm, George made it into work and then took calls at the switchboard from all the people who couldn’t make it to work from

much closer destinations. One more driving story: one terrible snow storm, Leslie wanted to go to Hebrew High School and George took her, even though when they arrived, they found out that the class had been cancelled. When Debbie, Steve's wife, was describing her father-in-law, she said, "It was so wonderful to feel so loved and have it expressed all of the time."

And for all you felt his love as you grew up, the beauty is that each of you experienced it in different ways. Karen talks of a father who appreciated her unique humor, and taught her the power of storytelling and using the right prop. Leslie spoke of a father who valued her as a teacher. Neil spoke of how George would ask you to introduce him at events where he would speak as a way to pull you into the story. Steven talked about pathos and how you are if anyone sees a trait in you that reflects your father. And each of your spouses' feels that George was a loving father to them in every way. Steven, Karen's husband tells how George would try to include him by asking him to help fix things. Some, you would say were beyond repair, but George didn't believe in throwing things away. In fact, it's still probably in the closet with a label.

Each of you shared that your dad did not talk about the Holocaust much when you were young except on Passover. When he held up the matza and said, "Ha Lachma Anya – This is the Bread of Affliction – we were slaves in Egypt; George would share that he too was a slave. He would tell of the time in a slave labor camp, and of the time he was at Mauthausen. He told of the Passover at the end of the war, where the inmates found a piece of matza, and of the terrible march at the end of the war where so few survived. He

asked that Kaddish be said for them as he lay in the hospital bed just a couple weeks ago and honored their memory.

More stories emerged as he began to tell what happened. When you asked why he didn't tell you more when you were younger, he replied that he didn't think anyone was interested. But he did come to talk about it – in a way that taught lessons and touched lives. One of his haunting stories that stays with so many of us is of the friend who turned to him and shared he had given up hope. At that moment, the young man died. George took from that story that you always hold onto hope. His experience of the Holocaust wasn't defined by being a victim, but by teaching that you can overcome the most difficult things in life by holding onto hope. He wanted young people to know the stories and learn the lessons, and he succeeded in extraordinary ways in touching lives.

His lessons of hope and perseverance also took root in his grandchildren. You understand the commandment to remember and make sure the Holocaust never happens again. You have been given the blessing of a grandfather who loved each of you so much and reveled in the love he received from you. Yours are the precious memories of the projects he would give you, the strudel he would bake with you, the talks he would have with you.

And like your parents, each of you was treated as a unique individual by your grandparents. Such precious stories! The tiny morsels I will share don't do justice to the depth and breadth of your relationship – but I know these stories will be told over and over by each of you over the years. Nina, whose beautiful letter sharing what she learned from George will be read later shared memories of making Napier bones to

multiply (math tools), and learning how to patch hole in the wall. Ilana learned from George how to count in binary on her fingers – but only to 7 since she was 7. Erika told him that 19 means, “I love you”, because the sign for ‘I love you’ is the same as the binary 19 represented on the fingers of one hand. He told you stories where he’d say a sentence and you would say the next and continue switching off. Naomi remembers how he spoke to her 7<sup>th</sup> Hebrew School class and told the story the man who lost hope and the need to hold on to hope.

Erika has beautiful memories of your grandfather’s stories and aphorisms. You remember jumping into bed between George and Iby. You shared how he would want her to finish this sentence: “How wonderful that..... You remember answering, “How wonderful that... that I can watch cartoons. You did the mitzvah of being with your grandfather after he died and that took a lot of courage. Shari gave a very practical anecdote – he taught you how to crack hard boiled egg on your head. Adam remembers that his grandfather taught him math as a game and you see your interest in becoming an engineer inspired by your grandfather. Such precious memories: when you traveled to Hungary, you brought list of words and worked on one of the vowels, and your grandfather made you a CD.

Becca shared a beautiful memory of your grandfather teaching you have to say please and thank you in as many languages as possible. You love writing and credit your grandfather you with teaching you the art of storytelling, social action and social justice. When you ran for office in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, your grandfather made the buttons. All of us with buttons from George treasure them. You have a button from him that says: “You cannot

control the events around you, but you can control how you react to them.” And that has become your mantra. Sam was blessed to interview your grandfather and present him at a Yom Hashoah ceremony. You treasure those talks and also remember how he would hide the afikomen in his shirt, reassuring you that had two clean shirts on.

George taught his children, grandchildren and each of us so much.

He taught us how to listen well. He would lean in to listen more carefully.

He taught us to care for others and would be sure to talk to everyone he encountered and truly listen to what they said.

He taught us to care for our bodies. He was doing aerobics before it was the popular thing to do, and began climbing the rock wall when he was 73 several times a week, continuing until he was 87. It’s possible.

He taught us to do things right and to do tikkun olam and repair the world.

He taught us to persevere and overcome challenges with determination and a plan. When he was rejected the first time at MIT, he figured out what classes he needed to take and get A’s in to get in the next time. When he was asked by the physical therapist these past few weeks if wanted to try something, he would say “Yes, let’s do it! Don’t help me.”

He taught us about strength, dignity and optimism. His daughter in law Debbie shared that these past few weeks have shown that piece of him in ways she didn’t previously understand.



George taught us to live life with gratitude. It was with genuine sincerity that he would thank the nurses, the aides, anyone who helped him. His words of thanks to me sit in my heart. Even in the store, he would say to people, “You are good.”

George taught us to grasp onto life fiercely and live every minute with joy. There is a fantastic picture of George eating ice cream the day before he died. He relished every bite, and said, “This is good!” – letting everyone know how happy he was.

The Rabbis in the Talmud teach, *tzadikim af b'mitatom nikra'u Chayim* – *the righteous one even in their death are called living*. George lives through the lessons that he has taught us and continues to teach us. In the words of his son Neil, our job is to internalize the lessons. Our prayer at this time is: May his soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.

Speakers:

Neal  
Debbie  
Rebecca  
Nina  
Erica  
Steve

Pallbearers - Grandchildren