

EULOGY
TO BE DELIVERED IN HONOR OF
HELEN JAKUBOWSKI

By: Steve Jakubowski

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May It Please the Court.

Today, we stand before the L-rd our G-d, uttering our first bracha since my mother's untimely death... "Baruch Atah Hashem, Dayan Ha'Emes."

"Blessed are you, G-d, Judge of the Truth." The Gemara in Yoma 69b says that the "signet of the Holy One, Blessed be He, is Truth." Truth is what G-d loves, and falsehood is what He despises.

And I ask leave of you, the Heavenly Court, not as a lawyer, but as her loving son, to present the Truth about my mother on behalf of not just myself, but my sister, our respective families, and those assembled with us today in presence or thought, on this, her day of *Emes*.

The proof of my mother's greatness is not readily apparent, is it? She received no awards. No inscribed silver chalices or platters. No dinners were sponsored in her honor. No buildings named after her. No honorariums established in her name. Seems quite an ordinary life.

Yet, when we closely examine her life story, even in a brief eulogy, it resonates with a feeling that somehow, it was "meant to be," as she often liked to say.

The first chapter, the "*Formative Years*," were pastoral; indeed, idyllic. Her memories are only happy and positive. And the optimism and independence her parents and grandparents nurtured within her during the enlightened interwar period remained with her to the end, and very much defined the *Emes* of who she was.

But those idyllic days passed quickly, and war overtook them, and imprinted within her an indelible mark... that of a survivor. And to listen to her stories, and few have done so, is something you have to do. They are stories you have to hear to believe, for there are none others like them.

Let me sum it up this way. When my mother reached the fork in the road, to quote the famous philosopher Yogi Berra, she took it. She didn't turn around, she didn't freeze. She didn't second guess herself and run. No, she knew when there was a fork in the road, and she took it, wherever it may lead. And it was by making those tough, smart, spontaneous decisions, by choosing a path and not looking back, when coupled with the ample blessings with which G-d protected her, that her choices were transformed into something that seemed "meant to be."

And during *shiva*, and for whomever asks, we'll play the tape of her interview with Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation so you can see and hear, from her own lips as an sentient eyewitness to history, just exactly how remarkable her story was. Let me mention here a few of the highlights.

So, just how did she survive, anyway? After all, every survivor has a unique story of survival. Well, far eastern Poland was relatively safe for Jews until 1942, when the Gestapo arrived. Along the way following her capture she met a brilliant chemical

engineer in the camps who registered her to join an elite chemist group being formed, and he intensely tutored her, resulting in her being the only woman among the 40 top entrants to pass the qualifying exam.

Later, that knowledge, experience, and lab training, helped her secure selection to another separate group, composed of mostly non-Jews from Berlin and elsewhere who were among Europe's greatest chemists and engineers.

From there, other women joined, thus expanding her group of elite to seven, five of whom survived to the end – a remarkable statistic in its own right. Sometimes, they'd be transported from camp to camp, not in crammed cattle cars, but in third class passenger quarters! In one other notable instance, my mother, clad in her fitted striped concentration camp best, disembarked from a train accompanied by the SS in Berlin's main train station, and remarkably sat down in a restaurant! [Of course, my mother would not tolerate just any striped clothes, no she insisted on fitted striped clothes, and got them].

Eventually, in 1944, this group had gained a certain mystique, that my mother, as the designated "minister of propaganda," would appropriately invoke to ward off any hostile parties... especially, if that special someone threatened – Heaven forefend – to cut off her hair. For you see, for my Mom, how she looked defined how she felt about herself, and how she thought others viewed her. This attitude – not vanity, more self-preservation – stayed with her to end, indeed to the night before she died. Sitting up in bed, courageously awaiting a very risky stent procedure given the extensiveness of her advanced coronary artery disease, she's putting on makeup. Not because she's vain, but because she feared that if things don't go too well, she didn't want the doctor to look down and say, "ahh, forget it, she's too old anyway, it's not gonna work."

You see, my Mom had a most critical eye for aesthetics and beauty by which she judged others, and by which she felt others judged her. She was born with it, and she carried on her sleeve throughout her life. It wasn't personal. She wanted the best for the person she judged, and for herself. She wasn't mean-spirited about it, though some surely took it that way. But when it came to aesthetics, she always had a definite opinion that she did not hesitate – and indeed felt qualified and obligated – to deliver.

So she survives in relative peace through December 1944. All in all, she's in pretty good shape. At that point, she's working in a chemical lab in Krakow supposedly to develop with this crack Berlin-based team a gas that stops all moving vehicles. Instead, what's she doing? Cooking, trading food and recipes with the Poles, and eating – as she described it – great food. The Nazis were simply too preoccupied to worry about this small group of brainiacs, and the Sergeant Schultz in charge didn't seem too anxious to lose this gig either.

The Russians, however, were now on their heels, and the good times would soon end. So Sergeant Schultz packs everyone up, and tells them they're going to Auschwitz. There were no guards, no dogs, no guns, she could have run, they all could have run away. But where were they going to go? The devil you know is better than the devil you don't. And so, my friends, I think we're talking about the only Jews during the entire Holocaust that

walked voluntarily into Auschwitz. You see, she was at the fork in the road, and she took it. And if you have G-d's blessings, maybe, like her, you'll live to see another day.

And after that remarkably crazy, counter-intuitive decision, the blessings rained down. What happens? It just so happens, after she takes a *real* shower, she runs into a Jewish girl from her home town – Regina – masquerading as an Aryan, and running the entire women's cell block. She recognizes my Mom, and takes her under her wing, and suddenly, Mom's living large, in true comfort, in Auschwitz, in January 1945.

But, as that great philosopher Yogi Berra said, "it ain't over 'til it's over." And the war wasn't over. And with the Russians advancing, the Germans put people on the move. So begins her death march – destination Bergen Belzen – on a bitter cold, snowy day, a date she never forgot, January 25, 1945. The goal, walk 150 km – 5 wide – the line holding together, prodding each other along, put in open carts; begging for food and water; falling asleep and freezing to the bottom of the carts. Well, she made it. And when asked what Bergen Belzen was like, she responded, "Bergen Belzen was the pits."

But, undeterred, this master of propaganda convinces them at Bergen Belzen of how important her group of six (down from seven) was by describing all the places they had been and people they knew. And the fact is, they all had their hair, so obviously something was up. So, once again they get upgraded to a single bunk-bed suite. Three to a bed. And who does she run into again... her old buddy, Regina, who gets her a job and moves her to another safer barrack, where she's peeling – and eating – potatoes. And sneaking food to her friends so they too can survive. And then the British finally arrive, and Mom survives, ending this second chapter in her life, that of "*Survivor*."

And from there, the third chapter begins, titled "*Freedom*." And as she says, freedom was marvelous. Of course, to quote Janis Joplin, freedom here really looks more like just another word for nothing left to lose. For she had nothing, except her life, and of course her fitted striped concentration camp outfit. And there she is again... at that fork in the road. First, of course, she has to make herself look better.... And that ain't happening overnight. My enterprising Dad – Dr. David Jakubowski – sends out a search and rescue party for her, but she's not ready to be seen yet. So she stays, and works for the British administrative authority at Bergen Belzen, and in a way, Bergen Belzen became her home, for now. A few months later, she left with a marvelous recommendation from a senior British officer, who described her as a devoted worker with a deep understanding of administration. Sound like anyone we know – Ruth? Still, though, the past continued to haunt her, and she had to see who was left at home, and what happened to it. She needed closure.

And how she again was disappointed by humanity. She saw murder, mayhem, cannibalism, and much more. But you know what? I don't think she expected her old neighbors to cheat her too. But, rest assured, they did – the keepers of her mom's furs – the tenants of her home – yes, they were none too happy to see that she had survived to redeem some old promises made during the war.

In the end, my Mom wanted out. Poland gave her the creeps... So, she smuggled herself across communist lines back to Germany, and decided to take that enterprising doctor

fellah in Amburg up on that offer to visit him. Well, next thing you know, they fall in love, get married and – they’re still free. So where should they go...America / Israel... My father wanted to go to Israel, but my Mom’s new American soldier-friends advised her that she’s no kibbutznik, and she reluctantly, but candidly, agreed. So off they went to America, with three suitcases and \$300 in their pocket.

And when they got off the boat, they instantly felt at home, they felt American. Prototypical Americans, I might add... Immigrants, hard working, honest, and patriotic. Those haunting images of the past were seared into their memories, and were relived daily, sometimes when awake, sometimes when asleep. But in the main, they looked ahead to the bright future that America offered. Upward mobility, a car, a profession. Freedom, with something to gain, and lose. And taking more risks.... Leaving Coney Island, going to a TB Clinic in Pennsylvania, then up to Copenhagen NY, in the heart of the snowbelt in upstate NY, where my father became the “physician-king.” Beloved throughout the countryside, though he probably delivered more animals than children. But while my Dad played “physician-king,” my Mom wanted more.... Including another child. See, my Dad was perfectly happy with Ruth. My Mom wasn’t.... No offense, Ruth. But my Dad wanted stability, finally, and was in no mood to take more chances. After all, my Mom had just miscarried with her second child. My Mom saw things differently from my Dad when it came to certain risks, however, and she had a few tricks left up her sleeve that she parlayed, 9 months later, thank G-d, into me – Steven Reginald – named after Steven, my Mom’s dad, and her buddy Regina, who twice saved her life.

But after a couple of years, frankly, “Green Acres” is *not* where my Mom wanted to be. And she convinced my Dad, that that’s not where he wanted to be either.

So off to Syracuse they went to begin a new chapter, “*Settling in Syracuse*,” where they would lay down their roots, integrate with the community, and even join a synagogue. And so begins the fourth chapter in my Mom’s life. One that lasted for a little over 25 years.

And in 1959, they hit the ground running. They got a mortgage, built an office, started a family practice, and they hustled. Night calls, day calls, cold calls, office visits, with Mom manning the phones and running the office, while Dad was out doing what he did best – healing. And finally Dad began to realize why he was beloved. Because he was a great doctor. And his practice was taking off. And life seemed good.

Too good, perhaps, for this afflicted couple. Labor day weekend, about three in the morning in 1961, my father sustains a massive heart attack that destroys the muscle in 80% of his left ventricle. He drops to the cold bathroom floor, lying in my mother’s arms, losing color, and telling her that he’s dying. And let me tell you, he *knew* death. As she related it, she couldn’t believe her eyes. How could this be happening? Didn’t she go through enough? Now with two children, no life insurance, nothing, no savings, G-d is going to take him away? And she yells at my Dad, “you can’t die... you can’t do this to me!” And she prays to her mother, as she always did in times of trouble, even last Sunday night in a semi-confused drug induced state; and somehow, miraculously, my Dad’s collaterals kicked in, some color returned to his face, and he survived.

But that single incident traumatized her like nothing she had ever previously experienced, even in the pits of Bergen Belzen.

And so, the goals set forth in this fourth chapter of their life are immediately, and irrevocably, reshaped into a singular one – that of keeping my Dad alive. And from that singular priority, the propriety of *all* other actions would henceforth be measured. So, *Ruth*, you don't go out at odd hours, because your father will worry. And, you don't skip school, *Ruth*, without telling your parents. Ok? To be fair ... No, *Steve*, you can't come to Florida like all the other kids do over break because your father will worry about where you are and he needs to rest. And yes, *Steve*, you must get straight A's because if you don't your father will get a heart attack.

So, from this, Ruth became “Miss Goody Two Shoes.” And I wasn't too bad either, at least until I decided, at 19 or 20, that I didn't want to be a doctor. I didn't know exactly what I was going to do, but I at least knew what I didn't want to do.

But obviously, there are great risks with such radical thoughts, particularly as such musings will upset your father, and possibly kill him! And so began, for the next three or four years, that famed tug of war between me and Mom.

But somehow, with G-d's blessing, things took a turn for the better in 1981. Why? It's hard to say. That was the year Harold Kushner came to Syracuse to promote his new acclaimed book, “*Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.*” Well, my Dad attended that lecture at a packed sanctuary, and he became very agitated by the lecture. After all, my Dad stood up to explain, who was Kushner to tell my father, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, the Blitzkrieg, Mydanek, the death march to Dachau, and much more, why bad things happened to good people?

Well, maybe G-d liked my Dad's spunk that day, but my Mom and we sure didn't as my Dad nearly collapsed later at home that night from the stress of that public moment. So from then on, a corollary rule was instituted ... no more public speaking for Dad. But, I must say, looking back on it, things suddenly turned for the better for both Ruth and me after that.

Ruth met her husband Richard, and I got into the Univ. of Chicago Law School. And just like that, how happy was their lot. *Ashrei yoshvei va'secha, od y'hallelucha selah; ashrei ha-am, shecacha lo; ashrei ha-am, sh'adokai alokav.* (“Happy are those who dwell in Your house, continually they will praise You. Happy are the people that such is their lot. Happy are the people, that the L-rd is their G-d.”)

Three years later, upon my graduation from law school, my parents perceived that their work was done, and Dad retired, thus ending the very long and tumultuous chapter 4, and thereby commencing chapter 5, which I've titled the “*Golden Years.*”

Those years, too, were years of bliss. Eight straight years of bliss, followed by a cardiac arrest and a dramatic save of my Dad, and another five years of bliss after that. And then, my Dad's heart could beat no more, and he passed away in December, 1997.

And so ended an era and began a new sixth chapter ... which I call “*Mourning and Independence.*” How my Mom beat herself up over my Dad’s death. He could have lived another day, two, five, weeks, months, years, she believed. She beat herself so much that she literally ate up her insides, and weakened herself in the process.

But did she roam around moaning about her fate? Nope. Did she ever wail aloud in public? Nope. She always bore a pleasant greeting and a smile, laughed heartily at every joke (both good and bad), showed compassion for her fellow man, perhaps even with a gift, or a meal, and another meal, and another meal, and perhaps some tuna, crackers, ice cream, nuts, chocolate, candy, and more, until you could eat no more.

Still, I think Ruth and I convinced her that she had much to be thankful for and she knew it. For in 1961, everyone had pretty much buried my father, yet he outlived most of them. And he knew, and we knew, and really everyone knows, that my Mom was the reason why. In fact, I think all would agree that without my Mom, my Dad probably would have stayed in Amburg.

And soon, too soon, she moved from the sixth chapter of mourning and independence into the seventh chapter, “*The Sunset.*” And, of course, it was during this twilight period, that her wonderful daughter Ruth fulfilled the unconditional promise she made as a young girl in Syracuse, that Mom would never have to worry about getting old, because – as Ruth said while pointing out the window – when she gets older, she’ll move next door and take care of Mom and Dad. Of course, it turned out Ruth couldn’t move in next door, because my Mom didn’t live there anymore. So, instead, Ruth moved the door to Baltimore. And, as a result, provided us in the know with a most spectacular sunset.

And I hope, in fact expect, Ruth, that you won’t beat yourself up over this, because Mom – as you know – went exactly the way she wanted to. Turn off the lights, and say good night. Thankfully, the wonderful Dr. Medea and Dr. Barr at St. Joe’s kept her alive long enough for me, and my sister, to tell her over and over until she expired in our arms while looking at us right in the eye, that we love her and that she was a great, great mother, grandmother, and friend. And in her last dying moments, she several times mouthed the letter “L” in an effort, despite a breathing tube down her throat, to say “I love you.”

The Sages say in Berachos 8b that the angel of death strikes on his 8th pass. And here we are, at chapter 8. Some would say that this chapter should be called “The Death of Helen.” But I think, taking a cue from our forefathers, and the Torah in which their deeds are recorded, that the fifth parsha of *Bereshis*, Genesis, *Chayei Sarah*... “the life of Sarah,” provides us with the title for this last chapter, which I call, “*Chayei Chai’a.*” The life of Helen, whose Hebrew name was *Chai’a*, which means “life.” And there are indeed many parallels between the matriarch Sarah, and our matriarch *Chai’a*.

- Sarah was the great matriarch, and so too will be *Chai’a*.
- Sarah lived to a decent age, relatively speaking, of 127. (Of course, Avraham lived for another 48 years). And so too did *Chai’a* live to a decent age, all things considered.

- Sarah was married to a great tzaddik, a truly righteous man, and so too was *Chai'a*, whose husband, my father, died on the twilight of Shabbos, another true sign of righteousness.
- Sarah stood by her man, and when guests came, she was busy preparing food, and so too would be *Chai'a*.
- In the last third of Sarah's life, according to my bar mitzvah parsha, *Vayeira*, Sarah lived through great turmoil: Sodom & Gomorrah; fights with Abimelech; mortal fear of death and rape in Egypt; troubles with, and banishment of, Hagar and Ishmael; and of course, the near sacrifice of Yitzchak, which Sarah only learned about after the fact. So too, as I've recounted, the last third of *Chai'a's* life, chapters 4-7, surely were no picnic.
- Finally, Sarah dropped dead from a heart attack, as did *Chai'a*.

Most significantly, however, the fact is that the death of Sarah is retold under the heading the "life of Sarah." So, what does this teach us? I think it teaches us that Sarah's – and *Chai'a's* – death should inspire us and provide meaning to our lives, for both Sarah and *Chai'a* lived each moment to its fullest until their very last breath.

After Sarah's death, it is written, Avraham came to eulogize her and bewail her, just as we are doing today for my mother, *Chai'a*.

And so, may it please the Heavenly Court, please accept these truths as self-evident and gather my mother's soul, with my Dad's, and all those whom they loved before them. Please care for them, save them, and bring them back to us – or with us – when the *mashiach* finally, and we hope soon, comes.

Thank you.