

A Final Tribute to a True Eshet Chayil - Sheva Shtaygrud

Leah and I mourn the passing of a very special member of the Washington Heights Congregation and a wonderful personal friend, Mrs. Sheva Shtaygrud. Sheva, together with her beloved husband Izzy, were part of the wave of immigrants from the former Soviet Union who came to Washington Heights in the late 80's and early 90's. While unfortunately many had little interest in using their new home and new-found freedom to rekindle their connection with observant Judaism, Sheva was of a different mind. Despite her being born into and growing up in a society that discriminated against Jews and made it illegal to practice and learn about Judaism, Sheva had a strong Jewish Neshama. She was determined to reconnect with Jewish tradition and live the life of an observant Jew. Fortunately, she found herself in a receptive community that was prepared to help. The Jewish Community Council helped the Shtaygrud family with their physical needs as well as with acculturation to their new home and to Judaism. They found welcoming Shuls. Most importantly, they found individuals, led by Ralph Mansbach, who were willing to give of their time to help teach the new immigrants and to help them turn their homes kosher.

Sheva availed herself of all that was offered and was most proud when her kitchen was koshered. I remember very clearly how proud she was to be able to invite the Rabbi to her home to celebrate her son's Sheva Brachot. She wanted me to be comfortable, so she kept bringing out all the packages from the food served to show me that it had an appropriate Hashgacha. You could truly sense the pride she had in the fact that she kept a kosher home.

For Sheva, the most important event of the week was to make it to Shul on Shabbat. Despite the language barriers and her lack of familiarity with the services, she knew that the place for her on Shabbat and Yom Tov was in Shul, communing with Hashem. Her health conditions made it very difficult for her to walk up hills and the ten-plus blocks were definitely a challenge, but she persevered. As time went on the trek became even more difficult. Sheva would describe to me how she had to climb the last flights of her six-flight climb on her hands and knees. By the time the Shul moved to its current location, just across the street from her apartment, it was too difficult to even make that trip. When Leah and I would visit, she always bemoaned her inability to make it to Shul on Shabbat.

One of the most moving events of my rabbinical career was the wedding of Izzy and Sheva. Sheva's good friend Nina Srogovich wanted to be married according to Halacha, and she convinced Sheva and a number of other friends and her children to do so as well. On a Sunday afternoon, we gathered in Shaare Hatikva's social hall to marry some half dozen couples with proper Ketuba and Chuppa. I partnered with Rabbi Yisrael Balsim, who filled out the Ketuba for each couple and explained to them what it was all about. I said the Sheva Berachot under the Chuppa. We followed the weddings with a beautiful Seuda and another set of Sheva Berachot. For these couples, this event marked the completion of their return to being a full part of the Jewish community.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the great Nachat that Sheva received from the accomplishments of her children and grandchildren. She took special delight in the time she spent with her son's family. The fact that he and his wife are fully observant and that her grandchildren are being raised to continue on the path that she blazed was a badge of honor that she wore with pride.

Sheva was a true woman of valor, whose Yiddisha Neshama, which could not be stamped out by the oppressive Soviet Union, gave her the strength to return to a fully observant and meaningful Jewish life. With her husband at her side, she overcame many obstacles to reach her goal. Her memory lives on as an inspiration for all of us.

May her soul be bound up in the bond of eternal life.

Rabbi Ellis Bloch