

Beryl Levenson, z"l

Eulogy for Beryl Levenson, z"l, delivered by NJOP Founder Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald  
on 02/17/2024.

Chazal (our rabbis) say: "*Bizchut nashim tzid'kah'nee'oht nig'ah'loo ah'voh'tay'noo mee Mitzrayaim,*" that in the merit of the righteous Jewish women, our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt. The women in the time of the Egyptian redemption had absolute faith in Hashem that they would be redeemed--that's why they came with musical instruments to the Yam Suf, prepared for redemption. That is why they did not participate in the sin of the Golden Calf. That is why the women refused to separate from their husbands when the men separated from their wives, because of Pharaoh's decree to throw the Jewish male children into the Nile River.

There is a long history of heroic Jewish women who saved the Jewish people, including Yocheved, Miriam, Ruth the Moabite, Queen Esther, Yehudit in the story of Chanukah. Beryl Levenson fits right into this list, as a contemporary hero of the Jewish people. I will explain in a moment.

Allow me to digress for a moment and give you a little background that will explain my relationship with Beryl, especially at NJOP (National Jewish Outreach Program), for which she served as the Associate Director for 25 years, until her retirement, and move to Israel.

I am the Beginners rabbi at Lincoln Square Synagogue. For the last 48 years, I have conducted a special Shabbat service for people with little to know synagogue background. I have tried to become a real rabbi, hopefully one day I will!

I joined the staff of Lincoln Square Synagogue in 1972 as a teacher in the fledgeling adult education program. In 1973 I became the Education Director of Lincoln Square Synagogue and served in that capacity for the next 15 years. During those 15 years, we developed some amazingly successful synagogue programs, including the Beginners Service, the program called "Turn Friday Night Intro Shabbos," which later became Shabbat Across America, the Hebrew Reading Crash Course, the Crash

Course in Basic Judaism and many others. The old LSS building opened in 1970, and soon became one of the most popular synagogues in America, with Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, who was often referred to as “Stevie Wonder” and Chazzan Sherwood Goffin, of blessed memory.

The Beginners Service started in December of 1975. There was little hope that anyone would attend. After all, the best “show” in town with Rabbi Riskin and Sherwood Goffin was taking place in the Main Sanctuary, and it was impossible to find a seat there. In fact, the fire department constantly warned that it was overcrowded and a fire hazard.

Somehow the Beginners Service started catching on, and in 1981 there was a front page second section story about it in the Saturday New York Times, and it became standing room only.

The Adult Education program was also exceedingly popular, it attracted 1,500 people a week, with 50 different classes, ranging from Aleph Bet, to advanced Gemara and philosophy, etc. highlighted by Rabbi Riskin’s popular Wednesday night lectures.

Sometime in 1980, with all this incredible success, I approached Rabbi Riskin and said, “The tragedy of Lincoln Square Synagogue is that there is only one Lincoln Square Synagogue.” There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of American Jews who could benefit from these programs. Why don’t we share the most successful programs that we developed at Lincoln Square Synagogue, and try to replicate them in synagogues around the country. Rabbi Riskin responded that it was a great idea, but that he was planning on moving to Israel, which he did in 1983, and created a very successful town of Efrat and established a host of noted educational institutions.

One of the institutions that Rabbi Riskin created while he was still in New York was the Manhattan High School for Girls. The school was led by the exceedingly talented, Rebbetzin Rivkah Blau and the Assistant Principal/Administrator was Beryl Levenson. In late 1970, I was asked to teach prayer and Jewish philosophy on Friday mornings. That is where I met Beryl for the first time, and was so impressed with her personality and incredible administrative abilities.

Beryl was a tall, beautiful, classy, brilliant and talented woman, who graduated from a specialized school, Hunter High School. As a young woman, she often starred in many locally sponsored community plays. She was truly gifted in so many ways. She was not only personally “classy,” but everything she touched, had the “Touch of Class.” The high standards that she set at NJOP, remain to this day!

I am a big believer that a leader of a school need not be a great visionary or consummate educational philosopher. I think the most important talent necessary to be an exceptional principal, is to be exceedingly organized--to make sure that everything runs properly in the school, a leader who is able to hire exceptional staff and support personnel. There are plenty of philosophers, but gifted administrators are very rare.

So, when in August of 1987, I was finally in a position to launch the National Jewish Outreach Program, I reached out to Beryl and asked her to join me in this vital endeavour. We both took a big risk. The first public NJOP program that we offered in January of 1988 was the Crash Course in Hebrew Reading. We were hoping that through our flashy marketing and advertising, we would be able to reach about 800 Jews and successfully teach them to read the Hebrew Aleph Bet. The marketing was completely novel and creative. We had jingles, “Being Jewish is just the beginning” on the radio, advertising on the busses and the subways. and we used 800 toll-free numbers for the first time to get responses.

We were completely blown away when 5,000 people registered for the first Hebrew Reading Crash Course, and we knew right away that we were on to something big. We chose Hebrew as our first public program because it was non threatening. It wasn't religious, even though the Hebrew reading Primer was based on the Siddur, the prayer book. Would American Jews be interested in taking a Crash Course in Basic Judaism? Belief in G-d, Prayer, Shabbat, Jewish Observances, Sexuality. Three thousand of the people who registered for the Hebrew Reading signed up for the Basic Judaism course. Over the years we have taught over 260,000 Jews in North America alone, how to read Hebrew, and many tens of thousands have taken the Crash Course in Basic Judaism. The big, splashy, program Shabbat Across America, has hosted over a million North

American Jews. These programs have been replicated, not only in North America, but all around the world, in 44 countries. And much of the credit is due to the brilliant organizational talents and skills of Beryl Levenson.

Every Friday night, in many Jewish homes we read the ode to the woman of valor, "*Eshes Chayil*." Now the Hebrew word, "*Chayil*" is very often translated as a valor, hence the name "woman of valor." But "*Chayil*" also means a soldier, and that is exactly what Beryl was. She was a soldier, she was a *mifakedet*, a commander, she was a general in the battle against Jewish assimilation. Her organizational genius, together with her passion, was unparalleled. She was a *Na'ah'seh v'nish'mah* person. Get it done, get it done! There was no one like her. She was all *Tachlis*.

One of the students that I taught at Manhattan High School for Girls was Beryl's daughter, Sora Levenson, who passed away in 1990, which was 3 years after the founding of NJOP.

After Sora's passing, Beryl was never the same. There was always a sparkle missing from her eye. But I do not believe that she ever missed a step in fulfilling her mission, in fulfilling her role as the same, brilliant coordinator that she was before Sora's passing. Beryl's exceptional perception also enabled her to keenly discern when selecting NJOP staff, and it was because of her keen eye and insights that we have been blessed with the most talented, dedicated and wonderful staff for the last 36 years, including Larry Greenman, who is the Assistant Director today.

The passing of Beryl Levenson marks the end of an era, but it also marks the passing of a great Jewish giant, one of the great giants in contemporary Jewish engagement. She is responsible for tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of Jews who have come closer to their Jewish heritage. Beryl is responsible for dozens of Reform Temples that have become kosher, for innumerable children of non-affiliated and non-observant Jews who have become observant and are today leaders in the committed community, some even becoming prominent Orthodox rabbis and teachers. So much of this can be directly attributed to Beryl Levenson, a true giant, a true hero.

Her passing is a great loss to the Jewish community.

*Yehi Zichrah Baruch*, may her memory be a blessing to all.

*Oo'mah'cha Hashem Eh'loh'kim dim'ah may'ahl kol panim,*" May G-d wipe away tears from the faces of all bereaved.