

Behind Every Man...

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Like many men, I prefer to drive my own car when getting around town. In fact I live in dread of the day when I get too old to drive and the state will take my license away. But this time I was in a strange city--without my car-- and traffic was awful. So I decided to take the subway to beat the traffic and found myself in a car filled with persons speaking in a variety of languages. A young boy caught my eye; he was about five or six years old, sitting next to an older woman whom I imagined to be his grandmother; she was earnestly speaking to him and he was nodding his head and from time to time answering in monosyllables. You know that I am a bit of a linguist by profession; but I did not recognize the language she spoke. Yet I could not fail to notice the deep affection in the eyes of the older woman as she spoke to her grandson.

The scene in the subway set me to thinking about my own grandmother, Sarah, who spoke to me only in Yiddish, a foreign language that, as a child, I only understood in a limited way. I knew the vocabulary of kitchen and family activities, but, as a child, I lacked those words necessary to formulate intellectual concepts and ideas. Nevertheless, I didn't need such an advanced vocabulary when I was five and six years old when my grandmother Sarah spoke to me. My grandmother spoke no English and stayed mostly at home; her apartment was her domain; and her conversation with me was expressed in terms that I could understand, usually focussed on making certain that I had enough to eat. I remember sitting at her large kitchen table and her serving me thick slices of hand-cut bread spread with sweet butter and jam, and drinking milk, not kept as cold as we had it at home, because my grandmother still used an ancient electric icebox on legs. She did not engage in long conversations with me but I did not need these to know and feel her love. I knew I was special to her for I was her youngest grandchild and named after her beloved husband, a respected congregational rabbi who was revered as patriarch of our family even after his death. He died before I was born but a large, sepia-toned photograph of him

hung in her dining room; it was only one of two that he sat for; he did so reluctantly I was later told, because he believed that photographs came close to violating the commandment against image-making and idolatry. He may have been right to be so concerned because in this iconic photograph, serious, unblinking eyes looked forward into the room; and as a child I imagined that he was somehow still present with us watching over his home and family.

My grandmother seemed very old to me in the way that children tend to look at older adults, unable to recognize that a kindred child-spirit can still be present inside but masked by the aged exterior. I regret that I did not get to know her youthful spirit through personal interaction because she died when I was nine. I only came to visualize her as a younger woman through stories told to me many years after her death, when our family came together to mourn the passing of my own mother, her daughter.

At that time I learned that my house-bound grandmother, Sarah, had in fact been a woman who, in the old country—in Lithuania during Czarist times— had carried great responsibility and was capable of decisive and resourceful action. She had married my grandfather when she was sixteen years old. Their marriage, as was the custom in those days, was arranged. My grandfather, who aspired to be a rabbinic scholar, received a dowry from her family in the form of economic support coming from a small village cantina, to be run and managed by my grandmother and her mother while my grandfather came and went, spending most of his time in post-ordination studies in the libraries of rabbinical seminaries located in larger cities and doing a bit of teaching to help support himself. My grandfather had already received ordination in a respected seminary in Navahrodok (Navahradak), the ancient capital of Lithuania, not too far from my grandmother's village. After marriage, over additional years of study, he managed to receive a second ordination, this time from a most famous teacher of that time-- Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spector in Kovno (now Kaunas) Lithuania. You can get a sense of the great importance of Rabbi Spector from the fact that when the institution that we now call Yeshiva University in New York first opened, its initial academic unit was a rabbinical seminary (founded in 1897) named "The Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Spector Theological Seminary." Rabbi Spector, who never lived in America had already died; but his prestige was such that the New York seminary was named after him by one of its founders, who had been his student in Lithuania.

In my reading, I have discovered that the marital arrangement between my grandparents was not unique in Lithuania during the nineteenth century. Study of sacred texts was seen as the true pathway to knowledge of the divine will and righteousness. This quest embraced not just the Bible but incorporated centuries of postbiblical writings, commentaries, treatises, and especially the Talmuds, a vast collection of writings covering the essential features of Jewish life and practice, which were compiled in Palestine and in Babylonia between the third and seventh centuries of our era. The highest level of spiritual existence would emerge if one were free to dwell among these texts and thereby to commune with their authors—centuries of sages who, in their times, had likewise aspired to reach and no doubt had even attained the most sublime wisdom. All such aspiring scholars harkened back to commandments such as the one found in Josh. 1:8 “Let not this Book of Teaching depart from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your ways and only then will you be wise.”

Years of study were required for one to become a scholar; but few men had the financial resources necessary for this style of living. Then, too, celibacy was frowned upon, being seen as a pathway to temptation and sin. The pursuit of such scholarship was a career open only to men; for women, learning was more limited and was mostly accomplished privately at home. So out of this culture and these values, the solution emerged: the wife, ideally, would support the family and raise the children, leaving her husband free to achieve the laudable goal of becoming a scholar of Torah. A proper wife could take justifiable pride in doing so for doubtlessly she would have a share in all the divinely bestowed blessings that would be forthcoming to her husband for his diligent study and religious devotion. After years of study, the young scholar would be ready for a position as seminary teacher or, failing that, might become the rabbi in a community where he hoped to be able also to continue with his studies.¹

My grandmother was evidently very proud of her ability to be the mainstay of support for a scholar and she thus accepted this arrangement happily. It bestowed esteem and demonstrated well-spent wealth to have a religious scholar in the family. Her family had owned the cantina for some years and had a valuable license to sell alcoholic beverages; Sarah’s father had died when

she was a child and thus Sarah, as the eldest child, grew up working with her mother in the cantina and selling prepared foods and beverages.

After ten years of post-ordination study, my grandfather was ready to assume a rabbinical position. There was a pulpit in my grandmother's home village but at the time it was not vacant; and so my grandfather had to look elsewhere; he took a private position in a large Ukrainian city, teaching young men from prominent Jewish families who were, at the same time, pursuing secular studies at the local university.

There was clearly affection in the relationship between my grandmother and grandfather because together they managed to have ten children, raised primarily by my grandmother, with occasional assistance by her kinfolk, who also resided in her native village where she ran her business. My grandfather would come home from time to time to see his family and spend time with them. Perhaps it was a bit like being married to a sailor who went off periodically for voyages. Long periods of separation must have created some stresses and tensions; but these were evidently offset by religious beliefs and the shared values underlying their life-style.

My grandmother was herself not a creature of books; in my childhood memories I recall her always busy running the house and doing things in the kitchen. The only time I saw her with a book was on Friday evening when the Sabbath candles were lit and while she was waiting for my uncle Eliezer, who lived with her, to come home from the synagogue. He, too was a congregational rabbi and had assumed the pulpit vacated by my grandfather when he died. My grandmother, wearing a nice dress and lace cap (for she always had her hair covered), would sit down near the candles and read the scriptural portion of the week, not in the Hebrew Bible but in her *Tzena Rena*, a much shorter Yiddish version written for women. The women's text omitted many of the seamy details of biblical stories and was filled instead with legends and hortatory homilies. Her time of reading was not long; she would soon close her book and go into the kitchen to get things ready for dinner.

I hope my grandmother would forgive me for saying that her reading was perfunctory. I suspect that she perhaps found the women's lectionary a bit tame and contrived. Let me tell you why. In

the family stories I learned that in 1911 my grandfather was sent off to America on a mission to raise money for his *alma mater*, the famous rabbinical seminary in Kovno Lithuania, where he had studied with Rabbi Spector. My grandmother remained at home and continued on her own as before. During this time of absence, one of the older daughters was sent off to America to keep house for my grandfather; the eldest son was drafted into the Russian army; and another son who in his youth was a bit wild and radical ran off to America on his own. The outbreak of World War I prevented my grandfather from returning home; the seminary in Lithuania fell on hard times and was closed. My grandfather, stranded in America, at that time, turned to the pulpit and became the rabbi of the Bnai Israel First Englewood Congregation in Chicago, the position he held until his death. My grandmother ran both business and home during these years of turmoil and upheaval which included German occupation and the civil war following the Bolshevik revolution, and the eventual, post-war partition of Lithuania. Food and provisions were often scarce; and on one occasion during the German occupation, my grandmother managed to buy a sack of grain which she took to the mill to be ground into flour. To her consternation, the miller, a neighbor and resident of her village, denied being given the grain and refused to give over the flour! My grandmother did not give up. Instead, she went to the German kommandant who was acting as governor of the occupied district and complained. Both she and the miller were summoned before the military court. The proceedings were conducted in German which my grandmother, who spoke Yiddish, could understand; but the miller who spoke only Russian did not. So my grandmother was required to act as interpreter as well as plaintiff. She presented her charges and when the truculent miller was asked to reply, my grandmother took the liberty of translating the miller's response into "Er sagt ihr seit alle schweine" (He says you are all swine!) The German officer then began to beat the miller angrily; the miller pleaded with my grandmother "Sarka, Sarka" --(Little Sarah, Little Sarah) please tell him the truth and I will give you the flour!" I found this story remarkable because it revealed a side of my grandmother that was certainly hidden from me in the way I saw her as a child.

Ten years were to pass between the time my grandfather left for America until the time when my grandmother and the rest of the family were able to join him in Chicago. There she assumed a new role, that of a congregational rabbi's wife. I had always seen her role as homebound and passive; but as I ponder this a bit more, I realize that the energy and talents that she possessed must have found new outlets. The congregation, after all, was not so different from a small

village. It too was a collection of families of varying means and professional interests; and there would be politics.

Politics was the subtle purpose surrounding an afternoon gathering that I witnessed when I was six or seven years old. My grandmother had arranged for a luncheon in her apartment and had asked my mother to help prepare and serve. My mother brought me along, probably because she had no baby-sitter with whom to leave me at home. I didn't mind; I liked going to my grandmother's house and there would be some great desserts to sample. I recall that both my mother and grandmother were in a high state of nervous energy. After the guests arrived and it was time to eat, my grandmother sat at the head of the table and around her sat a ring of mature women. They did not appear like a gaggle of women behaving like girls; they were, rather, a formal gathering of ladies wearing hats. This was clearly an important occasion. My mother did not sit long at the table and I was not invited in at all; I ate in the kitchen and then sat and watched from the living room. I did not recognize all of the ladies but they included Mrs. Rosenthal, obviously an important person, sitting upright next to my grandmother and dressed in an old fashioned but elegant style. Her husband, Mr. Rosenthal, was president of the congregation and I remember him also as an elegant gentleman, wearing a beautiful vest of damask-like material, with a gold watch chain and carrying a cane decorated with a gold knob on its head. He was a short man with eyes that conveyed alertness and humor; his manner was commanding; and every person--including my uncle Eliezer, the current rabbi of the congregation--spoke to him with courtesy and diffidence. Another luncheon guest was Mrs. Graf whom I knew much better. She and Mr. Graf had been close friends of my late grandfather; and he had regularly dined with the Grafts during the years before my grandmother and the rest of the family emigrated to Chicago. Mrs. Graf was a kind and gentle woman, who was both pious and generous. The Grafts, I later learned, were staunch and loyal supporters of my uncle Eliezer who was not always politically adroit in his relationship with the members of his congregation. My grandmother was visibly relieved when the luncheon was over; and after her guests--thanking her profusely-- departed, she sat down and had a short, serious discussion with my mother.

They spoke softly and I was not interested at the time. But now, thinking back on this scene, I realize that this luncheon was the setting for strategic action on behalf of my uncle Eliezer; maybe it was time to negotiate a new contract or salary. Maybe my uncle Eliezer had offended

some members in the congregation for he was dour and had a blunt and direct manner. I know the rabbinate was not his first career choice for when family and friends gathered at the time of my own mother's death, old Mr. Graf, my grandfather's friend, told me a story about my uncle that confirmed my impression of his discontent. When my uncle Eliezer came to America as a teenager, as required by law, he attended school--in his case high school. But my grandfather also sent him to a rabbinical seminary in Chicago which, in those years, maintained an afternoon and evening program of studies leading to ordination. He expected his son to complete his rabbinical studies and be ordained. Eliezer was, after all, a good student and, after graduating high school, went on to the University of Chicago where he majored in Classics. Eliezer really wanted to be a teacher of Latin and Greek but agreed to delay graduate work until after he earned ordination at the Chicago rabbinical seminary. Mr. Graf told me that my grandfather was worried about his son being so enamored of secular studies in the liberal arts; these were seen as dangerous gateways to apostasy, freethinking, and the loosening of the bonds of strict religious observance. Although my grandfather provided no financial support for Eliezer's studies at the university, Eliezer had been able to pursue his studies at the university by receiving a scholarship. My grandfather was apparently worried that his son would get a graduate fellowship and so, as Mr. Graf told me, my grandfather persuaded the seminary teachers, who were after all his colleagues, to delay Eliezer's ordination--which they did. Eliezer was frustrated but of course did not know of this plot; nor did I ever hear anyone in my family ever speak of this. Mr. Graf told me this story privately, during an afternoon drive while I was taking him home from his condolence visit with our family. It was while Eliezer was still a student at the seminary that my grandfather became ill and died. His pulpit at the congregation was vacant and a new rabbi was needed. The officers and trustees of the congregation turned to Eliezer who accepted the position and then--miraculously without further examinations-- he promptly received full ordination from his seminary teachers in a matter of days.

It was the Depression; and my uncle by assuming the pulpit held by my grandfather was able to support his mother and younger siblings still living at home--a brother and two sisters-- allowing their lives to continue more normally than could ever have been the case without him doing so. Did my grandmother know of any of this? I am not sure of what she knew or of what part she played. She certainly would have esteemed the rabbinate as a noble career for her son, considering the great sacrifices that she herself had made to support the extended rabbinical studies of my grandfather. I do not think she could in any comparable way have esteemed a

career teaching Latin and Greek. For her, as for my grandfather, no secular career could ever be equal to the calling of rabbi and the study of sacred texts and scriptures. Uncle Eliezer went on to serve the Englewood congregation down to its last days, for it dwindled and eventually closed as postwar prosperity propelled Jewish families to seek more spacious dwellings in other neighborhoods; they left Englewood behind. He then served a small congregation in another part of the city, continuing in his rabbinical career for a total of over sixty years. But I don't think he was completely fulfilled in his pulpit work. Although he was an excellent preacher and great homiletician, he found more pleasure in his texts than in his congregants. He favored a European mode of religious leadership where the rabbi acted more as religious authority rather than as pastor, guide, or counsellor. He was thus more appreciated by older congregants who knew and recalled the "old country" rather than by younger members who were born in America and who looked to newer patterns of activities and leadership style. But he clearly observed the commandment of honoring his father and mother; and while she lived, my grandmother, on her part, certainly must have done her utmost to support him in his congregational work in every way that she could.

I am today at an age close in time to where my grandmother was when I knew her as a child. With the perspective of age and my own life experience, I have come to further important insights about her relationship to me; I see the impact of her wisdom and the dynamic role that she played, despite the relatively few spoken words that passed between the two of us.

My grandmother clearly wanted to raise sons and grandsons who would be rabbinical scholars. It was a bit like owning a special, Procrustean uniform that everyone in our family had to try on; naturally it could not fit everyone. If the uniform fit, you would march off to seminary and become a rabbi; if it did not or if you refused to wear it, then you went off to work and made your way in the world as best you could in business, trade, or secular professions. My grandmother Sarah had four sons but only succeeded in making one, Eliezer, a rabbi. But her work was not finished. As a child, I was interested in books; very often in my grandmother's home I would wander over to the bookcases and look at them. When I was seven and eight, I could already read the Hebrew texts but lacking advanced vocabulary and depth of mature comprehension, I would soon turn instead to the English books collected by my uncles and aunts. My favorites were the twelve volume Jewish Encyclopedia published by Funk and Wagnalls in

1901 under the editorship of the most eminent scholars of that day, among them Kaufmann Kohler, Gotthard Deutsch, Moses Mielziner, and David Phillipson of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. (Of course I did not recognize any of these names or facts at the time.) These volumes fascinated me and I really enjoyed browsing through them, looking at illustrations and reading at random. My grandmother would watch me and smile but said nothing to me directly. But when I was eight, she did speak to my mother. My grandmother wanted me to attend a Hebrew parochial school and even live away from home to do so. After all, she had sent her own husband away to study; so why not me? It was not unusual to do so in the “old country” and my own father, who grew up in a rural area of farms and forests, had been sent away to study in a city when he was eight years old. Happily for me, my mother demurred. So instead my grandmother came up with an alternate plan; she turned to my uncle Eliezer the rabbi and made him promise to tutor me privately at home every day after public school--and this was in addition to the afternoon congregational Hebrew school which I also attended five days a week! My uncle honored my grandmother’s request and continued to tutor me even after she died, until I was nearly thirteen and my uncle married and moved away from where my family lived.

My grandmother’s plan succeeded to a remarkable degree. My uncle Eliezer started me with Genesis and off we went. I did not mind the extra lessons at all; in fact I was intrigued by them. My uncle was often grumpy and tired but the biblical texts we read compelled my interest. I had read nothing else like this; my edited Hebrew school texts were artificial and tame by comparison. These ancient texts were “the real thing” filled with passion and elegant language; they were the charter documents of our faith and how to interpret them was a challenge that led me into a world of adult contemplations. With Latin, Greek, and Hebrew dictionaries nearby, My uncle led me to ponder the wording of Hebrew passages, to search for appropriate English translations, and eventually to explore the world of medieval Bible commentaries. My grandmother, while she lived, would from time to time walk by the dining room table which my uncle and I used as a desk; she would say nothing; but I think I do recall more than once seeing a look of satisfaction on her face.

Thinking about her now, I am struck by the enduring power of her wisdom and her passion. She was extraordinarily devoted to learning and had been ready to make enormous financial and personal sacrifices to nurture this goal--not for herself but for others: for her family, her people,

and her God. She had succeeded in lighting the flame of scholarly learning in me, her grandson and namesake of her husband. When she could not send me away, she prodded my uncle to teach me. She had accomplished all of this despite the lack of words between the two of us; she had carefully watched me; she knew me better than I knew myself; and she managed, by strategy and determination, to set me on a path that I would follow for a lifetime. For here I am, more than a half century later, studying and teaching ancient texts and languages, sacred and secular, in the rabbinical seminary and graduate school at the Hebrew Union College here in Cincinnati, Ohio.

In the New York Times Science Section of Nov 5, 2002, it was reported that “At a recent international conference, the first devoted to grandmothers, researchers concluded with something approaching a consensus that grandmothers in particular, and elder female kin in general, have been an underrated source of power and sway in our evolutionary heritage.” The Times article went on to say:

“Among the Khasi (an ethnic group of northeast India) 96% of children endured to age 6 if their maternal grandmother were alive compared with only 83% if the grandmother had died.”

And finally: “Indeed a number of researchers at the conference admitted to being flummoxed by the nature of grandma’s goodness. This was a constant refrain: what is the mechanism?....What buttons are they pushing that end up making the difference to their families?”

I do not claim to know the answers that these scientists are seeking; I can however offer this story of my grandmother Sarah as yet another illustration of this profound and universal truth. Her actions spoke more loudly than her words and still resonate in me and in my life.

i See further, on this life-style, Immanuel Etkes, “Marriage and Torah Study Among the *Lomdim* in Lithuania in the Nineteenth Century” in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*, David Kraemer (ed.), New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 153-178.