

Eulogy - Sara Pepper - Sara bat Aharon v'Yehudit

By Rabbi Nathaniel Ezray

Sara Pepper was a beautiful neshama – a beautiful soul. She touched so many lives through the love that was her essence. Her generosity, her love of learning, her embrace of diverse friends, her compassion, her humility, her devotion to family, her love of music, her sense of humor will all be deeply missed. She touched us – and there is a hole in our hearts as we grieve her loss.

There was one theme that kept emerging as people spoke of Sara – and that was love. There is a beautiful prayer in the Siddur – *Ahavah Rabbah*- that talks about love and it captures some beautiful aspects of Sara's essence.

Ahavah Rabah ahavtanu – God loves us with a great love. Just as God loves us with great love – *ahavah rabah* - great love is how Sara related everyone in her life. You'll hear about that love when her brother Gidon speaks of their family and their laughter. I'll share some of the stories of Rita, her sister in law who called her sister and you'll hear of a friendship of two who were connected by the heart. Rita and Sara would turn to each other during good times and difficult times and talk about everything. You'll hear about deep love as we recount her relationships with her late husbands, Jack and Herman. You'll feel that love when her children and grandchildren tell stories of a mother and grandmother who lit up when she saw them, enveloping them with love. You'll understand the breadth of love in Sara's life when you listen to each of you who are here, and those who couldn't be here, share stories of how Sara touched their lives with *ahavah rabah – great love*. Sara had friends of every age and every nationality, every faith. She exuded the light of genuine love and people were pulled toward it.

The *ahavah rabah* prayer goes on to teach that love manifests itself through teaching, learning and living values: *va'ti'lam'dem chukei chayim – you taught them the laws of life. Ten b'libenu l'havin ul'haskil, lishmo'a, lil'mod, u'lelamed, lishmor, v'lasot – Put in our hearts to understand, and to discern, to hear, to learn, to teach, to follow and fulfill your laws.* Love manifests itself through mitzvah in Judaism: learning, teaching, doing – and that was Sara. Sara loved to learn. Every opportunity to study here at Congregation Beth Jacob, you would find Sara - and she had beautiful insights and a deep love of God that the texts nurtured. Sara also loved studying at the Methodist Church near her Palo Alto home. She was intrigued by other religions and backgrounds and she soaked up knowledge. We were richer because of her insights. Growing up in Jerusalem, loving Israel, Hebrew and holy texts – Sara had a depth of learning. She wasn't always confident in her knowledge and didn't realize how deeply her wisdom and insight touched those of us who learned with her. What was beautiful about how Sara learned is that learning was about her heart – and it led to change and growth throughout her life.

The *ahavah rabah* prayer challenges us not just to learn – *lilmod*; but to teach *l'lamed*. Sara was a teacher par excellent. For years she was a beloved teacher. She taught pre-school at South Peninsula Hebrew Day School and taught Hebrew at Beth Jacob and Kol Emet. Her grandchildren remember her as a teacher – be it formally teaching Hebrew, asking questions that made them think, or leading the Seder that she would assiduously prepare for. Sara taught us gently and with grace, with humor – with love.

And ultimately love manifest in the *ahavah raba* prayer through deeds – *lishmor v'la'asot* – *to do*. Sara's deeds tell the story of one devoted to deeds of loving kindness. Sara was truly one of the most generous people you will ever meet. She was always there for whatever was needed and would give anyone anything no strings attached. She kept cash around to slip to grandchildren and delighted giving them change. Giving with love fed Sara's soul – and defined her essence in big and small ways. If you complemented her sweater, the next thing you knew, she'd give it to you. If you admired a bracelet, she'd get you a similar one. A congregant shared the story of Sara giving his daughter – who Sara didn't know - money at DMV after she lost her wallet and didn't have the necessary identification. Sara saw a young woman in need and jumped in to help. It was only later that the synagogue connection was revealed – but the story captures Sara's devotion to fellow human.

The greatest mitzvot in Sara's life revolved around love of family. She loved being with family – it stretched from her childhood growing up, to her husbands – Jack and Herman and their families, to her children, Dalia, Don and Deena; to her sons and daughters in law, Menachem, Barbara and David – who she saw as sons and daughter; to her grandchildren – Ari, Saul and Joel and your wives Johanna, Yvonne and Clara; Rachel and Laura, Aviva and Noa. And she would kvell over her great granddaughter Sofia.

Sara would tell stories of growing up in Jerusalem. Her home was a home of laughter and love. Gidon share that Ema was the perfect straight woman – she'd give an opening and they would run with it. The relatives all wanted to come to their home for holidays because it was full of laughter and joy. She came to America as a 15 year old

girl and always retained a love and loyalty to Israel. She and her husband Jack lived in Israel from 1960 – 1963 and they were good years. They moved to Palo Alto in 1963 and built a family. At times things were tough economically, and Jack died far too young in 1981. Sara made it through tough times with an inner strength and staying true to her values.

She made a new life with Dr. Herman Pepper in her later years and they traveled the world and they enjoyed opera, symphony, ballet, theater and the 49er's. Herman would say that Sara gave him a quality of life that was beautiful.

Sara touched the lives of her children Dalia, Don and Deena in beautiful ways. The stories of how your mom supported you are legendary and abundant. She was a lioness when it came to defending you. Dalia tells a story about a school assignment where the teacher gave specific instructions. You talked to your mom about approaching the assignment in a different way and she supported your independence. When your unique approach disturbed the administration, Sara was right there by your side. She said, "She's just fine. It's the interpretation I got when I went to Brooklyn College." Don tells a great story about receiving his 3rd ticket before age 18 and appeared at Juvenile Court with Sara. "Do you trust his driving?" the judge asked. "Of course!" Sara replied – and he dismissed the ticket. This was a mom who would always be there for you.

One thing that each child learned from Sara was the ability to face life with humor and to live life with joy. If her children brought her joy, her grandchildren made her feel overjoyed. She was so proud of each of you. She had a special, unique relationship with each of you and would love going to meals and the movies – always arriving early of

course. She would love to hear what was going on in your lives and felt so blessed to have such wonderful grandchildren.

Sara had a big family – full of nieces and nephews and cousins who loved her and friends who treasured her and felt like she was family.

There are so many pieces of Sara’s beautiful *neshama – soul*. She loved music – and would compose beautiful songs and prayers. People would stop and listen because she played piano or accordion so beautifully. She loved Israeli songs and would write special songs for Pesach. Sara loved animals and her home when the kids were growing up was a menagerie – a monkey, a duck, a rabbit, a chicken and dog. She loved taking the dog for a walk.

Sara could be a character. She was notorious for getting lost when she drove places – she knew her way in life, but not around the city. It’s rumored that the bumps on Arastradero near Kol Emet were specially put in for Sara. There are many stories about the extents Sara would go to pass her driving exam – some involving receiving assistance that can’t be labeled kosher.

She loved to laugh. There is a poignancy to the fact that Sara died on Shushan Purim – a holiday that was all about learning how to laugh at life. She also died during the week we read about Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with the tablets a second time with his face radiating light. It is a beautiful story of second chances, of experience of the Divine resulting in a light that emanates from you towards others. Sara had that light that the portion describes Moses having. It is a light that comes from loving others and connecting with God. The light continues to fill us as we remember Sara and think about how she touched our lives. May her soul be bound up in the bond of life eternal.