

A Remarkable Life

The Psalm “A Woman of Accomplishment,” frequently read at Christian funerals and always read by the husband to his wife Friday night in Jewish tradition, is a description of the perfect wife. Few realize that the Psalm represents the advice of a mother millennia ago, probably a queen in Israel, giving advice to her son as to what kind of woman to marry. The woman described tells us much about the rights of Jewish women at the time. The Woman of Accomplishment owned land, freely bought and sold property, conducted her own business, and performed as well the domestic duties of providing for her family and being a partner with her husband.

Sylvia Rieders, my mother, was one such example of an accomplished woman. Born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York, raised on a dairy farm in upstate New York and returning to New York as a teenager, she led a most varied life. She entered Hunter College at a young age, and was the first professional comptroller at Revlon in 1940. She worked her way through a number of different businesses, including the operation of a quality control engineering business, which she ultimately sold so that she finally could at least semi-retire.

Sylvia witnessed World War I, the carnage of World War II, the Holocaust committed against the Jewish people, and the rebirth of the modern free independent State of Israel.

In the Jewish tradition, it is considered a great blessing to die on Shabbat, the same day that G-d took Moses from the Jewish people. It is also particularly noteworthy, in spiritualist Jewish circles, for a woman to die during the month of Adar. Adar is the month of the Festival of Purim. The hero of Purim is Queen Esther, who arose from humble roots, the orphaned ward raised by her uncle who nevertheless led her to the most important position in the world’s greatest power at the time, the Persian Empire. Her uncle, Mordechai, reminded her when she was secretly living with the King, “You cannot hide, even in the palace of the King.” Adar is also important to Jewish womanhood because it precedes the month of Passover. The Rabbis and the Talmud tell us that the Jews were saved at the Red Sea because of the virtue of the women of Israel. There are many examples given of their heroic acts.

What made Sylvia Rieders special, was not only her history and dedication to work, family and friends, but also because she lived the components required by the Talmud. It is also noteworthy that she died on Shabbat Terumah. This particular sedra of the week is about the destruction of the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary that Jewish people carried with them in the desert. This Torah portion is explicit with respect to the design, construction and configuration of the structure which housed the Ten Commandments and where Jewish religious ceremonies were conducted. Sylvia was a designer, decorator, and worked in a construction business for many years of her life.

Few knew it, but it was Sylvia Klein who fired a union agitator named Herbert Rieders. He sued and got his job back thanks to the Wagner Act, which in 1935 was passed to protect union organization. The two later became husband and wife. The story is told that Sylvia's father, Charles, pulled her off a picket line that her boyfriend Herbert took her to and said, "Don't hang out with those bums." Sylvia eventually won out and brought Herb from the union activist side to the Republican Party. They enjoyed their Republican activities in a Democratically dominated town and were proud of who and what they were. In their day, it did not matter that people thought differently. Their friends spanned the spectrum in terms of color and politics. In fact, they enjoyed diverse opinion and in our home there was never only one way of thinking about any problem.

Sylvia was discreet in her views. She did not raise her voice to others and made her position known in a way that defined class. In a world racked by uncivilized and crude behavior, Sylvia showed that it was possible to be a successful businessperson without being either a domineering mother or an obnoxious personality. In fact, quite the opposite was true. Everyone who knew Sylvia respected how capable she was in accomplishing her goals and tasks without the negativity that often accompanies successful people.

Sylvia's daughter-in-law calls her "the best mother-in-law anyone could have had." Her friends call her the best friend, and her children likewise esteemed her advice and counsel. Her grandchildren were happy to be able to call someone who would always agree with them and take their part over that of their parents. Sylvia knew how to get along with her grandchildren.

One of my favorite Sylvia stories, and there are many, is about her honeymoon on Little Pine Island in Lake George. Her husband, my father, Herbert was an outdoorsman. He was delighted to have married a Jewish country girl. For their honeymoon, they drove the Model A to Lake George and canoed out to Pine Island in a storm. Herb had to leave Sylvia on the island in her wet, smelly fur coat while he went for supplies. Eventually, she got fed up sitting there and got into a speed boat with a fine gentleman who took her back to the mainland. The honeymoon did not work out real well, but the couple managed to overcome their difficulties nevertheless.

Perhaps Sylvia's greatest failure, at least in her own mind, was that she never learned how to swim. That really bothered her, and when we were young she was forever taking swimming lessons somewhere. Herbert, of course, loved fishing and boating and wanted her on the water with him. It never came to be. She just could not get the hang of swimming, in spite of her serious attempts to float. It just did not work, and eventually she gave it up. She did, however, take up golf and played in a foursome, opening up the Douglaston Country Club, which is now a public course, to Jewish women for the first time. She and other women in her foursome enjoyed a long and serious friendship with one another. It was her private way to escape the serious responsibilities of business and family.

Oddly, on the day she died her best friend and “sister,” her sister-in-law, Joan Klein, also passed away. It meant a funeral on Sunday for Sylvia, and a funeral on Monday for Joan. It brought our families together, however, and the custom of Shiva for a week is a beautiful thing. Friends and families get together every afternoon and every night. My sister and I say the Kaddish prayer, which is not a prayer of mourning but rather is a prayer in praise of G-d, twice a day. It is a healing process that has no equal.

Sylvia will be missed, but as our Hassidic brethren say, only the outer mantle has been shed; the soul will be elevated continuously by the good works that others perform in her name and she will, after all, always be with us. Blessed in the holy judge; may her soul rest in peace.

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