

REFLECTIONS ON THE DEATH OF MY SOUL MATE

By

MAX PRAGER

Dedicated to the memory of Hilda Prager, my beloved wife.

And R' Yochanan said: Concerning any man whose first wife dies, it is as if the Holy Temple was destroyed in his lifetime.

R' Alexandri said: The world is darkened to any man whose wife dies in his lifetime.

Sanhedrin 22a

It was taught in a Baraisa: A man dies only for his wife and a woman dies only for her husband.

It is as difficult to pair a man and a woman for marriage as it was to accomplish the splitting of the Red Sea.

Sanhedrin 22b

CHAPTER ONE

I was sitting in my den on the evening of Sept. 16, 2009 reading or watching TV when my son, Kenneth, came into the room and said the fatal words “Dad, we are losing Mom,” to which I replied “will she live for another year?” and Kenny said “no Dad, within three days”.

I knew Kenny was an excellent physician but I did not know that he was also a clairvoyant. Three days later, on the first day of Rosh Hashana, we all, including grand children and great-grand children, went to shul to pray leaving Hilda at home with a nurse.

After services, Ken and the grandchildren went to visit my wife to see how she was doing. I did not go. Perhaps it was due to the prediction made by Kenny. About 2 hours later, they all returned to Kenny’s house and mournfully advised me that my beloved was gone. As I am writing this, I am sobbing as I am reliving that dreadful moment in my life.

In the late afternoon, when I felt that I was mentally strong enough to visit and say farewell to the woman who was and will always be an integral part of my life, I went to my home with the children. I, immediately, went to our bedroom where my *aishas chail* was lying on her side with a slight smile on her face bereft of any pain. An aura of contentment shown on her face. She accomplished what she always wanted. Her desire was that she would predecease me and she obtained her wish. I closed the bedroom door as I wanted to be alone with my darling.

I took her hands and caressed them with final kisses and began to cry uncontrollably. I could not believe that I would not hold her in my arms again and tell her how much I loved her and needed her.

On major festivals, Jewish law forbids Jews to inter their dead on the first day of the holiday. Because conditions in contemporary society are such that funerals on either day of the festival invariably result in needless transgressions of the law, it is preferable to postpone the funeral until after both days of the holiday.

Motzei yomtov, the funeral directors and Anne and Michael Strauss, who are in charge of the Chevra Kadisha of our schul, came to the house to take the body. Anne was to perform the *tahara* on my darling wife. About 20 years ago I wrote 2 notes to Hilda to be read by her when I die and I requested that she should insert these notes in her coffin. She complied with my request.

Now that she is gone, I can now publicize what is expressed in these notes that were placed in an envelope which read “For my dear wife after I will join my ancestors.”

TO MY ACHAS CHAIL HINDY

In the event that I depart without having an opportunity to express my heart-felt love and gratitude to you for being my alter-ego and partner for

these many years, I do so now and hope that we will meet again somehow, somewhere. You were instrumental in my enjoyment of the wonderful life that I was blessed with. How can I ever thank you enough for being such a devoted and loving wife and companion throughout the many years we've been together?

You exemplified the quintessence of an Aichas Chail. May God bless you with good health and a long and happy life to continue to enjoy our children and grandchildren. Please do not rush to join me.

The second note reads:

Dear Hindy,

From the moment I met you, I knew that you were my *zivik*. Your zest for life captivated me. Your ability to make me laugh, your constant smile, readiness to laugh and your beauty were traits that made me want to be with you forever.

The four years we spent together during our courtship were heavenly. Your strong commitment to me despite the first two years demonstrated your strong love for me. Your visiting me very often at my college library, while I was working there, again manifested your feelings toward me. You changed me in so many ways for which I will always be grateful. I can never forget what you said to me when you were only seventeen years of age. "Mac, if we will marry and have children, you will always be number one." Not many wives feel that way. Most importantly, you kept that promise.

Throughout our marriage you made my life as happy and full as can be. I am so grateful to God for giving you to me. You gave me two wonderful children and through them exceptional grandchildren. When, I leave this earth, I will have no regrets, thanks to you.

I want you to know that I love you and no man could have been given a better life partner that you have been to me.

Love

Mac

The funeral service was held on Monday morning Sept.11 in our newly built synagogue. This was the first event in our new sanctuary; not having prayed therein previously. It was incredible and amazing that close to 300 people attended the service to bid farewell to their close friend and relative whom they loved. Eulogies were delivered by Kenny, Dennis, Joshua, Tamar, Benjy, David and Rabbi Goldin. Even though I did not shed a tear, I was not able to speak as I was in a trance. My close friend of 59 years, Jack Walker, sang the *kheil molei rachamim*.

The cortege of many cars then drove to Wellwood Cemetery in Farmingdale, NY. The burial took place in our private plot which I purchased at the age of 24 when I was the accountant of Wellwood. I witnessed my sweetheart being placed in the earth and then being covered by many attending. Again, I was amazed that I did not cry. I kept thinking that the one being buried was not my Hilda who shared my life for 73 years. The person in the grave was a corpse which will soon decompose and only a skeleton will remain. Although I did not cry from the moment of her death to the end of the burial, I have not stopped crying many times daily to this day when I am writing this one year later. I will express my feelings about her demise later on.

We all sat *shiva* in Kenny's house which included Kenny, Dennis, Pearl and Chippy. I could not believe how many people came to *manachem oveil*. Besides our friends and relatives, persons came from Hilda's beauty parlor, her pharmacy and several physicians who took care of her for many years. She was loved by every person who she touched with her warmth and caring personality. Every morning and evening we conducted prayer services. Many people attended whom I never thought that they knew us. For many years Hilda and I were told that we were their role models. Perhaps, our devoted and intense love that we had for each other was quite evident. Throughout the seven days of *shiva*, I did not stop crying as I could not believe that death was final and that I would never hold her in my arms again and that there were no more hugs and kisses. There was a complete denial of reality.

A few months after Hilda's death, Kenny received a call from Rabbi Spitzer of Laniado Hospital in Netanya, Israel. For many years Ken was the primary doctor taking care of the Klauzenberger Rabbi who was a survivor of the Holocaust and who lost his wife and all his children therein. The Rabbi made a vow that if he would survive, he would build a hospital in Israel.

I believe Ken started to treat the Rabbi when he first lived in Union City, NJ. After a while, the Rabbi moved to Netanya with a new wife and children and redeemed his vow. For several years thereafter, the Klauzenberger Chassidim would send Kenny, Jeannie and the children to Netanya to observe the health of the Rabbi; especially, during *Succoth* and other Jewish holidays. One year at Laniado's annual dinner, Ken was the guest of honor.

Rabbi Spitzer in his call to Ken asked if he could visit him and me to discuss a matter. Ken advised him that it would be best to visit in my home. He arrived a few days later with Rabbi Waldman, the executive director of Laniado. I knew Rabbi Waldman through his wife who was a bookkeeper at one of my nursing home clients. Whenever I met him he kept thanking me for teaching his wife bookkeeping.

They began their conversation by telling us that they knew that Dennis was a good friend of Pastor John Agee who was the Senior Pastor and founder of the Cornerstone Church, a non-denominational evangelical church located in San Antonio, Tex. with more than 19,000 active members. Pastor Agee is President of John Agee Ministries, which telecasts his national radio and television

teachings throughout America and in 235 nations worldwide. Over the years, John Agee Ministries has given more than 60 million dollars toward humanitarian causes in Israel. In 2006, Dr. Agee founded, and is the National Chairman of Christians United for Israel. Dr. Agee gains support for this worthy cause by conducting “A Night to Honor Israel” in every major city in America and by organizing an annual Washington DC – Israel Summit where his church delegates have the opportunity to meet members of Congress face to face on behalf of Israel. Christians United for Israel has nearly 400,000 participants.

Knowing of Pastor Agee’s involvement with Israel and Dennis’s friendship with the Pastor, both rabbis who visited us suggested that, in memory of Hilda, a Department Of Pulmonary Medicine be inaugurated at Laniado Hospital. I presume that they selected pulmonary because Ken is a pulmonologist. They stated that this project would cost \$500,000. I told them that I and my 2 sons would naturally want to participate in this wonderful tribute to my wife and their mother. However, the cost was certainly not within our means. I then asked if Pastor Agee did not contribute would they go ahead and build this Department nonetheless; they answered in the affirmative.

On Sunday evening, April 25th, 2010, Laniado’s Annual Dinner was held at the Marriot Marquis Hotel in New York and the invitation read:

Inaugurating the

HILDA PRAGER

**DEPARTMENT OF
PULMONARY MEDICINE**

In Memory of

Mrs. Hilda Prager, o.b.m.

By Her Beloved Husband,

Mr. Max Prager

Her Dear Children,

Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Prager and Family

Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Prager and Family

I was very hesitant to go along with the idea since in November 2003, Hilda and I were guests of honor at the Annual Dinner of Chabad of Bergen County and we solicited contributions from many of our friends both within our schul and others. We also solicited members of our family. We were exceptionally successful by raising over \$39,000. We received a letter of thanks from Rabbi Ephraim Simon informing us that this was the largest Dinner that Friends of Lubavitch ever made and that it also raised the most money; namely, \$ 146,000. In fact, he told us later on that they had never reached our figure in subsequent dinners.

So I was in a dilemma. I discussed the situation with Kenny and we both decided to again solicit the people that I previously contacted. To my great and pleasant surprise, we raised \$34,000. A few months after the Dinner, Rabbi Waldman called me and said that Dennis had been with Pastor Agee at a speech that Dennis had given and that he donated \$400,000 for our project and 8 million dollars to other Israeli charities. I knew for sure that the project in memory of my beloved wife was a certainty.

CHAPTER TWO

Hilda had been in good health until around 1995 when she contracted type-2 diabetes which she inherited from her father. Since she injected herself with insulin every day, she functioned normally and she went for regular check-ups to the doctor.

Ten years later at the age of 86, her health began to fail. She had problems with her digestive system and made regular visits to Dr. Oscar Lebwohl at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital. One night in June 2005, she had an amnesia attack while sleeping. I awoke hearing her speaking to Dovid Mehler in a loud voice which lasted about 5 minutes. To my surprise, she was not speaking into a phone. She went back to sleep and about an hour later she went to the bathroom. When she returned to the bedroom, I asked her why she was speaking to Dovid in the early hours of the morning. She thought I was crazy asking such a ridiculous question. She definitely had an amnesia attack; but what caused it?

We went the following morning to our primary physician, Dr. Livelli, for consultation and he advised us to hospitalize her immediately fearing possible brain damage. I brought her to Columbia that evening so that Kenny could be with her. After 2 days she was discharged; all tests were negative.

In 2003, she began to have intermittent pain and numbness in her toes caused by poor blood circulation. This problem is usually caused by diabetes. She was advised to go to Roosevelt Hospital where a doctor, formally at Columbia, was considered tops in this ailment. He injected 2 stents in her legs to bypass her regular blood vessels and thereby increase her blood supply. Unfortunately, only one leg and foot returned somewhat to a normal flow of blood while the left leg remained the same.

On July 14, 2005, a Thursday, she was admitted to Columbia for a second attempt at stent surgery. The second attempt failed but what was more disheartening was the phone call I received from her Friday afternoon telling me that she experienced a mild heart attack and would have to stay over the weekend at the hospital.

On Monday, they performed an angiogram and, unfortunately, discovered that my wife had 4 coronary blockages and would require a quadruple bypass. The surgery was performed on Wednesday by Dr. Craig Smith, the same surgeon who performed the bypass on Pres. Clinton. I assume that Dr. Smith who knew Kenny very well elected to operate on his colleague's mother.

After 6 days of post-surgery, she began a period of 14 days of rehab and, finally, after 27 days she was discharged. For her entire stay at the hospital, I was with her from 10 a.m. to between 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. every day. Although I am an excellent sleeper, gazing at the empty bed beside mine was agonizing and I found it difficult to fall asleep. Also, very troublesome thoughts entered my mind; i.e. how would I react if she would leave me. Now that she left, I know what it feels like to lose the most important person in your life. Again, I am crying as I am writing these words. After 69 years of marital bliss and being together every day during our 4 years of courtship we functioned as one individual.

In June 2005, Hilda started to fall off the bed and in the bathroom which lasted and became more frequent till her death. After the first occurrence, we called Dr. Livelli and informed him of the incident.

Since she fell on her chest and head, he told us to immediately have an x-ray of her chest and a cat scan of her head which was done. Fortunately, the results were negative. I began to recall that throughout her life she fell frequently and usually fractured her wrist and ankles.

In July, she started to see Dr. Sepowitz, an endocrinologist, for her diabetes. He prescribed several medications and told her to continue with her daily injections of insulin. She would see him several times a year until her death. Since she always had a problem with her stomach, she began to see Dr. Oscar Lebwohl, a gastro-enterologist. I would drive her to Columbia since she stopped driving after her by-pass and I would drop her off at the hospital and she would call me to pick her up.

In October of 2008, Dr. Livelli suggested that she visit Holy Name Hospital in Teaneck to correct her balance. This hospital had a special unit that excelled in correcting the balance of patients. She went several times and found no relief; her falls did not diminish. In November, she no longer could live with the pain emanating in her legs and toes due to her lack of blood circulation. She had in the past had several epidurals to relieve the pain but they never helped. I took her to Dr. Gudin, a pain specialist, at Englewood Hospital and after several visits, her pain decreased a little.

In June 2009, due to her circulation problems, one of her toes became infected. I took her to Dr. Kocher at Englewood Hospital to examine her toe. He suggested that we consult with Dr. Strom at the same hospital. He was a specialist in infectious diseases. He advised us that I should cleanse and dress the wound every morning and apply an ointment which I did religiously.

She began to fall every day, usually in the bathroom. Whenever she fell, I would pick her up from the floor. One day she fell in the bathroom and fell into the bathtub. I tried picking her up but I was not able to do so. In fact, when she fell in the tub her head hit the porcelain soap dish and broke it. After repairing it with glue, I still gaze at it every time I visit the bathroom and it will be a tragic memento for me the rest of my life. Since I could not raise her up, I called 9/11 for help. Very soon an ambulance and the police came. They put her on a stretcher and took her to the Emergency Room of Englewood Hospital. She had been in the ER several times previously and a few times after this incident.

My children and grandchildren seeing that this situation could not continue, kept badgering me to engage help to take care of her as I was 91 years of age and not physically able to nurse her. Thus, I engaged a woman to be with her 12 hours a day. Hilda then began a rapid deterioration in her health. She was no longer the woman who I had known for 73 years. Sitting in her favorite chair in the den, she would close her eyes and dose. Conversing with me was infrequent. When visitors came to see her, in the midst of speaking to them, she would fall asleep. I then engaged an additional woman to be with her for the other 12 hours. At no time did I imagine losing my beloved. I could endure her condition as long as she would not leave me. So you can imagine my disbelief and denial when Kenny told me that my soul-mate would depart in 3 days.

CHAPTER THREE

Every event in our wonderful life is reborn. Our walking together every Friday night during our courtship to listen to the rabbi in the Brooklyn Jewish Center is in my mind. We would sing Hebrew songs while walking. We would see each other three times every *shabbos*. We *davened* together in the morning at the Hapoel Hamizrachi schul. In the afternoon, I went to her home and in the evening, we went to a movie theatre. We saw each other every evening during our four years of courtship. In fact, the evening prior to taking my CPA exam for the first time, I escorted her to the beauty salon.

Her many visits to see me at the college library where I worked while attending college is etched in my mind. She would leave her work at Pearl Dress Co. during her lunch hour taking a bus to do so. Our love for each other is indescribable. Never in the years that we were together did she or her parents ask me when I would consider marrying her. We were never engaged publicly but we were engaged from the moment we met. After working for one year, I was able to give her a diamond watch which she lost after wearing it for several weeks. A few months later, I gave her a watch without diamonds.

When I was taking inventory at one of my clients in the garment center in August 1940, I decided it was time to propose marriage to my darling. I phoned her at Pearl Dress Co. which was a block from my client and asked her if she would meet me for lunch; not mentioning the reason. We lunched at a cafeteria near Pearl and while eating I sprung the good news. Believe it or not, she reacted as though I told her what the weather would be tomorrow. She certainly was happy but she always knew that we would marry someday.

She suggested that we go immediately to inform her father about our decision. When we told him, he too was not at all surprised and asked us when the date should be. We said September 14, a Saturday night. Both my parents and Hilda's mother were in the Catskills so we printed the invitations and mailed it to them. Papa Friedfeld chose Trotzky Caterers located in the Hotel Sharon on West 49th Street between Broadway and 8th Avenue. Trotzky's was one of the most popular kosher caterers in New York. The hotel was a three story building built at the turn of the century and quite run-down. However, the ballroom was, at best, adequate for our needs. Papa Friedfeld made all the financial and menu arrangements. Taking care of the caterer was his only cost. I, personally, paid for flowers, photos, orchestra and the rabbi. Although both our parents were Orthodox, we had mixed seating for the *chupa* and the meal. We also had mixed dancing for Hebrew and Yiddish songs; but we had no social dancing.

We never had a honeymoon although we made up for it many times in the future. On Sunday afternoon we went walking, hand in hand, along Central Park West to see where Clarence Rainess, my boss, lived. Then we walked to 37th Street and 7th Avenue where Pearl Dress was located knowing that we would find Hilda's parents on their usual Sunday outing. When we arrived there, her father could not look us in the face. Evidently he felt I had defiled a daughter of his for the first time since Hilda was the first child who was married. My mother-in-law who always loved me embraced and kissed me. That night we went to Radio City Music Hall and enjoyed for the first time marital bliss. I remember as though it was yesterday that we felt as though we were walking on air. Whether it was our first day as husband and wife or it was the result of our first sexual experience, or both, I really cannot explain.

We rented an apartment on Parkside Ave. in Brooklyn near Prospect Park. It had a large living-dining room, a large bedroom and a kitchen in the wall; the refrigerator, stove and sink were against a wall which was enclosed by swinging doors. The building had an elevator and doorman and the rent was 40 dollars a month. Since I was now earning \$ 20 per week and Hilda was earning the same working for her father as model and head bookkeeper, we could afford the rent which was always supposed to be 25% of your earnings.

Since the furniture had not arrived yet, we were forced to stay at the Hotel Sharon for 2 weeks. Although most of the guests or residents of the hotel were shady characters: i.e. prostitutes, drug addicts and the like, my bride and I did not look down on them. They all could not have been nicer to us knowing that we were newly-weds. We were living a life-style quite different from theirs; however, I cannot forget their respect for us and their daily greetings. In fact, the desk clerk was so happy to have us as guests, that he gave us free tickets to Broadway shows. After 2 weeks we were ready to move into our new home. For one week we slept on a mattress since the rest of the furniture had not yet arrived. When you are in love, where you sleep is not important.

In April 1942, I received the very good news that Hilda was carrying a new member of our family. The expected date of our child's arrival as predicted by Hilda's obstetrician, Dr. Warwick, was the first week in Dec. 1942. Since this was my wife's first experience in child bearing, we didn't realize that a woman's first child usually arrives later than expected. Suffice it to say, I began phoning her every day from a client's office from the first of Dec. onward. After almost 4 weeks elapsed and still no baby, I asked her if she was really pregnant. Incidentally, Hilda worked every day till her ninth month picking up very large and heavy ledger books.

Finally, on a Saturday night after the conclusion of the Sabbath on Jan. 2, 1943, Hilda began to have contractions signifying the onset of labor. I immediately called Dr. Warwick who advised me to drive her to Beth-El Hospital. I remained in the hospital while Hilda went to the labor room; it was now 10 P.M. I noticed that if I sat in the men's bathroom, I was able to hear her moans and groans; and thus, I felt as though I shared her pain and that she was not alone. In those days no one was permitted to be in the labor room. After several hours she was transferred to the delivery room. I then went to the waiting room and sat with other expectant fathers. At around 4 A.M., Dr. Warwick came to the waiting room and said, "Mr. Prager, you are now the father of a boy who entered this world with a cane and monocle," meaning that Kenny was almost an adult weighing in at 10 lbs. 12 ounces. I then was permitted to see my wife who was being wheeled to her room.

A few months after Kenny's birth, I could no longer hide behind his diapers while Hitler was killing Jews and informed Hilda that I was going to apply for an officer's commission in the Navy although I was deferred since I had dependants. She didn't stop crying and pleaded with me not to leave her and Kenny. Her feelings did not deter me and I did apply in May 1943. I was not accepted possibly because I was an alumnus of CCNY which was a bastion of Jewish communists. In June I was drafted since my draft board was notified that I had applied for a commission. I entered the Navy on July 30, 1943 and since I had a 7 day leave, I had to report for active duty on August 6.

On that day, Hilda escorted me on a bus from Mt. Freedom, where we were staying that summer, to Penn Station leaving our son with our friend Jeanette who shared our bungalow in Mt. Freedom. The trip will always be etched in my mind; my wife's heavy sobbing and my realization that I was leaving the

woman whom I loved and adored and an infant son whom I was just getting to know. One must realize that for a couple who had seen each other every day for seven years, except for the summer of 1937 when I was managing Auerbach's Hotel, this was a very traumatic experience.

We arrived at Penn Station around 5 P.M. and then Hilda had to leave and return to our child in Mt. Freedom. I can still remember our ardent kisses and embraces and her constant sobbing as we took leave of each other; even though we knew that we would see each other in seven weeks upon the completion of my boot training.

The joy of reconciling with my wife and child was beyond belief. Unfortunately, the week flew too quickly and on the first night of Rosh Hashonah, I had to return to Sampson for future assignment. I stared at my son of 8 months in his crib and burst into violent sobs, not knowing if I was ever to see him again. I was escorted by Hilda, my parents, Hilda's parents and other members of our families to the subway station. I did not cease crying till I arrived at Penn Station.

Upon returning to Sampson, I received orders to report to the Naval Aviation Technical Training Center (NATTC) in Norman, Oklahoma. When Hilda visited me a few months after my arrival at the NATTC, I set her up at the Biltmore Hotel in Oklahoma City, several miles from Norman. She would take a bus that went specifically to the base and did this daily. One night we accepted an invitation from the rabbi of a congregation in Okla. City who was Orthodox. We spent a very enjoyable evening with the Rabbi and his rebbitzen who were approximately in their thirties. You can just imagine how I felt eating kosher meat after being in the Navy for six months. Since Hilda had been with me for two weeks, she too, missed eating kosher meat. After 3 weeks, it was time for Hilda to leave and rejoin Kenny.

I was given a leave of 14 days to go home for the Passover holidays which were in the early part of April 1944. On *chal hamoed* (intermediate days), I received a telegram advising me that I was granted a commission on March 7 and was now an Ensign in the U.S. Navy. The 14 days that I spent with Hilda, Kenny and our families were heavenly and much too brief.

On April 28, I received orders to report to the Naval Supply Corps School at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Mass. While the college was in session till the middle of June, I was not able to bring Hilda and Kenny to live with me. However, on Saturdays after inspection, I would visit them by going by train to Carroll Street in Brooklyn, where they were residing in my in-law's home, and return to Wellesley Sunday afternoon.

In the middle of June 1944, when the semester at the College ended, I was able to bring Hilda and Kenny to Wellesley. I rented an apartment in the city of Wellesley from a Mrs. Neal an Irish woman in her sixties who immediately took a liking to us and behaved as a mother to us and not as a landlord. She owned a 2 family house; we occupying the first floor and her family living above us.

Every day at 3 p.m. Hilda and Kenny would come by bus –a 15 minute trip- to visit me. We would be through with our classes then and would engage in calisthenics and football or baseball. On Saturdays after inspection which ended at 11 a.m. I went to our apartment and spent a most enjoyable time with my family till 4 p.m. Sunday when I returned to the school.

Every Sunday morning we took bus rides to Worcester and other cities close by and especially to Boston where we would spend the day at the Commons, which is the name of a large and beautiful park.

On one Saturday afternoon, we were invited to the home of a fellow student who was married and lived across the street of our apt. He invited several other students with their wives or girl friends. After a while mint juleps were served and I informed the host that I never drank and thanked him for his hospitality. That was a mistake that I made since getting me drunk would be a source of amusement to the other guests who were no novices in the art of drinking.

Every one kept telling me that mint juleps, which I had never heard of, were very mild and that one drink would certainly have no effect on me. Never being a “party pooper”, I acquiesced and tasted my first mint julep which, I, am sorry to say, enjoyed immensely. If one tasted great, two or more would taste even better. After 3 or more, I was completely inebriated. To this day, I don’t remember what happened from that moment to the following morning.

Hilda told me later that my “friends” took me home and that she had to undress me and put me to bed. I awoke Sunday morning with no hangover or any ill effects; that was the first and last time that I was drunk. It is quite possible that this incident created immunity to imbibing since I have been drinking from then on and have never had any difficulty in holding my liquor.

My classmates knew that I was Jewish since in our many conversations we spoke about religion. However, when Hilda joined me, many of them asked me why I married a Gentile; my wife not looking like the stereotyped Jew. I was the only Jew in the entire student body and they probably had not met many Jews in their lives. They also expressed surprise that I was not one of them: again thinking that all Jews looked alike.

On one Friday night, Hilda and I were invited to go “skinny dipping” in the lake with the rest of the boys and girls. Of course, we were taken aback at their suggestion since we knew that several of them were married and couldn’t believe that they would allow their wives to be seen nude and, perhaps, be fondled by other men.

We could understand unmarried persons indulging in this “sport”, but never married people. We, of course, made our excuses and spent that Friday night as we always did by lighting the Sabbath candles, making *kiddish*, eating the Sabbath meal, singing *zmiros*, saying grace after meals and maintaining our Jewish heritage as it should be on a Friday night.

CHAPTER FOUR

On August 25, 1944, I received my orders to proceed on Sept. 25 to Seattle, Wash. And report to the APA Pre-Commissioning School in connection with the USS Bollinger (APA 234) which was being built in Vancouver, Wash. and very soon to be commissioned and staffed. I was to be the assistant supply officer and the disbursing officer of this new ship. After completion of my course in Wellesley on Sept. 13, I went on leave and returned to Hilda and my family until Sept. 25 when I began a four day cross country train trip. Fortunately, being an officer, I traveled first class in a Pullman berth. It seems that the Almighty either has a sense of humor or was testing me since Yom Kippur was one of the days I was traveling. Needless to say, I fasted and my fellow officers pleaded with me to at least drink. However, Mendel, alias “nails” would not succumb to temptations of the flesh when his soul was of greater importance. By coincidence, when I left Hilda and Kenny at the age of six months, a year previously, it was Rosh Hashonah night.

On Sept. 28, I reported to the APA Pre-Commissioning School at the Hotel Fry in Seattle. Finally, on Dec. 3, I received orders to report to Astoria, OR. for the commissioning of my ship the USS Bollinger. On May 9, our ship arrived in Seattle after we participated in the invasion of Iwo Jima. Since we expected to remain there for at least 2 weeks, I grasped at the opportunity of having Hilda come out to Seattle and visit me. We hadn't seen each other for over 8 months so we were both salivating at the thought of “touching” each other and more.

On the morning of May 11, I went to pick her up at the train station. That morning I had to go to a bank to pick up Japanese currency since there were plans to attack the Japanese mainland which did not happen because of the atom bomb. Whenever I had to go to a bank, I strapped my 45 caliber pistol to my body and be escorted by my 2 disbursing storekeepers. I had made a reservation for Hilda at the Olympia Hotel which was one of the better hotels in town.

I requisitioned a jeep for my trip to the bank and, with the 2 sailors in the rear of the jeep, I arrived at the train station to reunite with my wife. You can imagine our joy in seeing each other after a long absence. We drove to the hotel, checked in and went up to the room. I will leave it to the reader's imagination as to what occurred immediately after we found ourselves alone. You can just envision the pent up passion that engulfed us after 8 months. After being in heaven for a short period of time, I left my beloved and rejoined my storekeepers who dutifully remained in the jeep. They shot meaningful glances at me throughout our trip back to the ship knowing full well what went on in the room.

Hilda and I spent the most enjoyable five days together. It was like a second honeymoon, although we never had a first. Of course, the time flew as usual because we were both so happy and on the afternoon of the 16th we said our farewells not knowing when we would see each other again.

On August 14, 1945, Japan surrendered and my greatest joy was that I was finally going home to Hilda and Kenny to be with them with no interruptions. I felt that I would be released in about a year. A point system of discharge was released by the Navy and it was terribly unfair. Firstly, no credit was given for overseas duty or combat service. Also, a married man with 3 children and a single man with a mother as a dependant would receive the same number of points.

We arrived in Frisco after visits to 2 cities in Japan and to the Philippines on Jan. 6, 1946. Being a disbursing officer and the custodian of large amounts of cash and checkbooks, I could not be relieved of my duties until the Navy could find a replacement for me. Almost all supply and disbursing officers were in a hurry to go home and were not interested in remaining in the service. I could see myself hanging around for at least another 6 months.

Perhaps my daily prayers helped. When Capt. Richter heard of my plight, he assured me that I would be relieved in a few days. He had a friend, a Lt. Cdr. in San Francisco at the Twelfth Naval District, who would help me in getting home. He made an appointment to see her which I did a day later. She, too, was a doll and empathized with my predicament. She asked me if there were any supply officers aboard my ship who were USN or USNR staying in the service. When I answered in the affirmative, she wrote orders directing my Captain to transfer all my funds and public property in my possession to Lt. R.C. Zell, USN, the supply officer of my ship.

On Jan. 16th, the transfer was consummated and I was detached as the Disbursing Officer of the Bollinger. I stayed in Frisco going through the procedure of being released from active duty and also waiting for transportation to my home. I left Frisco on the evening of the 22nd and arrived home on Saturday morning on Jan. 26. I just realize that I entered and left the Navy on a Saturday. Perhaps, it is only a coincidence or an act of God that on the same day I returned to my son, Kenny, his *zivik* or *basherta*, as we would say in Yiddish, was born. Jeannie entered this world on Jan. 26, 1946.

Arriving at my in-law's home on Carroll Street in Brooklyn, where Hilda and Kenny resided for my 2 ½ years in the Navy, my joy and anxiety in the thought of my being reunited with my wife, child and immediate family was beyond description. Although I had seen Hilda 8 months previously, holding her in my arms again was sheer bliss.

I can recall walking up the stairs to the second floor apartment, my arms laden with many toys, including a wooden horse, and seeing my wife and son at the head of the stairs. Their incredible happiness at seeing their husband and father returning from the war unscathed was indescribable. As soon as I entered the first room at the top of the stairs, which was the kitchen, I enveloped both in my arms and couldn't release them for quite some time. It was amazing that Kenny, who was 20 months old the last time I saw him, sat on my lap and wouldn't leave me for the rest of the day.

After 1 year living with my in-laws and 1 year living with my parents, it was time to have our privacy. We rented an apartment in a new 2 family house at 4514 Glendale Court in Brooklyn. We occupied the larger apartment on the second floor and paid \$ 450 monthly.

On August 2, 1948, we were blessed with our second son, Dennis Mark. I always wanted a daughter because of the affection that my brother's daughter displayed towards Murray; more than his 2 sons displayed towards him. I liked the name 'Denise' and if we were to have a daughter that was the name we would give her. So when our son arrived I told Hilda that we would name him Dennis. He was a doll from birth, lovable and extremely happy. He did not inherit his brother's habit of crying constantly; although Kenny did so because of infections in his ears.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, my brother in-law's family, after the experience of fleeing from Europe in 1940, became justifiably alarmed and decided to take up residence in Brazil in 1952. Having been in the textile business in the US, they formed Nailotex S.A. in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Although Nailotex engaged an accounting firm to prepare its taxes and financial statements, they needed someone who was proficient in cost accounting in order to price their spring and fall lines before going into production. In January 1955, they asked me if I was interested in coming to Brazil twice a year to accomplish their needs. I didn't need too much persuasion to accept their offer. The thought of visiting a country that I had never been to sealed the deal. Also, the compensation was very attractive.

Thus, on Jan. 8, 1955, I made my first trip to Brazil and my last trip was in 1973 when Nailotex was sold. I, therefore, made 36 trips to Sao Paulo and enjoyed every one of them. On each of my many trips I always came home with a gift of jewelry for Hilda. Brazil was known for its semi-precious stones and most of the gifts were of this type. The others were gold and silver items of jewelry.

Hilda accompanied me on 3 of the trips; all during Lent when the Brazilians celebrated carnival. We enjoyed watching the "escola de sambas" – the school of the sambas-. The dancing and the music are beyond description. In this same year, 1955, Hilda decided to spread her wings and return to a career. When we were going "steady", she emphatically stated to me that if and when we would marry, she would want a large family and I, of course, agreed with her. After our marriage, she sang a different tune repeatedly informing me that her ideal life would be a career, no children and living in Manhattan. In fact, I would jokingly retort that I had grounds for an annulment, she deluding me and not advising me of her true intentions prior to marriage.

At any rate, Dennis now reaching the age of seven and old enough to be cared for by a maid, gave my wife the opportunity to fulfill her ambition. Also, it is possible that my making twice a year trips to Brazil was another factor in her seeking employment. My brother-in-law, Al, who was a partner in the Garden Nursing Home asked her to become an assistant administrator in the Home. In order for Hilda to be able to go to work, we hired a wonderful, compassionate maid named Ethel. She really was the surrogate mother to Dennis for many years. Since he was a problem child in school and a doll at home, he conveyed his most private feelings to her.

Whenever Hilda went with me on my trips to Brazil, We would frequent one or two of the "night clubs" called *boites* where we would sit for hours enjoying the Latino music. Many weekends we would go to a beach called Guaruja with Edith and Joel Rosner, Al's sister and her husband.

Our first trip to Europe and Israel occurred in May 1965. Whether this was due to celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary or not, I can't recall. I would take a 3 week vacation in January in Florida and another 3 week vacation in May to travel. Our first stop was in London where we spent a very enjoyable and enlightening time. We liked London so much that we revisited this city 4 more times on our future trips. On all our trips, we would first go a European city for 1 week and then go to Israel for 2 weeks.

On Sept. 14, 1965, we celebrated our 25th anniversary at a party tendered to us at the home of our dear friends, Anita and Jack Walker. Among the many guests were our two sons, our close friends, the Lupkins and the Judds. Hilda presented me with a sterling silver *esrog* box inscribed "To my Darling Husband on Our 25th Wedding Anniversary". I gave her a pair of sterling silver three arm candelabra

inscribed “To My Lovely Dear Hilda on Our 25th Wedding Anniversary”. Kenny and Dennis gave us a beautiful sterling silver shaped box with a floral décor inscribed in Hebrew “To Our Dear Parents on their Wedding Anniversary”. Pearl, Hilda’s sister and her husband, Bert, gave us a Dutch silver “Reindeer and Sleigh”.

The occasion prompted me to express my long harbored feelings that I had for my beloved partner in life. I wrote the following letter:

Dearest Hilda,

This is the first time in my life that I am writing to you while not being separated in distance. In fact, as I am writing these words, I am gazing at your beautiful face as you are dozing on the couch.

As we say at the Passover Seder, *ma nomar, ma nidaber* (what shall I say, what shall I speak?) My heart is really too filled with emotion to articulate clearly my feelings on this milestone in our lives, the 25th anniversary of our wedding.

To tell you, “I love you”, would sound too much like a cliché and, of course, would be insufficient to express to you how I really feel towards you. A little incident 27 years ago taught me how strong my love is for you and since that day that love has become stronger with each passing day. So, just to tell you, “I love you”, is hardly any news to you.

To tell you, “I respect you”, should also not be something revealing to you. In the 29 years that we know each other, I have always asked you for advice and guidance. Many has been the occasion when I was troubled and groping for the proper and wise solution.

Your incredible wisdom, common sense, and mature understanding always rescued me from the dilemmas that befell me. How many times have I praised you and even envied you for having the right saying or the right thought at the right time. Your capacity for human understanding and for your transmitting your warm personality to others has made you beloved by young and old, by the healthy and infirm. So, to tell you, “I respect you”, is also nothing new to you.

To tell you, “I am proud of you”, that you have heard hundreds of times from my lips. Your beauty, carriage, dress and just plain CLASS has made me the envy of many a man. When you enter a room, all eyes stare at you; when you stroll in the street, all eyes follow you. You are always clean, neat, impeccably dressed and, of course, crowned always with a great big smile. Yes, Hil, I am truly proud of you and know that I will continue to be until we are called to Paradise. So, just to tell you, “I am proud of you”, again does not startle you because you have heard it before.

To tell you, “I am grateful to you”, for the wonderful sons that you bore in your womb for me; again this would be repetitious since I have not ceased telling you that. After the Almighty, I credit you for their marvelous upbringing. I can never forget the difficult years you spent in rearing Kenny with a father thousands of miles away while I was in the Navy. His childhood illnesses and problems you bore alone.

I was stern with the boys at times; however, you tempered my severity with the warm love of a mother. Thus, you were an ideal partner in the rearing of our sons and, incidentally, you are quite aware of how grateful they are to you for the manner in which they were raised. So, just to tell you, “I am grateful to you”, doesn’t really surprise you one iota.

What I will say to you now is that, “I need you”, more than you can ever imagine. I need you now and for the next seventy years. Without you I am just a floundering man. The many times I have been separated from you have shown me vividly what your presence means to me. So, please Hil, stay close to me for many years so that I can enjoy your warmth, lively disposition, hearty laugh, gorgeous face, exciting body, wise counsel and, above all, your precious companionship. I repeat *ma nomar, ma nidaber*. What shall I say? What shall I speak? Nothing more than that I NEED YOU.

All My Love,

Mac

Hilda loved to travel, get out of the house, and especially play the slot machines in various casinos. If I would say to her at midnight or later, “Hil let’s go”, she would reply “I’m already dressed”. We went numerous times to Las Vegas and stayed at Caesars Palace and she would stay at the slot machines to the early hours of the morning. She also enjoyed the shows that the various hotels had to offer. Every time we went to Vegas we visited Dennis and his family in California. We also went several times to the Bahamas while in Florida, to gamble at the casinos. I, personally, was not an avid gambler but went along because I knew that Hilda enjoyed this pastime. It is possible that her desire to gamble was genetic since her father loved to play the stock market and play cards with his friends. Also her sister, Chippy-alias Corinne- played the market and loved gambling. Years later, when we ceased going to Vegas, she would say to me at least twice a year “Mac, let’s go to Atlantic City”. She would play many hours while I would get bored and retire to the bar to smoke a cigar and drink beer.

From 1965 to 1998, we traveled to many foreign countries. In May 1965, we made our first trip to Israel. Every time we visited Israel, we would first visit a European city for 1 week and then visit Israel for 2 weeks. We did this till 1998 when we stopped traveling abroad due to our advanced age. During this period, we visited London, Rome, Zurich, Paris, Aruba several times as well as Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Helsinki, Madrid, Venice, Milan, Florence and Curacao. Each and every trip was sheer happiness and joy of being together with love and affection.

We made a train trip to California to visit Dennis in 2007 which was an experience that we never forgot and created laughter whenever we thought about it. We always wanted to go cross country by rail to see and enjoy the scenery of our beautiful country. Unfortunately, we chose the southern route and all we saw were farms and junk yards. We were told by Dennis later on that we should have selected the northern route whose scenery would be more interesting and enjoyable.

EPILOGUE

To express my feelings about the loss of the most important person in my life is extremely difficult. There is no beginning nor is there an end. I keep saying to myself that Hilda did not die. Only her physical body departed from my life. That is why, when she was buried, I did not shed a tear. Hilda was not in the coffin but a corpse that would decompose with time and all that would remain would be bones.

My lover would forever be in my heart and mind. Until the day I die she will be with me and hopefully be reunited. I miss her terribly and only God knows how much. I light the Sabbath candles, make *kiddish*, sing *zmiros* and *bench*; all the time staring at her sitting at her usual seat.

I find myself talking to her several times during the day and while lying in bed at night. I cry almost every day while thinking of her, staring at her beautiful face with her constant smile and when people speak about her. The memories of our 73 years together are relived. I relive every moment from the time we met until her death. My crying is a catharsis that prevents me from becoming depressed.

Every waking moment, I see her with a great big smile. I literally speak to her many times during the day and say “good night” to her each and every night. My life has changed dramatically. It is not the same as when she was with me. My home is filled with photos of my beloved wife and I do not cease looking at them. I never envisaged going through this ordeal because I always thought that I would predecease her, being the male partner.

Although I am lonely especially in the evening since I am occupied during the day working at my computer, I do not desire feminine companionship. No woman can replace my darling. In fact, it would be unfair for any woman to come into my life as I would constantly compare Hilda to her. Whether this will endure forever, I do not know. It is now 15 months since she left me and it is as though she departed yesterday.

Although we were together for 73 years, it is not the quantity of years but the quality of those years with her. Had she died after 10 years, my missing her would have been the same. She had every virtue a man seeks in his spouse; beauty, personality, kindness, devotion and putting her husband on a pedestal. Many times I fell off that pedestal but she immediately placed me on another.

The finality of death and not being with her physically is difficult to accept. What comforts me is that when I leave this world I will definitely be reunited with her. Where or when is not as important as the fact that it will occur.

Writing this is a catharsis for me and I am grateful to God for giving her to me and His giving me the ability to express my feelings. I wish all to have the fabulous life that I have had with her both in longevity and quality of life.