

### **Harvey and Helen, not Bernie or Rod**

The Book of Genesis concludes this week, as you have heard, with the deaths of Jacob and of Joseph. On his deathbed, Jacob spills to his sons his hopes for their future and his disappointments with their past. Jacob's body is returned to the Land of Israel and buried in Hebron. Joseph, before his death, extracts a promise that, when Israel leaves Egypt they will take his body with them. Although the Book of Genesis is a story of beginnings, it also includes many endings. It has put me in mind of how one hopes to be remembered.

Life is short – we no longer live to Jacob's 147 or even Joseph's 110 -- and what we leave behind may not amount to more than a few stories. What do we make of the few years allotted to us? We have some examples to consider, both positive and negative.

It is pretty clear, for example, how Bernie Madoff will be remembered. Why was it worth it to him, to leave behind a reputation as a greedy cheat? The Rubashkins, of Agriprocessors infamy, also paint an unpretty picture of exploitation, both of human workers and of animals. And what was our Governor thinking? So many examples of the corruption that too often accompanies wealth and/or political power.

Fortunately, we have some positive examples as well.

If you haven't seen "Milk" yet, well, I don't know what you are waiting for.

Iris Mann wrote a nice piece for this week's LA Jewish Journal,<sup>1</sup> beginning with a statement that Harvey Milk often made about himself, often on signs carried in marches:

**"I'M FROM WOODMERE. I'M JEWISH. I'M GAY."**

A friend, Sharyn Saslafsky, with whom Harvey often chatted in Yiddish, said, "We would also talk about Yiddishkayt, about what Judaism stresses.

That was clearly very important to Harvey. I believe his concern for justice, fairness, equality and ethical behavior came from his Jewish background."

This week I also watched the documentary, "The Times of Harvey Milk," which won an Oscar in 1984. Rob Epstein made that film, and he also likes the new film.

Very touching is the comment by Harvey's nephew, Stuart Milk, who spent time with his uncle in 1975, just after the funeral back East for Harvey Milk's father. Stuart Milk, who is gay, was 15 at the time and had not yet come out. He merely told his uncle that he felt different, and, without bringing up the issue of being gay, his uncle gave him encouragement and support. Stuart Milk describes it as a beacon of spiritual advice that touched him to his inner core.

"He told me that when anyone tries to hide who they are or their authenticity, whether it concerns their religion, their background or their ethnicity, the world is lessened," Stuart Milk recalls. "And he used a Native American phrase: 'You are the medicine the world needs. No one else can duplicate that.'

"His words set me on a path, and I realized that those who feel different, whether they're gay or they're Jewish in a Christian country, are providing a tremendous benefit. They're making their community and their society stronger through their differences, not through their sameness."

What constitutes a life? Why do some individuals manage to live bravely and unselfishly? Why do others collapse morally into confident and destructive selfishness? What does my life leave in its wake?

A recent important loss was the death of Helen Suzman in South Africa.

"Little in her early life suggested that Helen Suzman would become a great leader in the fight against apartheid," said one notice of her death.<sup>2</sup>

So too, as we see clearly in the movie, Harvey Milk did not set out to be a politician. The last ten years of his life must have been related somehow to who he had been, but in his case there seems to have been a decision to live differently.

Jacob lived 147 years, the last 17 in Egypt. Upon meeting Pharaoh, when he was 130 years old, Jacob described the years of his life as “few and hard” (Gn. 47:10). We do not know the path we are on until we actually walk it. We cannot know the full meaning of our lives while we are here.

The main thing is not to be afraid, as Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav said.

Harvey Milk spent less than a year on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Helen Suzman lived long – 91 years – and died a peaceful death, after serving 36 years in the South African Parliament (1953-1989).

She was born in Germiston, South Africa, in 1917, to Jewish parents from Lithuania. She was happily married to a doctor, had two daughters, and pursued undergraduate studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1948 she worked on preparing evidence for a government commission. She was appalled to discover how harshly racial restrictions affected the mobility of South African blacks, and the problems they faced as they tried to raise their families and earn a living. This experience brought her into active politics. In 1953, with her husband’s encouragement and support, she stood for Parliament in Houghton, a liberal, silk-stocking district.<sup>3</sup>

A blogger on the Jewish Women’s Archive website remembers protests against Helen Suzman when she came to Brandeis to receive an honorary degree. There and on other campuses many students were active in the movement for divestment from South Africa. Suzman opposed divestment, because she believed that it mainly harmed the poorest South Africans. She was accused of being, in a sense, a collaborator, since she served in the Parliament of an apartheid state – even though she was outspoken in her opposition to Apartheid.

She visited Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners on Robben Island. She attended the funerals of anti-Apartheid activists. Even though she said of herself that she never felt personally threatened with danger, she was outspoken and brave. “Sentiments that I expressed during my thirty-six years as an MP, which were received with ill-concealed disgust by my colleagues in Parliament, have now become government policy,” she said in 1992.<sup>4</sup>

No one runs the entire course of a lifetime without mistakes, and no one who takes significant risks will escape criticism. But each of us is the medicine that the world needs, if we can summon and sustain the courage live out our particular path.

*Hazak, hazak, v'nithazek* – may we each be strong, and may we strengthen one another!

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[http://www.jewishjournal.com/film/article/milk\\_captures\\_doomed\\_life\\_of\\_gay\\_jewish\\_politician\\_20081210/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/film/article/milk_captures_doomed_life_of_gay_jewish_politician_20081210/)

<sup>2</sup> Wallenberg Endowment, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

<sup>3</sup> <http://wallenberg.umich.edu/suzman.html>

<sup>4</sup> Wallenberg Lecture, U of M