

A Tribute to Joy Balsam ob"m  
Rabbi Yaakov Y. Kermaier

"בחדש השלישי לצאת בני ישראל ממצרים ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני"

"In the third month from the Exodus, on that very day - namely, on ראש חודש סיון, today - the Jews arrived at the desert of Sinai (Exodus 19:1)", in advance of receiving the Torah.

The desert is a harsh and unforgiving place, inhospitable to life. In stark contrast, the Torah is an עץ חיים, a tree of life, שדרכיה דרכי נועם, whose ways are gentle and pleasant. The Torah was given in a מדבר, a desert. Life, hope, happiness and faith burst forth in an unlikely, hostile environment.

I did not know Joy in her youth; I was neither her teacher nor her student. I did not see her in action as an inspiring educator in Israel, a Jewish Program Officer for Avi Chai in America, or as a vital catalyst for Jewish revival in Poland. I now know, through others, that to be Joy's teacher, disciple, friend or colleague was to be a person truly blessed. I knew Joy for only one year, her last - when she had already arrived in the מדבר. It was under the cruelest of circumstances that I witnessed Joy's faith, hope, humor and vitality in all their vibrant colors.

At her funeral, in this sanctuary one year ago, I recalled a visit to Joy in the hospital on the night after Passover. I arrived at Sloan Kettering late, close to midnight, with fresh H&H bagels. Joy had just experienced a huge setback in her battle with cancer, and I expected to find a depressed, emotionally wasted woman. When I walked into her room at that late hour, she looked at the bagels and exclaimed with a big smile, "you're crazy!" In the course of our conversation, she expressed her confidence that her health would take a turn for the better. "I am going to beat this," she said. On that visit and on others, she discussed her ideas for making our community better. And because Jerry was not around, she insisted that we had to take care of Jerry. Joy made this request of all her visitors. While Joy had faith in her own recovery, she was pained that her illness was taking its toll on Jerry.

Joy, in her מדבר, with all her pain and suffering, was very much alive. By her own telling, she was also very happy. To a friend, Joy commented, "Susie, this past year, I can't believe it.... I mean I have cancer and everything, with all the treatments and chemo and surgery, but, Susie, it has been the happiest year of my life."

This fact is, of course, the greatest consolation to the hundreds, perhaps thousands, who are still mourning Joy's passing. Joy's last year of life was her most fulfilling thanks to Jerry. Their marriage allowed fruit and flowers to grow in parched desert sands. Joy died young, and could have given so much more to the world. She never fulfilled her dream of raising a family in Israel. But she found love. The Almighty had decreed that Joy's time had come, and He must have decided to send Joy Jerry as a parting gift.

There is a widespread custom to place flowers and other plants in the synagogue on Shavuot. The *Sefer Atik Yomin* explains that the custom is rooted in a beautiful *Midrash* from *Shir Hashirim Rabba*. During the revelation at Sinai, comments the *Midrash*, with each Divine declaration, a sweet-smelling fragrance wafted through the air and spread around the world. For this reason, fragrant flowers are featured in our synagogues on Shavuot, when we celebrate the Sinai encounter.

Joy's fragrance, her far-reaching influence - felt in her lifetime by hundreds on at least three continents, continues to spread. On Memorial Day, Joy's brother, Jonathan, and his wife, Mandy, named their new son Eitan Yehuda. Yehuda is for Yocheved (Joy's Hebrew name); Eitan means

strength, and is a tribute to Joy's remarkable tenacity and courage. A friend and student of Joy's has also recently named her new daughter after Joy, hoping that the baby will grow up to represent Joy's ideals. A woman in the Fifth Avenue Synagogue community, who knew Joy for a short time, but was so moved by her interaction with Joy, has taken on the daily recitation of מזמור ל"ז, the 37th Psalm - this because Joy was 37 at the time of her passing. These are only a few examples of individual efforts to ensure that Joy's ideals and influence live on.

A letter was sent to Joy's family this week from Poland. At the family's request, I share the letter with you this evening:

A year has passed since Joy left us. Yet we still feel her presence. Everyday she is there in our conversations, in our thoughts. Joy came to Poland 14 years ago to teach Torah. She has been coming back at least twice a year since then. She was visiting big cities and small towns where there were only few Jews left - always following her motto, "even if there was only one Jew wanting to learn Torah I will go there to help him." After a few of her journeys to Poland, Joy decided to establish AtaRA association, of which she became director and I had the honor and pleasure to assist her in that undertaking. Working with Joy on this project was a fantastic and very moving experience.

Thanks to Joy, hundreds of Jews in Poland from different cities and towns had this rare opportunity to listen to the lectures of wonderful scholars from Israel and the U.S. She wanted to deliver us more of what's important in life. With her amazing personality she gave us all an example of what it is like to be a real human being. She was an extremely good person, she truly loved people. Her love to Hashem emanated on all of her surrounding. Whoever had a chance to meet her and to get to know her better became a better person. Many people following Joy made the decision to go back to their Jewish roots.

Now the Jewish community of Poland has lost a great friend, so close and dear to our hearts. We will try our best to continue the work Joy has started and developed over the years in Poland. It is our obligation to Joy.

Leszek Piszewski  
The Jewish Community of Warsaw, Poland

Those who studied with Joy, those who worked with Joy, those who loved Joy and laughed and cried with her, feel obliged to make sure that this beautiful person continues to perfume our world.

May Joy's memory continue to be a source of blessing.