

Bernice Angel Schotten: In Memoriam

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by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As we mark the end of the "sheloshim" mourning period for my sister Bernice, here are some words in her memory.

Bernice Angel Schotten passed away unexpectedly at the age of 77. She had been active pretty much until the day she died. She and her late husband Peter lived in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for 50 years, where Peter taught Political Science at Augustana College. After Peter's death a few years ago, Bernice decided to relocate to Brookline, MA, to live closer to her daughter.

Bernice was one of four siblings in our family, the only daughter. Although third-born, she was the first of us to pass away. The mourning symbol of "Keriah" comes to mind. We tear a garment as a sign of grief--but really as a sign of a tear in the fabric of our lives. The deceased has gone on to the world beyond, but the survivors feel the loss. Mourners learn to heal, but the tear leaves a permanent scar.

We grew up together in Seattle with wonderful parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins--a large network of family and friends. From her earliest years, Bernice was bright, energetic, thoughtful, and independent. She attended the Seattle Hebrew Day School, Franklin High School and the University of Washington and was a leader and activist in various school clubs and youth groups. She met Peter at U of W. Peter continued his PhD studies in Claremont, Ca., and he and Bernice lived there for a while before moving to Sioux Falls.

Although she lived much of her life far away from us, she maintained ongoing relationships with her siblings and other family members. She remembered birthdays; she loved when family members visited her in Sioux Falls; and she enjoyed traveling to join us for family celebrations and reunions. The last time I saw Bernice in person was in January 2024 when she came from Brookline to attend the wedding of our grandson Max and Rena.

But the Jewish mourning practices go beyond Keriah. Mourners recite Kaddish. Significantly, the Kaddish prayer has nothing whatsoever to do with death. Rather it is a dramatic expression of God's greatness, beyond any words of praise we can possibly utter. In praising God, we are acknowledging our faith in the ultimate wisdom of God's ways. When we tear Keriah, we bless God as the dayan ha-emet, the True Judge. It is a blessing of resignation. We don't understand the mysteries of life and death, the passing of the generations, the ongoing meaning of life in the face of death. But we bow our heads and praise God. At a time when we sense our own mortality and vulnerability, we express trust in the ultimate value of our God-given existence.

When we observe the "shiva" and "sheloshim" mourning periods, we reminisce. We remember the wonderful times--the family celebrations, picnics, vacations, parties of all kinds. Bernice had so much for which to be grateful--and she was truly grateful. When she had to face some difficult times and troubles, she demonstrated an amazing strength of character. In one of my last phone conversations with Bernice,

I told her she was gutsy and resilient in adjusting to her new life in Brookline. But she was gutsy and resilient throughout her life.

In her years in Sioux Falls, she was an active leader of the small Jewish community there. She taught in the Sunday School. She was part of an ongoing Torah study group with the Chabad rabbi of Sioux Falls. She was a proud and active Jewish leader...principled, generous, loving, devoted.

Her memory will be a blessing, source of strength and happiness to her daughter, her siblings, her extended family, her many friends in Sioux Falls, Seattle, Brookline and around the country.

"The Lord has given, and the Lord has taken away; may the Name of the Lord be blessed."