

Eulogy for Eileen Starr Moss

February 6, 2015

Widow of Richard, daughter of....., mother of Jennifer, mother in law of David, grandmother of Ethan, sister of Stephen, sister in law of , aunt of....., friend, neighbor, teacher.

On Wednesday afternoon, just a few hours after Eileen had breathed her last at Seasons Hospice at Franklin Square Hospital, her latest batch of students gathered in this sanctuary to grieve together and to share their memories of Morah Eileen. Parents bring their 3,4,5,6 grade kids after school on Wednesday afternoons to learn to read and recite an antiquated Semitic language preparing them for reading from a sacred parchment scroll before the entire congregation.

To learn this language of our ancestors requires the patient guidance of an exceptionally devoted teacher, who not only has to deal with restless children after a whole day of school, but transmit to them the importance of learning a new alphabet, the meaning of ancient prayers, our covenant with God, and the honor of leading their community from this bimah. Such an exceptionally devoted teacher was Eileen Moss who taught Hebrew and Jewish religion in this building for 35 years.

Eileen would tell you the story of her Jewish education. She only attended Hebrew school because someone had to walk her younger brother Stephen there. She never had a Bat Mitzvah as a child, well, because in that world, only boys read from the Torah. She became Bat Mitzvah here at this temple in the 1990's with a group of her friends and was so enthusiastic about her learning that she was determined to pass it on to the next generations.

Wednesday afternoon, I told the kids the truth: that she had died that morning, that it was a devastatingly sudden illness and death, and that she loved them all. That some of her last thoughts and words were about them. She cherished them and their learning with immense pride.

I wish you could have all been here on Wednesday afternoon with her students. They were totally engaged in the conversation about her life, her death, what she taught them, what they would remember about her. They each wrote a letter to her family. We discussed how they could go to the shiva gatherings in the next week, what to expect there, what they could say or do there.

Eileen had asked me on Tuesday, the day before she died, "so what are the kids doing for Tu Bishvat tomorrow?" And what they did was not what was planned; what they did was brainstorm about how to best memorialize their beloved teacher who died on Tu Bishvat, the day we celebrate the trees and nature. Let's plant a tree for her, let's paint a mural of a tree in her classroom, let's plant a tree in Israel for her, they all had ideas. One of the children raised his hand and said: whenever I pray v'ahavta, I will remember Morah Eileen.

Wednesday night I read through the letters they wrote, and quite a few of them echoed that: whenever I pray v'ahavta, I will remember Morah Eileen. That was one of the essential prayers that she taught them.

That prayer is recited daily in our synagogues, in our homes, every morning when we awaken and every evening before we fall asleep. The words that first appear in Deuteronomy, that were chanted here on this bimah last August at her grandson Ethan's Bar Mitzvah. Do you remember who read that particular section from the Torah? Right, it was Eileen.

It is on the page in your hands. Let's read it.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them diligently unto your children. You shall speak of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie

down and when you rise up. You shall bind them for a sign upon your hands and they shall be between your eyes. You shall write them upon the doorposts and upon your gates. That you may remember and do all My commandments and be holy unto your God.

This is the perfect prayer to remember Eileen. She believed and acted according to these words: by teaching the next generation, by being the most reliable person you could ever know every morning and every night. She lived with all her heart and soul and might. She loved God and she loved Judaism. And day by day, month by month, year by year, she never let you down. Whether you were her bridge partner, her Sisterhood friend, her fellow teacher, her neighbor, a member of her family, she never let you down.

Think about it for a minute, how many of us in this room have met anyone in their lives who are as dependable as Eileen? Who cared as much as Eileen? Who was devoted as much as Eileen? She did it without fanfare, without resentment, without needing plaques and accolades and rewards.

She was going to see it through, whether it was giving out honors at our high holiday services, or knitting the blanket from hell, or filling in as a sub at your bridge game, or picking you up after you couldn't drive at night anymore. She went to every birthday lunch, every grade level Shabbat service, every Bar or Bat Mitzvah, every Sisterhood meeting, every funeral, every shiva, every yizkor service, every Purim megillah reading, every Sukkot, every Chanukah party, every fundraising event, every book review, every Religious School committee meeting, every RPC meeting, every family simcha, every knitting night, every canasta game. She volunteered for any task that needed to get done. That is just the way she was.

Generally, I love humankind, but I admit that I get exasperated with flakiness, with tardiness, with no-shows, with dubious promises, and disappointing unreliability. Exasperated with others and with myself. During those moments of exasperation I thank God that I have had the privilege of knowing Eileen. And in the future, when am tempted to just skip an event, or to not return a call, I hope that I will continue to be inspired by her shining example. I thank God that I had the privilege of her inspiration.

Today we heard from Eileen's dear friend, Amy, from her brother Stephen, from her nephew Nate. At the shiva gatherings over the next week, you will all have an opportunity to share your recollections. When she knew that her condition was terminal, Eileen especially asked that I contact her madrichim, those high school teens who served as her classroom assistants over the years to let them know how much she appreciated them. I have called each of them in the past two days. Some are off at college, graduate school, and sent their words of admiration. It is an honor to share their tributes with you today.

From Noah: Thank you so much for passing along the message Rabbi, I really appreciate it. I'm thankful that she did not suffer too much. She was a phenomenal teacher and mentor as well as a great person overall. I also just realized that my first time ever teaching was with her and now I'm applying for a private school teaching job. She really inspired me and reinforced my belief that teaching is a noble and worthwhile profession. I'll never forget her and her positive influence on my life.

From Eli:

I taught alongside Morah Moss for 4 years. At first, she seemed to me, as I'm sure she seemed to a few of the kids, a little harsh. I wasn't really used to that style of teaching and it was a little strange for me. But in time I realized that unlike many teachers I've come across, Morah Moss genuinely cared whether these kids learned. After that, I began to see what a great teacher she was. She taught me so much about education and life and I'll always be grateful for the time I got to spend with her in her final years. She inspired me to be a teacher. I will sorely miss her.

From her dear friend Carol, who is with us by skype today from Georgia:

No one is ever prepared to unexpectedly say goodbye to a friend that meant the world to them. Eileen was more than a friend. She was my family. We laughed together and we cried together. Not a day will go by in which I will not miss my dear friend, Eileen. My heart is broken. She has taken a piece of it to Heaven. Carol

From Ethan, her grandson,
Bubbe always went to the movies with me to see whatever I wanted to see. Even after we stopped seeing little kid movies, she would come with me to watch what I wanted. When she wanted to see the Tales of Despereaux, she agreed to take me to see Paul Blart, Mall Cop. I know she didn't really want to see it, but she took me anyway.

Some of my favorite things about her was her baking things for the holidays. I love her Jewish apple cake for Passover and her honey cake for Rosh Hashanah. We even made Hamantaschen for Purim, which was messy but fun.

I'll miss just having her there to talk to and to listen to me. Even when I talked to her about sports that she did not know about or was not interested in, like Premier League Soccer, she pretended to be interested and always listened.

When I was younger and she would babysit at her house, I would always convince her to go to Target and get a toy to keep at her house. She would buy me a Lego set and when it was time to come home, I never left it there. I took it to my house. And the next time I went over there, she would do the same thing and never make me leave my toys at her house.

When I was a baby, she would read my favorite book "Strawberries Are Red" a million times until she knew it by heart but always read it because it was my favorite.

From Eric on Facebook:

"Eileen lived the ideals that we all hold high. Her presence was enjoyed by us all, We have been enlightened by her presence. You will be missed and remembered by all."

And from one of her fourth grade students: "It's all because of her that I can read Hebrew. She always expected us to do our very best. And because of her we did! "

One final word. Although her life came to a very sudden end, she knew in the past two days that she was going to die soon. She was at peace with this reality. With a smile, she whispered: I'm going to see Richard in heaven. And she was comforted.

May her memory be ever a blessing and an inspiration to all those who were privileged to be in her presence. Amen.