

**PARSHAT BERESHIT**  
**OCTOBER 18, 2014**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

One of my Jewish heroes died on October 7<sup>th</sup>. His name was Ralph Goldman, who as a young man, was instrumental in shepherding the State of Israel into existence and later devoted much of his professional life to bringing humanitarian relief to Jews across the globe. He died at the age of 100 in Jerusalem.

Ralph Goldman was born in Ukraine in 1914. His family immigrated to the United States and lived in Boston where he was educated in Jewish studies and Hebrew. He was involved in local Zionist activities as a young man and won an essay contest sponsored by a student Zionist organization in 1937. He was awarded a fellowship to spend a year in Palestine, where he participated in the establishment of Kibbutz Hanita in the Galilee. He returned to the States and went on to earn a Bachelor's Degree from Boston University and a Masters in Social Work from Harvard.

During the Second World War, he served in the U.S. Army, first in the United States and then in England. At the conclusion of the war, he was stationed in Germany and traveled to France where he was assigned to assist Jews in the displaced persons camps. It inspired him to devote his life to helping the Jewish people.

Post-Second World War Goldman was involved in the New York operation for the Haganah helping to buy and lease airplanes and ships to transport immigrants from Europe to Palestine, and assisting in the effort to recruit personnel for this new army. He became a close confidant and advisor to Teddy Kollek, later to become the Mayor of Jerusalem, and to David Ben Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister. He served for seven years in Ben Gurion's office and in 1951 was in charge of the Prime Minister's initial visit to the U.S. as head of state.

He later served as Executive Director of the American-Israel Cultural Foundation where he was instrumental in the nurturing of a young Israel violinist, Itzhak Perlman, and the Israel Education Fund, a fundraising arm of the United Jewish Appeal. He is the father of the JCC or Matnes Movement in Israel, was the guiding spirit behind MALBEN, the program that gave Israel its first social services infrastructure in the early days of statehood, established the ESHEL program which developed comprehensive services for Israel's elderly population, and was very helpful in nurturing the building of The Israel Museum.

But, it was through the work of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee that Ralph Goldman truly found his passion. He joined the JDC when he became the Associate Director of its Israel operation in 1968, establishing its department for the care of the elderly and introducing innovations in early childhood care. Goldman served as the Chief Executive of JDC from 1976 until 1985, and again from 1986 to 1988.

It was during this time that he had an enormous impact upon world Jewry and the State of Israel. In 1979, he successfully negotiated with the Hungarian government for JDC to work officially in that country. He made similar arrangements in Czechoslovakia and in Poland. He

reached out to the Jews of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. Through these projects which offered social welfare to Jews behind the Iron Curtain, JDC managed to build successful working relationships with the Communist regimes and to expand its activities into Jewish education and community-building activities.

He sent emissaries to Ethiopia to scout out possibilities for rescue opportunities and when Operation Moses occurred in 1984, JDC was there to help. He reached out to the Jews of Iran and North Africa. In 1989, with the fall of Communism, JDC moved out in the open in the Former Soviet Union and continues to do essential work in the social welfare and the community-building areas.

All of us who have been on missions to Jewish communities in Eastern Europe or the Former Soviet Union have seen the work of the JDC on the ground. We have been impressed and touched by the work of both the professionals and the local volunteers who make sure that even the most elderly or infirmed Jew receives appropriate and dignified care. Food, shelter, vocation training, and a friendly visitor are part of JDC's program and much of that is due to the work of Ralph Goldman. Though he retired officially in the summer of 1988, he continued to be an elder statesman and a trusted advisor to many people.

From my many trips to that part of the world I, of course, knew of the work of the Joint and had learned of Ralph Goldman and his remarkable career. The last time I saw him was only a few years ago when he spoke at a private home in Jerusalem. He was dressed impeccably as usual with his bowtie tied just right. He possessed a phenomenal memory. He told us of the early years of the state, the stories of Jews behind the Iron Curtain, and the indomitable spirit of the Jewish people. Many people have seen him as a mentor. In a recent article in the *Times of Israel* Ariel Beery, an Israeli entrepreneur, wrote: "Ralph embodied for us the hero we are so lacking in today's Israel: the quiet leader, unafraid to stand at the front when called upon but not seeking the limelight for its own sake. One accessible to all, actively seeking successors who will join him as partners in the work. One steadfast in the recognition that the opportunity to do good on a national scale is reward enough. One who celebrates others as they accomplish great things, and helps them to do so."

In honor of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday a few months ago, the then President of the State of Israel, Shimon Peres, who knew Goldman and his work for so many decades, suggested that Goldman won everyone's respect whether in the United States, in Israel, or in the Joint. Peres concluded his remarks by saying: "Ralph, we are proud of you. The State of Israel recognizes your unusual contribution and thanks you from the depths of our heart."

Ralph Goldman was a hero for me because behind the scenes he did so much to help the Jewish people. He was humble, dedicated, and honest and cared deeply for our people, yet he did not look for honor or notoriety. In fact, much of the work he did had to remain quiet for many decades.

I think of Ralph Goldman's life in the context of the Torah portion we read this morning. Today we begin at the very beginning with Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. According to the

second chapter of the Book of Genesis, Adam was created as a single human being, only later was Eve added. Still later she gave birth to Cain and Abel.

The Mishna in Sanhedrin deduces from this scenario that each human life is unique, special, and sacred. Since G-d created Adam the Mishna tells us there was a special lesson attached to that act: "For this reason was man created alone, to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul, (in Israel), Scripture imputes guilt to him as though he destroyed a complete world; and whoever preserves a single soul, (in Israel), Scripture ascribes merit to him as though he had preserved an entire world." In other words, the work of Ralph Goldman created worlds of individuals who were saved through the humanitarian work of the Joint and through his quiet diplomacy and strength.

I would be remiss if I did not mention one other very close association that I had with Ralph Goldman. His son, David Goldman, was born in the States. He made aliyah and eventually joined the Israeli Foreign Service. He took upon himself the name of David Ben Raphael, taking as his last name Ralph's Hebrew name. He represented Israel in a number of diplomatic posts, including here in Chicago as a Vice Consul. In 1988, I received a call asking me whether I would officiate at his wedding. He had met a young woman here in Chicago, Elisa Cirilo-Peres. As they did research on her family, Elisa was convinced that she was descended from the Conversos, the group of Jews that was forced to hide their Jewish identity during the Spanish Inquisition, so that they would either not be killed or expelled. The Orthodox Rabbi with whom they met asked her to go through the procedure of conversion since her pedigree could not be proven. The trouble was David Ben Raphael was a Kohen and according to Jewish law a Kohen may not marry a convert.

I was contacted and asked whether I would perform the wedding. The Conservative Movement has declared that a Kohen and a convert can get married. The Torah, itself, does not mention that injunction and conversion is rather frequent in our society and does not have the same negative implication that it used to have.

I met David and Isa and they told me that the Orthodox Rabbi suggested that they contact me, and though he did not feel comfortable officiating at the wedding, since she was an official convert, he would attend the wedding. Under those conditions I agreed to perform the wedding and in the presence of their friends and the Israeli Consulate staff, I officiated at their marriage under the Huppah.

After he finished his service here in Chicago David returned to Israel and worked in the Foreign Ministry headquarters in Jerusalem and then was sent to the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In March 1992, the Israeli Embassy was blown up. David was the Deputy Chief of Mission and it took two days to find his body. He was buried in Jerusalem surrounded by his friends, family, and members of the Foreign Ministry. He was 43 years old.

When I saw Ralph Goldman in Jerusalem, I reminded him that I was the person who had officiated at David and Isa's wedding. When David was killed I felt a part of Israeli history and we talked of David's life. For a while I was in touch with Isa and their children, but we have lost contact over the years. This past April, over 20 years after the bombing, she returned, along with

members of the Foreign Ministry, to Buenos Aires, to pay respect to his memory. Most people know that in 1994 the AMIA, the central building of Argentinian Jewry, was blown up with the loss of 85 lives. It is believed that Iran was behind both bombings, but the perpetrators have never been found. I have stood at the AMIA and recalled the lives of those who were killed. I have also stood at the site of the Israeli Embassy and remembered David Ben Raphael. Ralph Goldman and I had a very special tie to modern Jewish history.

In a book written in 2001 by Tom Shachtman about Ralph Goldman and the Joint, Teddy Kollek in the forward extols the virtues of his friend, and in the epilogue Gideon Taylor, then Executive Vice President of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany writes: “In a world that is all too often devoid of those who understand where we have come from and where we are going, Ralph has (or had) that indefinable quality that makes him one of the great Jewish leaders of our times – the gift of ‘vision.’”

When you lose one of your heroes you are sad but you know you continue to learn from their example. I believe Ralph Goldman made a difference in the lives of the Jewish people and followed the teaching of Mishna Sanhedrin.

May the memory of this remarkable man and Jewish leader always be for a blessing.