

Eulogy for Dr. Cecil Berner ^{Zeesa} ~~Zeeel~~ ben Pesach v'Shifra

Passed away July 5, 1998

This past week in synagogue we read from Parshat Chukat which begins with the quintessential decree of the Torah, a commandment we are asked to perform even though we are unable to understand its purpose and reason. The lesson of the *parah adumah* -the red heifer - whose ashes are used to purify people who have become tamei or spiritually impure. This is the classical example of a '*chok*', a statute decreed by God, and the understanding of which is beyond human comprehension.

Even King Solomon, reputed to be the wisest of the ancient kings of Israel, realized that the attempt to grasp the reason why the ashes of a red heifer purify a person with his human intellect was self-defeating and only made the reason for the commandment further away from his understanding. Referring to God he says in Ecclesiastes, "There is no wisdom except Your wisdom. There is no understanding except Your understanding, and Your comprehension is numberless." And only then did he understand the meaning of the red heifer.

So why do I relate this story to you as we gather to remember the life of our beloved Cecil Berner. Because Cecil Berner, also was a man who did not accept what some believe to be superficial answers at first glance. Cecil Berner asked questions, explored and studied and only when he was satisfied that he knew the answer, would he be satisfied. This reflected in the way he lived his life, and in the way his life had an impact on his family, his patients and colleagues and his friends.

I'm sure like myself, many of you were surprised to hear of the passing of Cecil Berner on Sunday. His energy, his vitality, and his continued desire to be involved in every possible way in the world around him belied his 82 years, almost 60 of them as an active member of the medical profession. It is a tribute to him that in this day when we hear so much about bright young medical school graduates trained in the latest techniques, that Cecil was still sought out by other doctors to take over their practices when they went on vacations. These doctors would schedule their vacations at Cecil's convenience to ensure that he would be available. They recognized not only

his ability but his devotion to medicine that led to an incredible loyalty from both patients and those who worked with him over the years.

There is no doubt that Cecil's early experiences molded him into the kind of a son, husband, father, grandfather and doctor that he was. He was old enough to remember glimpses of the life he enjoyed in his birthplace of Turnovka, on the Russian/Ukraine border before it fell under the rule of the Bolsheviks. His family was wealthy living in a big house with two kitchens, one for milk, one for meat, and his own pony in the back yard. But his father knew that as Jews and land owners they would be considered enemies of the new regime and he devised an elaborate plan of escape for his family. With the valuables they could carry hidden in food and sewn in their clothes, his parents split up to make it easier to get across the border into Romania and to a port where they could get passage to North America. Young Cecil traveled with his mother and his parents later recounted that his father Pacey, was delayed and showed up just in time to join the family on the S.S. Montreal bound for Halifax. From there they boarded the train to Winnipeg and the family, now four with the arrival of Janette began a new life. Although his father had been a merchant in Russia, he had taken training as a pharmacist and soon operated a drug store in downtown Winnipeg. Meanwhile Cecil's education began in both Hebrew and secular schools, then on to University, graduating in medicine from the University of Manitoba when he was only 24 years old. In later years he told his children that even in his new country he had to endure some of the same prejudice that was rampant in Russia. While receiving a medal for achieving top marks in bio-chemistry one of the professors told him that as a Jew he only won because he was so far ahead of the second place finisher.

Following graduation he chose to practice in the rural communities of Bashaw and Rimbey in Alberta. Here he developed an interest in agriculture, but unlike his father he didn't have to fall back on it as a second profession. With World War II underway he joined the army and as a medical officer was assigned to the POW camps in the Medicine Hat and Lethbridge areas. He still found time for other interests as he is listed as one of the founding members of the B'nai Brith chapter in Lethbridge.

Cecil was known for his practicality. When the medical team he was a part of received their orders to fly overseas in 1943, he shared different priorities than those of his colleagues. While they went in to a flurry of activity preparing for the new assignment Cecil calmly made his way to the base dentist to repair a tooth that had been giving him some problems. After all he said there was the possibility that he could be taken prisoner at some point and he didn't want to suffer from a toothache in a P.O.W. camp.

Fortunately his fears were not realized and he returned from Europe in 1946 and promptly moved to Edmonton to reestablish his medical practice. Two months after arriving he first met Lola Dower at a wiener roast party in July 1946. He asked her out on a date that night and they were married less than two years later in May 1948.

Cecil didn't waste any time becoming active in the communal life of his new home. He was active in B'nai Brith, and the boards of both the Talmud Torah and Beth Shalom Synagogue. He was a member of the Menorah Curling Club, the Army Reserve and the Lions. Later he and Lola were regulars at the Symphony and the Citadel Theatre and devoted followers of the Edmonton Eskimos. Wendy remembers how football nights were major family events as the Berner, Dower, Katzin and Cristall adults were in their seats at centre field while the children were assigned their own section on the 35 yard line.

I can vouch for Cecil's continued interest in the welfare of our synagogue. As an owner of life seats near the front of the sanctuary he called me a few months ago to inquire about purchasing the seats next to his for Carlee and Bill. Recently he called me after returning from Montreal for the Bar Mitzvah of his grandson. He told me of the wonderful Reconstructionist synagogue that Mark' and his family attend. He suggested that we consider that movement as a source for a new rabbi and in fact I did send them information about our search for a rabbi.

Considered the consummate family doctor, Cecil's practice flourished. Not only were his patients loyal but so were the nurses that worked for him. The majority left him only when they retired and they left

reluctantly. A fund in support of medical education was established in his honour many years ago at the Royal Alexandra Hospital.

He gave up his own practice at the age of 65, perhaps aggravated by the paperwork and worrying about the overhead that took time away from his patients. But he promptly started again by seeing patients in various medicentres and then as a sought after replacement for doctors on vacation.

He continued to learn. Until the last few months of his life he went to meetings and presentations put on by pharmaceutical companies and medical lecturers on the latest drugs and medical breakthroughs. He was methodical in his research - he loved to read books on a variety of subjects.

His interests were not limited to medicine. If he wanted to know more about something he would look into it with the mind of a young student. He took the Real Estate training program. He collected both coins and stamps. He maintained a healthy skepticism; always exploring for the answers himself before agreeing with the decisions or policies of others. If someone else expressed an interest in making any kind of purchase Cecil would take it upon himself to research the product for the best quality and price. He was a walking encyclopedia of consumerism. He read at least three newspapers a day which probably added to his disdain for politicians. If he came across an article that interested him he would cut it out. And if he thought it would interest someone else he cut it out and sent it to them. He never stopped learning. He was generous both with his time and his resources for the people and causes he loved.

He was an individualist, yet no one ever said a bad word about him. He was not a *kvetch* - and perhaps his concern for others rather than himself is another reason his loss seems so sudden and unexpected.

Cecil's number one priority was his family. He again showed his ability to look ahead by choosing to be one of the first to build in a new subdivision on Ravine Drive in late 1951. Although it was still bush when Cecil and Lola chose their lot and designed their home he had the

foresight to know that this would be the ideal place to raise his family. The home still reflects the love and time that Cecil and Lola spent there. This spring even though the pain in his back made it very difficult for him to walk Cecil still insisted on going to the greenhouses to pick the flowers for this seasons garden. And even when he was confined to bed he was giving detailed instructions on how each particular flowers species should be watered. When you visit the family this week take time to notice how beautiful the grounds are. This is another gift from Cecil to all of us.

But again this is so typical of Cecil - making sure that every detail is looked after.

When they weren't at home the family enjoyed many holidays together. The Okanagan, California , Pigeon Lake and of course the many trips to Jasper to stay at the Lodge. For years this was an annual visit that brings back special memories for Mark, Carlee and Wendy. Swimming in the pool, hiking and trips to Maligne Lake were opportunities to share quiet times with their mother and father away from the pressures of a busier life in the city. The importance of taking this time for the family reflects Cecil's belief in how important family was.

Some of his idiosyncrasies may have embarrassed his children when they were younger, but are now remembered with fondness. His letters to his children at camp B'nai Brith stood out from the rest at mail call as they were addressed with a thick colored pen, names underlined so that there was no fear they would go to the wrong person. Mark, Carlee and Wendy were amazed that on every vacation their father would run into people that knew him, even customs officers at remote border crossings.

The success of his children who have all graduated from University also reflects his influence. If you look at their careers, Mark, a doctor, Carlee, a teacher, and Wendy, whose talent as a story-teller has delighted audiences in many parts of the world, we see a piece of Cecil in each one.

There was also time for Cecil and Lola to explore the world together. They traveled to the Orient, and Israel. They cruised through Eastern Canada, and later in life would spend 6 weeks of the winter in Victoria. While the children were busy planning a way to celebrate Cecil and

Lola's 50th wedding anniversary this past May, Cecil decided to make matters in to his own hands and booked a Mediterranean cruise for the two of them.

His grandchildren have also been blessed with the devotion of this talented man. He visited with Mark's children frequently. First in Cochrane, Ontario, where Mark first practiced and then in Montreal. In fact when his second grandchild and first grandson, Lev, was born just over 13 years ago, he traveled to Cochrane to perform the ritual circumcision making it on to the front page of the local newspaper which covered the event.

In Edmonton, his grandson Jonathan was the apple of his eye. Recently Cecil gave Jonathan the affectionate nickname of Buster, which he proudly wants everyone to know. Over the past month Jonathan visited with his Zaida Ceci as often as he good and he knows from talking to both Cecil and Carlee and Bill that his grandfather was getting ready for a trip to a new world - a trip that has now begun.

Cecil lived the last weeks of his life as he had his full life. He was strong, he was dignified, he was aware of his own illness yet still more concerned for everyone else. He still made sure that his wife, his children and grandchildren knew that they were loved.

I began by relating the story of the Parah Adumah - the red heifer whose ashes were used to purify those who had become ritually unclean. There is another lesson we learn from this story. When this practice took place in ancient temple times the assistant to the high priest who performed the ceremony, became temporarily impure and was unable to enter the holy temple, yet they were still obligated to help another individual. From this we learn that when someone needs help and guidance in making their life better we cannot pass this job on to others feeling that we have no time, or it is beneath us. This is the example that Cecil Berner set for us. He cared, he shared, he loved. May we strive to make our lives and the lives of those around us better as an honor to his memory.

Tehi Nishmato Tzroorah Beetzror haChaim
May his soul be bound up in the bond of life.