

Readers' Theater
Presented to the Congregation
On WBI Shabbat, March 7, 2008
Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of Sisterhood

Shabbat Shalom. I'm Deni Deutsch Marshall, president of Women of B'nai Israel, the Sisterhood here at Congregation B'nai Israel. I thought we invited all of you here to share Shabbat with us to honor the 115th year of our organization. I was wrong. In doing my research I discovered that this year marks the 150th year of our women's group. We began as the Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Society in March 1858 which in 1882 became the B'nai Israel Ladies Auxiliary.

In the late 1890's Mrs. Abram Simon, who was the first Ladies' Auxiliary president and wife of our former Rabbi went on to found the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, an organization that is still in existence to this day. She later wrote in a letter to a friend "While in Sacramento, you may remember, I found it necessary to call the Auxiliary, the Sisterhood. The reason was that wherever I went in Sacramento in those days all I heard were references to our "Ox -iliarly; and so I complained to Dr. Simon that we were not oxen and I hit upon the euphonious all-inclusive name of Sisterhood." And indeed after she founded the National Organization, the Sisterhood of B'nai Israel was the first California group to affiliate with the National Federation of Sisterhoods, known today as Women of Reform Judaism.

The women who have comprised our Sisterhood throughout the years have been Eshot Chayal or women of valor. As you came in you received the poem A Woman of Valor. Please take this home for your use. On this sheet, Lisa Katz writes that according to commentators, the poem is allegorical and has been interpreted as a reference to the Shechinah, Shabbat, Torah, wisdom and the soul. Using Jewish women as the vehicle through which to describe these spiritual manifestations is a tribute to her.

Tonight we remember five women of valor who were Sisterhood presidents or board members. We welcome five past presidents of WBI Sisterhood who bring to us remembrances of these women of valor.

An accomplished woman, who can find? Her value is far beyond pearls.

(Read by Linda Henderson)

Hello. My name is Sophie Price. Some of you may know of me. I was the oldest member of CBI when I died at the age of 96. Tonight I want to tell you about Bertha Elkus, the sixth president of our Sisterhood at Congregation B'nai Israel which was housed at 6th and J street at the time.

My mother remembered when Bertha came to Sacramento, in 1882, as the pretty 18 year old bride of our temple president, Albert Elkus, with her long black velvet gown and thick blond braids. She had little formal education and acquired her education through reading, public lectures, civic life and music, and became a brilliant concert pianist with the Scheel Orchestra. She brought this talent to B'nai Israel as the resident organ player for services, and to the community as President of the Saturday Club. With her leadership, the Saturday Club became the largest women's musical group west of Chicago. In 1898 she helped found the Sacramento chapter of the American Red Cross and served as its first president. During World War I, Bertha taught first aid to our boys going overseas and donated many hand knitted items for their use.

Bertha loved her Judaism and was involved in every aspect of temple life. She was also known for her ecumenical spirit. She was a good friend to the small orthodox synagogue in town and had friends at the YMCA and in the Catholic and Protestant churches.

More importantly, Bertha was renowned for her acts of loving kindness and charity both public and private. Among the 1000 plus sympathy cards received by her family when she died, were many signed with only a first name and included hand written notes such as, "you do not know, me but Mrs. Elkus kept us in food for a year" or "she helped me when there was nowhere else to turn".

Bertha Elkus, sixth president of WBI Sisterhood, was truly a woman of valor who served as a role model for those who came after her.

(Read by Deni Deutsch Marshall)

Give her the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

(Read by Barri Freeman)

Thank you Sophie. I'm Nettie Price, and Sophie was my beloved younger sister. Our parents came out west as pioneers in the 1849 Gold Rush and eventually settled in Sacramento, where all five of us children grew up. Sophie, the youngest of us all, was an active member of Congregation B'nai Israel, Hadassah and City of Hope, and was on the board of CBI Sisterhood in the 1930's. Before she died, at the age of 93, she was the oldest member of B'nai Israel and received a certificate of honor from B'nai Israel for her more than 60 years as an active member.

Miss Sophie, as she was known to generations of young Sacramentans, was a teacher with the Sacramento school district for over 30 years. In 1935 she founded the State Capitol Division of the California Teacher's Retired Teacher's Association and remained an active member throughout her lifetime. In 1964, the Retired Teacher's Association presented her with a citation of merit, the only one of its kind ever given by them, which noted "her significant and valued contribution to the enrichment of retirement living".

When Sophie retired in 1922, at the age of 50, she wrote Sacramento Story, a history of Sacramento. The book was finally published in 1955, when she was 83 years old. Although she had no immediate family when this woman of valor passed away in 1965, she was mourned by the Sacramento and Jewish community alike.

(Read by Deni Deutsch Marshall)

Strength and honor are her clothing, she smiles at the future.

(Ready by Melissa McElheney)

Good Shabbos. I'm Hanah Tochterman and I want to share a little with you about my sister-in-law and business partner, Ethel Applebaum, who was born in 1909 and died in 1989. Ethel and I were ahead of our time. We owned a dress shop on Sutterville Road back in the 1950's and boy was she a great business woman. And stylish too! Ethel was Sisterhood President in the early 50's when they were building the new synagogue on Riverside Blvd. and was also active in other Jewish organizations. She was involved with Hadassah and was a founding member of Theta Delta XI Sorority which is a philanthropic society that continues to support many worthy projects today, including the Congregation B'nai Israel Confirmation Class Trip to Israel. Secular organizations she was active include the Sacramento Red Cross, the Polio Association and the old Eaglet Theatre, known today as the Sacramento Theatre Company.

Ethel was not just a good business woman. She was a wonderful mother, grandmother and mother-in-law too, who always put her family first. In her later years she was known at B'nai Israel as a "mother to us all". Her daughter-in-law, Robin says, "She was the sweetest, most loving, caring and nurturing woman who always had a smile on her face and a good word to say." All that from a daughter-in-law? Kind of breaks that negative stereotype of Jewish Mother don't you think? Sounds more like a Woman of Valor to me.

(Read by Deni Deutsch Marshall)

She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the lesson of kindness is on her tongue.

(Read by Bernadette Behar)

When you ask older members of B'nai Israel about women in their generation who were active in the synagogue and the community, Blanche Goldstein's name almost always comes up. We asked her daughter, Laurie Wood to tell us about her mother, who was born in 1917 and passed away in 2003 at the age of 86. Blanche, said Laurie, was an activist who was always involved in bettering the plight of the less fortunate. She was very assertive and outspoken and served on many boards, at Temple and in the community, including CBI Sisterhood, Hadassah, and Big Brothers/ Big Sisters.

Blanche was very involved with the Mercy Guild, the auxiliary for Mercy Hospital, was on the board at Wellspring and established the program for donation of toiletries to Wellspring, which we at CBI continue to this day. Blanche was also active in promoting women in government, and served as the vice president of the Women's Division of Democrats. She worked for Governor Jerry Brown as assistant director of social services and developed the CARE program, which made it possible for welfare moms go to Sacramento City College. Like many of her contemporaries who are still with us today, Blanche was a Woman of Valor committed to that most precious Jewish value - Tikkun Olam.

(Read by Deni Deutsch Marshall)

Her children rise and praise her, her husband lauds her.

(Read by Andrea Rosen)

Linda Tochterman, past president of Sisterhood, couldn't be here today, so I am representing her to remember her mother, Sylvia Shemansky, who was born in 1913 and died in 1999 at the age of 86. Of her mother, Linda says, 'She was a wonderful role model who taught me how to grow old gracefully'. Sylvia was Sisterhood president when Linda was about 9 or 10 years old and was always at meetings, which Linda resented. Linda remembers swearing to herself "I'll never do that", but of course that is exactly what she did!

Sylvia used to love to tell how as Sisterhood President in the early 1950's she would attend the board meetings to give her report. The board, all men at the time, would make her wait in the kitchen until it was time to give her report. She would come out and give it and then have to leave again. It pleased her greatly that she lived long enough to see that custom change!

Sylvia served two terms as Sisterhood President and was one of the originators of the Committee of the Concerned. Being concerned about hunger in the community, Sylvia joined with Betty Reuben and Jane Orkand (also both Sisterhood Presidents) to encourage CBI Sisterhood to be the first Jewish organization to join the coalition of the Sacramento Food Bank. The three of them also were instrumental in starting Touch of Shabbat. Both of these programs continue to this day.

Sylvia did all this and worked too! She and her husband owned a luggage store and was she ever a great saleswoman her daughter says! And still she found energy for more volunteer work.

In the larger Sacramento community, Sylvia was an active member of the Soroptomists, an organization of businesswomen who raise money for projects to help women and children. She volunteered at the downtown Food Closet handing out clothing to the needy. Sylvia loved to volunteer at the Federal Courthouse when new citizens were sworn in by giving a welcome speech to them.

Linda says, "As she aged she became like a mother to everyone". What a role model! What a woman of valor!

Deni Deutsch Marshall: These Women of Valor that we have presented are our history. You, WBI members, are our Women of Valor today and your daughters are our Women of Valor tomorrow. I'd like to invite all the Women of B'nai Israel up to the Bima at this time for a special blessing by Chazzan under our tallit.