

Minnie Etra, 1894-1999

A Eulogy Spoken on October 6, 1999 by Norman Lamm

I never knew anyone who lived so long--and so well--as Aunt Minnie Etra.

She was an extraordinary woman--comely in appearance, becoming in attitude, forthcoming in charity, who lived the Maimonidean ideal of moderation. Yet she was a very strong person in her principles, unshakable in her ideals, unassailable in her values, one who considered her Jewish commitment inviolable.

Aunt Minnie was American-born, and almost lived through three centuries. Her parents, especially mother, were the greatest influence in her life. Her brothers, Charles and David Greenbaum, were respected members of the community. She and her sisters constituted a remarkable threesome; they shared many characteristics in common, yet each specialized in a different מידה or attribute. My late mother-in law, Tillie Mehler, ע"ה, personified the trait of faith (אמונה); Pauline, the surviving sister, embodied the quality of hope (בטחון); and Minnie was preeminently the woman of charity (צדקה). Together, they constituted Faith, Hope, and Charity.

Yet Aunt Minnie possessed much of the other two properties as well: her faith was deep and pure, and her hope suffused her with optimism. No wonder that when her niece Judy Goldman, ע"ה, asked her what she wanted for her 90th birthday, she replied, "What I really could use is a new set of luggage." Indeed, she *knew* she'd achieve great longevity: at her 100th birthday party she said she didn't think that 100 years was so extraordinary, and she pointed to the photo of her grandfather on the wall, and said, "That's impressive--he lived to 106!" And, indeed, she just about made it to 106.

Her husband, Bernard, a scion of the well known philanthropic Etra family, died in a car accident at the age of 29, leaving her a widow of 23 and the mother of their only child, Morty. Aunt Minnie was thus the last of the senior generation of this distinguished family. To Morty, who passed away a few years ago, she bequeathed a legacy of personal goodness, sympathy, and friendliness. To her daughter-in-law Marilyn, her granddaughters Susan and Karen, her sons-in-law Billy and Rob, her great-grandchildren and her nephews and nieces--to all three generations--she was the beloved matriarch who symbolized for them the millennial Jewish tradition in all its fullness, charm, and sacredness.

When, in the Truman administration, General MacArthur resigned, he made the famous remark that, "Old soldiers never die; they fade away." Well, Aunt Minnie was an old soldier in the hosts of the Almighty--an אשת חיל, literally, a woman soldier--and for years now she has been fading but, fortunately, she retained full control her faculties, her mental acuity, and her extraordinary courage and heroism.

Her days filled with prayer. The way most of us will remember her is bent over a *Siddur* with a magnifying glass--or holding the prayerbook very close to her eyes--deeply engaged in her devotions, which lasted for many hours of the day. She was a living example of the dictum of the Talmudic sage, Rabbi Yohanan, that לואי שיתפלל אדם כל היום כולו, "would that a person pray all day long." The time she was not involved in prayer, she was occupied in *Tzedaka*, in charity. The list of her beneficiaries is most impressive--Amit Women, the Israel Aid Society, the Kimpaturin Society, Rabbonim Aid Society, the Kollel of בעל הנס, ר' מאיר, the Bais Yaakov Schools, Yeshiva University and Yeshiva University Women's Organization, UJA, and on and on. In addition, she extended her help to needy individuals; no one was ever turned down.

Aunt Minnie died between the readings of two Torah portions: וזאת הברכה and בראשית, the last Sidra of the annual cycle and the first of the new series of the weekly Torah portions. These two significantly symbolize her life and her values. For one thing she gave ברכות--blessings-- freely.

She expressed her gratitude not in a tepid "thank you" or in other conventional platitudes, but in a string of passionately meant blessings of the most intriguing variety. Also, her whole life was a ברכה, a blessing to so many people.

The Sages of the Midrash taught us that תורה תחילתה גמילת חסדים וסופה גמילת חסדים, that both the very beginning and the very end of Torah bespeak the quality of kindness and benevolence. Thus, the Torah in Genesis tells us that God made clothing for the undraped first couple, Adam and Eve, thus teaching humanity its first lesson in modesty. The end of the Torah describes the death of Moses--and God Himself, as it were, burying him in the desert. This lesson was not lost on Aunt Minnie. She was a person of גמילת חסדים from beginning to end--and in the middle as well...

Aunt Minnie was a profound believer, a woman of impeccable יראת שמים, and she now is on her journey to a new בראשית טוב, a new beginning, an existence in עולם שכולו טוב, a spiritual world of sheer goodness.

This life-long goodness was beautifully reciprocated by the extraordinary kindness and devotion of two of her nieces. I cannot fail to mention the two people closest to her during her declining years--and they were many: my wife Mindy and, especially, Gloria--who lived up to her Hebrew name, ברכה, a blessing. I have seen cases of genuine and impressive filial devotion, but never have I experienced such total dedication, self-sacrifice, love, and deep human concern for an aunt. What a selfless manifestation of voluntary assumption of responsibility, of deep sensitivity to Aunt Minnie's every need, and for her personal dignity. These nieces have been better to her the daughters she never had. They gave her time and love and worry and respect. They have earned the admiration of all of us to whom Aunt Minnie was dear.

Brachah, you were her ministering angel, you were her וזאת הברכה; her longevity was not only a matter of her genes; it was equally attributable to you, your fierce devotion, your loving commitment. May the רבשי"ע grant you and Mindy the great blessing she had--that of אריכות ימים ושנים טובים, the length of days and years, in health and happiness and dignity.

And may all of us remember Aunt Minnie with the tenderness that comes with long knowledge of a special personality, with the love that comes not only from family relationship but from an awareness of her intrinsic worth, and with the respect due to a woman of great achievement which will long be remembered and recalled as a model for future generations.

תהא נשמתה צרורה בצרור החיים

May her soul be bound up in the bond of life eternal