

Sermon delivered by Rabbi James A. Gibson, Temple Sinai, Pittsburgh, PA

Yom Kippur III - 5768

“Two Ladies”

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Two ladies died last month. Two grand, famous New York ladies, one Jewish, one Protestant. Two ladies of such vast wealth that most of us can only wonder about such riches. You would think they might travel in similar circles, given the nature of high society and philanthropy in New York. But you really couldn't find two more different people if you tried.

One of them was born Lena Rosenthal just north of New York City in 1920. Her parents were poor Polish Jewish immigrants. She was raised in Brooklyn and through hard work and a series of marriages amassed a fortune worth \$4 billion dollars when she died. You may know her better as Leona Helmsley, dubbed “The Queen of Mean,” for her hard manner and harder business practices. Although she gave away millions of dollars to charity, her reputation remained as a harsh, difficult woman who thought she was above everyone and everything, including the law.

The capper was the provision of her will that left \$12 million dollars for the care of her dog, both in this world and in the olam ha-ba, assuming there is a doggie world to come. At the same time, she didn't leave a penny for two of her four grandchildren, insisting in the will that it was “for reasons which are known to them.” The other two grandchildren were left generous bequests, but with strict stipulations concerning visiting their father's grave. That aside, I can say without a doubt, she will be remembered for a very long time.

The other lady was born Roberta Brooke Russell in 1902, 105 years ago. She became known publicly by quite a different title: “The First Lady of Philanthropy” and “New York's Living Landmark.” She was born to a Marine Corps officer and a socialite mother. She traveled extensively when she was young.

But it was not until her third marriage that she entered the fabled family of John Jacob Astor. From the Gilded Age of the 1890's onward, this family had ruled New York society with a fist in a velvet glove.

Mrs. Astor controlled a far smaller fortune than Mrs. Helmsley, only about \$68 million to start. She got married at age 16, a dreadful mistake. And then, in her 40's, her second husband died, leaving her no estate. She went back to work as a fashion writer for Conde Nast, the job she'd had in her 20's.

She almost didn't marry her third husband. Thank goodness he was persistent. Their marriage was tender, loving and brief. After only 5 years or so Victor Astor was dying. He told Brooke that he was leaving all his millions to her. He directed her to give

it all away “for the alleviation of human suffering.” She didn’t know the first thing about philanthropy, but he said to her, “You’ll have fun, Pookie.”

And she did. She gave away a ton by herself. And the causes and institutions she couldn’t fully support herself, she’d make matching gifts and help raise the rest by herself. According to the New York Times, “She made it her duty to evaluate for herself every organization ...that sought help from the Victor Astor Foundation. In her chauffeur-driven Mercedes-Benz, she traveled all over New York to visit the tenements and churches and neighborhood programs she was considering for foundation grants. Many times a welcoming lunch awaited her on paper plates and plastic folding tables [on which hot dogs were served] for the occasion. She would exclaim over what she call the ‘delicious sauces’: deli mustard and pickle relish.”

She always dressed her part when visiting these organizations. The Times says, she dressed in: “...a finely tailored suit or a designer dress, a hat in any weather, a cashmere coat when it was cool, and in her last years, an elegant cane...She always wore a ring of precious stones, a bracelet, a brooch and earrings. [She said] ‘If I go up to Harlem or down to Sixth Street, and I’m not dressed up, or I’m not wearing my jewelry, then the people feel I’m talking down to them...People expect to see Mrs. Astor, not some dowdy old lady, and I don’t’ intent to disappoint them.’”

According to the Times, she awarded around 2,400 grants a year to charities large and small. And by the time the foundation closed in 1997, she had disbursed more than 200 million dollars. Her legacy is assured forever, through the NY Public Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and countless other causes that she not only gave to, but championed.

What was the difference between these two women? Both were as determined as bulldogs, both as smart as any man, both in the business of giving money away. According to reports, Leona Helmsley may have given away personally even more than Brooke Astor.

But she never got over the shame of her remark, “Paying taxes is for little people.” She never lived down her reputation for bullying underlings and employees as if they were her personal servants. Brooke Astor deeply believed in the innate worth of every human being and had a wonderful sense of humor. Leona Helmsley came off in public as bitter and disparaging.

As I said, both ladies will be remembered for a long time. But Brooke Astor will be remembered as a giant woman with an even larger heart. Leona Helmsley will probably be thought of as a small person with a large purse who loved her dog way too much and wanted to control others with her money.

Brooke Astor wanted people of limited means to grow. Leona Helmsley wanted the little people to remain small to be there for her every beck and call.

Although it is not given to us to be either of these women, they do set out paths for us to choose. Leona Helmsley famously remarked that she wanted big fluffy towels, didn't everyone? She wanted to be known for her towels. Brooke Astor refused to take herself that seriously. She loved to go out and to enjoy herself and stay up late and make new friends, especially as she watched her old friends die.

Today at Yizkor, we remember all the family and friends we have lost over the years. We remember bright smiles and warm touches. At Yizkor this day we call to mind our parents and grandparents, our brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, our children and our dearest friends. They have left us behind but truly have not left us bereft. Here at Yizkor their essence is right before us. At this moment they seem real enough to reach and touch.

We are their heirs, we have been granted the legacy of loved ones. They have enriched us beyond measure of dollar signs. Their wealth cannot be counted in quarterly reports. Their hugs, their smiles, their jokes, their frowns, their tears. They remain as fresh for us as the moments we embraced.

Today at Yizkor, we hear their echoes asking us a question. They say, we are gone and our estates merely memory. They ask, what will you choose to leave behind? What riches will you give away? In doing so, how will you be remembered?

Will you be remembered like Brooke Astor, filled with life and laughter, always seeking to help and make a difference? Or will you be remembered like Leona Helmsley, always seeking an edge, an advantage, a hold over someone, even from the world beyond?

The choice is ours. We can be remembered as Leona or we can be remembered as Brooke. Which is it to be?

And although Yizkor is not the time to speak of money per se, many of us frankly, should be preparing to give ours away. Once we have taken care of ourselves and our families, we should be looking to support the values that define us, that give us joy, for which we feel passion.

And I will say, if this wonderful place reflects your Jewish religious and ethical values, then Temple Sinai should be remembered in your estate. Every day we, in this beloved community, seek to engage in faith and fellowship, covenant and companionship, spirit and social justice. We do much with little here. And too few of our congregants have recognized this by making Temple Sinai beneficiaries of their estates after they die.

And if not this community, then you should direct your resources to those causes and places that do express your highest values.

I spoke recently with a financial advisor who told me he was stunned by the amount that some of his clients wanted to keep for themselves and themselves alone. And maybe a family member or two. But not more than that.

When he would ask why, he would get two responses: First, they didn't know how long they were going to live and how much they would need. His reassurances that they had enough, that they would never be in want, fell on deaf ears. Second, they would snort that they didn't owe anyone anything. You know, the bootstrap theory - they made their fortunes by themselves and would spend it any way they wanted. He could only shake his head and say how sad he thought they were. Toward the end of long and otherwise fruitful lives, their money seemed to own them more than the other way around.

But as important as money, Brooke Astor taught the value of giving time and respect and laughter, all of which she showered freely all around her and especially on her beloved city of New York. She added to life by her presence, she did not try to hoard it for herself. She didn't want to remarry because she feared that her partner would want to go to bed at 10, or worse, simply stay at home for the evening. Speaking about her suitors later in life, she would say, "I want to go at my own speed, and it's a lot faster than theirs."

Unless restricted by health, there are very few of us here who cannot be giving of time, respect and happiness right now. Not to do so is a choice, if we are otherwise healthy. And it is a choice for which, that, Brooke Astor and Leona Helmsley remind us, we will be remembered.

Yizkor time defeats death, if only for a moment. This service is filled with life, the lives of those we cherished so much, for whom we freely cry today. But at this moment we cannot avoid dwelling on our future end as well as our present loss. The time has come for us to choose our legacy - Leona or Brooke or somewhere in between.

[HOLD UP BLANK SHEET]

Do you see this blank page? It is your legacy. Fill it with your gifts, your wealth and spirit. Fill it so that we remember it always with love and respect. All our legacies have net worth, they are all worthy of passing down.

Rabbi Eli Schochet of Chicago tells a story from his childhood: He grew up in Chicago, where his father and his grandfather were both rabbis. On Shabbat afternoon when he was a young boy at his grandpa's home a big Cadillac pulled up. Three burly guards stepped out with a well known Jewish gangster. The man walked in and laid an envelope on the rabbi's table filled with cash. He said, "This is for my mother's yahrzeit." Then he left.

Eli got angry at his grandfather. He said, "How can you accept money from a gangster on Shabbat?" His grandfather answered softly, "Don't you understand what

happened? This man is a criminal who lives an ugly life. But for one brief moment he looked on a calendar and saw it was his mother's yahrzeit. He remembered his mother's dreams for him, that he grow up to be a Jew, that he grow up to be a mensch. For one brief moment, he wants her memory to live on. That was a sacred moment and I don't want to judge it." Rabbi Schochet says, "Even from beyond the grave, our loved ones can reach out and touch us, and change us."

Remembrance redeems us. It saves us. May it make us worthy this day. May memory help us aspire to be living landmarks, every one of us. Landmarks of life and love and laughter for ages of Yizkors to come.

Brooke Astor succeeded in her mission; she gave most all of her fortune away. Leona Helmsley kept hers and will have a very happy dog. Who is richer? Whose legacy will we choose at Yizkor time? Let us choose wisely and give generously, in love and for the ages to come. We choose laughter over towels, now, tomorrow and forever.