

RBG, Sheldon Adelson & Larry King

Category: Beshalach, Shemos

The common denominator of these 3 famous Jews.

Three Famous Jews

Three famous American Jews passed away in the past few months: Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg passed away Rosh Hashana eve, the famous Jewish philanthropist Sheldon Adelson passed away several weeks ago, and Larry King, the famous media host, passed away this week.

What is the common denominator between the three of them?

Interestingly, they all lived to the age of 87. However, if you take a closer look at their lives, you will find a lot more in common as well.

The Mezuzah on the Supreme Court

When RBG died, the Guardian published an article which claimed that at age seventeen, she “abandoned her religion.” It immediately raised an uproar; many Jews were furious about the claim, saying that she was, in fact, always a proud Jew. A large silver Mezuzah hung on the door to her chambers in the Supreme Court, and she was known to have fought to stop court proceedings during the High Holidays. The newspaper soon apologized and corrected their statement: Though the justice had moved away from observance, “she nevertheless remained deeply committed to her Jewish identity.”

Recently, it became clear that even that wasn't completely true.

She was born in Brooklyn to a traditional family. Her mother would light Shabbos candles, and before Passover, they would clean out the entire house and bring in the set of Pesach dishes. They belonged to the Conservative movement, and she studied in Hebrew School and attended Jewish summer camp. As she got older, she became a counselor at the Jewish camp, and the campers dubbed her,

“Rabbi,” because she would deliver the sermon every Shabbos.

However, her mother passed away when she was seventeen years old, and she slowly drifted away from observance, devoting her life to her career.

Many years passed. In 2003, Rabbi Nosson Gurary, the Chabad Shliach of Buffalo, met with Justice Antony Scalia in his office for some matter or another. Justice Scalia was not Jewish, but he showed great interest in Judaism, and he introduced the rabbi to the two Jewish justices: Stephen Brayer and Ruth Bader Ginsburg. He had a pleasant meeting with RBG; she welcomed him into her chambers and also made sure to point out the Mezuzah on her door.

He soon developed a warm relationship with her. Each holiday, he would send her a holiday gift; Matzah before Pesach, Shalach Manos for Purim and so on. She would always reply with handwritten notes on the Supreme Court letterhead, where she shared her warm sentiments for Jewish tradition.

One time, after receiving Matzah, she wrote back, ““World’s best matzahs arrived in good time for Passover. I will bring one box to the family seder. . . It is a time that revives memories of seders at my grandparents’ home and of the dishes my mother brought up every year. They were my favorites.”

One Chanukah, she wrote, “My mother would smile to think of me lighting candles and saying the brucha; something she made very special in our home. Hanukkah was a happy holiday for us, not the least because of the gelt my grandfather gave to the grandchildren, for which we lined up from oldest to youngest.”

After her husband’s death in 2010, she began speaking to Jewish audiences more frequently, in the United States and in Israel, and she often spoke about the importance of tradition in her own life.

Kosher in his Blood

Larry King, who passed away this week, called himself an agnostic. However, he had a warm relationship with Rabbi Cunin, the Chabad Rabbi of California. For several years, he chaired the Chabad Telethon, and he put on Tefillin there several times.

In fact, his connection to Chabad began even earlier. Larry, like RBG, was born to a Jewish family in Brooklyn. They were Orthodox; when he was nine years old, his father died and his mother was so poor she didn't have money to buy his glasses. He related that someone from Chabad bought him the glasses that he needed.

He deeply loved Jewish holidays. Passover, Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur were serious days for him. After visiting Israel, he spoke about the wonderful feeling when visiting Jerusalem.

Although he wasn't an observant Jew, he never mixed milk and meat. In his childhood home, they had kept kosher, and he was never able to bring himself to break that tradition.

Why Only One Child?

The third Jew of the week is Sheldon Adelson. Unfortunately, he wasn't born in Brooklyn; he was born in Boston, in a very Jewish neighborhood. In 1990, he met his wife Miriam, who is Israeli, and then he "rediscovered" his Jewish origins.

At the time of his engagement, he had a relationship with Chabad Rabbi Alter Bukiet. One day, Rabbi Bukiet called him up. He wanted to give Sheldon and Miriam a wedding present, but on one condition: that Sheldon agree to accept it before he finds out what it is.

At the end, he agreed, and Rabbi Bukiet said that he would be taking them to New York to receive a blessing from the Rebbe before their wedding. Two weeks before their wedding, in the summer of 1991, they flew to New York. During the flight, Sheldon commented that he didn't understand why he was flying all the way to New York for a meeting that could last just a few seconds.

In the end, they arrived at 770 for dollars, and the Rebbe blessed them warmly in honor of their wedding. His bride, Miriam, asked the Rebbe for an additional blessing - for a child.

"Why only one child?" the Rebbe commented. "A child should have a brother and sister too..."

At the time, Mrs. Adelson was forty-six. Several years later, when she was fifty-one, she gave birth to her first son, Adam, and two years later, she gave birth to

her second son, Matan. Rabbi Shea Harlig (Chabad Shliach of Las Vegas) related that they always thanked the Rebbe for the blessing.

In the years that followed, Sheldon became perhaps the greatest Jewish philanthropist. He built the Chabad day school in Las Vegas, he gave twenty-five million dollars to Yad Vashem, and in the past fifteen years, he gave one hundred fifty million dollars to support birthright, to bring youngsters to Israel. Anyone here that sent their children on birthright was a beneficiary of his philanthropy. And recently, when he passed away, he asked to be buried in the most traditional form, in a modest grave on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

A Deep Connection

The common denominator between these three people is that they tell the story of the Jewish people in the past generation. It doesn't matter who they are or what their level of observance is - deep in their heart is a profound connection with G-d, the Jewish people, and Jewish tradition.

In this week's Parsha, we read about the Splitting of the Sea and about the song the Israelites sang afterwards. Right afterwards, the Torah relates that the Jewish people traveled for three days in the desert and didn't find water. When they finally reached a body of water, it turned out to be bitter. They began to complain to Moshe, "What are we going to drink?"

Moshe cried out to G-d; God told him to take a piece of wood and throw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

Then, a month passed since their Exodus from Egypt and they ran out of the Matzah that they had brought along from Egypt. Again, they complained, "what will we eat?" G-d told Moshe that he would rain down bread from heaven. That issue was resolved as well.

Not long afterwards, the Israelites reached Refidim. again, there was no water to drink, and the people angrily accosted Moshe: "Give us water to drink!" They began to complain even more: "Why did you take us out of Egypt?" Moshe called out to G-d and said, "What should I do with this nation? Soon, they will stone me!" This was already the third crisis, and Moses was afraid that they had reached their boiling point. But again, G-d told Moses to "walk before the nation" with his

stick and to hit a rock. Indeed, water began to flow.

On the verse "Walk before the nation," Rashi comments, "Walk before the nation and see if they stone you." G-d told Moshe, "These are my children, my beloved children; they will never do such a thing. Deep in their hearts, they love you and they want to do My will."

These three Jews were a demonstration of what the Rebbe would always repeat: that within every Jew, there is a treasure - true faith in G-d. We just need to help that person uncover the treasure within himself. And when we help others strengthen their connection, we come out stronger and more connected to G-d ourselves.