

Uncle Isaac's Shabbat

David Matouk Betesh

FOR MANY YEARS, I HAD A SUMMER SHABBAT ROUTINE OF WAKING UP AT SUNRISE AND GOING WITH MY FATHER TO THE FIRST MINYAN AT CONGREGATION OHEL YAACOB (LAWRENCE AVENUE SYNAGOGUE). EACH WEEK, HE AND I WOULD WALK TOGETHER ON OCEAN AVENUE FOR ABOUT TWO MILES TO GET THERE.

The minyan was led by Hakham Barukh Ben Haim (1921-2005) and Rabbi Michael Haber. Mark Benun would start the minyan while everyone else was trickling in or having coffee. The large windows of the room overlooked Ocean Avenue and the ocean. The *hazzanut* (services), participation, and decorum of the congregation were always excellent; with many rotating cantors each week. On a lucky week, I'd be able to hear my favorites: Isaac Cabasso, Murray Dweck, or Shelomo Antebi.

Despite the great *hazzanut*, they always managed to keep the service length to two hours. Before Musaf, the sermon would consist of our president, Ike J. Kassin, entertaining us with the announcements. The only thing anyone ever remembered from the announcements was the intense laughter that he was able to generate. The atmosphere in that synagogue was always peaceful.

Uncle Isaac Betesh was also at that minyan each Shabbat. For him, being at synagogue was a given. Nothing in the world gave him more enjoyment than participating in a minyan; whether it be Park Avenue, Turnberry, or the daily minyan on the SY buses from Manhattan to Deal.

Throughout his life, he took his commitment to synagogue to exemplary levels. He was named after his grandfather, Isaac Saul Betesh (1896-1954), a Syrian merchant, who spent his time building synagogues for our community, including Congregation Agudat



Uncle Isaac Betesh, in his 30s

Ahim (Knis Betesh) in Brooklyn and Congregation Magen David in Bradley Beach. For me, to see someone as cool as Uncle Isaac at synagogue, really left the impression that shul is cool.

After the minyan, we would go to breakfast at Grandma Benun's house with Jack M. Benun and the boys. Grandma Benun's sambusak were legendary, and that kept me coming back each week. Mrs. Sarah Benun (1911-2003) welcomed everyone at the breakfast, as if they were her own grandchildren. Uncle Isaac always included me in any social event, whether I was invited or not. I was seen so often around town with my uncle, that many assumed that I was his son.

After breakfast, we would walk one block to the corner of Wyckoff Street to Aunt Jean's house, to pick up Uncle Isaac's bike. Of course, for him, picking up his bike was the perfect excuse to wake Aunt Jean and have coffee with her. Aunt Jean and Uncle Isaac were like best friends, even though she was his aunt and 30 years his senior). They discussed many things, especially how everyone in the family was doing. They would also discuss the latest community real estate transactions—who bought which house and for how much. She would ask me how I was doing in school and remind me that she had single granddaughters. We always had a

Continued on page 128

Uncle Isaac...

Continued from page 126



Siblings Tuni Cohen, Isaac D. Betesh and Mitchell D. Betesh.



Aunty Jean

great time on that porch overlooking the ocean.

Once, as we were leaving Aunty Jean's house, before heading to a tennis game (he on his bike, while I was trying to catch up on foot), Uncle Isaac said to me, "David, stop a minute. I want all of this to sink into you. Look around! You don't know how lucky you are. Each week you are here in beautiful New Jersey, you come to the best shul, pray with Hakham Barukh, eat breakfast at Grandma Benun's, and spend time with Aunty Jean, who is the sharpest woman that I know—you're really lucky to have all of this. You should appreciate it while you still can."

Continuing my routine, I would walk back to the synagogue, where my dad was finishing up his class with Rabbi Haber, have more breakfast, then as we were leaving, we'd enter the main sanctuary to see

Uncle Jack Gemal (1909-2003), Aunty Jean's husband, to get some candy for the road. While glancing in the main minyan, I would always spot a few friends. Then we would exit the synagogue and continue with our day.

My dad and I had the opportunity to visit both Uncle Isaac and Aunty Jean on December 25, 2013, at their respective homes in New Jersey. Weeks later, they both passed away—only 13 days apart. Based on everything that I knew about them, it is fair to say that Shabbat was their favorite day of the week. Now, the two of them have merited to live in a world where it is Shabbat every day. □

Dr. David Matouk Betesh DMD is the nephew of Isaac David Betesh (April 24, 1949 - January 30, 2014) and the great nephew of Jean Cain Gemal (July 21, 1921 - February 11, 2014).