

Eulogy for Morris Pesin

delivered by Rabbi Kenneth Brickman

July, 12, 1992

We have assembled here today to give words to our sorrow, mindful that all we say truly cannot express the pain in our hearts, pain which the death of Morris Pesin has brought into our lives. Yet, we gather together for a brief time as a congregation of mourners, joining a bereaved family, offering them our words of comfort, and trying with them to catch just a glimpse into the life of a man who is remembered today as a beloved husband, father, grandfather, brother, dear family member and friend to many in our community.

Temple Beth-El was truly privileged to have had Morris Pesin as a member of our congregation. For many years, Morris has served as a member of the Temple's Board of Trustees and has served as chairperson of our Social Action and Publicity Committees. Morris was also a member of the Temple Brotherhood and served on the Brotherhood's Board. Personally and on behalf of the Temple Board of Trustees, the Brotherhood Board and the members of the congregation, I express heartfelt condolences to the Pesin Family.

Our hearts go out to you, Ethel; to Sam, Judy and Louis; to Daniel and Dara; to Edith and Allan; to Morris' sister-in-law, Libby; and to all the other members of the family. We can only hope that by sharing your grief, we may bring you some small measure of comfort and consolation in your time of sorrow.

Consolation comes as well from within Morris' Family. Today, this family, which on so many occasion has had the pleasure of sharing joyous occasions, is drawn together by their grief. In the hope that he might bring comfort to his family, Morris' brother-in-law, Allan Horowitz, will now share some of his personal memories of Morris with us. We will now hear a word of tribute to Morris from his niece, Ada Feyerick.

Today, we are truly a community in mourning, because Morris Pesin was such an integral part of the life of our city. I cannot imagine that there are many people in Jersey City, or in Hudson County, for that matter, who did not know Morris. However, before I enumerate the many contributions which Morris made to the life of our community, I want to address another aspect of Morris' life, one which was as important, if not more important than his communal activities, that is his devotion to his beloved family.

Morris was first and foremost a beloved husband to his dear wife, Ethel, with whom he shared 54 years in marriage.

Though I understand that someone once suggested that Ethel was the second woman in Morris' life, after Miss Liberty, I know that in fact Ethel was his true love. Throughout their marriage they were partners, sharing in the raising of their family, the operation of their clothing business and in so many other significant activities.

Morris was a devoted father to his son, Sam, and his daughter, Judy and her husband Louis. He took great pride in his children's achievements and reveled in their accomplishments. Both of Morris' grandchildren, Daniel and Dara, held a special place in his life, and in recent years, Dara was the light of Morris' life and was a tremendous source of pleasure for him, and he took great pride in watching her growth and development.

Morris' was also a loving brother and brother-in-law and was devoted to the members of his extended family, as well. During the past couple of years, he had reorganized the Sacks Family Circle, a cousins' club which was founded in the 1950's. He worked diligently contacting as many members of the family as he could, culminating his efforts in the family reunion which he organized at Liberty State Park.

Morris' family was truly one of the primary concerns in his life. The legacy he leaves to the members of his family was exemplified in the love and concern which he displayed toward them, and the lessons he tried to teach them through the example of his own life; to be fair, to be kind, to be helpful, to be informed and to actively work to make the world a better place.

These messages, however, were not only meant for Morris' family, they were meant for all of us who knew Morris. Every cause which Morris championed in our community demonstrated his sense of justice. Morris Pesin was a fighter all his life, a tireless worker in the ongoing battle to promote fairness, tolerance and understanding among all people. His overriding concern was social justice and his purpose in life was to serve humanity and God. Morris' life was a paradigm of the prophetic call, "Tzedek, Tzedek tirdof, Justice, Justice, shall you pursue."

Though Morris was born and raised here in Jersey City and lived his whole life in the city, he always had a love of nature, which was probably one of the factors which led to his lifelong devotion to the creation and preservation of Liberty State Park, land which he once referred to as "hallowed ground." Beginning with his now legendary canoe

trips from Jersey City to the Statue of Liberty in 1958 and 1961, Morris was unyielding in his efforts to create a park for the people along the waterfront of Jersey City.

A moving tribute was paid to Morris just last Sunday, at the first of this year's series of summer concerts to be held at the Park. On that occasion, Morris was praised as the "sole source of inspiration in developing what we now know as Liberty State Park." The tribute went on to say that, "Through his inexhaustible efforts, he brought this once vast wasteland through an unbelievable rehabilitation. Starting with his widely publicized canoe ride from the Jersey City shores to the Statue of Liberty, continuing through the years of meetings, legislative red tape and political treachery, this magnificent State Park is testament of Mr. Pesin's love of Jersey City and its 228,000 residents."

Morris richly deserves the title, "Father of Liberty State Park" and the naming of the drive through the park which leads to the Statue of Liberty after Morris will insure that future generations will never forget the significant role which Morris played in the history of our city, our state and our nation "by improving the quality of life for the residents of Jersey City and for every American who visits

the Statue of Liberty."

However, while the park will remain as a physical legacy of Morris devotion to our city, his spiritual legacy will be manifest through the many other important projects and causes in which he was involved in our community.

Morris was an early advocate for civil liberties. He organized the the Hudson County Committee for Fair Employment practices in the 1940's. He was also associated with the NAACP and assisted his brother Meyer, of blessed memory, in breaking the color line at Palisades Amusement Park in 1940. In recent years, the annual Jersey City Cultural Arts Festival, which Morris organized in his role as the director of the Cultural Arts Commission, has been a showcase for artistic and culinary talents and traditions brought to our city from around the world.

In an editorial published in the "Jersey Journal" last month, Morris was characterized as caring deeply for Jersey City. The article concluded by saying, "Convinced that members of the diverse groups in the city need to work together to make the city a better place, Pesin for decades has been seeking to break down barriers that keep them from doing so."

We, at Temple Beth-El, are deeply indebted to Morris for his efforts to build bridges of understanding between our Jewish community and other ethnic and religious groups in our city. Under the leadership of Morris and his dear friend, Milton Gottlieb, of blessed memory, our Temple has for many years sponsored an annual service of tribute to the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which has brought the general community into this sanctuary to remember Dr. King's life and to recommit ourselves to working toward the goals for which he labored.

Several years ago, Morris and Milton inspired the creation of a program sponsored by the Jersey City Public School System which brings high school students together to meet panels of clergy representing the variety of religious faiths which are practiced in our community. This program was a fulfillment of Morris' dream of creating better understanding among people in our city through communication and education. Morris also headed the Temple's drive to collect funds for the victims of the Armenian and Mexican earthquakes, as well as for famine victims in Ethiopia.

I, too, owe a personal debt of gratitude to Morris, with whom I had the privilege of working during the past 3 years. Morris' commitment to the highest ideals of our Jewish

faith always inspired me. I will miss him, but I will think of him always as I carry on his work here at the Temple.

Morris served on the City Council from 1969 through 1977, after which he volunteered his time as the Director of the City Spirit Program. He was the chairman of the Jersey City Bicentennial Commission, the Historic District Commission and the Jersey City Planning Board. He also served on a number of other significant commissions, including the Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Centennial Commission, and the Ellis Island Restoration Commission.

Morris was the self-described watchdog for our city. He was a community activist who spearheaded the successful drives to save the Hudson County Court House and to preserve the trees along Kennedy Boulevard.

Morris was the recipient of many awards in recognition of his achievements including the President's Volunteer Action Medal which he received from President Reagan in 1985, an honorary doctorate of humane letters which he received from Jersey City State College in 1983 and the Humanitarian Award from the Hudson County Chapter of the National Conference of Christians and Jews which he received in 1990. Morris also received a number of awards and citations last year at the

80th birthday party which was held for him at Liberty State Park. Though Morris received these along with many other awards, receiving such recognition was never his goal. Morris was a model of humility, an unpretentious and selfless individual whose every deed was preformed for the sake of others and never for the "kavod," the honor which his actions might bring to himself.

In an interview in the "Jewish Standard," Morris was once quoted as crediting his early upbringing in a devout Jewish home as having lead to his involvement in causes on behalf of the Jewish and general communities. He said, "This is the least that a Jew in America can do for a country which has done so much for all the Jews that have enjoyed freedom."

Morris remained devoted to Judaism and to the Jewish community throughout his life, not only through his involvement in the Temple, but also by his active participation in the Jewish Family and Counseling Service of Jersey City, Bayonne and Hoboken, on whose board he served.

Morris Pesin was a man of great intelligence and insight, a man with a great sense of humor, a man of incomparable integrity and immeasurable compassion. He was interested in

everything which was going on in our world and was an avid student of current events. He read the New York Times from cover to cover and was a fan of National Public Radio and PBS. He believed in the American system and the democratic values for which our country stands. He fought for good government and was especially concerned that future generations should be aware of what can happen when power falls into the hands of corrupt individuals. He was a student of the Holocaust and was very concerned that future generations study that period of history in order to learn the lessons which it has to teach us.

To say that Morris' interests were many and varied is an understatement, but to say that he gave fully and unstintingly of his time and energy to each and every one of them is no exaggeration. It may take some time for us to fully appreciate Morris' contributions to our community, but of one thing we can be sure. Morris' physical presence among us will be sorely missed. His spirit, however, will live on in our community for many years to come. I believe that I can say with some certainty that Morris' fondest dream, to leave this world a better place, has been realized. Now the responsibility is ours, to carry on in his work, to continue to labor for the betterment of our community, to build bridges of understanding among people

and to always fight for what is right, or as Morris was once quoted as having said, "Gee whiz, do the right thing."

I conclude with the words of an anonymous author in our Jewish tradition who described the successful man, as one "who has lived well, laughed often, and loved much; who has gained the respect of intelligent men and the love of little children; who has filled his niche and accomplished his task; who has left the world a better place than he found it...who has never lacked an appreciation of earth's beauty or failed to express it; who always looked for the best in others and gave the best he had; whose life was an inspiration; and whose memory is now a blessing."

Such a man was Morris Pesin, a truly successful man in every sense of the word, a man who brought blessing to all who knew him in life, a man whom we pray will now be blessed by God with the gift of eternal peace awaiting all of the righteous among us in the world to come.

AMEN