

קייִלא בת פייבעל הלי ויהודית - Carla Furstenberg Cohen  
נפטרה ג' חשוון תשע"א - died 10/11/2010

Carla Furstenberg Cohen was born on April 11, 1936, in Baltimore. She was the eldest of six children - her siblings, Mark, Frank, Michael, Ellie and Anne are all here today, as is her mother Edith. The family was an assimilated Jewish family, fiercely secular, committed to liberal causes, a hotbed of Civil rights activism.

Carla was a reader from her youth; she carried her love of education into the family she raised. And she was always opinionated - one survival strategy in a large, opinionated, boisterous family.

She met her husband to be, David Cohen, at a meeting of the Americans for Democratic Action. After graduating from Antioch College in 1958, she and David married. They were to be married for 52 years. Carla received a master's from the University of Pennsylvania in urban planning. In Philadelphia, she worked for a citizens' housing organization. In 1963, the family moved to this area, where Carla worked a number of different jobs. She worked for the Washington Planning and Housing Association, and also for the congressional subcommittee that had oversight of DC. Later, she worked for HUD. When her tenure there ended in 1981, she spent a number of years out of work, during which she gathered the energy and the money and the confidence to follow her dreams and start her own bookstore.

David and Carla joined this congregation in 1969. Carla was quite active at Tifereth Israel in the early days of their membership, even serving on the board. Among the privileges of a board member was the honor of carrying a Torah on Kol Nidre night. It was in this role that she became the first woman to carry a Torah at Tifereth Israel.

In truth, though, she was more drawn to the communal and political aspects of the congregation than the ritual. Which is not to say she didn't like ritual. The seders she put on at her house were legendary, with their mix of fidelity to tradition, and attention to the modern cause of freedom. Her son-in-law Robert called these seders magical. And she was known - like many Jews - to feel completely engrossed in shul on Yom Kippur, especially the final service of Ne'ilah. Though she grew up with no Jewish ritual background - she never learned to read Hebrew - she went to shul enough that she could sing along.

These last 25 years, her focus shifted to her bookstore. Not that she *abandoned* religion. In the early years, Politics and Prose was closed during the high holidays. (More recently, it remained open, the profit on those days given to tzedakah.) She made sure that the store had a sizable Judaica selection, and for Pesach, she put together herself a buying guide for haggadas.

But it was in the store, rather than at shul, that she focused her efforts to build community. I could go on about what I love about the store - as I'm sure many here today could. There were so many things she and her business partner Barbara Meade did to create community in an increasingly atomized world. Politics and Prose was an oasis of intellectualism, of inquiry, of learning for its own sake, and - no need to be ashamed of it - learning for the sake of liberal causes.

Like most of you here today, I went out of my way to buy my books there. Most of us here have spent time browsing in Politics and Prose - probably too much time. It was a comfortable place to be. Who knows what will come, long term, of her attempt to create community there. Short term, her life brought all of us together at this moment, to mourn her loss, to share memories, and voice thankfulness for the blessings of her work there.

This week in shul, we will read Parashat Lech L'cha, the beginning of the story of our father Abraham. God tells Abraham: leave your native land, leave your ancestral house, leave your father behind in Haran, and go to a new land. All this Abraham does quite thoroughly. In fact, according to the midrash, Abraham rejected everything his father Terach stood for. Many of you are no doubt familiar with the midrash about Abraham physically destroying Terach's business a workshop for making idols.

Well, speaking as a parent, I find Abraham's story at least as frightening as it is inspiring. Raising an iconoclast is no fun, even if the iconoclast is right, even if the child eventually becomes famous. What parent doesn't worry that their child will reject everything the parent treasures, that their offspring will forget every tradition the parents have tried to pass down? Especially in today's world, in which rejecting the dominant paradigm is itself the dominant paradigm, in which everyone thinks he's Abraham - being a parent can be painful.

To help soften the Abraham story, there is another midrash that tries to make this story a little more palatable. In this midrash (Breishit Rabba 39:7), Abraham says to God - you're telling me to go to this promised land, and leave my father behind? Aren't we supposed to be honoring our parents? God responds to Abraham: I give you, Abraham, permission to be exempted from **כִּבּוּד אָב וְאִם** - *you* do not have to honor your parents, however, God continues no-one else will ever be so exempted. That's the point of the phrase **לך לך** - this command of **לך**, "go", is special, it's just **לך** - for you only. In other words, there is only one Abraham - no else is entitled to destroy the tradition that came before. Else how would any tradition continue, if each generation acted like Abraham?

So where does this leave us? How do we live our lives today, in a world in which individualism is a good thing. To what extent should we march bravely, like our father Abraham, to the beat of the drummer only we can hear? And to what extent should we be faithful to the tradition that has brought us this far?

Carla Cohen worked out her own, unique compromise, as must we all. Carla clung both to the new and the old. On the one hand she was an iconoclast. Though she grew up in a strictly secular environment, she developed, partly because of David's influence, an appreciation for, and even some observance of Jewish tradition. The last Shabbat on which she was still conscious, just a week and a half ago, her family brought the challah and wine to her bedside. And she sang along with the kiddush. For her, a religious sensibility was a break from her past. Like Abraham, her own sense of religion was different than her immediate forbears.

On the other hand, she also clung to the past, with Politics and Prose. Some forward thinkers might say that a bookstore of bricks and mortar is a dinosaur. Maybe most people today would say that. But there are others, and Carla was a leader of this small band, who wonder if it's such a good thing when the element of community is taken out of commerce. There are many of us here today who wonder if the conversion from retail to etail is all good. Should the old slow ways, the days of face to face interactions between merchant and consumer, be swept away in the name of progress? Not if Carla Cohen could help it - at least not in the book business. There should always be a place for the moicher s'forim, the community bookseller - filled with advice, and not just about books - advice often helpful, advice whether you asked for it or not, advice from someone you know. Isn't that partly what community is about?

Carla Cohen worked out her own, unique compromise, balancing tradition and change. She listened perhaps *most* attentively to that drummer only she could hear, but in no sense did she ignore the call of tradition. In one sense this was her choice, yet in another sense her own choices were deeply influenced by her husband, the needs of her family, the needs of her

business which was itself a response to the needs of the larger Washington community.

She made our lives richer both with her outsized personality, and the store she cherished.  
May her memory serve us as a blessing.

My condolences to her husband, David,  
Her mother, Edith,  
Her daughter Eve, and her husband Richard,  
Her son Aaron, his wife Nina, and their children Ry and Georgia, and  
Her siblings: Mark, Frank, Michael, Ellie, and Anne.

- 1) And now, her brother, Mark Furstenberg, will speak.
- 2) And now, her oldest friend, Betsy Levin, will speak.
- 3) And now, Rabbi Gerry Serotta, who worked with her on social justice issues, will speak.
- 4) And finally, her son Aaron will speak.

Shiva at the Cohen residence (1322 Holly St., NW, about 5 blocks from TI)

Evenings: Wednesday through Monday nights (except for Friday night) at 7:30PM

Mornings: Thursday, Friday, Monday and Tuesday at 7:15 AM

Sunday morning at 9AM

Please get in cars quickly.