In Memoriam: Rachel El-Hassid

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Words of remembrance by Rabbi Marc D. Angel, December 17, 2014

“Thus said the Lord: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children because they are not. Thus said the Lord: refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for your work shall be rewarded, said the Lord; and they shall come back from the land of the enemy. And there is hope for your future, said the Lord; and your children shall return to their own border” (Jeremiah 31:15-17).

The prophet Jeremiah envisions our mother Rachel weeping for the exile of her children, the Jewish people who have been forced from the land of Israel. Rachel is eternally loyal to her people and to her land; she pleads with God for mercy. Jeremiah reports that God hears the cries of Rachel; her tears are not in vain. The Jews will return to their land. Redemption will come.

This week, our people has suffered the passing of a modern-day Rachel, Rachel El-Hassid. She was born 98 years ago in Jerusalem where she was raised; she spent much of her life in New York; with the passing of her husband Isaac and then her daughter, Ruth, she returned to Jerusalem where she lived her last years; and in Jerusalem she died.

Rachel El-Hassid was an old-time Sephardic grande dame, a gracious, strong-willed, elegant woman. She had a natural nobility that inspired respect and admiration. She spoke softly, sweetly, but with great power and eloquence. Over our many years of close friendship, Gilda and I thought of Rachel as an elder family member, a matriarch whose concern for her own immediate family expanded to include us and others in her circle. We saw her frequently when she lived in New York; we visited her each time we were in Jerusalem.

Rachel often reminisced about growing up in the Sephardic yishuv in the old city of Jerusalem. She remembered the close friendships that linked Jews and Arabs; she remembered the dignity and fine manners that characterized her family life. Jerusalem of those days was desolate. As a little girl, she was among those children who planted trees throughout the city and its surroundings—trees that are now full grown and beautiful. In her old age, she took infinite pride in the growth and beauty of Jerusalem; she felt she had been one of the pioneers of the blossoming of Israel as a modern Jewish State.

In many ways, Rachel El-Hassid lived a happy and privileged life. She and her husband travelled widely. They lived well. They were beloved by family and friends. Rachel was a superb hostess; her Sephardic delicacies were prepared to perfection. She had an innate sense of royalty, and she treated her guests as though they, too, were royalty.
During the many years she lived in New York, she was an activist in her synagogue and in Sephardic organizations. She was particularly concerned for the State of Israel and its people, and she worked on behalf of Israel with love and determination.

Rachel’s life had its share of grief—the passing of her husband Isaac, and the untimely death of her only child, Ruth Blumberg. Although the sadness of these losses never left her, she continued to lead her life as courageously and optimistically as possible.

In her later years, she worked on writing her autobiography, describing life in old Jerusalem, reminiscing about the old Sephardic customs and traditions, depicting her travels and her life in New York. She literally glowed with pride as she read pages of her manuscript to us. She was blessed with a lucid mind and a phenomenal memory right to the end of her life.

Rachel El-Hassid was a classic. She was a one-of-a-kind person whose life spanned nearly a century of active involvement in Israeli and Jewish communities. She was born in Jerusalem long before Israel was declared a Jewish State in 1948. She prayed for and worked for the flourishing of Israel; she rejoiced in its glories and mourned in its sufferings.

With the passing of Rachel El-Hassid, her family and friends have lost a beloved matriarch. The Jewish people has lost a remarkable woman. In a profound sense, her death marks the end of an era, the end of the old Sephardic yishuv in Jerusalem.

Rachel, Rachel: “Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears; for your work will be rewarded.”

Peace upon your soul with Isaac, Ruth and all your loved ones in the Olam ha-Emet.

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