Remembering Mom: Thoughts for Mother's Day

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Remembering Mom: Thoughts for Mother's Day

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

(Below is an essay I wrote, included in my book The Wisdom of Solomon and Us, Jewish Lights, 2016, pp. 135-138.)

My mother, Rachel Romey Angel, was born in 1914 in Seattle, Washington, the second of seven children born to Marco and Sultana Romey—both immigrants from Turkey. Although my grandparents were born and raised in Turkey, their first language was Judeo-Spanish, the language of the Sephardic Jews scattered throughout the former Ottoman Empire. My mother did not learn to speak English until she attended kindergarten in public school.

The Sephardic immigrants of Seattle came to America with little money and little formal education, but with a tremendous desire to make a new and better life for themselves and their families. The first generation immigrants worked at various trades; their children went on to own stores and other businesses; their grandchildren were nearly all university educated professionals and business people.

My mother was “only a girl.” In those days and in that society, it was assumed that girls would marry at an early age and have families of their own. Girls did not need much education, only basic domestic skills such as cooking and sewing. In the milieu of my mother’s childhood, it was highly unusual for a woman to attend university or to hold a serious job outside the home.

My mother was a brilliant student, but when she turned 16—the legal age that one was required to attend school—my grandfather told her she had to quit school and get a job to help support the family. Her older sister had done that and was working in a candy factory, and my grandfather wanted my mother to do likewise. My mother told her teachers at Garfield High School that she was going to be leaving school to go to work. One of the teachers was so distressed by this news that she spoke with my grandfather, urging him to let my mother graduate from high school. She told him that his daughter was a wonderful student with an excellent mind; if given the opportunity, she could attend university and do great things with her life. My grandfather replied: “she’s only a girl; she doesn’t need more education; she has to go to work and earn money.”

Thus ended my mother’s academic career. She never graduated from high school. She worked in the candy factory for a few years, got married at age 21, and went on to have four children, and eventually twelve grandchildren. She was a voracious reader, a deep thinker, and a keen observer of human nature. Neither her husband nor their close group of friends had a college graduate among them, so my mother was sort of a closet intellectual. She functioned happily and successfully in her world, but she kept her intellectual, philosophical side pretty much to herself. If she had been born two generations later, she would have been a university graduate, probably a Ph.D., and she would have had opportunities in academia, public life or business that were totally out of reach for her in her time and place.

Was my mother a success? Was she happy? Did she fulfill her mission in life? The answer to these questions depends on how we evaluate success, happiness and fulfillment in life. If we deem someone successful, happy and fulfilled if she earned a good income, lived a prosperous life, earned an academic degree, and held responsible positions in professional life—then my mother did not meet these requirements.

But my mother was a remarkable woman. She was a loyal daughter, devoted wife, loving mother and grandmother, gracious hostess, excellent friend. She was a profound thinker, an avid reader, a talented knitter. She enjoyed the simple pleasures of life. She was good and kind, thoughtful, and highly principled. If measured by standards of quality rather than quantity, my mother was eminently successful, happy and fulfilled in life.

When King Solomon praises the “woman of valor,” he refers to the virtues of being a good wife and mother, a hard-worker on behalf of her family, a generous soul who is charitable and kind. The Hebrew word for valor, hayyil, has the

connotation of strength and courage. The “ideal” woman is not identified as being passive and obedient, but rather as having a strong character focused on her life’s values and goals.

When reading the last passages of Mishlei today, one is struck by how much society has changed in recent generations. Women today have far more opportunities in education, professions, public life and business than had been true for women in many societies of the past. But this success has also come with trade-offs. In pursuing careers, women may defer or forego the joys of a solid marriage, child-rearing, and being full-time mothers. Are the modern “liberated” women more successful, happier, and more fulfilled than the women of my mother’s pattern of life? In some ways, yes; in other ways, probably not.

I remember reading somewhere that in our modern society a woman is considered creative if she produces a piece of sculpture or operates her own business. But if a woman is “merely” a mother who creates children, shapes their lives, and sees to it that they can lead happy and good lives, she is labeled somewhat pejoratively as “only being a housewife.” A full-time wife and mother is deemed to be on a lower level than women who devote their energies to professional or business life.

If my mother had been given more opportunities to develop her intellect and talents, she would have had a significant impact on many people beyond her immediate circle of family and friends. She would have been gratified to learn more and teach more, and to play a greater role in the larger society. She would have been very happy to have many of the opportunities which were available to her own daughter, daughters-in-law and granddaughters.

But having said that, her own life evaluated in its own context was a remarkably happy, meaningful and successful adventure. She was grateful for what she had and what she was able to achieve. She was beautiful and graceful; she feared the Lord; she loved and was loved; she raised and inspired her children; she left an indelible impact on her grandchildren. “She shall be praised.”