

Our synagogue sent out a post card to the membership informing them of Manny's death. Most people received it yesterday. After one Moriah member read the card, she called the shul in tears. I got on the phone with her and told her that, quite frankly, I was surprised she was so upset. Manny was a wonderful person, but he had joined the shul less than a year ago, you hardly knew him. Hardly knew him, she answered. I've known Manny Desnet for thirty-seven years. He was my advisor in BBYO back when I was in High School. He was a very important person in my life, she went on. In those days the youth workers at the Bnai Brith were highly-trained professionals. Manny taught me how to organize, how to administer. He taught me about leadership. Many of my best friends even today are the people I met in BBYO and the environment that fostered such friendships was, to a great extent, created by Manny Desnet. At this morning's minyan, it happened again. A man who, as far as I knew, had never met Manny, told me he had Manny's picture at home in an old AZA yearbook. He talked about Manny as if Manny had been a big influence in his life, because, of course, that's exactly what Manny was. In the words of the woman who called, Manny was a decent human being. She said, "I cannot imagine anyone who ever knew Manny saying a single negative word about him." In the brief time Manny belonged to and davened in Moriah Congregation, many people who did not already know him, came to know him and to respect and admire him. In his quiet way, without the slightest hint of pushiness, he made a place for himself and for Lil in this synagogue. This

congregation is going to miss him terribly.

Manny Desnet was the youngest of eleven children and the only one born in a hospital, rather than at home. His parents were European, although they met and married here. His father **חיים**, or Hyman as he was called in this country, was a blacksmith. Much of the metalwork in the gates and fences at the great Jewish cemetery of Waldheim was done by Hyman. Manny grew up in Humboldt Park and davenned at **עמרת ציון** Congregation on Spaulding Avenue. He studied at the Lowell Elementary School and graduated from Touly High. Manny went to **חדר** on his own and was proud of the Jewish education that he received. He put it to good use all his life.

Manny's mother died when he was only four or five. After his mother's death, Manny accompanied his father to shul twice a day to say **קדיש** for her. For the rest of his life, Manny was very sensitive to the need to say Kaddish for a loved one and he often took it on himself to say **קדיש** when he knew that, without him, it would go unsaid. His father passed away about seven years after his mother, so, before he was even **בר מצוה**, Manny lost both his parents. As Manny told a grandchild who asked, "Who took care of you?", he was raised by his Bubbe, who lived with the family, and by his brothers and sisters.

The whole family lived together. Bubbe and the brothers and sisters -- some of whom were more than twenty years older

than Manny -- all helped take care of him. Edith remembers occasions when she would want to go out and Manny was a sometimes unwelcome tag-along. There were times when she would leave the house, get a few blocks away and then turn around to see her baby brother following after her. But this huge family coped with small quarters and overcrowding. They managed, and the love they all had for their youngest brother shines through their every memory.

Immediately after graduating high school, at the tender age of eighteen, Manny Desnet entered the United States Army. He was in the Signal Corps and served overseas, in Switzerland -- where he found time to ski and to buy Swiss music boxes for his sisters -- and in Wiesbaden, Germany. After the War, he used the GI Bill to become the first member of the family to go to college, an endeavor which was encouraged by his brother and father-figure Al, of blessed memory. His brothers and sisters were extremely proud of him. When Manny graduated from George Williams College on the South Side, they all pitched in to rent him a tux so he could attend his prom. It was a time of great excitement. The family could see, in Manny's graduation, the result of the labor of love they had committed to in raising him.

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soon proposed, and they were married within nine months of their introduction. Lil was then 23 and worked as a secretary for Israel Bonds, having previously worked for Rabbi Schaalman at the Chicago branch of the Hebrew Union College. Manny was then a regional director of the Bnai Brith Youth Organization, BBYO, and had such places as Elgin, Aurora and the Tri-Cities in his jurisdiction.

Manny spent his entire working life with youth, and the impact he had on the thousands of kids who knew him at school, in camp and in Bnai Brith is amazing. Manny put himself through college with what he made at the Indian Trails Day Camp which he owned with a partner. In 1957, he and Lil moved to the South Side and Manny bought another day camp called Green Valley. Finally, Manny bought a residential, liberal arts and sports camp in Wisconsin called Camp Waupaca for boys. His first season there was in 1966. Although Waupaca was not officially a "Jewish" camp, most of the boys there were Jews and Manny broke with precedent by serving them only kosher meat.

At the same time that his summers were devoted to camping, Manny continued his involvement with kids during the academic year as well. He earned an MSW from the Jane Adams School of Social Work, and was employed as a social worker by the Park Ridge school district for almost twenty years beginning in 1970. For much of that period, Manny worked in Park Ridge elementary

schools as a counselor three days a week and did his camp business -- recruiting, maintaining his camp site, administration and such -- the other two week days. My impression is that Manny was far from wealthy during this period of his life. Eventually, wise investing brought Lil and Manny to a more comfortable financial position. I mention this now because Marla told me that no matter how things were, the children never wanted for anything, never felt deprived. Nobody ever complained about money. Manny and Lil dealt with that area of the family's life and refused to allow worries about money to filter down to their daughters.

For all the good work he did with youth, Manny made his biggest mark as a father. Random comments from his daughters: the best, a tower of strength, supportive, optimistic, encouraging, positive. One of his favorite sayings, and one which captures his outlook on life was, "it'll all work out. It'll all be OK." Ellen remembers her dad taking the girls to the Goodman Children's Theater. He bought them books. He took them to his office in Park Ridge. He loved to go shopping with Lil and the four girls. Each summer, as school approached, he would take his girls to Appelton, Wisconsin from Waupaca and outfit them all with clothes for school. They would go into the dressing room with their Mom and try on clothes which they then modeled for their appreciative father. He was so generous with them. Once, he bought a pair of very expensive shoes for Marla. Lil yelled at him, "what did you do?" and Manny could only answer, sheepishly,

"but she wanted them so much."

Manny was infinitely proud of his girls. More than once, in the short time I knew him, he would get a big smile on his face and boast about how they had all married Jewish boys and all kept kosher homes. It was a boast I was happy to hear. Beth said that, Monday night as she lay in bed trying to sleep, she thought about her dad. She remembered that when she was a kid she was afraid to go to overnight camp so she spent the summer at Waupaca with her parents. Her father put her in charge of the canteen, a rather intimidating job for an eleven-year-old girl who had to tell 150 hungry boys that they could only have one candy bar. But Manny trusted her to do it. He even allowed Beth to do some of the ordering from the driver of the big delivery truck that brought the candy to camp. The trust Manny had in Beth went a long way to forming her self-image. Her self-reliance and independence as a person were fostered by those seemingly trivial things her father did for her. I have to believe that Manny knew exactly what he was doing and the impact of what he did for Beth and for all his children will be felt by them forever.

At camp, Manny was in his glory. Whenever any of the boys would complain about anything, Manny's stock answer was, "You never had it so good." He used to take the extended family up to Waupaca for a reunion prior to the camp season. They loved it. One year they were together for **שבועות**, and Edith remembers

that it was raining. Manny got up in front of the family and said, "It may be raining outside, but in here, in our circle, it's dry and it's warm and it's beautiful." And they spent that holiday worshipping together, as a family. Manny had a knack for the little gesture, the perfect word to make people feel good. When the family had shabbos dinner together, as they did so often, Manny had a way of going around the table and taking something current in the life of each person there and, by mentioning it as though it was the most important thing in the world, he made everyone feel like a million bucks. Last summer Waupaca, which is now a Young Judea camp, hosted a reunion for several generations of campers and it turned into an impromptu tribute to Manny Desnet. So many people came up to him that weekend and told him that he had made a difference in their lives. Manny got a tremendous kick out of seeing how his boys had developed over the years. He would look at this boy who was now a lawyer, he'd point at that one who was now a doctor and say, "Can you believe so-and-so's a surgeon? At camp he was such a goofball!" Manny had great poise and presence at camp. He would stand up in front of the whole camp and do that hat trick where you let your hat fall off your head and down your arm and then you catch it. The boys ate it up, but not because he was a magician. They liked his trick because they liked him.

Manny was a character, in a good sense. He often refused a meal but had no trouble wolfing down cookies or chips. When he visited the girls he frequently made a beeline for the pantry

to get some junk to eat. He was a denizen of Dunkin' Donuts and Dairy Queen. He could not resist a good hot fudge sundae. He loved to pinch little kids. He loved to sing, in fact singing was a big part of family life. They used to get into costume and put on little shows. They loved to sing show tunes -- Fiddler was a particular favorite -- and Beth told me how, in the eight months since Emily was born, her Dad used to just enjoy singing her name out loud and how, when she would hear him sing, Emily would smile. He even had a kind of theme song of which Nancy snag a snippet that went back to his Bnai Brith days when his buddies used it to welcome him. Manny loved to play the Lottery, but only the Big Game and only when there was enough in the pot to make it worth his while. He knew exactly what that amount was because he used to figure out how much would be left after taxes and then he would advise the girls how best to divide the winnings among themselves. That they would share equally with each other was a given. Manny typically called from Florida to check up on the Illinois lottery and he would dispatch a daughter or a son-in-law to buy him some tickets.

Manny was an excellent tap dancer. When the girls were young, Manny could take their tap shoes and dance. He loved Vegas. He enjoyed playing the slot machines. He liked to take the girls ice skating when they were younger and then just stand and watch the people. Years ago he had a regular poker game and the girls always knew when he won because, the next morning,

he would divvy up all his winnings -- \$16 or so -- among them. He taught them all to drive -- before they were legal -- by taking them to the Bell and Howell parking lot when it was empty and having them parallel park in the family station wagon. When he taught them to drive -- possibly the most nerve-wracking thing a father can do with a daughter -- he always managed to stay calm. He used to send them letters when they were in college and would often stick in a \$5 bill with a note telling them to "have a pizza on me." He loved TV talk shows and Wheel of Fortune. He loved going to shul. He came to the morning minyan here at Moriah seven days a week and Lil told me that he did the same in Boca at the main Conservative shul there. He loved Shabbat and the holidays and even though his health would not permit him to be a **שומר שבת**, last **יום כפור** he not only walked home but even fasted, despite his diabetes. Manny was well-aware of the often-difficult situations in which people find themselves and he was the first person to approach the gabbai with a **מי שברך לחולים**, the prayer on behalf of the sick.

Lil and Manny loved to travel and they were able to travel quite a bit to Europe and, of course, to Israel. When Manny turned 70, the whole family went on a Caribbean cruise. They took all the grandchildren, whom Manny enjoyed pushing in their strollers. The girls made up T-shirts with Manny's name on them and people at the ship's pool started asking for them, thinking that they were being given out.

The Desnet brothers and sisters were very close and I get the impression that, as the baby they had all taken turns raising, Manny was the focal point for the siblings. After brother Al died, Manny took over as the unofficial head of the family. He organized, he arranged, he picked up, he worried. He loved to talk on the phone. He loved to get the mail, including even the junk, and he spent many pleasant hours going through it. He would call from Florida to see what mail had been delivered to him in Chicago. He was the kind of guy who is always ready to help, for whom nothing is too much. Marla said that her friends would often remark at how unusual it was for a family to love being together the way the Desnets did and how much time they spent together. To Marla it didn't seem unusual at all. They just did it because that's what they wanted to do, what they enjoyed doing.

Of course, those who know Manny are only too aware that there was another aspect to his life that was very far removed from the happiness we have thus far described. Manny was a strong, active, vigorous person for most of his life, but he suffered a mild heart attack when he was in his fifties and then, in 1983, he survived a major heart attack and serious by-pass surgery. From that point on, although he continued to live his life, his health was never the same. His attitude to everything related to his personal health -- as to most other things in life -- was optimistic. He would tell his girls, "it'll be OK," even when he

was in the hospital and had every procedure and was attached to every hideous tube and machine. He toughed it out and he did not burden anyone -- not Lil, not the kids -- with the suffering and pain he endured. Naturally, he could not shelter his family completely. The girls always used to cry when they had to say good-bye to their father. Marla was in Florida with her parents just a few days before Manny died. On her return to Chicago, Lil and Manny drove her to the airport and she looked back at her Dad again and again, wondering if this would be the last time she would ever see him. I think they all wondered the same thing. As one of the girls said, there is going to be a last time some time. You just never know when it is.

But Manny Desnet was, in almost every way, a lucky man. His children are all living productive lives as wives, as mothers, in their careers and, most important, as sisters and as daughters. In other words, Manny participated in the development of four fine human beings. He lived to see grandchildren from each of his girls. He appreciated his good fortune. He knew how to play with the grandchildren -- just last week he was teaching them how to play poker. Aces and deuces wild.

His sons-in-law adored him. Terry says that he was intimidated the first time he met Manny, but, in Terry's words, "Once we established that I was not only Jewish but the nephew of one of his friends," things began to go smoothly. Robby, whose last name, "Hayes," caused some initial consternation explained that

his family's Jewish-Persian name had been changed at Ellis Island by an Irish clerk, marvelled that every time he was with Manny, people always recognized him. Some of Terry's law school classmates had been Manny's campers and had loved his father-in-law since their childhoods. Ron said that Manny was like a father to him in every way. For the more than twenty years Ron knew him, Manny was always guiding and helping. Hal said that Manny was the kind of guy who tried to do the right thing. He said that the highest compliment his wife Ellen can pay him is to compare him to her father.

I haven't spoken much about Manny's and Lil's marriage. Sometimes when two people are as right for each other as Lil and Manny have been these last more than 43 years, when they are as comfortable with each other, you might take for granted how much love and effort have been devoted to creating that kind of relationship and nurturing it and replenishing it with every passing day. Manny and Lil loved each other deeply. They took care of each other. Lil made sure he took the right number of the right pills at the right time. She watched his diabetes, she took him to an endless parade of doctors and hospitals. He loved her so much. More than once, when Lil's birthday rolled around, Manny would be in the hospital, but no matter what, he made sure that the girls took care of buying Lil something from him. Manny was devoted to Lil's parents. Lil used to say of her husband, "He's such a good egg."

For years on **ערב שבת**, the family would get together. Nancy, Beth, Ellen and Marla loved to hear their father make **קידוש**. Ron thought it was a beautiful thing how, after dinner, Manny would be surrounded by his family. At first, it was Lil and the girls and Ron. Then as the years passed, there were more sons-in-law, then, one by one, grandchildren were added to the circle. Manny was the constant, always at the center of everything, always the axis around which the lives of the family members revolved.

Manny Desnet was a happy man, I think. I don't mean to simplify him by calling him happy. No. I think that Manny had a deep understanding of happiness. I think that he wasn't merely happy, but that he was profoundly happy. He was gladdened by the right things, by the decent things. He was happy to have touched so many lives, so many young impressionable people whose lives turned out at least a little bit better because they spent a summer with him or talked to him in school or were advised by him in their youth groups. He was happy in his marriage and with his children and with the men they married. He was happy with his grandchildren.

Manny Desnet was a man whose life was full of love, for God and for man. His life was too short and for that there is no remedy, no compensation. But the years God gave Manny to live on this earth were full of **גמילות חסדים**, full of acts of lovingkindness. When the end came, he suffered little, if at all. When it came, death was gentle to Manny.

His was a life well-lived. His was a life worth emulating. A good man. A decent man. A good son, son-in-law, brother, husband, father, grandfather and friend. A worthwhile life. Be proud of him. Remember him. Follow his example. May he rest in peace.

תהי נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים.