

October 10 2010

## OPENING SERVICE OF PARDES CHAIM

Tomorrow is our day of national thanksgiving. It is a day when we become especially aware of our continuing good fortune. We give solemn thanks for being permitted to be a functioning part of the very profound mystery of life itself. In all of these things are we truly blessed; but for those of who have worked to make Pardes Chaim a reality, this the tenth day of the tenth month of the year 2010, is in addition, a singularly special day.

Today we give our thanks to be able to celebrate the culmination of a fifteen year effort in establishing and officially opening Pardes Chaim the second major cemetery ground owned by the total community which it serves.

The years have gone by so quickly. At times I remember as yesterday particular moments in the effort to create an entirely new paradigm, the establishment of an organization that is representative of the entire Jewish community in all of its diversity. I think back to a rainy day in the spring of 1991, when we dedicated the entrance garden and gates at Pardes Shalom cemetery.

If I go back for a moment to 1991- after listening to the gracious introduction that Bill had made prior to my speaking, and in reply, I thought aloud that the next time that such nice things were being said about me at Pardes Shalom I would without doubt be somewhat out of earshot. When the laughter had all but subsided the gathering heard the tiny voice of my then two year old granddaughter exclaim "My Zaida made a funny". Her unexpected comment prompted an additional round of laughter.

But even at a time such as at that day at Pardes Shalom when there had been no personal loss; we were there simply to dedicate our new entrance grounds, some might rightly have been taken aback by spontaneous laughter at a place of solemnity and remembrance – yet, the memory of my granddaughter's exclamation stays with me as a construct; as a metaphor for the drama of the life cycle.

Within that life cycle we must all know the duality of tears and of laughter, through the eyes of innocent youth as well as through the eyes of mature reflection. The manifestation of both tears and laughter embraces the power of both in the joy and in the pain that every person must experience as being partner to the life process.

But how exactly does Judaism understand the passing of lives? Some religions see it as a positive spectacle and sanctify it as a portal to a transcendence that leads to a more spiritual dimension than that capable of being achieved in this life. That is not the Hebraic message.

Judaism sees death as an end to the human responsibility of bringing spirituality into this earthly realm. The departed are seen as freed from the commandments. In this world man is given the opportunity to create, to act, and to accomplish, while in the world to come

he is powerless to effect change. We believe that we must therefore turn our attention to the needs of the living in order to fulfill the commandment to create a world worthy of the Divine vision.

Every person at birth has been given the gift of a talent, a potential that must be nurtured and matured to the benefit of mankind. Our loss is read in wasted years and in the unfulfilled promise that shone so brightly in the eyes of each newborn child. Because every person is a unique human being every death is tragic. But in the theology of Judaism death in and of itself is not considered so. If you think deeply about it, it is in man's unfulfilled promise that we experience our greatest loss and our truest challenge.

Our sages throughout centuries past have declared that the participation with others in mourning and in commemorating a life should be had in proportion. Jews believe that mourning should not be so excessive that it sets a mood that is irreconcilable with the fact that generations do and must pass on. But because passing on is so much a natural and an inescapable part of the symphony of life, because those that we once loved and mourn can yet inspire our years; it is with that understanding that I chose the name Pardes Chaim for the cemetery whose official opening we celebrate today.

Pardes has its root meaning in the word paradise - an enclosed garden. Pardes Chaim translates as "the garden of life". It will be a place where we will grow the fruit of remembrance and the wisdom flowers of generations past.

The principles that underlay the establishment of Toronto Hebrew Memorial Park with Pardes Shalom as its first effort evolved into a self imposed mandate. I had at the beginning undertaken an obligation to satisfy our total Jewish community burial needs for all time. By the early nineties it was apparent that it would soon be necessary to build another cemetery.

As a matter of timing it may be wise to reflect on the fact that while Pardes Shalom was started on a shoestring a hope and a prayer, Pardes Chaim from the time of purchasing this land to its first use, will have taken some fifteen years and the expenditure of many millions of dollars.

It will not be easy for small independent cemeteries to be structured in future. The regulatory and approval process with its attendant delays and escalating costs are light years away from those in place at the time of building Pardes Shalom. Now as a mature and successful corporation we were able to create and finance a first phase at this site which is larger than the whole of Pardes Shalom.

To summarize, we benefit the community fourfold. Firstly it benefits from reasonable and affordable charges for our services. Secondly, it creates a competitive barrier to escalating plot prices elsewhere. Thirdly it benefits from the surpluses generated in the ongoing business itself. Fourthly, it is of a size and scale necessary to generate the funds required for its continuity.

This will be the last time that I speak to our community on an occasion such as the one we celebrate today and so it is a proper time for me to share with you some thoughts and observations gained during a span of some forty five years.

At times I have been asked to explain how Toronto Hebrew Memorial Park came into being. There is some confusion in the mind of the general community as to its origin. After a protracted and sometime conflicted deliberation, I have decided to publicly explain its origin not just to set the record straight, but more importantly because the story of its birth has a direct bearing on the structure and purposes of Pardes Shalom and now of Pardes Chaim.

In 1965 I had come to realize that a new model- a newly structured cemetery operation could be the vehicle for my ongoing contribution to the community. It could be established on a much grander scale than what had been done before. It could be established and run in an entirely new way; in a way that to my knowledge had never been attempted or achieved in or by any major Jewish community. It could be run as a business by a corporation but it could be owned by the whole community in all of its diversity which it would serve for all the years to come.

Properly administered, the cemetery use which would be generational in its continuity could fund generational needs in perpetuity. Departing generations would gift ensuing ones in an ongoing and automatic relationship which would serve as long as there was a Jewish presence in Toronto. It was a simple formula; I had to try to make it work.

But my aim was not only to produce ongoing revenue for the community. It was as well to produce a new model in cemetery usage and in its administration. It would set new standards for beauty, for service, and for the correction of abuses. The time had come to make the vision a reality.

In 1970, five years after my initial research and negotiations with existing organizations had come to a dead end, I bought the land which became Pardes Shalom and began the process to rezone the land for cemetery usage. By November of 1972 when some of the approvals had been received, I gifted both the property and the business to the community.

With careful planning and with building the cemetery in stages, Pardes Shalom was not a financial burden to community coffers from the beginning. I am gratified that Federation on behalf of the community has never had to invest a penny towards the establishment of the cemetery, its operation, or its growth

But before the business was up and running I had to determine how our cemetery operation would be governed. How was this operation going to satisfy community needs? From my own experience, and from talking to people like you, I found a number of issues that needed addressing. It was the resolution of those issues that gave rise to the principles on which Toronto Hebrew Memorial Park was founded.

There is for example, no reason for cemeteries to be forbidding ugly places which people are reluctant to visit. There is nothing in halakah that constrains the beautification of a cemetery; quite the contrary. I had at the beginning determined that our cemeteries would be beautifully landscaped and maintained. One of the more satisfying experiences I have had throughout the years has been in the calls from people who have told me that they were comforted in their worst moments by the beauty of Pardes Shalom which they visit more often than usual and more than custom requires.

We have recently completed a professional survey and inventory of the treed areas at Pardes Shalom. You should know, and I am proud to report, that we are third in the variety of tree species of institutional grounds surveyed in Toronto. We are surpassed only by Mount Pleasant cemetery and the University of Toronto grounds. Both of these institutions predate us by more than one hundred and ten years.

Pardes Chaim being newly established is obviously not now extensively treed as is Pardes Shalom. Over the passage of time it will be landscaped and maintained to a similar high standard. In time we will build a beautiful chapel and eventually we will build areas where people can walk or sit quietly undisturbed

But how can you ensure; how can you guarantee an ONGOING high standard of beautification and maintenance? A cemetery that has no continuity in its ownership and control will eventually be abandoned. It is easy to understand that a plot that sold for ten dollars in the year nineteen hundred can not support maintenance costs in the year two thousand and ten. In fact some of our older cemeteries are badly maintained and are in danger of abandonment. Many small cemetery organizations are defunct and simply have no surviving membership. Monuments are fallen, some are broken and there is no one left to set them right.

When a cemetery is abandoned it falls to the municipality in which it is located. They in effect become the responsible owners.

Maintenance funds required to be set aside by legislative fiat can become inadequate to their purpose because of inflation. In that case the only way to guarantee adequate maintenance is to develop new cemetery lands as needed, the plots from which at current prices can support older grounds as well. New grounds must therefore be developed within the same corporate ownership. Because THMP is owned by the total community through Federation, its continuity and therefore its capability for generational maintenance can be assured. As a consequence no cemetery owned and operated by THMP will ever become abandoned.

If we were going to deal openly and fairly with the community in its totality we had to develop a culture of sensitive service. One had to say yes rather than no to meaningful submissions by individuals and organizations. In a diverse community this has not always been easy or possible but I believe that in the main we have achieved a balance.

I wanted to create a structure which would eliminate abuses. People are most vulnerable emotionally when a loved one is lost. They are not able to resist pressure tactics at that difficult and traumatic time in their lives.

I wanted to make certain that an adequate supply of plots would always be available so that there would not be an incentive to charge inflated prices. I wanted to provide for the indigent and for the hard pressed.

Though we have done much in this area including the prohibition of profiteering, I can not say that abuses by some of our member organizations do not occur or that we do not make mistakes in the administrative process, but when we are informed of instances of abuse or error we make every effort to redress the wrong done.

Above all I had hoped that our organization would serve to bring our community closer together. I believe that it has done so. Every branch of Jewish expression is accommodated at Pardes Shalom as they will be at Pardes Chaim and at successor cemeteries. However our differences in life we are equally served at the end. In a world approaching seven billion people, we of the Jewish family, all of us included, are not quite one half the population of any of the world's major cities. When you consider how few we are in number as a world community I believe that resolving differences among us to be an ambition worth thinking and acting upon.

While retaining our differences we can at the least honour each other with admiration and respect, for we are moved and affected by the same needs and by the same world events. There is no distinction made between us by those who do not admire us. We entertain the same ideals and obligations and we have the same high hope for our children and for our grandchildren.

There is one other function that a community cemetery embraces as does no other. As the generations move on the cemetery becomes the repository of the history of that community. That history speaks to us of who we were. It reminds us of who we are. It tells us who we may yet become.

In fact cemeteries are successor communities as restructured and re settled in a final common resting place. The rituals that we practice today have evolved over the centuries. We do not inter our deceased in caves as did our ancestors in the holy land some thousands of years ago, but in our dedication to the memory of our departed generations we form an unbroken link to our line. It is a link of Biblical proportion.

But mourners don't generally come to visit a cemetery to tap into its historical construct. They come to visit a specific place. It is a place where they have erected a marker, a monument signifying a unique life once lived.

You and I come to talk to the stones. They are stones that stand in the place of someone - a person who had family, who had hopes, who had ambition, who had dreams and memories. They must not be forgotten. They must be commemorated. The stones belong not only to specific families, but to all of us as well, for they are our community's heritage and its legacy.

In past generations a habit has been rediscovered in those coming to visit a cemetery of leaving a pebble behind, a little stone that says - I was here, I remember, and as long as I remember, you are still with me.

By our very presence, we give thanks for the still nurturing memory of those who raised us to maturity but are now gone from our lives. We in turn ask forgiveness for hurts inflicted long ago, for words said in anger; for words which could not be redeemed, for injurious words which had not the opportunity of being washed clean. We come to say the things that should have been said but were not out of fear or misplaced pride. We come to explain long forgotten grievances, to ask pardon, and to forgive in turn. We come to heal our hearts and to comfort our souls.

One need not wonder that Jews the world over visit cemeteries faithfully before the days of awe, the high holidays signifying the beginning of a new year. At a time of personal reassessment we instinctively turn for guidance to the memory of those who have gone before. We want to live our lives so as to give meaning to the symbolic continuity of theirs.

Looking ahead as the years unfold we will have to periodically reconsider ongoing needs. Our community will grow in number. Its composition and demographics will change. What served in the past might not serve quite as well in the future. While one can not anticipate all of the issues that may confront future leadership, I am confident that a strong well run and unfettered institution such as THMP is today will meet and surmount whatever challenges that might arise.

Because of unprecedented and immediate need we have already begun operations at Pardes Chaim. In doing so we were aware that this new and historic ground will be a hallowed link in the chain of sacred repositories of the memories of our ancient people. Within the spirit embedded in their timeless continuity, within the passing of the ages, historic anomalies, generational distinctions and differences, fracturing disputes, incubating angers all fade and disappear. In the end we are and will remain one people.

It is not possible for me to recount how many over the years have given so much of their time and sincere effort to this organization. Nothing of the scale of this endeavor is accomplished by one person acting alone or even by a number of people who come and go.

At Pardes Shalom we host almost seventy member organizations that have plot sections and therefore are entitled to apply for representation at our board level. This shows that

we have served the needs of an extraordinarily large segment of our community. In fact we presently administer to more than one half of all of the burials in the greater Toronto area. It speaks well of the work done by many devoted people who have made THMP the indispensable organization that it has become. We have attracted notice abroad. It increasingly serves as a model for Jewish communities elsewhere.

I want very much to acknowledge and thank our long acting, totally devoted, insufficiently recognized, and exceptional president Bill Draimin. Bill served with me for many years when I was president of THMP and I have served under his leadership for twenty years since that time. His leadership and counsel are exemplary. He has been a leader not only in the affairs of THMP but in our ongoing relationship with the ministry where our reputation is of the highest order. He is listened to with respect at associate meetings and forums of cemetery organizations in Ontario and throughout North America where T.H.M.P is respected and is regarded as a model to be emulated.

I remember and acknowledge Ben Schneider. Ben knew the community well and was in a position to recommend me to the organizations that became our first sectional plot purchasers long before I was in a position to produce any. He became our first executive director after he retired from his work at Federation. Ben was totally devoted to our organization and continued to serve it even after he retired at the age of eighty six

I give special thanks to Lou Greenbaum. Lou is an inspiring community advocate who notwithstanding his commitments to many causes, still found the time to work with me in the difficult and protracted planning, zoning and servicing aspects of the development of Pardes Chaim. He continues to serve on our board. His help has been invaluable; his counsel wise and experienced.

I obviously can not mention by name all of the great people who have served and still serve on our boards and committees over a period of almost forty years. They know that a grateful community which is not always aware of what has been accomplished acknowledges a job well done as confirmed by your presence here today.

It has been forty five years since I began what has become quite an adventure. Many faces and many voices come to mind at this moment, many challenges met and many lessons learned. It is a legacy I carry with me as I always will.

Memories course a ghostly track following rapidly on each other's coattails. I remember as yesterday five years of false starts learning what not to do. I remember what I would call "the years of futility" They were the years of surmounting pessimism and of navigating road blocks. I remember finally deciding to go it alone.

I remember a rapid course of positive action; buying the land and entering into a lengthy development process. I remember the zoning battles which we ultimately won. I remember the summers spent onsite personally attending to the planning, the design of

road patterns, the engineering and the substantial grading and servicing of succeeding phases as the need for them arose.

No professional engineering firms were hired back then. I had to become an amateur planner and an amateur engineer. No contracts for services were ever tendered. People and equipment, earthmovers and backhoes were hired and paid by the hour, their work scheduled and their performance monitored and certified daily. I had no budget. I simply borrowed the money to supplement the original capital investment when it was necessary to get the job done; and it was done, on time and at reasonable cost.

But now those early heady days are come and gone. The morning dew gives way to hot, exciting and demanding days. The days grow long then slowly fade as the sun retreating sets. It ushers in the calming night. It yields its place to quiet and reflective eventide. And so it is with me.

Though I myself set the table so many years ago, I feel like the man who came to dinner and never left. I am much aware of the need to move on for I have sat at that table too long.

While it is an emotional rollercoaster ride for me to accept the reality, it is a time for me to let go of an organization to which I have devoted more than one half of my life.

And so on this day, warmed in the embrace of that sad sweetness which marks the waning of my travel along an historic road, comforted in the reliving of old memories and at the time of formally opening these massive new grounds, I make my fond farewells. In doing so, I send grateful greeting to all past and present who have contributed to the success of THMP. Though I may not participate in its affairs in days and years to come, my heart will always be warmed in the glow reflected in the continuing service of this great organization to the ongoing needs of our community.

It is a blessing to see an idea become a reality, that reality then to grow and to become a success in every dimension beyond one's initial expectation. I have been so blessed and I am thankful for it. I thank our president, our present board, and I thank our previous boards for their support and for their friendship, and I thank all of you who are in attendance on this most memorable day. It is through each of you, that I salute the community whom it has been my privilege to serve.