

Rabbi Zeldin

Experience has taught me that I should be starting my talk today with a wonderful story ending with a killer punch line. In fact, in preparing my comments, I even re-read "Zeldin's Way" thinking I might tell one of yours. After a great deal of thought, I came to the conclusion that I could never tell a story like you, but I can certainly tell a story about you and all of the guests here in this room today, and how you have impacted my family's life.

To begin, I would like to say that I have known Mrs. Zeldin and you since I was a little girl and you have not changed a bit. You are ageless. Oh, ... I know what you're thinking... Susan the same holds true for you! I guess this mountain top truly is the Fountain of Youth.

I must confess that it is rather daunting to be standing here, speaking in front of our temple's clergy, founders and founding rabbi. Jon and I were honored and felt humbled to be asked to co-chair this year's Wisdom of Legacy Gala. Little did I know that Jay would also ask us to speak today? That's when the butterflies kicked in. After driving my family crazy these last couple of weeks, I finally overcame my jitters when I remembered your Wise words Rabbi. I once confided that I was afraid of public speaking. You took me aside and told me to focus on looking to the back of the room without making eye contact with any one person. You told me that everyone present would feel that I was looking directly at them. I have used your advice and have passed it on; only today, I want to look all of you in the eye and tell you about my 40 plus years of life here at Stephen S. Wise.

I have divided my comments into five categories. Visionary, Legendary, Luminary Dignitary, and Celebrated Leader. Or as I chose to say, "Berger's Reflections on Zeldin's Legacy of Wisdom". Does this format sound familiar? I am certain that it is to everyone here today.

My life here at Stephen S. Wise Temple began over 40 years ago because of your wisdom and "visionary" leadership. Initially, High Holiday services were held at a church and Sunday school was held in the classrooms of Leo Beck Temple. Metuka was my teacher and the cantors played guitars. We sang and danced while learning and embracing Jewish life and rituals. I remember singing all the way up this very hill for the groundbreaking of our school and temple.

On Sunday's, my family and I would walk up the hill behind Z-H to witness the progress of construction. The pool, the first classrooms, Hershensohn Hall, the Early Education center and eventually after more singing and another groundbreaking, Z-H. While I was learning to swim at the Shul with the Pool, your Vision was becoming a concrete reality with the growth of the schools and congregation. It was exciting to be a part of it even as a young child. I loved attending Friday night services and especially enjoyed the Israeli dancing late into the night.

After religious school, I attended Hebrew school and summer camp on our very new and state of the art campus. Over the years, my father forged a coveted friendship with you and loved playing in our temple golf tournaments. My mother became active in temple life and guided my sister and me to become involved in all aspects of our synagogue (chorus and temple plays included). This became our home away from home. Rabbi and Mrs. Zeldin (I know you said it's ok to call you Florence, it's just habit), knew us all by name and delighted in our laughter and smiles. I loved when you would pick me up in your station wagon with your camp hat on and drive me up the hill to camp. I thought it was so cool. As campers, we slept on the grassy field with deer running by and Metuka waking us to the cries that the "Ruach" (the spirit) was coming. I feel that same contagious spirit every time I walk the campus.

It wasn't long before I wanted to be a camp counselor, assist in the classrooms and tutor children for their B'nai Mitzvah's. You continued to plan and build around us, yet we always felt that we were part of a small and intimate place with so much to offer. The same holds true to this day. My lifelong friendships were nurtured here and my first real kiss even took place discretely behind the classrooms. I'll bet you never envisioned that one!

There was never a question in our minds about where our own children would attend school. Beginning with mommy & me our daughters Sami and Carly have benefited from your dreams, your hard work and your Vision. Elementary School, Milken, two Bat Mitzvah's and The Academy are the legacy you have given to our precious girls and many more generations to come. Through our children, Jon and I became active on the school board and I am about to begin my second term on the Temple Board.

The second Berger Reflection has to do with your "Legendary" status in our family. To us, you are Legendary because four generations of Bergers and Wards have celebrated life's journey together with you. Jon's grandparents, Nate & Laura Sherman were friends of yours and you officiated at Jon's parents wedding a mere 50 years ago and our own wedding 20 years ago. Jon, my sister Carrie and I were all Bar & Bat Mitzvah'd here with you at our side. Soon we were in confirmation and challenged by rabbi's and teachers to think and grasp the importance of being Jewish leaders in our community.

As an aside, my most memorable confirmation teacher was Zev Yaraslovsky who pushed us to understand that standing idly by was not ok when the Russian Jews were being persecuted (the same lesson we impart to our children here today). He challenged us to work tirelessly on their behalf and we did. The gallery of confirmation pictures in this building & in Hersenson Hall is legendary in and of itself. I love hearing the children giggle when they see a parent, relative or friend they recognize. It is an important and lasting connection with the past and our future.

In good times and sad times you have been here for my family, Jon and me. I will never forget when you so selflessly dropped everything on your schedule to be at my father's bedside when he was in his final days. You brought comfort to us all as you have done



for so many others. On a larger scale, our community is a constant source of comfort and prayer with its abundance of educational programs, evolving prayer worship services, community outreach programs, groups such as the Women of Wise, A Few Wise Men, Carpool Torah Study programs, and my new favorite, Wiser after 50, just to name a few! We travel to Israel and Poland together and always impress on our community the importance of the State of Israel. You planted this legendary seed and it continues to thrive stronger than ever.

As a "Luminary" leader in our community you are a source of light and an influential person. I am not just talking about your charm, charismatic storytelling, wit, brilliance and intelligence; I am talking about your influence over the weather during four decades of Purim carnivals! I mean, where else on earth could there be as large, successful and spirited a Purim Carnival as here at Stephen S. Wise? The climate is always guaranteed to be perfect as everyone knows that Rabbi Zeldin has a direct hand in making sure there is no wet weather on carnival day. In fact, as chair of the Purim carnival, I was repeatedly asked about a contingency plan for rain. With all of the confidence in the world, I assured my committee that the sun would shine.

My fourth reflection relates to you Rabbi Zeldin as a Dignitary and Celebrated Leader recognized throughout the United States and the World at Large. With Mrs. Zeldin always by your side, you are recognized as a brilliant leader, orator and (golfer as well). World leaders, renowned politicians, journalists, novelists, musicians, and clergy of all faiths; have come to our Temple and continue to do so because of the road you have paved for us all. This is truly a place of Spirituality, Community and Lifelong Learning for so many others and especially for Jon and me. You laid the foundation (no pun intended) and with the outstanding vision of our dedicated clergy, Metuka and all of our administrators, our schools and our temple are thriving and we are a prestigious model for so many other congregations near and far.

Jon and I continue to experience a life of fulfillment and memories here at this School and Temple all because of the tireless work everyone in this room has done together. I consider it a Legacy of your collective Wisdom and am looking forward to honoring our Celebrated Leader, Rabbi Zeldin, together on May 11, 2010.

Ken hi ratzon

