

GRAVESIDE EULOGY FOR OUR CHERISHED FATHER, GEORGE SASSOWER
by his daughter Elena Sassower
February 3, 2019

We are here at the family plot of Abraham and Rose Lipson, our mother's father and mother – to bury our cherished father, George Sassower.

George Sassower – a cohen and descendant of rabbis – is the son of Lazer Lieber Sassower (Louis) & Henya Akner (Helen), who with other Sassowers and Akners are buried in Mt. Hebron cemetery, not so far away, in Queens. Like our mother, Doris, dad was a first generation American – and I remember, as a child, our grandmother Helen explaining that America was the best country, because it had laws.

On the day Pearl Harbor was attacked, dad was visiting his father, Louis, in the hospital on Governor's Island with his mom Helen, his sister Frances, and, I believe, his beloved Uncle Mo, his mom's only sibling. Immediately thereafter, though only 17, he went to enlist in the army.

The years our father served in the army were a defining part of his life, instilling in him the concept of sacrifice for a purpose larger than himself. I recall him once explaining that in the army, it is the mission that is paramount, the individual is dispensable. This notion of self-sacrifice guided our father throughout his life.

After the war, our dad was interested in becoming an electrical engineer, but there were no jobs – and, perhaps influenced by his adored Uncle Mo, who was a lawyer, he went to law school. He was admitted to the bar in 1949.

I do not know if dad worked for Mo before Mo became sick with cancer, but he handled Mo's cases at that point and after he died in October 1952, giving part, if not all, of what he earned to Mo's widow, Dotty – struggling with two small children, Jeffrey and Lois.

Dad married our mom, Doris, in August 1952 – and encouraged her to become a lawyer, rather than – as she had planned – a Spanish teacher. For about two decades, from 1955, they worked together in their own small firm of Sassower & Sassower.

In practicing law, dad found that the vaunted rule of law and precepts of attorney ethics are quite illusory. But he never caved to the corruption that infests the courts – maybe because, as he understood from his mother, the law was what made this the best country, and, as he learned in the army, you fight, and sacrifice, for the things that are important. Dad, like mom, revered the law.

Dad sacrificed plenty, including his family, in his battle to achieve justice in the courts – a battle that spanned more than 40 years, from about the mid-1970's until he died, this past Thursday.

It has been said that pious individuals seem to die on a parasha (Torah portion) that relates to their life or lifestyle. Yesterday's parasha was Mishpatim – judgments – and deals primarily with civil and tort law. It follows upon the prior parasha, Yitro, containing the ten commandments and laws of the alter. The commentary remarks that the juxtaposition of these two parshiot “provide[s] a startling insight into Judaism”. As it explains:

“To G-d, there is no realm of ‘religion’ in the colloquial sense of the word. Most people think of religion as a matter of ritual and spirituality. Western man differentiates between Church and State. The Torah knows no such distinction. To the contrary, all areas of life are intertwined and holiness derives from halachically correct business dealings no less than from piety in matters of ritual. The Sages teach that one who wishes to be a chassid, or devoutly pious person, should be scrupulous in matters of civil and tort law for in Judaism the concept of the ‘temple’ is in the courtroom as well as the synagogue. This is the significance of the juxtaposition of chapters.

From this proximity, the Sages derive that the seat of the Sanhedrin, the seventy-one member court that is the supreme authority on halachic matters, should be on the Temple Mount, near the Temple itself, for both the Temple and Sanhedrin are expressions of holiness and worship of G-d. A judge who rules correctly is considered a partner in Creation, and one who rules corruptly is a destroyer of G-d’s world....” (The Chumash, ArtScroll Series – The Stone Edition – at p. 416).

Dad was not a religious man, in terms of ritual observance. But he lived and fought for the realization of some of Judaism’s most fundamental precepts – as, for example, as directed by parshat Mishpatim:

“Do not accept a false report, do not extend your hand with the wicked to be a venal witness. Do not be a follower of the majority for evil; and do not respond to a grievance by yielding to the majority to pervert the law.”

Dad would never align himself with falsehood – and stood courageously alone, against wicked, law-perverting majorities. He was an amazing, heroic man – with a brilliant mind that he used, to the fullest, in trying to creatively rectify the abuses of the legal system. And it was not just in big ways that he was exceptional, but in the mundane. In the recollection of all three of his daughters, dad never was unkind, surly, impatient, rude, sarcastic to any stranger – maybe subliminally actualizing another key precept articulated in parshat Mishpatim: “You shall not taunt or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt...”.

Dad was a profoundly fair, honest, and decent man – and, at the same time – an extraordinarily good-natured, humorous man, always ready to tell some wonderful, interesting story and to crack a joke – a quality he ascribed to his Uncle Mo. And I think dad would quite approve – and relish – that I end by recounting a little story-slash-joke that maybe was the last he ever heard, told by Mo’s grown-up daughter Lois, who visited him on the last day of his life, as he lay unconscious in his hospital bed. It goes like this. There were two twins, in utero, just about to enter the birth canal. The one twin says “It’s been nine months and I think this is the end. We’re going to have to say good-bye. It’s over.” But the other twin says: “You know, I’m not so sure. I think there may be something more and we will be together again. I think this is just the beginning.”