

## **Ruth Jesol Goldman**

How many hours must Ruth have spent around the seder table over the years with six generations of her family? For at least half of those hours spent recounting the Exodus from Egypt, she was known as ‘Ar-ru’, the name that stuck after her infant niece, Louise, contracted ‘Aunt Ruth’ into ‘Ar-ru’. And how pleased Ar-ru was when Louise’s grandson, Callan, was old enough to address her as ‘Ar-ru’, making it four generations of her family who had known her as ‘Ar-ru’ on seder night. I should think that I was present for about a third of those seder nights with her. But I was in London the year that immortal remark was uttered; when one of the participants, looking up from her soup plate, exclaimed: “Ruth, your balls are delicious!”

Of course this came as no surprise to anyone in our family. We all knew hers were the best. But perhaps we were biased – it was, after all, our family recipe. However, I know this to be a fair judgment because no less a judge than Justice Michael Kirby – and his partner, Johan – both signified their approval by requesting seconds at a dinner party I gave on Johan’s birthday some years ago. Ar-ru had made the matzo balls with me, carefully inspecting each ball I rolled, explaining, “I still remember Mummy giving me her recipe over the phone after I was married and wanted to serve them at a dinner party.” And so it was that when their mother was no longer up to making them, Ar-ru’s matzo balls would be served in Gingie’s chicken soup. It is strangely poignant, now, to recall that her balls and her big sister’s soup were served always with one another, for, as Ar-ru recently reminisced, when looking at an early photograph of the two girls, “They were really loving sisters, always with one another, and great pals.”

She left school to join her great pal, who was already working at their Uncle Harry’s Curio Shop, and it was probably there that she acquired her first taste of beauty.

All her life she adored beautiful, fine, and precious objects, and she spent many years among them in the Curio Shop and later in life at the Strand Watchmakers. But it was not only the objects that were elegant. Elegance was the hallmark of the very way that she lived her life.

One need only look at the photographs of Ruth and Dudley in those early years to see what a glamorous age it was. And to listen to the stories, and imagine them, having spent one summer in the sun on the Isle of Capri with all the beautiful people, waiting in the darkness at the wharf, when Ruth realized that she had left the jewels in the hotel safe, and Dudley had to sprint up to the hotel and back in time to board the last ferry back to the mainland. Summer, sun, Capri, beautiful people, jewels, the hotel safe: in a word, glamour. And the theatrical circles in which they moved in Sydney. And the year they spent in Los Angeles. “Dudley would have stayed longer,” she told me, “but I wanted to go home because I missed my Mummy, and my sister, and my nieces.”

So it was that, despite the allure of a more glamorous life, she realized that it was the bonds of family that really mattered to her, and, like her namesake, Ruth valued highly the special bond that family creates between women. Just as the biblical Ruth clung to her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, and accompanied her back to Naomi’s native Judah from Moab, so did our Ruth cling faithfully to her widowed and childless aunt, Nita, and minister to her needs, well into Auntie Nita’s nineties. Such was her commitment to family and the bonds that are formed between women in a family.

She loved her family and this little part of the city in which they had lived for generations, and worshiped at the Great Synagogue for generations. When she read in the Great Synagogue newsletter that Rabbi Apple was to give a course of daytime lectures on the history of Sydney Jewry, she went along to the Synagogue to learn more

about the topics in which she had always taken an interest. She and Rabbi Apple waited, but no one else turned up. So instead of his lecturing her, she lectured him about the history of her family in Sydney. This continued the following week. Then the Rabbi, ever mindful of public perceptions, asked her if she would mind if they discontinued their meetings, fascinating though they had been to him. Her family history remained a lifelong interest which she continued to enjoy researching.

Her family had established its place in Sydney, and this was something that she treasured. It was not just the Curio shop run by her father's family. Her mother was known widely for the excellence of her handmade coat hangers. It was with a source of pride that I, at least, could appreciate, that she told me, "I still remember boxing up the coat hangers and helping Mummy deliver them," when a special order was placed by Government House in Sydney, before the arrival of Her Majesty The Queen.

Such was her life, that national events somehow found a special place in the life of her family. It was not only special events, such as a Royal Tour, but annual events, too. Each year there was the ritual of the WIZO Melbourne Cup sweep, for which she, her sister, and their friends each had an allocated role in the preparations. So it was that, along with the rest of Australia, they shared the excitement of the Cup, and at the same time raised money for women and children in Israel. This was her life: a life that participated in Australian culture; that was committed to the Jewish community; and that was anchored most securely in her home with husband and children. Dudley once said to her, "We don't have two children, we have five." So it was: when Ruth and Joan married Dudley and Noel, the Goldman and Lasker families were to become as close as the two loving sisters and great pals always remained. For both sisters, theirs was a life that revolved around family.

For one who valued family so highly, the thought of any marriage breaking down would be a source of sadness. In her own case, the particular circumstances were extremely painful to her for many years, as were the adversities endured by her children and those closest to her. Such anguish was further compounded by the fact that all her life she was dogged by ill health and it was difficult for her to cope with this on her own. And so she was not only Ruth, but also Naomi. As Scripture records:

The women said, "Can this be Naomi?" "Do not call me Naomi," she replied. "Call me Mara – Bitterness – for the Almighty has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. How can you call me Naomi, when the Lord has dealt harshly with me, when the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me!" (Ruth 1.19-21)

Our tradition has never shied away from the bitterness that life deals some of us, and the difficulty they have in coping with it. Did not Job curse the day of his birth? And, in Lamentations, Jeremiah cries out:

May it never befall you,  
 All who pass along the road –  
 Look about and see:  
 Is there any agony like mine,  
 Which was dealt out to me  
 When the Lord afflicted me  
 On His day of wrath? (Lamentations 1.12)

For all the glamour and excitement that life had offered Ruth, she was to suffer, as did Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah, for the inexplicable bitterness with which she felt she had been afflicted. But I turn now to another tradition that might also help us understand this.

Michael Cunningham's novel, *The Hours*, charts the last day in the life of Richard, a fictitious poet in New York. He dies after a long struggle with AIDS, which

ravaged not only his body, but his mind too, leading him to endure tremendous anxiety. In the last pages, his mother arrives from Canada for the funeral, and the narrator tells us:

We live our lives, do whatever we do, and then we sleep – it's as simple and ordinary as that ... There's just this for consolation: an hour here or there when our lives seem, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give us everything we've ever imagined, though everyone but children (and perhaps even they) know these hours will inevitably be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, we cherish the city, the morning; we hope, more than anything, for more.

Heaven only knows why we love it so.

This morning, we came together in one of those darker and more difficult hours. They are hours which are sadly known well to us all. We all cope with them in different ways. Ar-ru, like Richard in *The Hours*, was one of those people who was acutely aware of the far darker and more difficult hours that inevitably lay ahead, and she suffered considerable anxiety on account of this. And yet she pressed on for over eighty years. Why? Because she cherished the hours here or there when her life seemed, against all odds and expectations, to burst open:

Hours spent every week (if not every day) on the telephone with Brook; hours spent looking at all the beautiful things that Brook had made for her mother's home; and the hours they spent driving together through the Southern Highlands for her eightieth birthday;

Hours spent talking to Georgina who would call from London regularly as she was on her way to work, and the pleasure of giving her granddaughter her own engagement ring when Georgie became engaged to Josh in this past year;

Hours spent in the car, being driven here and there by Gomez; and more recently, when her grandson would stop by the hospital on his way to work, and brush his fingers

across her cheek to wake her up, and the pleasure of waking up to see how he had grown up since he once asked her, “Granny, did you come to Australia with the convicts?”

Hours spent wondering what “my baby” – her youngest grandson, Simon – would make of his life, and then excitedly reporting to everyone that he had been recruited for a graduate position in the Australian Public Service in the coming year;

Hours spent playing bridge at endless card parties in friends’ homes;

Hours spent researching her family history on the Internet;

Hours spent watching the Roosters, in younger days in the grandstand with her sister, brother-in-law, and their friends, and later on television;

Hours spent at family *simchat*, recently watching her son, Richard, officiate at the wedding of her nephew, Stephen, to Cathy, and of her great-nephew, Elliott, to Liliam;

Hours spent with friends chatting on the phone, sharing meals together, buying flowers, going out to shows and concerts;

Hours spent in Double Bay having her hair done by Louis;

And hours with Richard. “Richard loves animals,” she told me recently, “and he’d like to move to the country – but he won’t leave here whilst I’m alive.” Whether or not he actually wanted to move to the country, I don’t know. But what I do know is that she derived a tremendous sense of security from the fact that she knew her son would always put her needs first. Ruth’s Richard has suffered like Cunningham’s Richard in *The Hours*. However, unlike that Richard, he never wallowed in self-pity, but had the strength to meet the challenges that life presented head on. We would all understand if such a person felt exasperated by the self-pity of the Jobs, Jeremiahs, and Naomis of this world. And yet, he showed abiding *chesed* – loving-kindness – in constantly devoting hours to his mother’s practical and emotional needs. And, in doing so cheerfully, he

afforded her the sense of security that she needed in order to endure old age with any measure of comfort and dignity.

Ruth lived her life, did whatever she did, and then she slept – it was as simple and ordinary as that. Let us hope that there is now this consolation for Brook and Richard, Georgina, Gomez, and Simon: that their mother and grandmother had many hours here or there when her life seemed, against all odds and expectations, to burst open and give her everything she'd ever imagined, though she knew these hours would be followed by others, far darker and more difficult. Still, she cherished her family, her country, her community. And up until these last days, she hoped, more than anything, for more.

After we left the synagogue this morning, we drove to the burial ground in which we interred her mortal remains in the same earth in which those of her dear parents and grandparents rest; but a stone's throw from those of her really loving sister and great pal. And, with the *el malei rachamim* prayer, we commended to Almighty God that part of her which our Faith teaches us transcends the mystery of death. In these actions, as with the mourners' *Kaddish*, let us give thanks to God for a life that knew hours of glamour and celebration; hours of heartfelt friendship; and hours of filial love, gratitude, and support.

May her memory be for a blessing.