

## **IRENE ZEHMAN VOLUNTEER AWARD**

**May 3, 2011**

**Good afternoon Ladies:**

**It's my turn this year to have the privilege to announce the Irene Zehman Volunteer Award – but it's the first year I have to do it without my beloved mother, Judy Sherman, here with us. So in one of the truest traditions of the strong, but pragmatic Ratner women, I have their hankies in hand . . . so you can be assured I am covered if I cry.**

**For those of you who don't know, I am Charna Sherman, and I am one of the lucky granddaughters of Irene Ratner Zehman. I am lucky to be here today with so many other family members whose lives were also blessed by being related to her. They include my cousin, Nancy Wolf, and the**

**two tables seated in the front. You all know them. Will all of the family please stand.**

**Given the breadth of involvement of so many Ratner women in this community, there have been years when it just proved impossible to choose an awardee without some connection to one or more of them. This year, as it turns out, the Committee's choice is particularly meaningful to me – but by reason only of a coincidence that ironically exemplifies what this award was intended to honor.**

**As many of you know, my mother was the last female Ratner cousin of her generation . . . and so as a family, we couldn't have been more shaken by her loss. But as her daughter, I was simply devastated. And honestly, I can't tell you why – but after her death, I turned for the first time in my life to the ancient ceremony of the mikveh. I literally knew**

nothing about the ritual of immersion. Rather, my lifelong impressions had been negative, as had been those of the Ratner women who raised me.

But her death so shattered my world that I just felt this need to physically confront the sheer incomprehensibility of living without her – and by sharing and actually experiencing my grief with centuries of other Jewish women in a tradition of comfort and renewal. So I literally called up a stranger – one of the so-called “Mikveh Ladies,” and ignorantly reached out to her for help with my mourning. And this woman

- who didn't know me,
- who had a full plate of work and family responsibilities and challenges of her own,
- and who had nothing to gain from devoting her precious time to my needs

not only immediately and warmly responded to my plea, but selflessly and caringly led me – step-by-step – through a ritual of healing, the power of which I really couldn't ever have imagined.

I learned further that these remarkable women – on their own initiative, and with no expectation of recognition – together decided years ago to help more women in our community – and some men too -- access this ancient ceremony that is, at its core, about transformation. And they did so by transforming it for literally hundreds in our community.

These women -- who serve as shomeret or witnesses at the Charlotte Goldberg Community Mikveh -- have pioneered new ways to think about mikvah: that is, immersion as symbolically enacting profound change for individuals. They

**have built upon the resurgence of mikvah practice in our faith by innovatively adding new meditations and practices -- to broaden the reach of a tradition of comfort and hope to a more expansive spectrum of “moments of transition.”**

**They have thus not only attended to mourners, like they did for me, but have forged new connections to those who are ill, Holocaust survivors, divorcees, those facing infertility issues, victims of rape and domestic abuse, and those facing other losses or setbacks. They have also expanded the ways to mark and reflect upon joyous milestones, embracing not only traditional life cycle events, but virtually any new stage of life, such as remission of an illness, an achievement, or even a new commitment in how one approaches her daily responsibilities and relationships.**

**And their leadership has extended beyond just reinventing a tradition, but making it accessible and relevant for the full diversity of our people. The Charlotte Goldberg Community Mikvah is among a growing pool of liberal mikvot which are open to the entire Jewish community. Further to this commitment of inclusiveness, the Mikvah Ladies not only undertake community education – here and nationally -- but also engage in the most personal gestures of welcome and belonging, such as making special challahs for brides visiting the mikvah.**

**By every measure, our awardees this year represent the best of our past and our future: they are spearheading a movement to reinvent the ancient ritual of mikvah to serve the Jewish community of today. As one rabbi has**

**commented, when "the old becomes new, . . . the new becomes holy."**

**And indeed, although so much has changed since my Aunt Roz and Mom created this award 31 years ago to honor the special legacy of Grandma Irene's volunteer service, the innovative adaptation of hands-on service to the needs of our people today remains the highest endeavor of tzedakah. The women we honor today exemplify the real heart of Grandma Irene's leadership, which was her unwavering commitment to the healing power of human connection.**

**This award is meant to recognize the unsung women of valor in our community: those who in truest tradition of our faith — and like Irene Zehman herself — have made extraordinary marks in providing direct service to those in need. And they stand out —**

**for doing what they do with exemplary humility: for no reward other than repairing our world, day-to-day, person-to-person. As the needlepoint Grandma Irene hung in her kitchen read:**

**I shall walk through this world but once, and any good I  
may do, let me do it now, for I shall not walk  
this way again.**

**At the end of my period of mourning, I called my Mikvah Lady to immerse again – but this time with a changed and renewed spirit, just as she had predicted. And then a few months later, I had the privilege of serving as the witness to my niece Jessica’s immersion, in honor of her becoming a Bat Mitzvah. And how utterly surprised, but joyful Grandma Irene, Aunt Roz and Mom would have been had they been here to witness it themselves -- not only given their own**



**skepticism of the practice, but since my brother had been one of those 60's rebels who rejected his Judaism in his youth.**

**So how poignant is it that the word mikveh is from the same root as the word for "hope." And indeed, on behalf of our family, we hope you will all consider reaching out to one of these remarkable women yourselves. You'll be surprised too by the transformational power of entering and leaving living waters, especially with their gracious guidance and caring. So please join us in honoring Lee Apple, Sandy Berkowitz, Mina Saidel, and Karen Wine as this year's Irene Zehman Volunteer honorees.**