

IRENE ZEHMAN VOLUNTEER AWARD
May 14, 2007

Hello. And Shalom.

I am Charna Sherman, and I am one of the lucky granddaughters of Irene Ratner Zehman. And I am lucky to be here with so many other family members whose lives were also blessed by being related to her. They include my mother, Judy Sherman, my cousin, Nancy Wolf, and my daughter, Sydney Silverstein, and the two tables seated in the front. You all know them. Will all of the family please stand.

For too many years in a row, Nancy and I have had to start our remarks about this award by first pausing to remember the loss of yet another of the truly great Ratner women. But thank G-d . . . not this year.

In fact, this year, we have been blessed by the opposite: births galore! Mostly boys, but a few girls. Even Aunt Betty's lone granddaughter from her four sons finally this year begat the first great granddaughter of this Ratner line.

And technically, even I'm a grandmother this year. For the second time, actually: since my husband's eldest daughter just gave birth to Georgia Bee Rainey -- you know, of the plantation Raineys from Brooklyn.

I have to admit that I just cringed the first time the title of “grandmother” was bestowed on me. But once a newborn arrives, it only takes an instant to fall in love. It’s just like that line in that Tom Cruise movie: “You had me at hello.”

But as those of us who have been privileged with the blessing of children and grandchildren know too well, raising children takes a lot more than just love. In my recent visit with Georgia Bee and her 3½ year-old brother Finn, I was overwhelmed by flashbacks of the utter physical and emotional exhaustion that goes hand in hand with the exhilaration of raising children.

It was one of those moments when I gave thanks -- again -- to what a difference it has made in my life that my mother has been so involved and so helpful in raising my kids. And I remember the same was true when I was a young girl: my grandmother, and all of my aunts and great aunts were always there to pitch in.

Although this is not a moment for politics, Hilary Clinton at least got it right when she took the stand that “it takes a village.” Indeed, that is not only the legacy that my grandmother and her sisters engrained in us, but the very message that G-d conveyed to Abraham when he agreed to save Sodom and

Gomorraah, but only if Abraham could find ten worthy people who lived there. It is why as a people, we require a minyan . . . for births, for daily prayer and even upon our deaths. The very heart of our religion -- of the promise of redemption for each of us -- hinges on our all pitching in, as a community, to improve our world together.

This core Jewish tenet is what imbued my grandmother's life with purpose, with limitless energy, and with great joy. It is what today's award in her memory honors. Our beloved Irene Zehman was one of those rare people who truly took to heart, every day of her life, reaching out beyond her own family to address the needs of the families, as it were, of her village. And she did so most often in the quietest and most unsung of ways that matter most: as the model hands-on volunteer. She was always doing for those in need around her . . . whether it was sewing, or cooking, or organizing whatever effort was necessary to lend a helping hand.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise that when she died, the only thing in her estate that my Aunt Rozzy and mother fought over was the needlepoint that hung in her kitchen that so encapsulated her life's calling:

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.

We are so pleased that today's award honors a life's work by another great hands-on pioneer. And what is even more meaningful is that her contributions not only resemble my grandmother's in ways that would have been so familiar to her, but also in ways she probably could never have anticipated.

For all intents and purposes, my grandmother was the village parent-in-a-pinch. But, she was not from a generation of wives that worked. What struck the Committee so was how today's awardee had the vision to carry forward my grandmother's traditions to a new generation. As an innovator and co-founder of the Heights Parent Center, she grasped, before many, the pressures two working parents add to the already stressful challenge of raising children, let alone often times far from "home" and the support of an extended family. And the numbers alone are testament to the impact of her visionary efforts: from 126 families when its doors opened in 1982 to now over 2500 families annually.

But like Irene Zehman, our awardee also wasn't satisfied with reaching out just to familiar families in the backyard. My mother always recounts how my grandmother, during World War II, organized the shipping of kosher salamis to soldiers overseas . . . including setting up the neighborhood assembly line in her basement for first dipping them in wax to preserve them.

It should be ever-present in our mind, every day, that we are now again at war . . . and perhaps even world war of a different kind. But long before President Bush declared war on terror, our awardee saw that the promise of peace in a turbulent world lied in the same greeting she had offered to thousands of families in her village. As you'll hear, she has been the driving force of an extraordinary project -- Hello Israel -- that, at its core, is built on the very same and simple tradition of starting by saying hello to the family next door. But for this project, she took the message on the road, outside her village and the familiar . . . to strangers in the next village, with their own preconceived perceptions and prejudices.

I started today with a movie reference, and I'll end on one. I just returned to Netflix Hollywood's most recent rendition of the biblical story of Babel . . . and the chilling depiction of the sheer chaos the Bible warns is sure to result from miscommunication, and in turn, misunderstanding. But I was

reminded why the Bible starts first with a husband and wife learning to communicate and take responsibility for each other; then siblings; then tribes; and then nations. Because the Bible teaches us that the key to resolving conflict in each of these relationships is the same: reaching out to say hello in a way that can be understood, and asking to help. That is how the Bible instructs us to repair our world . . . one good deed at a time, and together as a community. That is “T’kun Olam.”

That was Irene Zehman’s legacy: in our family, in our village, and even beyond. And it is precisely because today’s awardee so exemplifies the continuing relevance of that legacy that the Awards Committee this year quickly concluded that she “had us at Hello.”