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JEWISH WOMEN, DIVAS or HEROINES?

By Marge DiGalbo

Esther The Savior of the Jewish People. The story of Esther is important to us as Esther emphasizes the power of God instructing us that we should use our blessing to help others. The moral of the story of Esther is to always do the right thing, using the influence and possessions you have to help others.

The book of Esther offers us an example of how imperfect, yet faithful, people can continue to live faithfully and love others. In fact, the name Esther in Hebrew means peace, joy, generosity and Justice. Yes, this story is about Esther who saves her people from Haman who planned to eliminate all Jews in Persia. She is definitely a heroine. She stepped out of her comfort zone to tell the King of Haman's plan, thereby saving all her people from execution.

We can't ignore that before Esther there was Queen Vashti who said no to a group of very powerful men, including her husband, the king, at a time when denying her husband's request to dance for him and his drunken friends could have cost her her life. Although not detailed it is believed she was banished. Or maybe executed. Was Vashti being a Diva by refusing to dance for the king and his drunken buddies or, was she a role model of empowerment for the other women and children of Persia?

Another good lesson for girls (**women?**) is their right to resist pressure and say a firm NO when being pushed to do something they are uncomfortable with. Vashti was truly a strong woman who teaches us of integrity and courage. So, Was Vashti a Diva or Heroine

for refusing the king's request at a time when just being in a room with men who weren't her husband could have gotten her stoned? To dance for him and his company so he could show off her beauty? I personally think she was a strong woman who was way ahead of her time in demanding her rights at a time when it was unheard of to say no to your husband let alone the king. I think she was definitely a heroine.

I've been fortunate to have had, and known, many strong assertive Jewish women, including my great grandmother, my grandmother and my mother. But the story I want to tell you is about my friend Alice Friedlein Holloway's mother, Toni. In the 1930s, at about 18 years old, she was kicked out of nursing school in Munich, because she was Jewish. In the 1930s, Toni's father Alfred Selz, a lawyer and bank manager, was dismissed from BMW's Board of Directors, because he was Jewish. At some time soon after, Toni's mother was put on a train to a Nazi camp in Lithuania. Because she was Jewish. It is assumed the people on the train were shot, her final demise was never fully established.

Back to our story. Toni's father arranged for her to leave Germany. Toni joined the British Women's Corp. and served in the military until the end of the war. Because of her service, she was granted British citizenship, which she retained for life, mostly in appreciation and gratitude, for all England had done for her as a German refugee. I see Toni as a true heroine.

Toni survived the Nazis who had forced her out of Germany and permanently changed her family. After the war, Toni accepted a job offer and relocated to Rhodesia, which is now Zimbabwe. There she met Oscar Friedlein, another Holocaust survivor. In Germany, he had received information the Nazis were looking for him and his brother. Because they were Jewish. One Sunday afternoon, they walked out of Germany and eventually made their way to

Zimbabwe. Oscar and Toni were married in 1950 and raised their 2 daughters, Alice and Monica, in Zimbabwe. In 1964, then-Rhodesia declared independence from the United Kingdom. Seeing events in other countries on the African continent, Oscar and Toni, decided it was time to emigrate to insure a stronger future for their two daughters.

So, for the third time, Toni gave up the life she has built, and moved to another country. On a third new continent. Toni and Oscar each had a sibling in the New York City area and arrived in July, 1964. They were visiting a cousin, who was a Rabbi, in Connecticut, and he offered to help them find a home and work. Liking CT more than NY city, they moved to Hartford, Ct.

The family was settling in to their new life in the US. In 1968, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated and many weeks of unrest, including riots, followed in Hartford neighborhoods. Again, for the sake of their daughters, Oscar and Toni decided it was time to move again. For the fourth time in Toni's life.

This move was, thankfully, only a short distance. Alice enrolled in West Hartford's Hall High School in 11th grade where I was a junior. The school was forming teams for girls' field hockey. I was persuaded to join 7 other girls on a team called "The Losers." But we were far from losers! We won many of the field hockey games we played. We continued to play intermural volleyball, and softball. Some of us also played basketball. For obvious reasons I DID NOT play basketball.

Throughout high school we remained close friends. These 8 girls came from very different backgrounds: 4 of us Jewish, an Irish Catholic, a French Catholic, a British-Irish Protestant Swede, and Kay, a British Scot who was the first UU I ever met. This unlikely bunch became lifelong friends. Together we participated in sports,

the school shows, going to dances, having sleepovers all while supporting each other. After graduation we all went off to college.

Back then you weren't asked "are you going to college?" but "where are you going to college?" It was expected you would continue your education. 3 of the girls went to Russell Sage in NY, Sharon and I were in the Boston area; Patty went Gettysburg, Kay to Hollins College and Lauri went to Randolph Macon in Va. We continued to see each other over school and summer vacations. Yes, we did write letters to each other, but had an occasional phone call because, back then, it was very expensive to call.

After graduation, we would see each other now and then, and for some of us, we went long periods of time without connecting. We were all busy with our own lives. We were all professional women working in our chosen careers: 3 teachers, a nurse, a brain injury vocational therapist, an IT specialist, a fundraiser for Jewish Organizations, a pharmacy marketing specialist, and even an aerobic and dancer instructor. We celebrated at each other's weddings, and rejoiced at the births of our children and grandchildren. We cried and supported each other at the loss of 15 of our 16 parents, the death of one friend's husband and brother, my sister's passing, and then at the loss one of our own group, our dear sweet Kay at a way-too-early age.

My best friend Lauri met Bob's brother at our wedding. She became my S-I-L. Her father met my aunt at our wedding and they married. Talk about relationships. My best friend became my cousin/S-I-L. Sounds strange but it works really well for us. She is a big part of our family. We've always have been there supporting each other and sharing the joys, sorrows, and everyday struggles; and now the aches and pains we are starting to experience as we try to age gracefully.

Today, with the day to day of our lives, and 3 of us having moved to Florida, the frequency of our in-person get-togethers is much less often, but we remain close and stay in touch. During the pandemic, the 7 of us began ZOOMing monthly, and we continue to zoom regularly. We get together in person whenever Alice, Sharon and/or I are back in the northeast, or when the 3 of us in Florida can get together. As recently as this past Thanksgiving, while we were back home in CT, we had a 3 hour lunch where we talked and laughed so much my face hurt afterwards.

In fact, we Zoomed this past Thursday where I rehearsed today's message with them. Of course, as only good friends will do for you, they made several corrections for me. We had a wonderful discussion about how fortunate we are to have this special bond. Today, we are 7 strong independent retired professional women who have maintained this special relationship for more than 50 years! We have supported each other each other thru everything life has presented. We have been involved in everything from helping to start a foundation that raises money for pancreatic cancer research and treatment, speaking on the national stage about brain injury, coaching youth sports, and starting a new synagogue school. We work at the polls on election day, feed the homeless and are involved in many other causes. Not a Diva in the bunch! Maybe a Jewish princess or 2, ok maybe 3, but in my opinion Heroines All. For this we thank the heroines in our lives who taught us the importance of close family and friendship ties, of giving back that which we are so fortunate to have, and to pay it forward.

As instructed in the story of Esther, we are paying our blessings and possessions forward to help our families. To my sons, Marc and Scott, to my friends' kiddos Kate, Sarah, & Adam, Rachel, Julie, & Ashley. And to our grandkids, Kayla and Connor. As well as Asher and Sharon's other grands, Collette, Jamie (?) and all the other grandchildren yet to come. To our communities and our synagogues,

churches, and all the organizations that we believe in, and support. We are teaching the next generation how important it is to pay it forward and to be there for each other.

Thank you for letting me share our story with you.

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim.

I do have a joke today!

A Jewish father was very troubled by the way his son turned out so he went to see his rabbi about it.

“Rabbi, I brought him up in the faith, gave him a very expensive bar mitzvah, and it cost me a fortune to educate him. Then last week, he decided to become a Christian. Rabbi, where did I go wrong?”

The Rabbi stroked his beard and said, “Funny you should come and ask me this. I, too, brought up my son in the faith, sending him to university. It cost me a fortune. Then one day he says to me he wants to be a Christian.”

“What did you do?” asked the man.

“I turned to God for the answer,” replied the Rabbi.

“What did God say?” asked the man.

The Rabbi replied, “Funny you should come to me.”