

Obituary: Suzanne Wells Sabath (1937-2021)



Suzanne Wells Sabath (Zipporah Sarah bat Lev v'Sura Ginendle) died on Monday, August 23, 2021 with her daughter Rachel by her side. Born in New Haven, CT to Louis Wells and Shirley Lindenberg Wells, Suzanne was an alumna of Harvard (Radcliffe) College and earned a masters degree at Yale University. While raising three small children she went to law school at Boston University and practiced for many years in Minneapolis, MN. She was a trained classical pianist, an avid reader, and active in working toward women's equal rights and reproductive freedom. She is survived by her three daughters,

Natasha Shabat, Joanna Sabath, and Rabbi Rachel (Rabbi Ofer) Sabath Beit-Halachmi, as well as three grandchildren. Suzanne is also survived by two older brothers, Dr. Herb (Beth) Wells and Dr. Allan (Raquel) Wells.

Contributions in memory of Suzanne Wells Sabath can be made to NARAL-
<https://www.prochoiceamerica.org/> and/or to Har Sinai-Oheb Shalom Congregation:
<https://www.hsosc-baltimore.org/give>.

Eulogy: The 'Torah' of My Mother: In Loving Memory of Suzanne Wells Sabath z"l (1937-2021)

My mother, Suzanne Reillert Wells Sabath, was as filled with wisdom as she was with love. She was a brilliant, fun, resilient, and – most of all – an extraordinarily loving and generous person. A graduate of Harvard College, Yale University and Boston University Law School, a concert pianist and a beautiful woman, my Imah was also one of the most humble, brave, loving and generous people I have ever known.

Whether she was honoring her own parents or her older brothers or devoting herself to her husband, her daughters, her nieces and nephews, and then three grandchildren, she embodied warmth, kindness, honesty, patience, acceptance and love. Unconditional love.



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She was always so much smarter than she let on, but she never wanted anybody to feel dumb or lesser around her. She was never arrogant nor was she publicly prideful about her talents or professional and social justice achievements. It was always about other people.

Even when she was disappointed in how another person behaved or what was happening in the world, it was baffling to me how she could pivot and focus on figuring out what needed to be done to fix the situation or help another person. No matter how disappointed or frustrated she was by the misbehavior of someone in our home, in her office, at the legislature or in a court room, she had a stunning capacity to listen, make her case, and then move on to the next matter at hand. I admit that at times I found this to be frustrating. The rest of us would keep arguing about something large or



small but she tried to model how one could disagree but keep moving forward together.

Whenever I complained to her about how people in my world or in the world at large were acting poorly or acting with what I thought was great stupidity, I would repeatedly ask her: “Don’t they know better? Aren’t they smarter than that?!” She nearly

always had the same response: “When good, smart people do stupid things you know that there must be great forces at work.”

“Seriously? How does that help?!” But as I got older, I came to see how often this was indeed the case: “when good, smart people do stupid things you know that there must be great forces at work.”

Despite — or because of — the “great forces at work” in the world, she led me to believe that I could achieve anything. In her mind she didn’t think it was absurd when I shared that I wanted to be like Dorothy Hamill, or Golda Meir. She lovingly encouraged me and said I could achieve any of it. In fact, why not work toward all these goals?? Recently I’ve found myself suggesting the same sort of absurd things to our children. The world awaits all that they want to do and be. May they, too, have the opportunity to follow

their hearts and minds into a life of meaningful service to humanity. That's our "family business."

My Imah fought for and raised us into what she believed would be a new world, a world in which women could be anything—that there could and would be full equality for all people. I was nearly 18 years old before I learned that many Jews didn't think that a woman could or should be a Rabbi. Imagine my shock.



On more than one occasion as I got older I complained to her that she had lied to us. The truth — I learned — was that women weren't really equal in so many arenas; most women in the world couldn't (and many still can't) achieve their full potential or live self-determined lives, much less have autonomy over their own bodies. Today there are still so many people in the world who treat others — those different from themselves — as lesser, less than equal. Her work to ensure equality for all women was, as ours still is, to finish the "unfinished business of the 20th century." Women's full equality in every arena, in every country. As impossible as that task might have seemed, she simply believed and taught and modeled and worked for what was right. Her consistent and clear values were always present. As was her love.

During my third year of rabbinic school I shared with her that I was overwhelmed by what a few families were going through in the congregation where I was a student rabbi. I couldn't share any of the details except that despite my training and the wisdom of my mentors, I didn't know how to help them. I visited with them, prayed with them, helped them make hard decisions according to Jewish values— I did everything 'according to the book,' but still felt that I was failing them. My mom listened to me carefully and then reminded me of a simple human truth, one of the wisest things that anybody has ever taught: "Remember that most people really just want to be heard; they need you to listen to them without judgement, with kindness and understanding. They need your listening ear and open heart to help them find healing."

One summer after I'd been a rabbi for about nine years, my mother joined me on Nantucket Island where I served as the rabbi during the high season for more than a decade, while Ofer stayed in Israel to serve his own Congregation.

She came to Nantucket for two weeks so she could help me with our little girl— her granddaughter, Tehillah, who was then about 3 years old— during the high holy days. From the day I became a parent myself, and as I nursed each baby, and felt my heart ever expanding with love, I began to have a sense of the kind of fierce love that drove her to work so hard to provide the safest, best and most joyful life for us she could. Only after I became a mother myself did I begin to understand what that must have entailed. What she gave. And the depth of her love.

During many exhausting days and nights before and since, she was my faithful editor. She edited many of my articles, lectures, and especially my sermons. With such intelligence, precision and gentle but serious critique, she made each one better, stronger, clearer, and yes, shorter.



Late one Friday night, when I confided in her that I had worked so hard on a sermon but really couldn't tell from the faces of the congregants whether or not it was well-received, understood or even appreciated, she gently told me it was interesting but perhaps a bit long.

Then she taught me something that I confess I hadn't considered til that moment but I have kept in mind ever since: "Older people don't always smile on the outside even if they are smiling inside." Frustrated, I responded with "What!?" She then simply explained that "sometimes older people have difficulties of their own and can't always be positive; besides which, the muscles in their faces droop over time and with gravity turn downward, so one shouldn't take that as a frown but rather understand that it's just their stage in life."

A couple of years later, she came to Israel to help us get some sleep when little Yedidya was born. And in the six months that followed, while I nursed

Yedidya, mothered Tehillah, and tried to be the best rebbetzin and wife to Ofer that I could be while utterly sleep deprived, I learned that I had to finally finish my dissertation. With total commitment night and day, my mother encouraged me and as I sent her chapter by chapter, footnotes and bibliographies, she edited the whole dissertation, twice. When I later flew with nursing Yedidya to run a conference in New York, and then to defend the dissertation, she flew from Minneapolis to meet us there to spend precious time with her only grandchildren and to celebrate with us. Looking back, what was I thinking?? I realize that it was insane to attempt to work full time, lead two international departments, nurse a baby, mother a little girl, be a good rabbi, wife and rebbetzin, and attempt to finish writing a doctoral dissertation. What made me think that such a feat was even possible?? She did.

At the age of 35, with three little girls at home, she began law school and became a lawyer, while being a dedicated doctor's wife, a loving daughter and sister, and of course continuing to fight for equal rights wherever and whenever possible. All this, mind you was in the early 1970s when she had essentially no role models and little support. But, as a senator she worked for wrote in a letter of recommendation for her application to law school, she had the kind of drive, diplomacy, ethics and intelligence to be a great lawyer. She was inspired and profoundly affected by the new 'Torah' of feminism of her generation. There was so much hope and possibility for change and she wanted to help lead it.

Later in life, from a hospital bed, she uttered one of the only theological statements I ever heard her say. Facing a minor surgery, I heard she was scared, so I flew from New York (as I later did from Israel or Cincinnati and most recently from Baltimore) to be by her side. She said and then asked me to write it on the whiteboard of her hospital room for every medical teammate to see, claiming that she learned it from her mother (who's lineage I just learned can be traced back ten (!!)) generations: "You should trust in God and tie your camel to a tree." In other words, go ahead and do all this irrational ritual —like saying prayers for healing— but be sure to go to the doctor and do everything in your power to protect yourself and those you love. I still think it's a very sound and succinct theology: "Trust in God and tie your camel to a tree."

She passionately loved music, especially classical piano music and was constantly playing the piano — as recently as about a month ago — Bach, Chopin, Schubert, Beethoven and Mozart. She passed that love on to all of us. She also loved art, especially Monet and Picasso; she loved opera and ballet, especially Mikhail Baryshnikov. She was constantly reading and loved literature, especially the classics. Both she and my father loved literature so much that they named each of their children after characters in great Russian novels. When we fell in love with horses, she helped us go to horseback riding camp. When we fell in love with ice-skating (yes, I really did want to be Dorothy Hamill) she drove us and



paid for as many private ice-skating lessons as possible, and helped make the costumes for elaborate ice-skating productions and endless competitions.

She especially loved the sea, having grown up in Connecticut and spending most of her adult life in Boston. After we moved to Minnesota, she would often tell us that she felt “landlocked.” Minnesota—the land of 10,000 lakes—and she felt landlocked!? Yes, she replied. “I need that salty wind and the sound of the waves of the Atlantic.”

When she visited me and her new son-in-law, Ofer, in Israel and learned that he grew up — and his parents still lived — within yards of the Mediterranean Sea, she decided that that sea despite its very different salt, sand, and wind would do just fine. It was for her, as she often said about food, simply scrumptious.

My Imah loved flowers, especially lilacs and daffodils. Now as a working mother of three kids myself, I can’t fully understand how she also managed



to love and help us care for all the pets we had, including the many fish, mice, gerbils and guinea pigs, cats and even our adorable puppy but then huge German Shepherd named "Newton." Yes, I thought he was named after the cookie Fig Newton but of course was named after Sir Isaac Newton. She let us have just about any pet we wanted as long as we would love them and take care of them and allow them to be as free as possible.

Once, when I really wanted to get a bird, she said I couldn't. I was stunned but when I repeatedly asked her why we could have all of these other animals but not a bird, she finally simply explained that she just couldn't bear to see a bird, meant to fly free, in a cage.

In the beginning and in the end, she was all about justice and love. Unconditional love. There is, ultimately, no greater 'Torah' than that.

May her life continue to lead to many blessings.
Zichrona livracha....