



On My Mother's Shoulders

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I am a *baalas teshuvah* and proud of it. (I do seem to announce that quite often.) Living in Southern California means encountering *shluchim* on every street corner, most coming from a lineage of esteemed Rabbis and Rebbetzins. They often share inspiring stories of their ancestors who escaped Soviet Russia or survived the Holocaust—narratives which can be found in every issue of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*.

When I read these stories, I cannot help but feel sad. My ancestors remain unknown, their stories unwritten.

Here is the little I do know:

My maternal grandparents immigrated to the United States between 1908 and 1911 from Russia. This coincided with a notable surge in Jewish migration from Russia, driven by deteriorating conditions stemming from the May Laws. These laws severely curtailed Jewish rights and freedoms in Russia, particularly in areas such as education, employment, and land ownership.

My maternal grandfather founded his picture-framing business in Boston. Boston offered a less chaotic environment compared to New York, but it lacked large synagogues and yeshivas, making it less appealing to religious Jewish immigrants. My grandparents managed to maintain kosher and Shabbos in their home but enrolled all their children in public schools.

In contrast, my paternal grandparents arrived in this country in 1910 from Baku and Odessa. They were White Russians who disliked the Bolsheviks and identified as Jews by race rather than religious practice. Despite being



Mom as a child.

a *kohen*, my grandfather didn't follow any organized religion and my father proclaimed himself an atheist.

This is why, dear readers, when I first became Torah-observant, I struggled with identifying which aspects of my "*yichus*" I could pass down to my descendants.

My mother didn't share much of her history and I was foolish enough not to ask. After her passing in 2003, I discovered a treasure: A journal she had written at 15 years old. Its clarity and purity impressed me, revealing how little I knew about my mother and the values she held dear.

My mother, Mildred Belle Miller (Mina Baila), was born on February 23, 1911. A true patriot, she shared her birthday with George Washington.

At the tender age of eight, she, her 12-year-old brother, and their six-month-old baby sister lost their mother to the Spanish flu pandemic. As my mother wrote in her journal, "My dear and beloved mother passed out of existence into a far and sweeter land." Her father married again to keep their small family together. My mother grew to love and respect her stepmother Tova.

In her journal, my mother expressed joy in babysitting her siblings so that her parents could have a night out.

←My mother, Mildred Belle Miller, lighting Shabbos candles.



Mom and me, 1948.

Despite having more responsibilities than her peers, she took pride in her trustworthiness and capability. As a young woman, she attended secretarial school and excelled as the fastest shorthand-writer and typist in her class.

My father initially pursued an art degree. He then shifted careers to fashion design—a more practical choice to support a family. My parents married in 1933, amid the Depression. Due to financial constraints, they lived with my paternal grandparents.

On the night of my parents' 26th anniversary, my father moved out of the house without warning. The reasons behind my father's departure remain unclear; perhaps he sought a life he never had. Despite these hardships, my mother maintained a constant smile, and if she cried, I never witnessed it.



Grandma Tova and me.



Mom and me, 1993.

Initiating a divorce after five years, my mother embarked on a new chapter of her life. She moved out of her mother-in-law's house and secured her first apartment. She furnished and decorated it, marking a significant turning point in her life. She took a bold step toward independence by purchasing her first car at the age of 60. The initial drive from the car dealer to our new house was eventful, with me running several red lights

to keep up with her. She continued driving well into her 80s until her car was stolen. She accused me of orchestrating the theft to keep her off the road. I assured her that I had no part in it, although the mystery of the stolen car remains unsolved.

My mother demonstrated foresight by placing her name on a subsidized Boston Housing list well in advance of old age. This strategic move ensured a seamless transition. Throughout her life, my mother consistently exhibited a keen sense of timing and decision-making. I attribute this to her innate trust in Hashem. For example, she was the sole supporter of my decision to marry my husband, Isser Chaim, when I was 16 and he was 19. I believe she intuited that we would build a Torah-true family.



The three Minas (the fourth wasn't born yet).

← Mom with her first two great-grandchildren, Ari Cadaner and Chasya Fridman.



The fourth Mina: Mina Baila Cadaner.

One time, I went with my mother to her Reform synagogue. (At the time I did not know this was not allowed.) When the leader of the congregation handed her a *Sefer Torah* to hold, I couldn't help but make a disrespectful comment about the proceedings. Swiftly, she contacted my boss, Rabbi Chaim Ciment, *a"h*, and instructed him to give me a lesson on honoring one's parents.



Mom and her prince, my son Naftali, 1992

Becoming a mother myself brought forth a revelation: Tova, the grandmother I knew and loved, wasn't my biological grandmother! I never knew my mother's biological mother had passed away when she was a child. In her characteristic manner, unpleasant memories were seamlessly compartmentalized. This was her way of moving forward. Years later, when my oldest daughter named her second daughter after her step-grandmother, Tova, she was overjoyed.

Shortly after my mother's 90th birthday, her health began to rapidly decline. My family had recently moved to New York, and we invited her to live with us. In her spunky manner, she replied, "Your noisy home? Over my dead body!"

My mother's final move was to the Hebrew Rehabilitation Center of Boston. Hebrew Rehab stood out as a leader in geriatric research, offering a range of amenities including a beautiful shul, a library, and an art center, and my mother was happy there. My mother, being a native Bostonian, fostered connections with friends from various stages of her life, including women from her elementary school days.

On the 21st of Elul, 2003, my mother passed away in her sleep. Her death was serene, as if she had orchestrated it. Although we miss her daily, we find solace in the belief that she watches over us from *Shamayim*. As I write this, my son Naftali—her little prince—is fighting as a volunteer in the IDF. He flew to Israel immediately after the events of October 7th. I do not worry, knowing his grandmother stands by Hashem's side, protecting him.

As I reflect on my mother's resilience and her positivity in the face of adversity, I've come to realize that, for her, the glass wasn't half empty or half full—there simply was no glass. She never asked herself whether something was good for her or bad for her; whether she was happy or unhappy; she trusted that everything that happened was completely for the best. Although I did not always understand her optimism, I grew to appreciate it.

Despite not participating in religious ceremonies, my mother's intrinsic strength and determination testified to a profound faith in Hashem. I'm certain she engaged in frequent conversations with Him, perhaps even including a few complaints about me along the way.

My mother never learned about *tznius*, yet she embodied modesty. She was naturally classy and maintained impeccable grooming. She designed her own clothes and made sure that her neckline and knees were not exposed. There was never a hole or a stain on her clothing, and she continued getting her hair professionally washed and set until she passed.



The last picture of Mom with Naftali, 2003.

Her approach to giving *tzedakah* was rooted in actions rather than words. From World War II until she was asked to stop at 75, she regularly donated blood. She also visited the local Veterans Hospital until she could no longer drive. She dedicated many hours, for many years, to volunteering as a secretary at Lubavitz Yeshiva in Boston, reflecting her commitment to making a tangible, positive impact in her community.

My mother's *yichus* began with her and this is priceless because it was innate. No one taught her what kind of a person or mother she should be. It was her character that shone through every hardship she experienced. She is the giant upon whose shoulders I try to live.

Most of my granddaughters and great-granddaughters are named after great Rebbetzins, but there are four precious little girls named after her: Mina Baila Cadaner (Crown Heights), Mina Leba Muchnik (Camarillo, CA), Mina Luna Barrocas (Jacksonville, Florida), and Mina Baila Cadaner (Lawndale, CA).

I will tell these girls about their namesake and hope that they will follow in her footsteps. Her legacy, characterized by perseverance, modesty, and unwavering spirit, serves as a guiding light for generations to come. ❀

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