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Rogers State University

In Memory of Sergeant Maurice Meyer and Irvin Frank

Friends, let me tell you a little bit about why you and I are here today, because I believe that this story is an interesting slice of American and Jewish history.

The Oklahoma Military Academy, which was established in 1919 on the campus of what was then the Eastern University Preparatory School, had forty high school cadets enrolled in military academy training. The first class of cadets lived in tents and learned to “rough it” on a high ridge overlooking the city of Claremore. In 1920, they moved into new barracks.

They chose to call these the Maurice Meyer Barracks, and the Class of 1920 dedicated their yearbook, *The Vedette*, “To Maurice Meyer who gave his life leading the raid for a sick comrade on foreign battlefields.” Sergeant Meyer had served with distinction as an officer, was mortally wounded by German shrapnel in France and died on September 24, 1918. Or reasons we still do not know, Maurice Meyer’s body was not returned to this country until May, 1922, when his remains were buried. Please recall that in the interim, one of this nation’s worst race riots occurred not that far from this peaceful spot.

Maurice Meyer was descended from immigrants who had come to the United States during the 19th century. Maurice’s grandparents came from Germany, seeking greater opportunity. For the same reason, his father, Leo Meyer, journeyed from Brooklyn to Texas at the tender age of sixteen. Subsequently, Leo moved to Oklahoma where he helped found the first Jewish congregation in the city of Guthrie. Leo Meyer, Maurice’s father, went on to become an important figure in state politics, a successful businessman, and a leader of Tulsa’s Jewish community.

Leo Meyer was the first mayor of Sayre, Oklahoma; was Oklahoma’s very first Secretary of State from 1907 to 1911; and then served as State Auditor from 1911 to 1913. He also was the seventh president of Temple Israel and served longer as our congregation’s Honorary President – from 1945 to 1964 – than any other person in the history of our congregation. Clearly, those who chose to name the barracks – and later the beautiful building, Meyer Hall – knew that the young man they were honoring was a Jew.

On the other hand, the Tulsa Tribune, describing the funeral of Sergeant Meyer, referred to “Reverend Joseph Blatt of Oklahoma City” and wrote, “following the service at the church.” Well, Temple Israel was not a church then and is not now, and it was Rabbi Joseph Blatt who came from Oklahoma City, because the Temple did not have its own resident rabbi at that time. General Understanding of “the other” was still somewhat limited.

Yet Maurice Meyer’s heroism must have been well known in this corner of Oklahoma. After the funeral service at Temple Israel’s first site in downtown Tulsa, Meyer’s body was borne through downtown Tulsa on a gun carriage draped with an American flag. Caissons from the Oklahoma Military Academy escorted the body to Rose Hill Cemetery in what is still believed to be the largest military funeral ever held in Tulsa.

The Meyer Family is an example of the pioneers who built good lives and good communities out of nothing but high hopes and hard work. It is the story of tens of millions of immigrants to this great country. Like every religious, racial or ethnic minority, the Meyers experienced bigotry; yet like so many who have chosen to make this country their home, they did not allow prejudice and intolerance to spoil their dreams. They trusted that our land could truly be one of freedom and justice for all, and their energetic optimism helped to make it so. Nor did they take their new lives for granted. Maurice Meyer was fully prepared to make the costliest of sacrifices on behalf of his country.

For some reason, there seems almost to have been a curtain of silence around the life of Maurice Meyer. Perhaps his parents were just so deeply grieved by his tragic death that for years they could not and did not speak about him. For example, we have a memorial board at Temple which lists the names of those three young men of our Temple Family who died in World War II, but there is no mention of Maurice Meyer.

So, some of this history is now known today because of Leo Meyer's grandson and Sergeant Maurice Meyer's nephew, Irv Frank. Irv was one of the most visionary leaders it was my privilege to know and work with. He served, like his grandfather Leo, the Temple and the Tulsa Jewish community. Irv was a President of Temple Israel from 1972 to 1974; the farsighted spirit behind the Zarrow Campus and the building of the Tulsa Jewish Community Center; President of the Tulsa Jewish community and the general community for decades. Irv died in February, 2008.

Let me simply give you a snapshot of the large playing field on which Irv Frank lived his life: Leadership positions at Hillcrest Medical Center, the National Conference for Community and Justice. From 1980 to 1987, Irv held a presidential appointment to the United States Memorial Museum council. These were the years when the museum in Washington was conceived, planned and built.

Irv always had a sense of heritage and appreciated the deep roots that his family had in this state and his own father's immigrant origins. So, one day, as he was driving back from his home on Grand Lake, Irv decided to see what he understood was "Meyer Hall" on the campus of Rogers State University in Claremore. It was a puzzle piece which he needed to put in place in his own family history. Having located the building on this campus, Irv then wanted to know what was being done to preserve this place. Was there an endowment for the upkeep of Meyer Hall? Irv understood that it costs money to preserve and maintain buildings. So, Irv started an endowment for Meyer Hall.

Then, because of this man's unique vision, Irv looked around and could see that the Oklahoma Military Academy had become an important four-year state institution of higher learning. Rogers State University proudly houses the Oklahoma Military Academy Museum, because nobody wants those origins to be forgotten. They are an important part of Oklahoma history. But, at the

same time, there are students coming to attend more course offerings than ever before here. He would have been impressed with the recent formation of your International Student Association.

So, Irv asked, as he so often did, "What can I do to help?" And Irv decided on an annual lectureship on the topic of diversity, of encouraging pluralism, cooperation, and bringing people together, Irv Frank's philosophy. Fortunately, Dr. Joe Wiley, then RSU President, and Dr. Danette Boyle recognized the possibilities of this opportunity which Irv was offering.

It was my great honor and privilege to deliver the inaugural Maurice Meyer Lecture in March of 2000, and I want you to know that in June, 2001, we dedicated a new memorial board at Temple Israel honoring the memory of Sergeant Maurice Meyer. I said at that time: "We dedicate this board in appreciation for all those who lived and died defending freedom and democracy and with the prayer that we, their survivors, will be able to live our lives in peace. Surrounded by those who, recognizing that differences will always exist, cherish the variety that our neighbors represent, celebrate the rich diversity of this world and appreciate that we are all brothers and sisters, God's children."

So, we are really here today, friends, because of two people, Sergeant Maurice Meyer and his nephew, Irvin Frank. As we would say in our Jewish tradition, *zichronam I'ivracha*, may their memories be a blessing. And it is in their memory that I offer this closing story. It is one of my very favorites.

Two brothers lived long ago on the site of old Jerusalem. They were both farmers and they tilled the land which they had inherited from their father. The older brother was unmarried and lived alone; the younger was married and lived with his wife and four children. The brothers loved each other dearly and did not want to divide up the fields; both plowed, planted and harvested the crop together and shared equally in the produce of the earth.

One night during harvest time, the older brother laid down to sleep and his thoughts were troubled. "Here I am, all alone, with no wife and no children," he told himself. "I do not have to feed or clothe anyone but myself, but my brother has the responsibility of a family. Is it right that we share our harvest equally? His needs are much greater than mine."

So at midnight, he arose and took a pile of sheaves from his crop, carried them to his brother's field, and left them there. Then he returned to his tent quietly and went to sleep in peace.

That same night, his brother too could not sleep. He thought about his older brother. "Here I am." He said to himself, "When I grow old, my children will take care of me, but what will happen to my brother in his old age? Who will take care of his needs? It is not fair to divide the crops equally."

So he arose and took a load of sheaves and brought them to his brother's field and left them there. Then he returned home and went to sleep in peace.

When morning came, both brothers were amazed to find their crops exactly as they had the night before. They wondered what had happened, but did not say anything to each other about this strange event. The next night, each brother repeated his action. Then morning came, and again they were amazed to find the same number of sheaves as they had the left the night before.

On the third night, when each brother was carrying a pile of sheaves to the other, they met under a full moon at the top of the hill. Suddenly they understood. Overcome, they dropped their sheaves and embraced and cried tears of gratitude and happiness. God saw this act of love between brothers and blessed the place where they met that night. When, in the course of time, King Solomon built the First Temple, it was on that very spot that God's sanctuary was built.

We have but one field among us – this world entrusted to us by our mutual God. May this generation plant seeds of understanding and mutual respect, a true appreciation of diversity, so that as brothers and sisters genuinely concerned about each other, God will find is worthy to harvest sheaves of love and peace.