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EULOGY FOR MRS. ERNA
SONDHEIMER MICHAEL ע"ה

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Rabbi Norman Lamm
December 31, 1964

This is the moment we had feared, and which so many worked with such dedication and so valiantly to avoid, or at least ward off. But, in the words of Job, that man of suffering, "את אשר יגורתי יבא לי", "that which I had feared has come to pass."

This occasion is not an end, but a transition. For the family, it is a transition from the comforting knowledge of her presence to the grief that is inevitable in her absence. For her husband, especially, this is the transition from a long and arduous struggle fought on her behalf against a dread disease, to a period when, despite inevitable and inexorable physical defeat, he emerges with a moral victory. And for her, this is the transition between עולם הזה and עולם הבא , between this life and life hereafter.

Two Hebrew words can best describe the mood of this transition period: עם חשיכה . Literally that means "with the darkness," and figuratively it means "twilight." Indeed a sun has set, and it is still too early to feel the full impact of the bitter darkness, and certainly too soon to look for the redeeming rays of the moon and the stars.

Even more, this is a twilight not only for a day that is done, but of an entire week, symbolizing the life of Erna Sondheimer Michael. It is, in the language of our Rabbis, ערב שבת , the late Friday twilight, that period towards the end of the week when active life, the days of labor, have come to an end, and final peace, the eternal Sabbath מנוחה is about to arrive.

It is at a time of this sort that we recall the words of the Mishnah: שלשה דברים צריך אדם לאמר ערב שבת עם חשיכה , ~~that~~ during this period of twilight on Friday evenings, a man must say three things in his home: ערבתם , עשרתם , הדליקו את הנר : Have you given the tithe? Have you made the Eruv? Light the candle!

The home where Mrs. Michael was raised was a distinguished one in Israel. It was a kind of home where she was taught since childhood the three components of life that stand by a person to the very end, even until ערב שבת עם חשיכה . Together with her three beloved sisters -- good-hearted, gentle, generous -- she learned at the very beginning of the adventure of her life, from her father whom she so adored and from her loving mother, the principles of עשרתם , ערבתם , and הדליקו את הנר .

עשרתם : Have you given the tithe? A Jewish life must not be lived for one's self, but for others as well. Erna Michael was not only married to a philanthropist, but was one in her own right. Indeed, philanthropy became, for her husband and her, a joint project, which drew them even closer together. The roster of her charitable interests --and the testament to her noble memory in the impressive array of obituary notices in this morning's newspapers is only partial and incomplete -- reads like the outline of the history of our times. Her interests were wide and varied, but at all times authentic and intense: from Yeshiva University to schools throughout the world; from a love of Jewish art to loyalty to her spiritual home, The Jewish Center. Her benefactions spanned the globe and her goodness was felt in every corner of it.

But her major and special interest was the United Jewish Appeal. She put herself in the service of this sacred cause, cherishing its manifold works. She committed to it not only her substance and her time, but her considerable talents as an eloquent and charming and persuasive speaker whose services were sought far beyond the borders of New York City. But even beyond the communal framework, she gave of herself freely to all who were needy, and volunteered her assistance to those too embarrassed to ask for it. And each and every instance of her generosity was accompanied by her own inimitable graciousness which bespoke a concern for the dignity and sensitivity of the recipients of her kindness.

The second principle is that of ערוב, the making of an Eruv. This is a Jewish legal institution which requires, for certain purposes, that neighbors and friends decide to share their property, that they declare their domains as belonging to each other in common. Indeed Mrs. Michael knew this secret of the Eruv, that of sharing and companionship and friendship.

As a child she harbored a childhood ambition: the love of the theatre and of acting. With most people, such early loves are either doomed to frustration or are fulfilled professionally. With her, neither happened. Instead, as an adult she sublimated and elevated this childhood interest into a remarkable and marvelous capacity to identify with others. She salvaged its ethical content.

She was able to achieve not only sympathy but empathy, placing herself in the roles of others though they were of a different social standing, out of her class, caught up in needs and woes which were not her own. This striking capacity to feel for and with others grew out of her love for people, her genuine warmth and wholesome generosity.

She was a woman who treasured her own individuality; yet she also cherished the ideal of living with people, with society. She reconciled these two complementary ideals within the bosom of her own family. Here she found her greatest satisfactions and deepest loves. To her children she brought not only maternal love, but a wonderful, mature ability to listen; she thus became for them not only a loving mother during their childhood, but a trusted friend and confidante during their adulthood as well.

She was a superb homemaker. With keen intelligence she was able to understand and cater to the specific needs and sensitivities of all with whom she came in contact, from parents and sisters to husband and children.

But above all else, she opened her life and joined her destiny to her dearly beloved husband. And in this she demonstrated the third of the great precepts -- הדליקו את הנר -- kindle the lights!

Erna Michael kindled many lights and blessed many candles in her all too short lifetime. One of the most precious of these was the candle of piety and faith and Jewishness. נר ה' נשמת האדם -- the soul of man is the candle of the Lord. And how brightly her neshamah, her precious soul, burned --- indeed, it was like a candle of the Lord!

Her very appearance was radiant. Her queenly elegance and regal bearing were a delight to behold. When she entered a room, she illuminated it. It was about such people that our Sages exclaimed: וְיָ לְהָאִי שׁוּפְרָא דְּבִלְעָה אֶרֶצָא -- woe that such beauty must be swallowed by the earth!

Her innate character was a candle too, and it shone forth in consummate brilliance in the dignity with which she emerged from her final suffering. The mental anguish which she underwent made her not, as would seem natural, more bitter, but more sweet and considerate. She seemed to experience what the Rabbis intended when they averred that the olive oil chosen as fuel for the Menorah in the Sanctuary was made from שֶׁמֶן כֹּהֵן , that is, from pressed olives: and the Sages taught that the harder one beat the olives, the purer was the flame. So it was with her: Almost magically, the more she was subjected to suffering, to pain, to difficulty, the purer did her flame of character glow, the more compassionate was she towards all creatures, the more attentive towards her beloved husband who ministered to her with such tender devotion.

Indeed, she was at her most luminous brilliance and brightness in the way she and her husband illuminated each other's lives. At a young age she decided to join her fate to that of this brilliant young man of unusual distinction, attainment, and renown. From the very beginning, her outgoing, vivacious, and warm personality completed her husband's reflective, intellectual, disciplined

qualities. From that moment on, they were together like wick and flame. Or, better, they were together like two Sabbath candles, side by side, superbly serene in each other's presence, content, happy, bright, resplendent. Each was the light of the life of the other. Their devotion to each other was unlimited. If ever a marriage was made in heaven, this was it. Her desire to please him knew no bounds; from her very deathbed she would search for new ways to make him happy and please him. And Mr. Michael's undying love for his wife expressed itself during this last illness in the superhuman dedication with which he applied himself to her well-being, from his study of her medical condition to his superb sensitivity towards her psychological welfare. Together they developed an exemplary relationship which can only become a shining beacon for all others.

That infinitely precious candle has now burned itself out. But its light continues, never to fail, never to be extinguished.

Mr. Michael, Ernest, Jacqueline, Charles: if ever, in the days ahead, you feel dark and dismal and enshrouded in the gloom of grief, remember the shine and the radiance of her life and her character, and let the brilliance of her triumph of the spirit give you the comfort and the consolation, and yes, the gratitude to the Almighty, that you had the privilege of living in the presence of this exquisite "candle of the Lord."

If in this time of twilight, of ערוב היום , you weep for her sun that has set, remember that the afterglow continues forever, and that the intensity of its brilliance depends only upon your willingness to pattern your own lives on her luminous model.

On Sabbath eve, after having kindled the Sabbath lights, and before reciting the *אשח חיל*, that tribute by King Solomon in his Proverbs to Jewish motherhood, we greet the divine angels who come to our home on the Sabbath with the words *שלום עליכם* -- peace unto you, O ministering angels.

Now, unfortunately, we cannot remain with the words *שלום צאתכם*. Instead we must skip to the last stanza and say: *לשלום מלאכי השרת מלאכי עליון*, go in peace, O ye ministering angels, angels of the Most High, angels who have come to bear upwards the pure and lovely soul of Erna Sondheimer Michael.

Farewell, dear friend, kind sister, loving mother, beloved wife. *כי מלאכיו יצוה לך לשמך בכל דרכיך*: May the Almighty charge His angels to guard you in all your ways.
ה' ישמר צאתך וכוואך מעתה ועד עולם: May the Lord watch over your coming in and your going out from now and unto all eternity.
Amen.