

*This issue of Reflections marks the last for S. L. Abels as Editor-in-Chief, but she will always remain its founder. As the journal continues and evolves, it will never lose the spirit inspired by her tireless efforts in the name of the helping professions and with the goal of humane social progress. In this final letter to you, she puts the journal in the context of her life, and shares some of the events and concerns that found an expression in its creation. [RR]*

Dear Readers,

To write these words of "retirement" to you, after I have thought them this past year, is like the "Second City" joke, "if you read it in black and white, than it must be true." I have retired as the founding editor of *Reflections*. (There—I wrote it.) And in Bea Saunders' tradition (former Executive Editor, *Social Work*) I am Emerita Editor, *Reflections*.

During the second year of editing *Reflections*, I realized that my sense of place is not a physical entity; it has more to do with my being and doing in context, not where I physically belong. I think we try to fill that empty space, as the patterns that make up reality are missing. *Reflections*, and all the persons connected with it, filled that space for me, with opportunities for learning, creativity, and connections.

The context within which *Reflections* developed, may have been the powerful policy and structural changes within the social welfare system; the profession's heavy emphasis on "scientific writing;" and the new attention across the social and behavioral science disciplines given to narrative knowing. Affected in their daily transactions by the horrific social policy changes, people in

the helping professions were searching for ways to become more connected, less isolated from others similarly engaged. The narrative serves as a means to build community, in real ways, and in virtual reality.

Within the same temporal sequence, personal stories/narratives, were becoming popular in all sorts of media venues. In the late eighties, and early nineties, the personal story became public. Personal narratives became popular on TV, in magazines such as, *MS*, *New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and in the academy. For example in 1989, Tappan and Brown (p.182) argued, that the narrative is central to the study and teaching of morality..." (*Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 59). In 1994, when we began the journal I did a library search and found over 3,000 listings for "narrative." Three years earlier, about 400 articles were listed.

At this moment, *Reflections* is the only journal dedicated to narratives about practice, in which social workers, physicians, nurses, researchers, teachers, counselors, community organizers, policy/program practitioners narrate their versions of a piece of their life experience, and the meaning it has to them.

Over these years the editors and I have read and published a variety of narratives

that resonate with the meaning of our professional lives. Narratives about working with women that have breast cancer, and how the experience shifts reasoning about boundaries: finding the meaning of private loss and public forgiveness in the context of South Africa; helping others who are economically poor when you have everything except the baby you gave birth to; preparing youngsters adjudicated delinquent to present their case in court, and as a lawyer/social worker not being allowed to appear in court; struggling to be a good teacher, making mistakes and learning from students; realizing how much impact and difference one's born gender is looked down upon if you don't fit the stereotype; organizing the homeless against merciless forces; a spiritual journey working with men who are incarcerated; explaining the meaning of Kwanzaa and the concept of Sankofa; coping with the tension in being/doing, practice/research re: attachment histories of mothers of children with non organic failure to thrive; countertransference; creating programs for Cambodian women that became blind—no longer able to witness the raping and the killing fields; preventing a company from polluting your community and learning the

meaning of citizenship; standing up for women abused as children against the psychological pathologizers; reconciling western treatment and traditional healing; using the story of your being raped to teach students in your course; illuminating The Tiger, loss of homeland, Korean-Talk story, and the socially constructed relations of adoption and discrimination; learning how and why to write narratives; and uncovering the life stories of luminaries, and their interviewers.

What reflections! How wonderful that such rich and resolute practice evidence has been shared by professional helpers, teachers, researchers engaged in helping and social change. John Dewey said, "We reflect in order that we may get hold of the full and adequate significance of what happens" (*How We Think*, 1910, p.119).

We invited Harry Specht, just before he died, to write a narrative for our first issue about his work as the dean at Berkeley. He said he would write, but not about being a dean—for that he would wait until he was no longer dean. In his wonderful memoir about his career, "How I Didn't Become a Psychotherapist" (January 1995), he wrote about the meaning of his life choices: "...if there are any, sound like the homely virtues my mother taught: Be true to yourself; Stand up for what you think its right; Care about people in need. Those are certainly values to live by, but how each of us perceives and re-

alizes these values is a complex matter" (p.65). As Harry was, I too am attracted by the idea of social interaction. We differed. I believe that a desired outcome of all helping structures, that includes psychotherapy, is to connect people to each other in concrete ways, particularly in today's fast technologically correct society. The *New Yorker*, in "Talk of the Town," once stated that our opinions are shaped more by "administration," meaning the TV, than friends, colleagues, and teachers. Add the internet. We are losing our citizen networks.

With some hesitancy I asked Harry to do a revision. After all, he was a significant social work scholar, and I was a first time editor/publisher. Delighted with the editorial comments, he revised his narrative twice. Since that time I have not been hesitant. His memoir initiated a new feature. "Brief Reflections," which gave us an opportunity to publish autobiographies and oral histories of significant scholars and practitioners in social work, therefore adding to the profession's narrative. There are oral histories and acquisitions of professional/personal papers of social work leaders and others, stored in the archives of university libraries, but inaccessible to thousands of social work students, professionals, and academics. We are dearly missing a thick piece of our history, and exemplars for our own professional/personal lives. A function of *Reflections* is to fill that gap.

*Reflections* began simply, and I began five years as editor.

The morning after a dinner with Bill Meezan and his partner, Michael Brittenback, Paul and I commented about the wonderful stories we had told each other about our teaching experience in Lithuania. Bill had just returned, and we had been there the previous year. We agreed that there are many good and important stories, and the profession is missing out on what happens when you teach, or practice. We tell each other stories, but they are never made public. Paul said, "why don't we start a journal called *Reflections...*" I added *Narratives of Helping Professionals...* After our first go around, at a conference soliciting narratives and subscriptions, we renamed it, *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*.

The design of the journal had to be different than other scholarly formats; we were publishing "narratives." The CSULB University Print Shop participated in the design and our daughter, Beth Abels, and son-in-law, James F, Sullivan contributed the drawings and the cover. The design and the art work made the journal visually exciting, and distinct from other scholarly journals. All of us know that art can change perceptions, and perhaps world views.

In 1994, while trying to market *Reflections* on our own, Jim Kelly invited me to write a proposal seeking the department's support. Presented to faculty in January, with a support vote in February, we began March 1994. Our first issue was published January 1995.

*Reflections* continues with strong support by the faculty, our Executive Board, and the CSULB Social Work Department's Director, John Oliver. The new editors begin with the forthcoming (summer) issue. Mary Ann Jimenez, Editor, has Ph.D.s in Social Welfare and in History from Brandeis University. Rebecca Lopez, Associate Editor, also has her Ph.D. from Brandeis. Dan Jimenez will be Art Director.

In 1989 I left University of Southern California (USC) after two years of teaching and field coordination. I had been Associate Professor with tenure at Cleveland State University, a one year visiting professor at Haciteppe University, Ankara, Turkey, a one term visiting professor at both Walla Walla College, College Place, WA and Vytatus Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania.

Teaching social work in Lithuania required that we help students learn to accept intellectual doubt and challenge certainty. Their stories describing the struggle for, and fear of, freedom—"we cannot raise questions as we lived under the KGB so long"—their work in the underground, the death of family members in that struggle, and their investment in change deeply affected us; neither of us has ever faced the risks they took. Sister Pyioscati, the Executive Director of Caritas in Kaunas, Lithuania (Catholic Charities) initiated the social work education program. She is the only holy person I have ever met—

her commitments are to humanity and the Catholic Church. For example: most concerned about the spread of AIDS in Lithuania, she provided money for a young physician to learn about AIDS prevention in Denmark, and upon his return to Lithuania he organized a Condom Festival. She believes the church places human life as the highest value.

In the 1950's I married, as did most of this generation of daughters of the depression. I lived in Seattle, Washington and Frankfurt, Germany while Paul was in the Army, and then Boston, Massachusetts where Paul went to the Boston University School of Social Work. During the first summer break we worked at an agency overnight camp that fired, in the mid-summer, four of us who were unit heads because we asked the camp executive to stop the program director from physically pummeling campers. We found other camp jobs where the sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were campers. We then worked at Camp Oakhurst, a camp for severely disabled children and young adults, whose executive was Mel Herman. On the first day of camp, watching three busloads of children with severe disabilities coming off the bus, I ran and hid. Yet, by the end of the first session, my fears and my heart came back to the right place.

We moved to Chicago. I went to social work graduate school, Paul worked and studied in the doctoral program at

the University of Chicago. I was active in CORE, we marched on Washington, I was arrested for sitting in, we marched some more, and we integrated Rainbow Beach. I was program director of a South Chicago settlement house that served a Black and Latino/a community, a youth and gang worker in the Chicago Commons Settlement House(s) on Chicago's West Side, and youth worker and special services administrator for young adults with mental disabilities in a Jewish communal agency.

We were fortunate that our neighbors in Hyde Park-Kenwood provided the context for social action, especially around school integration. Tom and Connie Sherrard lived next door; he taught Community Organization at the University of Chicago and worked with the first Black mayor of Gary, Indiana; she was a teacher. Debby Meier, a Socialist Democrat, took us to the Eugene V. Debs celebrations and involved us in local and national socialist activities with Bayard Rustin and Michael Harrington. Chicago had the neighborhoods, cause, and reason to be active in social change and action. The social work community had strong social networks. Although Chicago is very large city, as Simmel, an early 20th century sociologist explained, people stay friends with each other because they have friends in common. We also were a family connected to other families sharing mutual concerns and interests: three daughters, a mother-in-law, a cat, and a dog.

We left Chicago with the same coterie for Paul's new job as Assistant Professor at Case Western Reserve MSASS in Cleveland. I took a job as staff trainer with President Johnson's War On Poverty Community Action Program at the Cleveland Neighborhood Centers. When the city and politics took over, I lost my job and was hired by Leon Richman, consultant to the director of the Cuyahoga County Child Welfare Department (CCCWD). I became Group Services Coordinator, a job of my own making, persuading staff to organize client groups, and working with a group of youths in foster care. Leon left, and my own actions threatened my autonomous job. Carola Mayer, a staff member, and I organized staff to protest the agency's decision to use a large donation to buy and distribute shoes to the children of families on AFDC. (We wanted them to distribute the cash, and to invite a group of persons on Welfare to advise how to do that.) The new Associate Director of Cuyahoga County Welfare Department, and Director of Child Welfare, was distinctly unhappy with our organizing, particularly with our letters to the county commissioners, the agency's advisory board, and the newspapers. He closed out my job, moved me in to a windowless office in the Welfare Department building, and appointed me to the Department of Staff Development. Public agencies find it difficult to fire people after probation, so while staff is on vacation, they take away their office and either

eliminate their job responsibilities or give them a job without responsibilities. After a month he relented. I began to train supervisors and administrators, and, with the "heads" of different departments, designed an integrated team—staff members from each service: intake, protective services, foster care, institutional... The team stayed



Sonia at Cleveland

with a family from the start of service to its end—in this way the family did not transfer to another department each time a new service was required. It was successful, the department directors and I had fun in the design process; it was a new idea they had created and implemented. I left soon after.

Paul was then awarded a teaching Fulbright to Turkey for a year. I was hired to teach group work at Haciteppe University, and our children went to school on the American Air Base. I also joined the protest at the U.S. Embassy against Nix-

on's bombing of Cambodia, as part of the war against Vietnam, and had my picture taken by U.S. Security Agents. While we were in Turkey, the Director of the Department of Social work at Cleveland State invited me to apply for the position of Assistant Professor to teach social work practice.

Cleveland State University established in the late sixties, provided education to students living within commuting range. Up until that time, going to a state school meant leaving home. Higher education was expanding with new faculty members and eager students. For over 20 years, the coming of fall meant the beginning of school. Classes begin in early autumn, when the sun shines and the leaves turn color. The first day of school shimmers. Thousands of students from the Cleveland Metropolitan area came onto campus. A treasure of students from all parts of that racially divided metropolis. To the immediate East were black communities, people that had moved up North and sent their children to the public university; further East were the white, the integrated and the rich suburbs; to the immediate West the white poor, the Appalachians, white ethnics, persons with physical and mental stress, and public housing for whites only; beyond were the Western suburbs filled with blue collar workers, in the automobile and steel industries, whose sons and daughters were the first generation of college students at

Cleveland State University.

In three years, the Department of Social Work expanded from four faculty to thirteen. When I started, there were no text books as we know them—cumulative knowledge organized for specific courses such as Practice, Human Behavior and the Social Environment (HBSE), Social Welfare, Policy, Research et al. In the first years of teaching I used readings from professional journals (see Alex Gitterman's article this issue), and trade books. Around the middle seventies, social work text books, similar to text books in other disciplines, began to appear. This was the beginning of the information age, the start of an extraordinary expansion of text books and journals. This was also the time of an increasing number of social work students and social workers, and an expansion of undergraduate and graduate social work education. There was a huge market for texts. Using texts for courses is easier than searching non-computerized libraries for appropriate journal articles. Texts began to shape course outlines. Beyond that, the number of published journals expanded, with most inclining toward publishing research. *Social Case Work*, now *Family and Society*, shifted its perspective from publishing articles containing a lot of process data, case material, and essays to articles reporting and analyzing programs, practice theories, and research. By the middle to late seventies it was difficult to find articles in any social work journal that actually described, analyzed, and

explained practice at all levels.

It seemed to me that social work was loosing its grounding. Literally. Formal practice knowledge comes from theories developed by eminent social work scholars; and for the most part, social work knowledge is derivative from the behavioral and social science. It has not been generated from its own practice experience.

As a teacher, I tried to use a grounded approach (Glazer and Strauss) to teach practice: asking students to compare their own experiences, their practice, and the readings relative to similarities and differences, and accounting for them. Teaching this way was interesting and ambiguous. It was the student's task to discern the explanation. The students engaged in critical thinking, and used a "research methodology" to generate practice hypothesis to test out in their own practice experiences.

At USC, I taught an undergraduate course in Crisis in Human Behavior. I used a number of non-fiction accounts of various crisis in human/social life such as Kai Erickson's *Buffalo Creek Disaster*, Lillian Rubin's story of the man that shot three young men on the subway because they asked him for money, Carol Stack's account of mutual aid among women on Public Welfare living in Gary, Indiana, and other such books. I asked students to generate hypothesis about what happens to persons in crisis by comparing the content of the different narratives. The students discussed and wrote about those differences and similarities in terms of

the author's intention; the context, the characters' history, background, socio-economic status, relationships, ethnicity, age, gender; the consequences and outcomes of actions and behavior, and the authors' views relative to the people he/she wrote about. The students read and wrote comparisons of seven assigned books. I think they developed a grounded way to explain, and perhaps understand, crisis in human behavior. I had learned over a number of years that students do not read text books, but they do read interesting, literary books whose center is human beings, their social relations, and their stories.

While in Cleveland, there was an intense campaign in social work education to encourage more research, and to persuade social workers to use research to inform their practice. I wanted to publish a newsletter for social work practitioners, neatly written in interesting language reporting research on social work practice. No one wanted to do it. I thought it a grand idea, but put it away. I knew nothing about publishing, and did not have the ambition or passion then, as I did when we began *Reflections*.

The above takes you on my life's journey as far as what I did and where I went. Now I want to talk about how, through my intellectual roots, I came to believe so strongly in the benefit of narrative. My first roots in social work grew from my experience with Bill Schwartz,

my teacher, mentor, and critic. His work on the interactional perspective changed the way social workers think about practice. He saw the world in the context of social interaction with the task of the worker to further mutual aid. He used to say, as did Skinner, you don't know it until you do it, and/or write it.

Publishing autobiographical narratives and narratives about the work of practitioners, teachers, and researchers enriches the social work narrative, has strengthened the community of members of the helping professions, and has contributed to social action. That does seem somewhat ambitious. We do think mutual aid occurs among professionals as they read each others' accounts of their practice and life experiences. We receive many requests for reprints. I also know there is a large underground copying the narratives for students and clients, and, aside from cost issues, I think it's wonderful.

Frequently we ask authors to amplify the narrator's voice, along with the voices of the other participants in the experience. By showing the voices, rather than telling about them or interpreting them, the voices are no longer subjugated, and are outside the binds of assessment. Bill Schwartz eschewed psychosocial assessments. He made a strong argument that assessments are unhelpful to the worker as they rarely tell the worker how he/she should proceed—his focus was on the here and now. My own interpretation is that a

psychosocial assessment is a professional arrogance. It is not doing, it is not practice. It is the voice of the client subjugated by the worker, taking from the client a life narrative or purpose, and accessing it. The assessment is the worker's voice, not the client's.

Other roots of my intellectual heritage lie at Cleveland State University, its faculty, and its students. I taught in its interdisciplinary college (First College) and in the social work department. As a young student at Rutgers University I joined with other "progressives" to petition the University "to recruit, hire, and promote Negro (sic) faculty persons." At Cleveland State, in the department's early years, I took that responsibility in a more local way.

The interdisciplinary college's directors, Sam Richmond and Bob Klein, exemplified mutuality and respect among faculty and students. The department's director, Harry Butler, worked to cast a strong intellectual focus. At First College, Richmond taught me the importance of "because" and ethical reasoning. I designed an ethical reasoning methodology, used it in class, and, presented it at Hiram College's Bioethics Narrative Seminar and at an AID'S conference in the first year of publishing *Reflections*.

Ethical reasoning requires non-fiction narratives, not general stories used as examples for NASW Social Work

Ethics. Sam used to say that Social Work needs to gather narratives from practitioners engaged in ethical decisions—the process, the consequences, and the outcomes—so that the profession is able to develop a grounded foundation for ethical decision making. In this issue I think Pritchard tries to do that as he examines his experience in committing clients to mental hospitals.

I had a lot of practice experience before and after graduate school to draw on as a teacher, which meant I could tell stories about practice, supervision, clients, agencies and so on. At Cleveland, another practice faculty member and I were asked to work with a group of men at the county jail. All of them had problems with alcohol. The purpose of the group was not very clear. We wanted to help them with the issues about which they were concerned: getting out of jail and not drinking alcohol during daily work leaves. We met every Friday afternoon, and by the time we left, all Ruth Ellen Lindenberg and I could think about was getting a drink! We were confronting our own lack of preparation to work with this group: developing a purpose and identifying, together with the men, how we could be helpful. The men were great con artists, and not in the prison sense. Soon after we started the group, one of our faculty members arranged a "lock down" for us, other interested faculty, and students. It was a horror. I found it impossible to take on the position of a social worker, even

though it was an experiment. After everyone was locked in their cell, one student's real cries startled and distressed us. She was very frightened, but according to the jail's policy, the social worker was not allowed to enter the cell of an inmate after a lockdown.

I did not succeed with the men's group, but they did teach us that we needed to be very clear about our purpose and that they had not come to the group to work—they came to the meeting to get out of their cells. A difficult experience for me, but a good story of failure to tell the students.

About two years before we came to California I organized a conference on the impact of religious fundamentalism on social work education and practice. A student in a secular public hospital was praying with clients, and the supervisor did not know what to do. Our quick and easy solution was to tell the student it was not a social work function. The conference produced papers, a newsletter, and added to the discourse on spirituality.

This has been a long letter. I have tried to examine the links between my professional life and my intellectual history. Writing this letter has reinforced my belief in the need to search for meaning in one's life. Just as I have searched my own life to discern its meaningfulness, so I ask authors to allow themselves to be vulnerable in writing a narrative as it may lead to their discovering something new about themselves and their experiences. The process of

making meaning may offer the author and the reader stronger bonds of connection, and lessen the fears we share in taking risks for justice.

The narratives in this journal are non fictional and autobiographical; from personal career autobiographies to stories of practice in prose and poetry. The stories come directly from a professional helper's life. They explore, explain, and describe episodes of helping, changing, organizing, failing, succeeding, challenging, and loving. We have published narratives that are interesting, painful, and sometimes shocking. Each author, as they describe the meaning of their experiences, speaks the personal universal language to those engaged in *Titikkun Olam*, "responsibility to repair the world" [see this issue's Mail].

John A. Kayser, in "Comedy, Romance, Mystery and Tragedy in the Helping Professions..." "wanted to discover whether narratives about practice have to make a point. He and I have had a running debate: I have argued "that narratives should be more like literature and art—without needing to hammer readers with the heavy handed 'moral' of the story" (Spring, 98, p.71). John has helped me understand why meaning is so important in an author's work. He believes that the author ought to draw the moral, or make a point to the story. On the other hand I believe a good story contains its own moral imperative.

One Sunday, Paul asked me if "there were people I could not forgive?" "Of course," I said. The next day we asked Charles Garvin to edit a special issue, "Forgiveness," which led to a campus wide event "Private Loss Public Forgiveness." It was in that special issue that we published Linda and Peter Biehls' second narrative, their story of forgiveness at the Amnesty Committee's hearing (South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission) of the four youths that killed their daughter.

Their first narrative in *Reflections* about Amy's death in South Africa and the establishment of the Amy Biehl Foundation included commentary from a wide range of people. Some thought that the Biehls' use of community vernacular was inappropriate, and expressed concern that whites ought not to be organizing services in South Africa. Others thought their work was significant. I asked Wilma Peebles-Wilkins, one of our editors to comment on the article. She proposed several others, such as Kenneth Lutterman of NIH, to write commentary. He did, and sent *Reflections* to Tipper Gore, Donna Shalalah, and other cabinet members. Lutterman and the Biehls arranged for this powerful group to visit some of the agencies the Biehl's had funded. Serendipitously, because *Reflections* published the Biehls' narratives, new opportunities became available for social development.

Things have not always been perfect at *Reflections*. We are a mom and pop journal, along with Russell Rossetto, our

assistant editor and typesetter, and Vilma Chemers, who copy edits the proofs and put a stop to our occasional editorial disasters.

Our monumental mistake: Carol Meyer, known for her smarts and admirable toughness, responded gracefully to my request that she write a "Brief Reflection." Three of the columns about her teaching were left off the proofs, and I did not catch it until after the journal was printed and mailed! I called to tell her, anticipating the worst. She said it happens all the time, and told me how to correct it. She also said she wished she had thought of creating *Reflections*.

The journal has a new feature: "Retrospectives." Ruth Middleman sent us her narrative published in *Children* (1967). We realized its content was quite contemporary, and we published it in its original form with the author's comments. We tried it again with Paul Abels' "Riding with Superman, Batman and the Green Hornet" which was published several issues ago. We now have a "Retrospective" contributing editor, Alex Gitterman. His classic, co-authored with Alice Schaefer Nadelman, is in this issue. Alfred Kadushin's "Games people play in Supervision," *Social Work* (July 1968) comes out this Summer.

I will miss doing the journal. It has helped me to gain new insight about the things I care about, and more awareness about my independence, although Chauncey Alexander calls it obstinance. How won-

derfully helpful and supportive many of you have been. Of course I have used this letter to caress my ego. As Leon Ginsberg said, everyone likes to write about themselves.

I am awed by the complex issues helpers face. Publishing *Reflections* made it possible to know much more about what people are doing in the profession, and how and why they do it. I hope our educational and professional organizations become more mindful to the meanings the authors have articulated in their narratives about their practice and their professional careers.

Narratives about what we do, and whom we do it with, invite society to be more empathetic to us and, more significantly, the persons we serve. Many of the narratives also give ample evidence that the concepts of micro, mezzo, and macro are superficial distinctions. C. Wright Mills said it a long time ago: private troubles are public issues.

I am still uncertain as to why I made the decision to do *Reflections*. My "Salutatory" in the first issue (January 1995), "a greeting to the readers of the first issue of a periodical," said that "our single mission is to publish narratives of good literary quality that contribute knowledge on ways of helping others and creating social change." I believe that *Reflections* continues to persuade academics, researchers, and practitioners that narrative inquiry is another, albeit different, legitimate way to generate knowledge about practice." *Reflections*

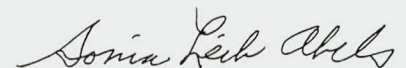
continues to publish "narratives" that "convey the meaningfulness of human engagement," "that serve as a medium for discourse," and "that strengthen and expand community bonds."

Thank you to the National Editorial Board, the narrators and the people in their stories, the subscribers, the Executive Board, the faculty, the former and present Directors of the Department of Social Work at CSULB, the University President and Provost, and the two deans (Whoppie is signaling me to speed up) for the opportunity for doing one of the things I had yet to do. I also thank Harold Larkin, Company A, Boca Raton, Florida for his gift to the journal—and all of you who have said that you read *Reflections* cover to cover. That is the most important gift. There are many persons that have done well for this journal.

Certainly the journal will change with its new editors. As I began this letter, the process of leaving engendered feelings of happiness for the new editors for getting to publish the engaging narratives that appear to be arriving every day; and sadness, that I have given up that opportunity. Farewell.

Sincerely,

Sonia Leib Abels,



Editor Emeritus



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