

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
Arlington Street Church  
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### **Irene Moskowitz and the Air Conditioner**

“She turns to me, her blue eyes faded, the petal soft skin of her cheeks, deeply lined. She smells like Oil of Olay lotion, the pink kind. In the overstuffed chair, she is tiny and her shoulders are bent with the weight of the years. The hands that once were busy are idle and tremble with old age.”

Yael Zoldan is visiting her grandmother, Irene Moskowitz.

“I ever said for you the story about the Feigenbaums and the air conditioner?” she asks....

“My grandmother looks far backward in time to when she was a young woman. Her eyes sharpen and for a moment I can see how she was then – busy, purposeful and full of life.

“Well,’ she says, leaning forward, ‘we were living in Brooklyn then, and it was a hot summer. A terrible, hot summer. And we weren’t rich, not at all, but your Zaidy, he worked hard, and we had an air conditioner. One big air conditioner, and in the evenings we’d sit around it, with the boys, to cool off. Those days, there wasn’t no central air, you know.

“Anyway, we had one, but the Feigenbaums, they didn’t. They didn’t have nothing! Well, I shouldn’t say nothing. They did have eight kids squeezed into that little apartment, like sardines, maybe. And poor Mrs. Feigenbaum, she always looked so nervous! I don’t know from what. But anyway, that summer was the worst.... So hot, and all of them together in that little house. Their baby, he cried all night. Every night, screaming his head off from the heat. And it hurt me so to hear it! Sometimes I cried along with him, the poor little thing.

“So one night, I couldn’t take it no more. And I said to your Zaidy, ‘Willy! Wake

up!"

"He jumped up real fast in the bed. "What? What happened?" he said.

"I want we should buy for the Feigenbaums an air conditioner."

"What?!"

"An air conditioner, so they shouldn't be so hot." Then I said it soft, 'Please, Willy.'

"You know he was a mensch, your Zaidy, and always he had a soft heart for the children. So, he worked hard? Nu, so he'd work a little harder. Next day, he said that by Friday he could have for me the money to buy for the Feigenbaums an air conditioner. I was so happy I baked him a Dobos torte for supper."

"Finally on Friday, before Shabbos, he comes home, your Zaidy, and he gives me the money. But it's Friday, before Shabbos and there's nothing I can do. I have to wait until Sunday for the stores to open. And when Sunday came, I went with Zaidy to old Mr. Katzenstein's store on 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue, to buy for the Feigenbaums an air conditioner. Now, Mr. Katzenstein, he knew your Zaidy good, from back home. So he made for him a real deal.

"Let me tell you, by the time we come home, was already late and I wanted I should put the boys to bed. So the air conditioner, it had to wait in its box on the floor. Next morning, after the boys go to school, I shove the air conditioner box to the door and down the steps to the outside. I know. Is hard to believe because now I'm small, but back then I was at least five feet, maybe even five foot one, and I had good, strong arms. So I took a big breath and I push the box over next door, to the house where the Feigenbaums live. Then slowly, I push that *farsh tinkene* box up the stairs. One step. Two. *Gott in Himmel*, it was heavy! I thought for sure, I should have a heart attack. You should know it was 18 steps up to the second floor!

"And, halfway up, was maybe the tenth step or maybe eleven, all of a sudden I realize: What I'm gonna do when she opens the door, Mrs. Feigenbaum? What am I gonna say for her? I bought for you an air conditioner? Can't be! She'll be *farshamed* and my fault! Oy! I'm a *dumkopf*. I don't know what I should do! But I said for myself, *Irene, just go up the stairs. You'll figure for yourself something*

“So, slow, slow, *shwitzing* and shlepping, I get up the stairs. So much pushing I did, I think I should have a baby! Finally I get to the top, and I lean on the box a little to catch my breath, you know? Then I knock on the door, hard.

“Mrs. Feigenbaum calls out, “Who is it?” and I said, “It’s me, Irene Moskovitz.” A minute, and she opens the door.

“Oh, Hello, Mrs. Moskovitz,' she says, and she looks at me and then she looks at the box. So I say, 'Hello, Mrs. Feigenbaum, and congratulations!' Then I smiled at her big. 'I brought for you the air conditioner that you won.'

“The air conditioner that I won?’ she says, real confused.

“Yes! The air conditioner that you won!' I said.

“From who did I win an air conditioner?’ she asks.

“From the Ladies Auxiliary!’

My grandmother turns to me. '*Mamala*, do you know who was the Ladies Auxiliary? I was the Ladies Auxiliary!’”<sup>1</sup>

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Irene Moskovitz told this story with relish. Even she had been surprised by her new identity as agent of the divinely-inspired, fully fabricated Ladies Auxiliary. I love this story because she is so compassionate, generous, funny ... and inspiring. I want to be the Ladies Auxiliary, and I hope you do, too. We don't have to deliver gifts of air conditioners to second story apartments in sweltering heat, although that's not a bad place to begin. We only have to see a need, and feel the need, and imagine even one small gesture we could make to alleviate someone else's suffering. It's hardly intuitive that there is a payoff, but there is. The payoff is that in giving service, we will find our own suffering lifting, as well.

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Sri Neem Karoli Baba, a Hindu teacher known affectionately as Maharaj-ji, established temples throughout India, and taught many Americans students in the 1960s. Ram Dass, the best-known of those students, asked his teacher, “How can I know the bliss of G\*d?” Marharaj-ji answered, “One word: Serve.” The answer was always the same; when Ram Dass asked about the most direct path to awakening, Maharaj-ji

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<sup>1</sup> Yael Zoldan, *The Ladies Auxiliary*, Aish.com, 8.21.10

answered, “Feed everyone.” When Ram Dass asked how he might become enlightened, Maharaj-ji responded, “Love everyone.” He said, “Love everyone, feed everyone, serve everyone, remember G\*d.” And it may and may not have been he who added, “It is better to see G\*d in everything than to try to figure it out.”

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Years ago, I arrived here on a Sunday morning and greeted Joe, one of our homeless neighbors, who was panhandling outside. He told me he'd be in for worship, and then, there he was, sitting in the left hand balcony. During the offering, from my seat in the pulpit, I watched as the plate was passed to him, watched as he dumped out the entire contents of his cup, giving it a good shake.

After the service, I told him I'd seen him, and thanked him. He gave me a big smile. “It's the best thing that's happened to me all day,” he said.

Cherokee teacher Dhyani Ywahoo reminds us, “When you are feeling the poorest – and she means this in every sense of the word – when you are feeling the poorest, that is the time to give a gift.”

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My spiritual companions, don't take Irene Moskowitz's or Joe's example on faith. Don't take my word or Maharaj-ji's or Dhyani Ywahoo's word for it. *Try it for yourself. Try bliss!* Each of us can be the Ladies Auxiliary. Give a gift, give an air conditioner, shake out your cup: let us love, feed, and serve.