Taking Tillie to Bally's
By
Gail Cohen

All convention aside, the grandmother we knew would have applauded the family’s decision to take her ashes to the place she loved most on Earth, especially now that Tillie is dealing cards to a higher authority.

Despite a perpetual diet of coffee, coffee-flavored ice cream, bagels with a schmear and a smoking habit that resembled that of a recovering alcoholic with no other addiction left, Grandma Tillie lived past her 90th birthday. We speculate about whether butting into everyone’s personal business may have been the motivation that kept her going, but who can be sure? At a fragile 95 pounds, she was (an understatement) a force to be reckoned with and a bane to the existence of those of us who came under her purview.

Lest you think her nothing but a shallow buttinsky after reading that introduction, I should add that under that blustery exterior was that of a woman with a serious set of Jewish values. Her parenting skills and instincts were solid; she raised her kids in New York and New Jersey with the skill of a high-ranking general committed to keeping her son’s and daughter’s moral compasses fixed firmly on the horizon.

True, she threatened and cajoled to get her way, but she believed that fear was a great motivator and so the offspring, grand-offspring and cousins under her spell towed the line. We all managed to make it to adulthood without criminal records, a happenstance that she believed was all due to the holiday meals everyone was commanded to attend.

You may not believe what you're about to read, but I swear, it's all true.

Once Upon a Pot of Matzo Balls
The year escapes me, but the details don't: the first night of Passover on a balmy spring evening in South Florida. The formal Seder portion of the night had ended, appetites were honed and soup pots simmered as appetizers (including the ubiquitous relish tray) took the edge off appetites. Into this idyllic moment came the sound of a body sliding down onto the terrazzo tile. Everyone jumped.

Tillie was in hot pursuit of the perfect pot of soup and there were times she moved too quickly while retrieving ingredients, leaving her lightheaded and momentarily out of
control. It had happened before and the family had paid the price for violating her “Step into this kitchen when I’m working and you have no idea what I can do to you” rule. On this particular day, the collective memory of threats caused everyone to freeze in place like a medieval tapestry.

I leaned forward in my chair and saw her legs and the edge of her long floral apron. Her hand fluttered, an admonition that nobody was to move. I’m not making this up. She had been hard at work creating her matzo ball fantasia—the perfect marriage of hard balls and soft balls—when it happened. “Don’t you dare come in here—any of you,” she demanded. Obviously, we’re a bunch of pansies because nobody budged. In a couple of minutes she struggled to her feet and a collective sigh of relief was heard round the table. Like alcoholics in denial, no mention was made of the “episode” as 16 of us sat there and passed soup bowls, acting as though it were a perfectly normal and acceptable occurrence for an old woman to be propped up against the side of an oven just feet from the nearest diner. The moment passed. The tableau relaxed. The subject was buried. The matzo balls, by the way, were particularly tasty that year.

**A Table Set For the Minions**

Passing out at the stove wasn't the only endearing trait we recall when thinking of Tillie. When she barked, "You’ll come to holiday dinner, I don’t care what else is going on," you said, "Of course." Even if it meant canceling a long-standing engagement with the Queen of England or a Publisher's Clearing House prize trip to Tahiti.

Ours was the only family on the planet praying that nobody would win a Nobel or Pulitzer Prize because if the awards ceremony happened to fall on Rosh Hashanah, the honoree would have to take a pass. Only death got a family member out of Tillie’s grip; she took her holiday meals that seriously—a fact that should be evident in light of what we now like to call the aforementioned “Matzo ball Moment.”

There have been heated family debates about whether, for example, Tillie was aware of the fact that sitting on the floor of the kitchen while forbidding others to help was a great burden on those of us who find it disconcerting to pass olives when someone could be having a stroke or heart attack. Perhaps this is why my siblings and I took to calling people at Tillie’s holiday dinner tables “hostages” rather than guests. But of course, nobody was about to try and change anything. We just got along by going along. Or else.
Time passed. Tillie moved her moveable feast from a multi-room apartment to a studio when she decided to downscale in the interest of saving money. Her new living area consisted of two pullout couches and end tables with a couple of fold-down TV tables. Not exactly the place anyone would pick for a large sit-down dinner, but Tillie was nonplussed when queried about where she planned to put 16 people. She stayed mum. We stayed incredulous. The enormity of the occasion resulted in everyone arriving early—an occurrence rarely seen in our clan—fearful that there might not be a seat at the table for whomever arrived late.

As usual, Tillie was busy cooking for several regiments of the U.S. Army as guests arrived. The kids were assigned to set up the room for the sit-down dinner. From her vantage point at the end of the room in the “kitchen area,” Tillie kept an eye on our moves as she hand-ground enough chicken livers to wipe out a small nation's poultry supply and tended to multiple briskets despite frequent reminders that many of us had become vegetarians. Actually, she didn’t even notice the fact that we all arrived early, as she was in the middle of a rant about the wimpy turkey the butcher sold her.

Under her watchful eye, the kids set about the business of proving how integral bridge tables and folding chairs can be to the life of a Jew at holiday time. Tillie had a never-ending supply of collapsible tables and folding chairs and while we never figured out where this cache of furniture was stored, it always appeared as if by magic at holiday time—a near-miracle hat-trick in light of the fact that she was now living in about 500 square feet. We deftly filled the corridor between the two couches, literally crawling along the seats on our knees to get the silver and china settings in place.

In the end, no fire department would approve our setup. Mismatched folding chairs were crammed together so closely, we would likely burn before we could evacuate the place in the event of a fire. Money and favors were promised to those who would forsake an end seat, proving a terrific opportunity to see who in our crowd favored money over the chance of becoming a crispy critter.

Once Tillie was satisfied with the banquet arrangement, the “good silver” that had lasted more than 60 years because it only made rare appearances and the napkin placement were perfect, the stage was set. Diners lounged in the yard until the signal was given to enter.
Somehow, even the most robust diner (her word for overweight) climbed over couches to get to a seat, looking pretty much like residents of overcrowded chicken pens.

And though the venue was new, the meal followed the inevitable process: pass, cram, ladle, “Eat, you’re too thin,” “You haven’t touched a thing,” yadda yadda. Racing to the finish, everyone knew rewards waited, so as soon as cigarettes were squashed into plates and the kids were summarily ordered away from the dinner table, the studio was quickly reconfigured into the game room. Tillie’s casino was open for business as it had been for so many previous decades of holiday meals.

The kids scampered out, thrilled to be free. It was assumed by all that we’d be fine without benefit of GPS trackers and the cautionary measures employed by today’s parents sure a molester lurks on every street corner. The philosophy of the era was this: Everybody already had plenty of kids--nobody wanted more--so parents always assumed that if they sent three out the same number would return and, indeed, they did.

God forbid someone fell or got hurt and required a bandage. Fast clotting was mandatory in Tillie’s world as one did not disturb the post-dinner games that were considered the real reason God called his people together on a seasonal basis: Stud poker.

Non-gamblers Need Not Apply

Tillie’s passion for gambling out-shone her penchant for coffee, order-giving, martyrdom and cigarettes. Gambling had always been a passion and it became more so as she grew older. Eventually, the guilty pleasure pushed her to make a decision: she would abandon warm Miami and the little studio apartment for her Jersey roots. A sentimental journey? Not so much. Atlantic City had dispensed gambling licenses. You get the picture.

Traveling to Tillie’s for holiday meals had morphed from family get-together to full-blown excursion, even if airfares had to be put on plastic. Remember, there was no turning down her invitations. Better to borrow money to get the plane ticket that spirited a member of the clan to Jersey for the holiday where the bridge tables and folding chairs awaited the same menu. By this time, the youngest kids were growing up so instead of being kicked out of the house to play, everyone headed to the casino du jour.

Sometimes, the card games lasted half the night. By the next day, we were the only extended Jewish family in Atlantic City who looked as though the Pharaoh had just
released us and we had walked from Egypt to the land of milk and money during the night.
We were exhausted. Wrung out. Too mortified to tell anyone asking that our grandmother had detained us half the night in her eternal quest for a royal flush. And so it went for a few more years until age finally caught up with Tillie. The tell tale sign? She had stopped being able to distinguish a spade from a club. No medical tests needed. The end was near. When at last Tillie passed away, the family honored her wish to be burned and urned despite Jewish tradition and after full-scale family warfare that included passionate arguments that it was “unseemly for a woman whose devotion to holiday rituals were so important to be committed to an urn.” But frankly, nobody knew how high her influence might still be. The mere mention of the plagues that would be visited upon our heads if her directions weren’t followed to the letter was enough to bring consensus.
After the memorial service and cremation, Aunt Ruth tucked the urn filled with Tillie’s ashes into the trunk of her car. Off went mother and daughter to the tables of Atlantic City so Tillie could have a final go at Let it Ride and Caribbean Poker with a large contingent of family trailing behind in a ludicrous funeral procession that ended at Bally’s rather than Shalom Gardens.
Why Bally’s? It was Tillie’s favorite so Ruth hadn’t even considered an alternative. She reminded us that Tillie’s rules still applied and the somewhat macabre memorial gaming experience played out in late August of the year she died.
Tillie won big. Really big. She made an appearance at a variety of tables and slot machines. It was a bit frightening to witness the nonplussed attitude of the dealers and other players each time Tillie’s urn was ceremoniously placed atop the green felt table beside the piles of chips Ruth had amassed. She played all of Tillie’s favorite hands, tipped generously, followed the ritual of doubling down when appropriate and decided to call it quits only when exhaustion had overtaken her.
We all figured that this portion of life as we knew it was over. Everyone faced the reality of designing our individual holiday rituals—until the call rang out from Ruth less than a year after Tillie’s last big win: everyone was commanded to appear in New Jersey for the next Passover celebration to be held at Aunt Ruth’s.
Oy. The mantle of the holiday dictatorship had passed to the heir apparent. Different apartment. Larger table. Fewer bridge chairs. A one-hour drive from Atlantic City. Everything had changed. Nothing had changed. Let the hostage taking begin.

A Legacy of Lunacy Continues

The noodle pudding, you should excuse the expression, didn’t fall far from the oven when it came to Tillie’s only daughter. To prove my point, I’ll tell you how Aunt Ruth picked up the gauntlet.

During a Passover trip to Atlantic City a few years back, Aunt Ruth advised the gathering that she had Cancer, was in the midst of radiology treatment and, in the tone we recognized as the one Tillie used during the Matzo ball Moment, she dared anyone to turn down her holiday dinner invite.

The recipes came out. The turkey-matzo-ball-soup-hard and-soft-balls-homemade-chopped-liver ritual began anew minus fainting at the stove. We figured that Tillie’s no kitchen mandate had passed with her and were prepared to go to the aid of Ruth if the occasion required action. And of course, we all headed to the casino en mass after the first round of dishes were tucked into the dishwasher.

According to tradition, Ruth hit a huge winning streak in our presence that continued the following day when she asked one of the cousins to play her hand while she called the oncology department of the hospital overseeing her treatment to tell ‘em she couldn’t make her radiation appointment that afternoon.

This can’t have been the first time she did this, or the folks on the other end of the phone would have done more than just ask when she wanted to reschedule. Surely there would have been some screaming and ringing of the hands, but no such response could be heard and Ruth was back in minutes.

In the end, we learned a valuable lesson: The missed treatment had no effect on her recovery, and she lived many more years during which time she metamorphosed into Tillie, issuing holiday dinner edicts, taking no prisoners and generally taking everyone back to that cocoon of a time when everyone knew the rules and were happy to obey them despite the crazy ones.
Well, that’s the story about the Jewish holidays, the Tillie legacy, the new regime of Aunt Ruth and new rules for Passover in New Jersey. Tillie’s legacy lives on. The family is convinced she spends her time in the hereafter cooking her heart out in that large kitchen in the sky, swooning during soup making and threatening bodily harm should anyone—including the prophets—ask why she's sitting at the foot of her celestial stove.

We’re pretty certain she takes a new batch of holiday hostages annually, ordering folks about as New Year’s and Passover dinners approach, and finding the heavenly equivalent of bridge tables and chairs for each season’s lavish spread, consisting of the Soup of the Martyrs, several weights of matzo balls, hand-ground liver and the dessert du jour: A tasty helping of card shuffling and gaming immediately following the meal.

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