

# Marcus on menschlikeit

by Eric Blum  
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**W**ashington Post columnist Ruth Marcus believes that being a mensch is necessary in order to be a good journalist.

She shared that belief in front of a crowd of 200 people at Congregation Beth El of Montgomery County in Bethesda last Sunday, which played host to the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington's 54<sup>th</sup> annual meeting. Marcus was the event's keynote speaker.

The veteran journalist began with a contrary point of view from *New Yorker Magazine* writer Janet Malcolm, who has said that journalists "gain people's trust only to betray them without remorse." That statement has infuriated Marcus since she first read it 15 years ago, she told the audience.

In contrast to that dim view of journalistic scruples, Marcus held up former *Washington Post* Executive Editor Ben Bradlee, whom she described as

"the ultimate mensch," even though he was not Jewish.

Bradlee, who died this past October, considered himself an honorary Jew. He often came to her with story ideas and asked "is this good for the Jews," by which he meant "is this good for us," given the *Post's* heavy Jewish readership.

Marcus described the journalistic *menschlikeit* she learned from him as reporting a story accurately and fairly, even though doing so might make some people mad.

She gave two examples from her own career. Once, a White House chief of staff woke her up on the phone to berate her about a story. Another time, a sitting president shook a disapproving finger in her face. Marcus said that, in both cases, she wouldn't have changed anything she wrote.

To her credit, Marcus revealed two occasions on which she felt she failed the mensch test as a journalist. The first took place when she was interviewing a female Supreme Court clerk who told

Marcus at the end of their interview that she wished to not be identified; Marcus said that she was going to disclose the source's name anyway.

That clerk rose to become current Dean of Harvard Law School Martha Minow. Marcus said doesn't know if

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Minow has ever forgiven her for running the story with her name.

Marcus then said that even though she would respect a source's wish for anonymity today, she was only following what she was taught in college.

The second time, however, she was saved from a breach of *menschlikeit* by Bradlee, who killed a detail in a story she was planning to run on a Justice Department official who was about to be denied a major promotion because he had fathered a child out of wedlock.

Marcus ended her talk by answering questions from the crowd about how the American media covers Israel and the recent events in Ferguson, Mo. Marcus declined to comment on whether she believes her *Washington Post* colleagues fairly cover Israel, saying that

"it's very easy to see in any individual choice bias and malice. I have never heard or seen anything that makes me think there is anything expect for telling the truth as best we see it."

Marcus defended the work of journalism as a "first draft" of history, and inherently an imperfect draft at that. ■