

RABBI KEITH STERN'S 20TH ANNIVERSARY AT TEMPLE BETH AVODAH

TWENTY YEARS AGO I WAS ON THE SEARCH COMMITTEE TO FIND A NEW RABBI FOR TEMPLE BETH AVODAH. EACH APPLICANT WAS ASKED TO WRITE A PERSONAL STATEMENT AS PART OF THE PROCESS. AS I READ THROUGH THE STACK OF APPLICATIONS, ONE OF THOSE PERSONAL STATEMENTS JUMPED OUT AT ME. INSTEAD OF THE USUAL LISTING OF LOFTY GOALS, THIS PARTICULAR CANDIDATE TOLD A HASIDIC TALE THAT HE FELT DEFINED HIM AND HIS RABBINATE.

THE TALE WAS ABOUT TWO HASSIDIM WHO MET WHILE TRAVELING. EACH HAD A DIFFERENT REBBE. THE FIRST HASID PRAISED HIS REBBE'S SINGING VOICE, HIS INSIGHTS INTO TALMUD AND MANY OTHER REASONS WHY HIS REBBE WAS OUTSTANDING. WHATEVER THE FIRST HASID MENTIONED, THE SECOND HASID WOULD RESPOND, "I'M PLEASED TO HEAR THAT, BUT MY REBBE DOES MORE." THE FIRST HASID BECAME SO EXASPERATED THAT HE GRABBED THE SECOND ONE AND SAID, "EVERYTHING I SAY ABOUT MY REBBE, YOU SAY YOUR REBBE DOES BETTER. WHAT DOES HE DO?" THE SECOND HASID RESPONDED, "I DON'T KNOW, BUT WHATEVER HE DOES, HE DOES IT!"

THIS CANDIDATE CONTINUED HIS STATEMENT BY EXPLAINING THAT HIS RABBINATE IS ABOUT STORIES, CELEBRATION, STUDY, JOY, SORROW AND SONG AND A DEEP ABIDING LOVE FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE. HE CONCLUDED BY SAYING, "AND WHATEVER I DO, I DO IT!"

OF COURSE, I AM DESCRIBING THE ESSAY WRITTEN BY OUR BELOVED RABBI KEITH STERN. I AM SO THANKFUL THAT WE HAD THE WISDOM TO CHOOSE HIM TO BE OUR RABBI TWENTY YEARS AGO. HE HAS FULFILLED HIS PROMISE TO LEAD OUR

CONGREGATION WITH ALL HIS HEART AND SOUL, AND WE HAVE BECOME A VIBRANT, CARING AND ENGAGED COMMUNITY BECAUSE OF HIM.

RABBI STERN HAS ENHANCED ALL ASPECTS OF OUR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE. HE IS THERE FOR US TO CELEBRATE OUR JOYS AND TO SHARE OUR SORROWS. HE CONNECTS WITH EACH OF US AND GUIDES US TO CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER.

HIS IMPACT ON OUR YOUNG PEOPLE IS PERSONAL AND PROFOUND. OUR STUDENTS ADORE HIM! THE PRE SCHOOLERS CAN'T WAIT TO HUG HIM ON FRIDAY MORNINGS AND HAVE FOND MEMORIES OF HIS VERY SPECIAL "TALKING CHALLAH." HE MAKES SURE THAT EACH OF OUR BAR AND BAT MITZVAH STUDENTS HAS A VERY MEMORABLE AND INDIVIDUALIZED EXPERIENCE THAT IS A JOYOUS CELEBRATION FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY. OUR MIDRASHA STUDENTS LOVE THEIR CLASSES WITH HIM. THOSE WHO HAVE GONE WITH HIM ON A TRIP TO ISRAEL HAVE UNFORGETTABLE MEMORIES OF A UNIQUE AND MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE. HE HAS MADE THE TEMPLE A SAFE AND COMFORTING PLACE FOR OUR TEENAGERS TO GATHER WITH THEIR FRIENDS AT TIMES OF SADNESS AND TRAGEDY. THE LARGE NUMBER OF OUR STUDENTS WHO REMAIN IN OUR RELIGIOUS SCHOOL THROUGH THE TWELFTH GRADE IS A DIRECT TRIBUTE TO RABBI STERN.

RABBI STERN ENLIGHTENS OUR ADULT CONGREGANTS THROUGH MANY AND VARIED EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS. HIS TORAH CLASS HAS MET ON SUNDAY MORNINGS FOR ALL OF HIS TWENTY YEARS AND IT CONTINUES TO DELIGHT AND INSPIRE A DEVOTED GROUP OF PARTICIPANTS. SCHOLARS IN RESIDENCE AND "CONVERSATIONS WITH THE RABBI" PROGRAMS HAVE BROUGHT US A DISTINGUISHED GROUP OF SPEAKERS ON IMPORTANT TOPICS OF THE DAY. HIS BOOK REVIEWS, COURSES ON ISRAEL, DISCUSSION GROUPS ON WISE AGING, DEATH AND DYING, AND SO MANY OTHER

OFFERINGS ENHANCE OUR INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS. HIS WEEKLY BEFORE SHABBAT MESSAGES PROVIDE US WITH THOUGHT PROVOKING COMMENTS ON CURRENT EVENTS AND HELPFUL GUIDELINES ON HOW TO INTERPRET OUR COMPLEX WORLD.

RABBI STERN'S PASSION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE HAS INSPIRED US TO GET INVOLVED IN OUR LARGER COMMUNITY THROUGH IMPORTANT PROJECTS SUCH AS MITZVAH DAY AND, MORE RECENTLY, OUR INITIATIVE TO TAKE ON THE ISSUE OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE THROUGH PARTNERING WITH LOCAL AGENCIES WHO ADDRESS THAT ISSUE. WE HAVE BECOME A MORE CARING CONGREGATION BECAUSE OF HIM.

FOR ME THE THING THAT RESONATES THE MOST ABOUT RABBI STERN IS WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SANCTUARY. NO MATTER HOW I FEEL WHEN I ARRIVE FOR A FRIDAY NIGHT SERVICE, I ALWAYS LEAVE FEELING UPLIFTED. I MARVEL AT HIS ABILITY TO SPEAK FROM HIS HEART IN A WAY THAT REACHES OUT TO THE HOPES AND FEARS THAT LIE DEEP WITHIN EACH OF US. IT MAKES NO DIFFERENCE WHETHER HE IS SPEAKING TO A THOUSAND CONGREGANTS ON THE HIGH HOLY DAYS OR A DOZEN STALWARTS ON A SNOWY NIGHT IN JANUARY - HIS MESSAGE IS ALWAYS SIGNIFICANT AND MEANINGFUL. HE CAN CONVEY HIS SPIRITUAL DEPTH WHETHER HE IS TALKING ABOUT THE MIRACLE OF HIS DAFFODILS REAPPEARING EACH SPRING, RELATING A PROFOUND MOMENT THAT HE EXPERIENCED WITH ONE OF HIS CHILDREN DURING A MOONLIT NIGHT ON THE CAPE OR REVEALING HIS LONG AND PAINFUL JOURNEY TO COME TO TERMS WITH HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS FATHER. BY SHARING HIS PERSONAL MOMENTS OF RECOGNITION HE HELPS US TO APPRECIATE THOSE ENCOUNTERS WHERE WE CAN OPEN UP OUR OWN HEARTS.

RABBI STERN ALSO MAKES THE SANCTUARY A PLACE WHERE WE CAN COME TOGETHER TO PROCESS AND HEAL FROM THE STRESS GOING ON IN OUR CHAOTIC WORLD. HIS SPECIAL SERVICE IN AUGUST FOLLOWING THE TRAUMATIC EVENTS IN CHARLOTTESVILLE GUIDED US TO COMFORT EACH OTHER AND LOOK FOR A WAY TO MOVE FORWARD WITH HOPE AND COURAGE.

RABBI STERN SPEAKS TO EACH OF US BECAUSE HE RECOGNIZES OUR COMMON HUMANITY, COMPLETE WITH OUR WEAKNESSES AND OUR STRENGTHS, OUR FLAWS AND OUR SOARING CAPABILITIES. HE IS CONSTANTLY TRYING TO BECOME A BETTER RABBI AND A BETTER PERSON AND IN DOING SO, HE INSPIRES US ALL TO BE BETTER PEOPLE. AS HE SAID IN THAT INSIGHTFUL ESSAY TWENTY YEARS AGO, WHATEVER HE DOES, HE DOES IT. HOW BLESSED WE ARE AT TEMPLE BETH AVODAH THAT HE DOES IT FOR US!

BONNIE MILLENDER, NOVEMBER 17, 2017