

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Always Celebrate Life

One of the greatest honors of being a rabbi is when I am asked to officiate a ceremony for someone whose life has ended. This may come as a surprise; it was to me. When I first began my rabbinic journey, I knew that life cycle events would be a big part of my responsibilities. I was very comfortable embracing the *simchas*: weddings, naming babies, bar and bat mitzvahs, anniversary blessings, etc. Some might think that funerals and memorial services are a necessary annoyance, and the fewer the better. But while some people might not have a bar/bat mitzvah, some might not get married or have children, *everyone* is going to die. It is the great equalizer. I feel very blessed to learn about people's lives from their loved ones. When the deceased is someone who I knew, I learn things I never realized. When they are someone who I did not know, or only met briefly, I have the extraordinary blessing of getting to know someone posthumously. I can tell you; I have met some incredible souls after their transition from this world into the world to come.

In recent years, many have adopted the custom of calling the event a "celebration of life," rather than a funeral or memorial. I believe this is very consistent with Jewish philosophy. While American custom is to make big celebrations and even commemorations about birthdays, in Judaism, we acknowledge the *yahrtzeit*, or anniversary of a death, rather than the birthday. Perhaps this is because when we are born, we have not accomplished anything yet, but when our loved one dies, we have a whole lifetime to remember. When we recite the Mourner's Kaddish, we are not lamenting our loss, we are praising God for bringing loved ones into our lives. Of course we are sad about the recent loss, but that sadness is only possible because of the preciousness of what we had before. As written in the Book of Job: "The LORD gives, the LORD takes away, blessed is the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21).

When we celebrate a life, we keep alive a legacy. And when we delight in the gifts that our loved ones gave, it also helps others connect with similar blessings they may have received from their own loved ones. When I hear or read someone extolling virtues, it gives me the opportunity to think of others. "Yes, my uncle was kind of like that." Or "That reminds me of what a friend once said to me." It may even make us think about those we never met, but perhaps have some kind of connection to our future. I personally had very little experience with any of my own grandparents, having all died before I got to know them. But they were part of who I am, whether I can identify individual qualities or not. When I learn about the elders in other people's families, I can imagine the legacies that are part of me. When I think of my own teachers, and study about my teachers' teachers, my own philosophy becomes enlightened.

At the end of this month, we will celebrate legacy. We will hear a little about the beginning of our temple community, past, present and future. We will also dedicate two new stained-glass windows, provided by current bar/bat mitzvah families and by legacy gifts made by two members, who thought to include Temple Beth Torah in their final wishes. **Dale Israel Vine**

was only with the temple a short time. He came to the temple in 2019 and chose to convert to Judaism when he was in his late sixties, already battling cancer. Dale passed away in 2022, and in those three years, the temple meant so much to him that he wanted to continue to support us after his death. **Jeffrey Kaufman** had a more noticeable impact in the temple story. He and his family were members – and still are – for over 25 years. He served in many capacities on our board, including president, treasurer, membership chair and chair of safety and security. He and his wife, Alice, renewed their wedding vows on our pulpit, and their grandchildren attend our Religious School.

Dale and Jeff are just two examples of the many who have an impact on our community. Every legacy is worth celebrating! Please join us on January 31 to honor Temple Beth Torah's many flavors of legacy. And if you cannot make it that evening, come look at the windows and think about those who have influenced your life and how you would like to be remembered.

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon

P.S. Many thanks to the estates of Dale Vine and Jeff Kaufman and the Bar/Bar Mitzvah families for funding the stained-glass windows and to the Houston Jewish Community Foundation for inspiring the Legacy program and sponsoring the January 31 service.