

*In Memory of Rabbi Harold S. Kushner (May 1, 2023) by Rabbi David Klutzker*

The Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 111a, says: Haval al de-avdin ve-la mishtakahin, woe to those who have lost and do not find. Rashi explains it is a tragic loss when a great person dies and there is no one to replace him.

My friends, I will be very brief. There are other speakers today, and none of us will be able to say everything that is on our hearts.

I owe Harold a tremendous debt of gratitude for his generous mentorship when I was a young rabbi and for his constant encouragement through the years. When I came here to work with him, I was not entirely sure that I wanted to commit myself to the rabbinate, but he convinced me that synagogues are where the rubber meets the road in Jewish life, and that caring communities are where God's love is most keenly felt.

I want to focus on the image of Harold preaching from this bimah (which, to be sure, looked different in those days).

When I was the associate rabbi here, each of his sermons and Torah commentaries was—I can only say—an event. Shabbat after Shabbat, holiday after holiday, we would come to this sanctuary with the feeling that something important was going to happen in the next few minutes, and I cannot recall ever having been disappointed. I would not have missed one of his talks for anything.

It was obvious that Harold loved the preacher's craft, just as he loved his material (Tanak, Siddur, Mahzor, Midrash, Hassidic divrei Torah, world literature, and stories from many traditions). He had an amazing command of them all. You might not know that Harold seldom read from a prepared text. He usually jotted down a few notes on a page from a notepad, and that was enough for him to deliver a brilliantly crafted and highly original dvar Torah. When he wasn't looking, I used to retrieve some of those notes from the trash so that I could study them.

His sermons were sometimes quite daring. Because he was not afraid to say things that challenged conventional ideas about God and the world, he exposed himself to harsh criticism from more traditional thinkers. But he knew that people suffering grief and pain, people who felt empty and unable, people who wanted to make sense of it all, needed something more honest and sensitive than the pat answers that they were getting from most faith leaders. He invited us all to an

authentic conversation about our fear, anxiety, anger, and sadness. He showed us how we can care for ourselves and others. Although he might have believed that *God can't do everything*, he was constantly in search of evidence of God's *doing* everywhere around us.

Of course, it has been many years, and those of us who remember him standing here may not recall everything that he said to us. Thankfully, we have his books to remind us. But what will remain with us the longest are not his words but rather the sound of his voice, the look, the light of his face. Those of us at Temple Israel will not forget the experience of being in his passionate and caring presence. And when we stand at his graveside this afternoon we will stand without words, only standing in amazement at his continuing presence above and beyond its strength in his living life.

And that will comfort us.