

Yizkor 5781
September 28, 2020

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"Remembering Rabbi Samuel Karff with Our Own"

Gathering for Yizkor creates a safe space where we can grieve and remember, together. We share the mourners' bench with others who feel as we do: bent over, longing, and praying. This year, we remember our family members and our dear Rabbi Samuel Karff. For the first time, he is not sitting among us or here to offer his closing benediction, though he had given it to me to do a few years ago. The inability to look beyond this bimah and see him, again, places a heaviness on my heart, and, likewise, on yours.

At his funeral, there were two eulogies that I could have delivered. The one that I shared was for a broad audience that included us, plus hundreds of colleagues and admirers beyond Beth Israel and Houston. It highlighted his role as a rabbi and human being who studied and taught while he grew into the person we came to know as a righteous and dear man. His daughters, Rachel, Amy and Liz, and his grandson, Josh, added personal stories about moments that they will cling to every day.

The second eulogy I planned to give was about the man we came to know for ourselves. Today, I don't intend to give a eulogy, because this isn't a funeral. But, in Rabbi Karff's, in Sam's life, he lived in ways that do speak to us, today, and which honor not only his role in our life, but also the roles of our loved ones, too.

Sam Karff was a man who modeled humility and good humor. I'll tell you a story. Sam loved baseball. He was an Astro's fan. One day, he had a great seat in the diamond section seated just rows from the fence behind home plate. What he didn't know was that seated in the section behind him was a dear friend he knew from the congregation. Such a good friend was he, that he decided to play a friendly trick on Sam. He called over the usher and pointed to Sam, who was sitting with a sweater around his shoulders, in case he got cold, which wasn't uncommon. He instructed the usher to go to the man sitting there and tell him that, if he didn't mind putting the sweater on top of his head, there was another person sitting above him who couldn't see because of the glare coming from his bald head. The usher made her way to Sam, who told him the problem. Being a man of extraordinary kindness, he began to move his sweater to the top of his head, and then quickly realized that he was the brunt of someone's silly trick. He turned around to see his friend laughing and waving. Sam returned the laugh and the wave.

Sam was a good sport. He made us laugh with him, because he laughed at himself, too. His greatness was not diminished by such self-deprecation; instead, it was magnified.

Sam Karff was a man who modeled Torah lessons with amazing skill. It wasn't only in his magnificent sermons or lectures or radio recordings; it was also in the subtle ways he extended a lesson we needed to hear in the course of a casual conversation. In one such case, a young man who grew up at Temple, came to see

Sam about a personal problem. His father had prompted him to see the rabbi. As their conversation began, Sam pulled out a book for the young man. It was a book about the benefits of AA and spirituality. Sam asked him to tell him about the book and its purpose. The result was that Sam didn't do the teaching; instead, the young man taught himself with Sam's support about finding his way to sobriety.

Sam's kindness enabled us to open doors we thought were locked in front of us. He lifted us up without telling us we were low or lowly. He helped us find what we needed to know and how to make our lives better.

Sam was a man of integrity and honesty. Though rabbis are held to very high standards placed on them by others and themselves, Sam apologized when he needed to, and hoped that others would allow him to be humanly holy. It isn't easy to hold our spiritual leaders in high esteem and then discover that they are more like us than we knew. Whether or not we wanted to accept it, he couldn't always heal what was broken or deliver answers that weren't available. But, no one will forget, if you were here, when he pointed to the heavens during a sermon and at the same time a loud clap of thunder shook the skies. So, I'll admit that my conclusion about his mere human holiness is only tentative.

Sam Karff was also my mentor. Truly, he was the most important rabbi in my life, and our relationship grew dearer and deeper when I returned to Beth Israel in 2004. He honored me as his successor, and I honored him as rabbi emeritus. He felt grateful to me, and to all of you, that the congregation he served for 24 years was flourishing.

Rabbi Karff's presence was reassuring to us. Though he no longer preached to us, or held his regular classes anymore, he was there for us. His place in the pews told us everything we needed to know. His absence, though hard to adjust to, is, as nature goes, part of the rhythm that all life must obey. And, therefore, while we mourn Rabbi Karff's death and our own dear ones, too, we retrieve from death what cannot be taken from us.

Laughter, humility, wisdom, security, and friendship are still ours. You and I can recall those who are gone from life any time we want. It's not the same, and I won't tell you that it is; but I can feel, sense, hear, and know everything I need without failing to appreciate what Rabbi Karff knew was the Truth of God's judgment. Near the end of his life, he said, "When death comes, I will feel sad; but I will not feel cheated." Even now, his wisdom helps us understand what death's moment might mean to us. Though some are taken too soon and are torn from their family circle, we can cling to the blessings that were their lives and are now their memories.

Yizkor, this time set aside for remembering, turns us to each other now. We are a congregation of mourners who seek God's blessing on their beloved. So, we pray: O God, remember our loved ones, the men, women, and children, who graced our days, that we may know that love once shared in this world is a love that endures in the peace of life eternal. May you embrace them, God, as they once embraced us; love them as they loved us; and, then with grateful hearts, may we all be comforted. Amen.