



Rabbi Samuel Egal Karff

September 19, 1931 - August 15, 2020

Rabbi Samuel Egal Karff was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1931. He was a first generation American, the son of two Israeli immigrants, Louis and Reba Karff. His parents were both Hebrew school teachers, and he grew up with a strong love of both Judaism and education. Encouraged by his Central High School English teacher, Sam Karff applied to Harvard University and was accepted into the class of 1953 with a full tuition scholarship. At one time, he thought about using his sonorous voice and love of baseball to become a sports announcer but decided instead to enter the rabbinate after his meaningful interactions at Harvard's Hillel. After graduating Magna Cum Laude from Harvard, he was ordained as a Reform Rabbi in 1956 from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio where he also received a Doctorate in Hebrew Letters in 1962.

Prior to starting his career as a congregational Rabbi, he served as an Air Force Chaplain where he had many memorable experiences in the states and overseas. Rabbi Karff's rabbinate took him first to Temple Beth Israel in Hartford, Connecticut, where he met the beautiful and captivating Joan Mag. Before leaving Connecticut to accept his first solo pulpit in Flint, Michigan, Joan and Sam were married in 1959. They loved to tell stories about their whirlwind courtship which resulted in an engagement by the end of their fifth date! Theirs was a love affair that spanned four states and fifty-seven years. They were lovers and best friends and shared the deepest kind of connection.

She was always his first reader of sermons and articles, giving honest feedback that he respected. He was her biggest fan and carried overflowing bouquets of roses onstage after her many dance performances. Together, Joan and Sam proudly raised three daughters, Rachel Karff Weissenstein, Amy Karff Halevy and Liz Karff Seitz.

In 1963, Rabbi Karff's career took him from Flint to the prestigious Reform congregation, Sinai Temple in Chicago's Hyde Park. Those were rich and productive years for Rabbi Karff and his family. In addition to his rabbinic responsibilities, Rabbi Karff taught classes at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Notre Dame and became involved in social justice issues that he would champion the rest of his life. The family also enjoyed numerous deep and life-long friendships from those Chicago years. Another important aspect of those years was the connection the family formed with a small town in Northern Michigan, Charlevoix. This magical place became the Karff family's retreat every summer for rest and intellectual and spiritual rejuvenation. Rabbi Karff's congregants eagerly looked forward to his "Charlevoix Sermon" upon his return to the pulpit each fall.

In 1974, Rabbi Karff accepted the position of senior Rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel, (Texas's oldest synagogue) in Houston, Texas. He was charmed by the southern hospitality of the hosts who brought him down to interview, and he believed in the expansive and inclusive nature of this growing city.

During his twenty-four year tenure at Congregation Beth Israel, he founded the Shlenker School which continues to provide a rich Jewish and secular education for students from early childhood through fifth grade. The role of congregational rabbi is multi-faceted, and Rabbi Karff was uniquely gifted in all of the different areas. He was a phenomenal speaker and wove brilliant sermons together by blending biblical scholarship, contemporary literary fiction, current events and film. Each sermon was a profound collage that

moved the congregation so much you could often hear their collective murmurs of awe after he finished speaking.

He was also able to preach and teach to the youngest members of his congregation; every child lucky enough to have heard his Yom Kippur story will never forget "The Land of No Second Chances." But he was also the consummate spiritual guide as his own deep and abiding faith was both genuine and constant. Additionally, his soothing manner and unlimited ability to empathize allowed him to be a remarkable healer to those who found themselves dealing with life's darkness. Rabbi Karff was also a Rabbi's Rabbi, leading his colleagues as the President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis from 1989-1991 and by sharing his experience of being called to the rabbinate in his memoir, *For This You Were Created*. Rabbi Karff's other publications include: *Agada: The Language of Jewish Faith*, *The Soul of the Rav*, and *Permission to Believe: Finding Faith in Troubled Times*. Rabbi Karff also wrote the chapters on Judaism for *Religions of the World*, a text that has gone through three editions and been used in 200 colleges.

While in Houston, Rabbi Karff found many ways to interact with the larger community outside the congregation, including his Sunday morning radio program on KODA that was popular with listeners of all faiths for over twenty years. He taught in the Religion Department at Rice University and was actively involved with Interfaith Ministries. His social justice work, begun in Chicago, took on even deeper meaning, when he joined forces with Rev. William A. Lawson, Founding Pastor Emeritus Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church and Archbishop Emeritus Joseph Fiorenza of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. Together, they were fondly known as the Three Amigos. A mighty force, they united their formidable powers to champion the causes that were important to them. In the mid 1980's during Houston's economic

downturn, the Three Amigos, along with other local clergy, banded together to form the Campaign for the Homeless, which exists today as the Coalition for the Homeless. They were also leading voices in the Anti-Defamation League's Coalition for Mutual Respect since its inception twenty-five years ago. Additionally, they worked for numerous other city causes including juvenile justice reform, geriatric health care needs, and distribution of funding for low-income victims of Hurricane Harvey. The beautiful Plaza of Respect at the Interfaith Ministries building in downtown Houston is dedicated to all three of them. It is a lasting legacy of their love of each other, this city and humanity.

After becoming the Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Beth Israel in 1999, Rabbi Karff embarked on new challenges in the Texas Medical Center. He was profoundly inspired by this new endeavor and brought a unique perspective to the field of health care. He founded the Health and Human Spirit Program--the precursor to the McGovern Center. He also co-created the Sacred Vocation Program (SVP) at the University of Texas Medical School and served as its codirector. SVP is a program which focuses on the relational aspects of being a physician; Rabbi Karff believed deeply that all members of a patient's health care team-- and all employees of health care institutions-- were part of a sacred vocation because they had opportunities to make each person feel honored and nurtured. The Sacred Vocation Program is now incorporated into medical centers across the United States.

In addition to his three adored and adoring daughters, Rachel, Amy and Liz, he leaves behind a beloved son-in-law, Dr. Amir Halevy and seven extraordinary grandchildren Josh, Ben and Emily Weissenstein, Jacob and Daniel Halevy, Zack and Zoe Kampf and two beautiful bonus grandchildren: Jacob's wife, Leah and Josh's fiancé, Sara. Rabbi Karff had one sister, Elana Kohn, who was the most devoted younger sister and will miss him terribly, as we all will. Her son David Cherner, wife Stacie, and children Julia and Andrew were incredibly close to Rabbi Karff as well. He also leaves behind his

beloved and cherished companion, Valerie Baron who brought tremendous light to his life in the years after Joan's death.

Rabbi Karff will also be lovingly remembered by many members of his extended family around the world. He also cherished his many, many close friends from all areas of his life. He adored his friend and driver, Emmitt Bryan and deeply missed their days together when Covid forced us all apart. He shared a very special bond with the other two thirds of the Three Amigos, Reverend Bill Lawson and Archbishop Emeritus Joseph Fiorenza. We feel confident that they will continue the good work of the Amigos in their fight for equity, inclusion and fairness.

In addition to Congregation Beth Israel, contributions may be made to two charities near and dear to Rabbi Karff's heart: the Rabbi Samuel Egal Karff Fund at Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston and Joan Karff's Women on the Way Up, the mentoring program created by his late wife, Joan. Rabbi Karff's funeral will be live streamed from the sanctuary at Congregation Beth Israel on Wednesday, August 19th at 10:00 am (CST). www.beth-israel.org.

Tribute Wall

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“ I am most appreciative for the opportunity to meet and know Rabbi Karff. He was a gentle spirit, whenever he entered a room, you knew that from his lips he espoused wisdom. We are saddened by the loss of this global faith Giant. Shalom! Preston Allen - Houston

Preston Allen - August 03, 2021 at 12:11 PM