

Eulogy for Rabbi Peter S. Knobel

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Beth Emet The Free Synagogue

*Eizehu m'chubad, hamechabed et habriyot.*

Who is honored? The one who honors others.

In thinking about how to encapsulate the life and career of Rabbi Peter Knobel, this adage from Pirke Avot struck me as capturing his essence more than any other. For a man of such vast accomplishments and prodigious gifts, from scholarship on the ancient Aramaic translation of the Torah to prayerbook editor, senior rabbi and leader of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, one might expect a certain amount of conceitedness or vanity. Yet Peter Knobel was a mensch who was supportive of, and placed the greatest emphasis on, the accomplishments of others, not his own. I can think of countless examples of his publicly praising others; it seemed he never missed an opportunity to elevate those around him.

Colleagues at other congregations are amazed to learn that lay people at Beth Emet participate not only in the administrative aspects of running a synagogue, but in giving divrei torah, leading worship, and teaching. This is a credit to Peter, who nurtured and encouraged such leadership for 30 years. Peter used to say, if the lay people are passionate about it, it will happen. He planted the idea for a soup kitchen at Beth Emet, and he knew that lay leadership would have to take hold of it for it to succeed. He proposed founding a progressive Chevra Kadisha, or burial society, something nearly unheard of at a Reform congregation, and then he found like-minded congregants to make it happen. Peter modeled how lay and professional partnerships could be the most collaborative, and he lavished praise on others when the goal was achieved, even when the idea was originally his.

Peter loved being a rabbi. He loved Jewish scholarship, prompting him after rabbinic school to pursue a doctorate at Yale. But his greatest satisfaction came from being a congregational rabbi. He served in Groton, CT, was the senior rabbi here at Beth Emet for 30 years, and subsequently served as interim rabbi at Temple Sholom in Chicago; Temple Judea in Coral Gables, FL; Beth Shalom in Auckland, New Zealand, and, most recently at Temple Israel of Hollywood. He delighted in all aspects of congregational life—leading worship, officiating at life-cycle events, counseling, working with lay leadership and staff, and teaching.

It was an honor to work with Peter. His leadership role was one of the principle reasons I chose to come Beth Emet 19 years ago. Under his leadership, Beth Emet had the reputation for being a leader in all aspects of congregational life—learning, prayer, and social justice. Peter had a passion for liturgy and showed a gift for editing as head of the editorial team that produced the Reform Movement's siddur – *Mishkan Tefillah*.

Peter also took seriously the notion of Beth Emet as “The Free Synagogue”—a place for honest, respectful, and thoughtful discourse. He didn’t shy away from controversy and encouraged his colleagues to speak from the heart. If anyone complained, he would point to the Beth Emet bylaws and say that this kind of speech is a hallmark of Beth Emet and one of the qualities that makes this community special.

Peter was also passionate about Israel. He was very proud of the study trips he led there. In a memorial for the J Street community, I wrote that, during his five decades in the rabbinate, Peter was an advocate for the two-state solution and for justice and peace for Jews and Palestinians, and one of the first rabbis to join the J Street rabbinic and cantorial cabinet after its formation. Under his leadership, Beth Emet was a center for thoughtful conversation and dialogue about Israel and the conflict, hosting many prominent Jewish and Palestinian academics, journalists, politicians, and peace advocates. Peter would often say, “Never apologize for your principles,” and he lived by that wisdom. He was not afraid to take controversial stands or to shy away from the truth even if people chafed at his views. He lived with honesty and integrity and was a tireless advocate for justice and peace for all the inhabitants of the Land of Israel. His moral voice and passion will be missed, but his legacy endures as a model for all of us.

From these observations, one might come away with the impression of an entirely somber and serious man. But Peter had a playful side as well. I remember one particular meeting when Peter asked for my opinion on an early draft of *Mishkan Tefilah*. We were in the midst of a thoughtful conversation about the text, and he was listening intently to my critiques when I asked him about a curious reference in this early draft to “gazelles of the spirit.” What, I asked, was a gazelle of the spirit?! Peter promptly rose from his chair and began leaping and pirouetting around his office and the two of us had a long and hysterical laugh that brought us both to the point of tears. That was Peter: earnest about his work and his projects, but also fun-loving and blessed with a sense of joy and humor. Not only did he enjoy a good wine, as so many of you know, he also enjoyed a good laugh.

Leaping and laughing aside, Peter was an energetic man who delighted not only in congregational life, but also in playing a role in the Jewish community nationally. He was a leader on matters of Jewish bio-ethics and he relished his involvement in the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in which he served on many committees and on the board and eventually as president—a role he cherished. We still give to each of our b’nai mitzvah the books Peter edited on life-cycles and holidays. Even since becoming rabbi emeritus at Beth Emet and spending extended periods away from Evanston, his writing has continued to inspire our young people.

As in any close relationship, Peter and I had our moments of disagreement over the years. But no matter how strongly we might disagree, I always felt his love and respect—and he knew that the feelings were mutual—and I appreciated how we worked through those moments and got closer in the process. Most recently, Peter chaired a CCAR committee on rabbi emeritus-senior rabbi relationships, and he would regularly share with me, sometimes with disbelief and sometimes with laughter, the stories that he heard about frictions and tensions in some of these relationships at other congregations. He would say, “I tell everyone about how our

relationships is a model for senior rabbi emeritus relationships.” I couldn’t agree more, and I attribute that primarily to Peter’s wisdom, his collaborative nature and his generosity of spirit.

All of us who are here today will miss Peter very much, and we extend our hearts and our prayers to his family, who grieve his loss most acutely. Peter was an only child and was very close to Elaine’s siblings and to his nieces and nephews. He had a deeply loving relationship with his sons, Seth and Jeremy, and he adored being “Poppa” to Leah, Alana, Heather, Stephen, Lily, and Oliver. As much as Peter loved his work, his family always came first. He picked up the phone whenever they called even if he was in the middle of a meeting. He was there for every occasion—birthdays, games, plays, holidays, you name it. Peter talked with pride and joy about each of his children and grandchildren. But as we heard from them, what is most enduring were not the big occasions, but the sleepovers, the family dinners, the cheesy eggs he would serve them for breakfast. He was an active and loving presence in their lives. As you well know, his fame and accomplishments are known far and wide, but you had the privilege of being the center of his life.

And, of course, it’s impossible to talk about Peter without talking about the love of his life, Elaine. “Peter and Elaine” was almost one word. They were devoted to each other for 53 years. As their daughter in law, Alyssa, put it, they had an “epic” marriage. Elaine supported Peter in everything he did. She was his most trusted sermon critic, she encouraged his academic work and she was so proud of his involvement and leadership in a myriad of projects on the national Jewish scene.

And he adored and doted on you, Elaine. Being in the presence of the two of you was such a joy because you got so much enjoyment from each other.

A defining feature of Peter’s rabbinate was his gracious hospitality. He and Elaine would frequently host people at their home, and this typically meant Elaine cooking up an incredible meal that Peter paired with a great bottle of wine...or two...or three. So many of us were blessed not only with the incredible food and drink at the Knobels’ home, but in the warmth and kindness that Elaine and Peter shared with all of us.

We pledge to continue to honor Peter’s memory by living by the legacy he left for us—a legacy of love of learning, love of Jewish tradition and practice, and, most importantly, love and caring for people. *Aizehu M’chubad?* Who is honored? One who honors others. You honored us by your life Peter. We pray we may honor you by living by the legacy you’ve left for us.