

Remarks accepting the Ohavi Zedek Synagogue 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Mitzvah Award. Michael P. Schaal  
January 21, 2023

Shabbat Shalom,

I accept this award with gratitude, humility and a bit of sheepishness.

I have spoken to the Congregation in this Sanctuary many times. With one exception, the emphasis has always been on advocating for the things that I believe in, rather than focusing on myself. That is where I am most comfortable.

I believe that the reward for doing something well is having done it. There are so many people in this congregation who are worthy of receiving this award. I am hopeful that in the years to come they will be recognized. I am very appreciative of the honor of being the first.

I want to acknowledge Judy Breitmeyer, my beloved, my wife. She is here with me today. And my daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren, who are zooming in. Our love for each other is the Center of my Universe

I am the Son and Grandson of German Jewish Refugees on both sides of my family.

From the age of about ten, when our family moved to Connecticut, my parents immersed themselves in many aspects of the local Jewish Community, including service to fellow Jews and beyond, to the community at large.

I remember walking under the stars with my father as he reflected, "There must have been a reason why I survived and so many others did not".

It was not Survivor's guilt that motivated my parents, but rather a lifelong journey to live their values out of a sense of obligation and gratitude. They had great empathy for others who were suffering. As young people, they were forced to leave their homes and country, or face death. Their families were scattered around the world. Family members died in the Holocaust. They knew what it was to be the "other". Rather than turning their anguish into bitterness and rage, they were grateful to have survived and to have the ability to build a viable life in this country. Even as they struggled economically, for awhile, it was intuitively right for them to join other Jews in community service. It was part of Jewish life where we lived at that time.

Theodore Roosevelt once said: "Do what you can, with what you have, where you are".

My parents and their Jewish friends may not have been familiar with the quote, but they lived it.

Each Christmas Eve the members of B'nai Brith, the Women's chapter, the Men's Lodge and the Girls and Boys Youth Groups, would carpool up to the Veteran's hospital. We would offer comfort and companionship to those Veterans who were alone without visitors, and who were too sick to go home for the Holiday.

My parents joined with others to volunteer in a Homeless Shelter. Jewish community members collaborated with the congregants of an African-American Church. Together they formed the "Good Guys" club, a youth group in the Projects of Bridgeport. My father represented the Jewish Community in the Bridgeport anti-poverty agency .

When my parents moved to Florida, my father chaired the Social Action committee of his Temple. That congregation engaged in Interfaith efforts to supply backpacks with school supplies and food for Children.

Under the auspices of the Florida Holocaust Museum, my parents, Eva and Frank, went to Synagogues, Churches, Schools and other venues to educate and tell their stories about what it was like to be a child growing up in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. They continued to do so into their late Eighties.

My parents and many others whom I met along the way modeled and taught me the meaning of Mitzvah, the responsibility and obligation, the privilege and gratification that comes from pursuing Social Justice, or, just the act of being kind.

Every day as I do my work as a Psychotherapist I have the knowledge that I can positively impact the lives of the people that I see. It is a Mitzvah.

I vowed to myself early in my adulthood that, unless I was in immanent physical danger, I would always speak out, whenever I encountered racism, antisemitism or prejudice of any kind. As my consciousness grew that came to include Sexism, Homophobia, other anti- LGBTQ hatred, and anti-immigrant sentiment.

I too was once an immigrant.

Along the way I joined others when I believed that people or groups were being unfairly and unjustly treated. Whenever possible I joined the efforts to address the unjust systems that caused that suffering. Sometimes I led those efforts.

The motivation for my actions comes from Humanistic values. I also act from my deeply held Jewish identity, my Jewish core.

It does not matter to me that other wisdom traditions, be they religious or secular, also have underlying principles of Social Justice. The values that I live from are universal, but they are particularly Jewish.

We are a people who have been taught to care about right and wrong and who have been commanded to confront Injustice.

There are profound lessons from Torah, Talmud and other Sacred texts. Teachings like Tikkun Olam, that neither G-d or the people who inhabit this earth can heal the world alone. We are in partnership. We must rely on each other.

The teaching of Tikkun Olam has been a guiding principle in my life.

The Jewish people's experience of oppression is long and difficult. We just read about an example a few minutes ago in today's Parsha. Yes, we were once enslaved. Other painful memories too numerous to count have informed our world view.

Yet, we have survived and as a people we have thrived. Not without painful memories, not without trauma.

Yet we live and breathe, love and laugh. We are fully alive as a people. Anyone who tries to stop us will fail. We have survived and we thrive.

We live the values and teachings of the Sages:

You have probably heard this before, but it never stops being worthy of repetition:

Hillel

"If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, what am I? And if not now, when"?

And Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose fifty year anniversary yahrzeit we observed last week. This scholar and activist, refugee from Poland, friend and ally of Martin Luther King Jr. who once remarked as he marched for Civil Rights that "I prayed with my feet".

He also said:

"morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

He may have been speaking about racism, but his message is applicable universally.

We can be responsible with love and caring toward each other within our congregation and toward others who need us locally, nationally and around the world. Remember that when we perform Mizvot, we get as much back as we give.

I came to Ohavi Zedek in 1996 after years of estrangement from the organized Jewish Community. Due to a series of very significant events that greatly affected me, I wanted to fill something inside me that was missing. It was a yearning and a wish for Jewish Community. I needed a connection, a place where I could be all of myself. Here I have formed friendships that have stood the test of time.

I found a group of kindred spirits in the Wednesday Morning Group. We met for twenty two years. Other people throughout the Congregation also shared my values, my spiritual Jewish practice, that was not only about what was observed, but how we lived and how we engaged in the journey of Social Justice.

It became clear to me that it could not be the Rabbi alone who was responsible for Social Action in our Congregation. We, the members, needed to be in partnership with the Rabbi, to practice Tikkun Olam.

Shortly after 9/11, I began to organize what would eventually be the Ohavi Zedek Interfaith and Social Action committee. I was joined by a remarkable group of people who shared my enthusiasm and energy for the many things that we could do.

Some of you are still active in those efforts and you have been joined by others.

Imagine 2025 has emerged with Social Justice as one of the three Pillars of our community. Social Justice is a priority for many of our members. I hope that I played a small role in nurturing that part of our Synagogue Culture.

On most Wednesday evenings, much more often than not, you will find me at 7:00 P.M., participating in Minyan. That has been my custom for the past fifteen or twenty years. I'm not sure how long. Pre-pandemic we were in the small sanctuary. Now we are on Zoom. The opportunity to be one of ten, to be present with members of our community at a time of great loss, or during Yahrzeit, when we hear the stories of those being remembered with great love, is a privilege that I hold dear.

When I have sustained family loss and when I observe Yahrzeit, being a part of Minyan has been a great and deep comfort.

If you can bring yourself to regularly or even sometimes, attend Minyan, I promise that what you receive will surpass what you give.

In our Synagogue lobby, not far from where I stand today, you will find a large cabinet, a Hutch once owned by members of our Congregation, Harry and Irene Kahn.

They lived in Burlington and were members of Ohavi Zedek. Their children Hazel and Max grew up in Burlington and participated in Synagogue life.

Harry and Irene were German-Jewish refugees who emigrated from Germany in 1939. They came to Vermont with their young American born daughter Hazel, when she was a very young child, after spending a few years in New York City. Harry was offered a Hebrew School job here at OZ in 1944. Their son Max was born in Burlington. Eventually, Harry, whose German name was Helmut, joined the faculty in the German Department at UVM. He taught courses in the Religion and Philosophy Departments as well.

Harry's influence at UVM over the years still is felt. He mentored young Faculty members, taught Hebrew and was influential in supporting Hillel.

Since 1990 there has been an Annual Harry H. Kahn Memorial Lecture.

Harry and Irene's story was similar to many who managed to escape the Nazis during that time. Not so different from the story of my family and other families whose children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren are currently members of our Congregation.

I am interested in hearing from those of you who come from families who had relatives who either perished or survived the Holocaust. How has the experience of hearing the stories about, or from these relatives, influenced you, and helped to shape your life?

Harry and Irene survived Kristallnacht, in Germany, on the night of November 10, 1938. (the English translation is the night of broken glass). That night Synagogues were burned. Jews were attacked, sometimes beaten and some killed.

Here are some important words from Irene:

"A few nights later, the village policeman knocked on the door and told Helmut, 'You don't have to fear anything for the time being. I don't have a warrant and I have nothing against you, but I've come because I] have something I saved from the fire. If you want it, I'll give it to you.'" From under his coat he took out a small Sefer Torah. He had picked it up from the gutter on Kristallnacht.

Harry and Irene brought that Torah, a Kiddush cup and, we believe, the Hutch that was recently donated to us, with them, when they left Germany and eventually came here to Vermont. Sometime after they had established themselves in Burlington and here at Ohavi Zedek, Harry and Irene donated the Sefer Torah and the Kiddush cup to our Synagogue.

My efforts are now directed to the restoration of the Hutch and to telling the story of the Kahn family. The Hutch is representative of a prevailing furniture style of the 1930s. The intention is to convert it into a display case for the Kristallnacht Torah, the Kiddush cup, and other items in our possession.

We have established the Kahn Hutch Fund to pay for materials and the skilled professional services necessary complete the Project. One day I hope that we will be able to create a self-guided tour that will tell the story of the Kahn family and objects that will be displayed. All of this will complement the magnificent Mural that has now been fully restored, just outside the Sanctuary.

Any donations to the Kahn Hutch Fund would be greatly appreciated.

We will not display this Torah and the other objects merely because they are interesting historical Jewish artifacts. We do not do so to remind us that anti-Semitism is real and present and that we must be vigilant. We already know that.

We display and value these objects because they remind us that as a people we have survived and we thrive. They remind us to empathize with others who are suffering.

If Hitler had his way I would not be standing here and talking to you today. Nor would most of you be present in this room or participating virtually.

Yet here I am. I stand before you conscious and committed to meeting my responsibilities as a person and especially as a Jew. I revel in the balance between the Giving and the Getting. I am honored to be engaging in the Mitzvah of Social Justice.

Harry and Irene Kahn found a home here at Ohavi Zedek and in our "Brave Little State".

Hazel and Max went on to live good and meaningful lives and had families. Their children and grandchildren continue Harry and Irene's Legacy.

Ohavi Zedek Synagogue is a thriving Jewish community. Our future looks bright. Our Board, Clergy and Staff are strong and competent.

Rabbi Amy has ably led us. We are grateful to her for all that she has given us. When we say goodbye to Rabbi Amy and Bob at the end of June, we will thank them. We will wish them well in the next adventure of their lives. We will remember their time with us.

I believe that the next Rabbi whom we are searching for as I speak, will be someone who will be capable and special in her, his or their own way. A Rabbi who will join Cantor Steve and all of us and lead us toward the opportunities that are just over the horizon.

We are committed to actualizing and manifesting Social Justice within our Congregation and in the Communities where we live and work. There are many Mitzvot now and in the future that await us to be fulfilled.

Today Rabah