

## OZ's Inaugural Social Justice Award, Presented January 22, 2023

### Michael Schaal Honor

In Hebrew, Ohavi Zedek *means* "Lovers of Justice," and for the many years since its founding we have strived to live up to that name. OZ's recent *Imagine 2025* strategic planning process clarified our community's desire to elevate our focus on Social Justice – and to be a community of *social action*. With that in mind, we are proud to share the start a new tradition: The launch of **The Ohavi Zedek Social Justice Award**. **Each year, this honor will be given to a individuals or group in our congregation who has made significant contributions to the promotion of social justice.** The award recognizes those who have actively worked to make our world a better place, and those who have made a lasting impact on our community through their efforts.

The intent of this award is to celebrate and recognize the important role that social justice plays in the Jewish community and to inspire others to join in the work of making a more just and equitable society.

**Michael Schaal** is the first recipient of this honor.

The son and grandson of German Jews who nearly all managed to escape the Holocaust's 'final solution,' Michael was born in England in 1946, arriving in America with his parents the following year. A licensed independent clinical social worker, he co-founded a private psychotherapy practice with his wife, Judy Breitemeyer, who later worked as a school counselor. While Michael still works part-time, Judy has retired. They have two daughters and five grandchildren. He has been a regular Shabbat services attendee for many years.

Michael believes his family's experience in World War II shaped his world view. "*Tikkun olam* is not a once-in-a-while thing for me," he says. "It's my guiding principle in life. It guides my family, my work, my volunteer choices. It's how I see the world." Committed to the necessity of respecting individual and human rights, he has always been actively engaged in Jewish and interfaith issues in both the local and larger communities. In the period after September 11, 2001, observing the discrimination of the Islamic of community, Michael became inspired to do ad hoc interfaith and intercultural volunteer work with the OZ community. In 2012 he serving as chair of OZ's committee focused on interfaith and social action, a role he shared with others through 2022. Among other things, he collaborated with fellow volunteers, staff and clergy to reach out to Vermont's Islamic and African American communities, participated in the committee's [Stopping Stones](#) project that raised awareness of the lives of enslaved individuals here in Vermont and across the US, and confronting issues of poverty, war, hunger and inequality.

Michael also served as president of Ohavi Zedek in 2015 and 2016. Because the Holocaust experience still informs much of his life, Michael has been an active member of the advisory board of UVM's Holocaust Studies program for many years, through which he spearheaded several multigenerational gatherings of Holocaust survivor families. At present, he is excited about a new Holocaust-related project through our synagogue that will launch shortly.

The Social Justice Award will be presented during Shabbat Morning Services on Saturday January 22, 2023, and will be followed by a vegetarian kiddush meal.

This event represents an expansion of OZ Hebrew School's long-standing annual [Mitzvah Day](#) event, which takes place Sunday January 23. That event includes a guest speaker and group action project, but

the highlight of Mitzvah Day is the presentation by our b mitzvah students of their individual “Mitzvah Projects.” They each will share how they are taking action to make the world a better place. Naomi Barell, Director of Youth Education, describes Mitzvah Day as the most important day of the Hebrew School year, when our students share how they turn learning into action. It is truly inspiring to seek the work of these young adults.

The Social Justice Award combined with Mitzvah Day is sure to be an inspiring weekend!

###

### **Get Involved In OZ Social Justice**

In 2022, OZ’s new Social Justice programs included launching the award-winning annual [Reverse Tashlich waterway clean up](#), the annual [Pride Seder](#) and creation of our Social Justice Fair. We aspire to do more and are seeking ideas and help with programs in 2023. Please reach out to Sophie Miller, who can provide information on upcoming opportunities.