

Rabbi Bernard Baskin Eulogy – January 22, 2023

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I recently related a conversation that Rabbi Baskin and I had about 15 years ago, about a year after I began my tenure as rabbi of Temple Anshe Sholom. We were standing in the upper foyer just outside of the Temple Office. I can't remember what we were discussing but then, apropos of nothing, Rabbi Baskin says to me, "I am glad you are going to be officiating at my funeral." I understand now that there was a bigger context to his statement, but at the time I was a bit shocked and taken aback by this apparently random musing. I was also a bit flattered by his comfort and faith in me. How do you respond to such a statement? I simply said, "God willing we won't have to worry about that for a very long time.

Well we both got our way that day. The then 87-year-old was blessed with 15 more years of life and vigour and activity that continued to inspire so many around him, and here we are today, gathered in the Rabbi Bernard Baskin Sanctuary at Temple Anshe Sholom, the house that Baskin built, to honour and remember and pay our dearest respects to a towering figure who served a combined 74 years as a spiritual leader of this community. Personally I am honoured to have followed in his footsteps on this bima and deeply deeply appreciative of his unwavering support and the deep wisdom he shared with me over our years together here at the Temple. As far as Rabbi and Rabbi Emeritus relations go, I feel privileged and am just glad I did not have to follow immediately in his shoes after his retirement. I want to say, as an aside, that from the time we first met as colleagues, he invited me to call him Bernie. But like many of us, I couldn't. Rabbi Baskin is simply who he was.

Until recent years, Rabbi Baskin did not talk much of death; his focus was always firmly on this world. That was deliberate. We know, however, from his few writings on the topic, that his attitude towards

death tended more towards the thinking of the philosophers than the speculations of the mystics. In an article published in the Hamilton Spectator in 2011 entitled *Life and Death*, he wrote of his affinity for Socrates, who, when sentenced to die by an Athenian court, serenely drank the fatal cup of Hemlock. Death, he assured his friends, is either a long dreamless slumber, or the migration of the soul from one realm to another. Either way it is nothing to be feared. Despite his numerous problems, Spinoza declared, “A free man thinks least of all about death” (*Life and Death in Spec, 2011*).

In the same article he wrote, “We must surrender so much that is precious to us. But that should encourage us to enjoy these very things while they are still ours. Because we and those closest to us are mortal, we must love each other while we may and serve each other with added tenderness. Because life is of limited duration, our is the task to make it of unlimited depth. Because as quantity is fixed we should enrich its quality” (*Life and Death in Spec, 2011*). Depth and quality is how Bernard Baskin lived his life.

And, as a result, Rabbi Baskin was able to influence and inspire so many, both within this Temple and larger Hamilton Jewish community, and within the general community as well. His accolades are innumerable, and all well deserved. But Rabbi Baskin was not without any critics. There are those who have said that he never taught any Torah. And it is true that he was easily dismissive of certain biblical elements that he deemed, “antiquated passages of our scriptures that are simply irrelevant to our modern lives” and that, in his sermons and writing, he was more likely to quote Shakespeare or Dickinson than the Psalms or the Prophets. Rabbi Baskin once told me he really should have become an English professor instead of a rabbi, but his orthodox rabbi father was already angry that his brother had chosen to become an artist, and he did not want to risk upsetting him again.

But teaching Torah is exactly what Bernard Baskin did. Baskin taught a Torah that was inspired by the values of our Jewish tradition, by a deep abiding commitment to social justice and communal well-being; a Torah of egalitarianism, respect and integrity and, above all, a Torah of kindness. It is this Torah that was exemplified not only in his teaching and speaking and writing, but in the very way he carried himself and his interactions with others.

We all know about Rabbi Baskin's devotion to the written word, his love of books that was expressed through his book reviews in the CJN, his Books & Ideas lecture series that he conducted before a filled sanctuary for decades, and the book business he ran with his beloved Marjorie. And yet, despite his many articles and sermons over seven decades, he never wrote his own book. And so, in 2008, to honour Rabbi Baskin on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his ordination as a rabbi, Temple Anshe Sholom and the Baskin family published the first volume of *The Essential Bernard Baskin*. That first collection of Rabbi Baskin's writings from the *Hamilton Spectator* and the *Canadian Jewish News*, as well as some sermonic material, was long overdue. As I noted at the time in the introduction, "it is the height of irony that, for such a distinguished writer and speaker [and bibliophile], there has never been a book published under his own name. That injustice has now been rectified." *The Essential Bernard Baskin* proved to be popular, especially amongst Rabbi Baskin's generations of students and congregants, his "Books & Ideas" devotees, and the many unidentifiable readers whose lives were touched by the deep discernment and sage insights of "Hamilton's Clergyman". *The Essential Bernard Baskin* sold out numerous times and was followed by a second volume ten years later. I know Rabbi Baskin was deeply honoured and proud that these collections of his writing and wisdom were so well received and that his words were meaningful to others.

A few years ago I was going through some files and I found a copy of a Holy Blossom Temple Bulletin from 1977. In it there was youth group

report about a NELFTY kallah that had been held in Hamilton. Accompanying the article was a photo, of me, 16 years old, and Rabbi Baskin on this very bima together. I was the ritual vice-president of our youth region and, as such, we lead services together that weekend. In the photo, he, of course, was as dapper as ever, in suit and tie, perfectly groomed and dignified. I, on the other hand, had hair out to here, and wore a corduroy blazer over jeans and sandals. I vaguely remember that event, but mostly recalled how gracious and respectful Rabbi Baskin was to this gaggle of hippy kids who wanted to take over his bima. When I showed him the photo, he understandably couldn't remember the event, but commented how much he enjoyed and encouraged the creative services that the young people led. And then he laughed and told me he was pleased that I had learned to dress better. Who could have thought at that time that we would come to share this bima together.

I could go on and on. So many stories and recollections of his iconic "Baskinisms." It has been a blessing for me to serve this sacred community with the profound presence and legacy of Rabbi Bernard Baskin as our Rabbi Emeritus and for that privilege I am deeply grateful. He will be sorely missed. And yet, in this community, his presence will still be felt for generations to come.

I want to end with Rabbi Baskin's own words, a passage from an undated sermon which, I believe, was delivered sometime around his retirement in 1989. In this sermon he reflects on the power of prayer and concludes with his own prayer of gratitude:

"And so, I ask You, "What words, O God, can I speak for the blessings of my life?" So, I simply set my blessings before You: the love of my family and how it has sustained me; the Torah of my people and how it has lighted my way; the partnership with this congregation and how it has taught me with love to be a rabbi; and Your blessing of life itself, O God, who has kept me alive and sustained me and brought me to this day. I

set these blessings before You, and now You, O God, You put them together into a hymn of my thanksgiving that will be acceptable before You, my Rock and my Redeemer.” *Amen.*