

Memorial for David Ellenson

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שְׁמַאי אוֹמֵר עֲשֵׂה תוֹרָתְךָ קִבֵּעַ אֲמַר מְעַט וַעֲשֵׂה הַרְבֵּה וְהָיִי מִקְבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּסָכָר פְּנִים יְפוּת

[The 1st century CE sage] Shammai said: “Make your learning a fixture; say little and do much; receive each person with a smiling face.” (Mishnah Avot 1:15)

For Rabbi Dr David Ellenson, Torah - learning and scholarship were definitely a fixture. Growing up in an Orthodox Jewish home, he was ultimately attracted to the reform movement, to what he described as “an ongoing narrative where each generation of Jews writes a different story in which they attempt to capture what it is they feel that God commands in their age.” He was ordained by Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, received a doctorate from Columbia University, joined the faculty of HUC-JIR, and eventually served as its president for 12 years. One way or another, through numerous books and hundreds of articles, he explored the variety of ways that Jews have made meaning, and responded intellectually, spiritually and politically to the challenges of modernity.

I don't know if David “said little” in the words of Shammai - as a major institutional leader he had to talk - but he most certainly did a lot. I won't rehearse his myriad institutional and communal achievements in these few minutes. Suffice it to say that he led HUC-JIR through challenging times, fought for for the rights of women and LGBTQ Jews in the Reform movement, promoted Progressive Jewish leadership in Israel, all the while - on the strength of his scholarship and his character - maintaining close ties with leaders in other Jewish denominations as well as other religious groups and academic institutions.

We were blessed that David considered it the fulfillment of a lifelong dream to spend time at Brandeis. He was the director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies, and visiting professor in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, from 2015-2018. During this short time, he taught many classes, supervised a number of PhD dissertations, championed the expansion of important areas of Israel Studies such as the study of Mizrahi history, presided over a wide range of programs, and co-edited a collection on American Jewish Thought for Brandeis University Press.

“Receive each person with a smiling face.”

This advice may sound trite, child-like even, but it is profound. And I think Shammai had David in mind when he said it. For all that he achieved in the realms of scholarship and

leadership, David is perhaps remembered most of all for his endless kindness, generosity, emotional openness, and good humor. I met him when I was a young scholar and he was president of a college. I felt - knew - that he was totally invested in my personal and professional success. And thousands of other people felt the same. Not long before his death he told me that he had met with the President of Israel and had recommended to the President that he should meet with me. (I have written about the President's grandfather.) How many people use their time with a head of state to promote junior colleagues? And of course it was not just for me. He was a wise and compassionate guide to countless students and colleagues, and shone with care and respect for everyone he came across. Even years after leaving Brandeis he held regular meetings with his former students and staff. It is exceedingly rare for such a gifted orator to be such an attentive listener, for a single individual to have such a brilliant mind and such a generous heart.

In these times, his life reminds us to value the capacious heart and the smiling face lifted up to others.

יהי זכרו ברוך

May his memory be a blessing.