

The Long Happy Life of Rabbi Gendler

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In 1995, after more than 20 years of teaching and spiritual leadership, Rabbi Everett Gendler stepped down from his dual posts of rabbi at Temple Emanuel in Lowell, and Jewish Chaplain and instructor of philosophy and religious studies at Phillips Academy in Andover. Though now officially "retired," his work continues to educate and inspire people from Massachusetts to members of the Tibetan community in exile in India.

Gendler, 72, and his wife Mary, a photographer and retired psychologist, have lived in a warm and sun-lit home on five acres of farm and wooded land in Andover since 1971. After raising a family and "tending their garden," the Gendlers are selling their home and moving their permanent base-camp 140 miles west to the Berkshires in the spring, where construction was completed on their house three years ago. Before deciding to build in 1994, they owned and camped on the small acreage of land near Tanglewood in a pop-up trailer for 19 summers in a row.

A philosophy-major graduate of the University of Chicago, the rabbi did a year of graduate work at UC's School of Social Work, and attended the Jewish Theological Seminar, where he studied under the renowned rabbi/author, Abraham Joshua Heschel. "He was incredibly inspiring," Gendler said. "A bit overwhelming at times. I wish I had been strong enough to be closer to him more of the time." After ordination in 1957, the young rabbi briefly served congregations in Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro, and did some graduate work at Columbia University before leading a congregation in Princeton, NJ. After only 10 days there, he received a call that would provide the opportunity to put his "feet where his mouth was."

The call was from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who asked that he participate in a prayer vigil in Albany, GA. He accepted the invitation, but the experience was short-lived. The rabbi and others were arrested and spent 10 days in jail. Two years later, he rejoined King to lead a group of rabbis to Birmingham, AL, in 1963, and again in 1965 to Selma to participate in non-violent demonstrations. According to Gendler, the feeling of participating in the civil rights movement was one of "great possibility." He sensed that the "idealism was no longer an illusion" and that the work to empower black citizens and change the status quo, though incredibly difficult, could actually happen. On the day he was released from prison, he received a

telegram from Heschel which read, 'The God of holiness is exalted by justice.' "It was a beautiful affirmation," Gendler said.

How can non-violent resistance stand up in the face of hoses and tear gas, and help people realize their own power to affect change? The rabbi said that the simplest means and displays of resistance yielded surprising and positive results. "Looking people in the eye is a very effective way to convey one's power," he said. "It makes the ones holding the hoses aware of one's dignity. When those who would turn the hoses on another person see that they are human, it makes it difficult to carry out the task," he says. The rabbi points to Gandhi's non-violent efforts and what simple Indian people did to resist their oppressors. "One of the most important things you can do to empower people is tell stories. Cite other historical incidents where people stood up against what seemed to be overwhelming odds. It's amazing to see what people can do with these basic ideas."

In 1989, the rabbi and his wife began visiting India on holiday. Whether by chance or beshert, Gendler soon became involved with the Tibetan movement to educate and empower citizens in exile through community education programs. The Dalai Lama, who escaped in 1959, has been joined by some 125,000 people who have made their way to Daram Sala, India, since the Chinese invaded and occupied Tibet in 1949. "This community is more like the Jews than any other for centuries," the rabbi says. While visiting in 1989, Gendler had a private audience with the Tibetan spiritual leader and again in 1995. Gendler and Mary have spent a total of seven months there over the last five years. During that time, he has co-developed and run seminars and workshops with Tibetan high school students, teachers and community leaders on methods of understanding and improving their situation. He says he feels "extremely blessed to have been able to accept this rare opportunity."

Though the Buddhists have always lived their lives based on the practice of refraining from harming other creatures and practicing non-violence in general, Gendler says they never had anything specific to guide them in the face of Chinese occupation and oppression. The rabbi proposed and co-developed a "manual of operations for non-violent struggle" with the head of the Institute for Higher Tibetan Studies in Banaras and other community leaders. "The young Tibetans are growing restless," Gendler says. "They look at the Jews and wonder why they are not brave enough to stand up to the Chinese in that way." Will Tibet one day be free? "Would you have thought at the turn of the century that a little strip of land called Palestine would one day be a Jewish state?", the rabbi asks rhetorically. "Who knows what may happen. The Tibetans need to be prepared for that day."

As the rabbi and his wife prepare for their permanent departure from the Merrimack Valley, there is no shortage of work to do. They just "put the garden to bed" in the Berkshires and are currently reaping the benefits of their hard work. Their 42 by 72 foot garden is numerically significant, says the rabbi. Seventy-two is four times chai (good luck) and 42 is the number of letters that spell the name of god in the Kabbalah. "A garden properly approached is sacred ground," the rabbi says. "It is a portal to a spiritual experience and an opportunity to connect with hei haolomim, the life of the universe. You want a sacred text? Try looking at a seed." Musing on the many gifts and opportunities in the world, Gendler reflectively states, "What we've been given is endless." His advice? "Slow down. When you choose to do something, do it to its depth." And most importantly, "Pay attention. If you're aware of the signs, you can be guided toward your true path."