

JEWISH BOOK MONTH

Rabbi Everett Gendler Reflects on His (and Our) Jewish Life in the Berkshires

Author of *Jews for Universalists* talks about nature, tradition, and letting go in retirement

By Albert Stern

GREAT BARRINGTON – The Berkshires has long been a place where people have built domiciles that announce, “We made it.” But even in a region abounding in dream homes, the residence of Rabbi Everett Gendler and his wife Mary stands out by saying “We made it” in an entirely different way.

The house is sited near Monument Mountain on a stunning property that sprawls from the road past a hayfield, down to a creek and then nearly to the top of a forested hillside beyond – “paradise,” says Rabbi Gendler, a characterization that is impossible to argue against. But it is not a *Gan Eden* fashioned by an Almighty hand. Both Rabbi Gendler, a pioneer of Jewish environmentalism, and Mary have worked on the land for close to 40 years. For the first 19 years they owned it, the Gendler family spent summers living in a pop-up trailer and bathing in the stream. The previous owner, says the rabbi, “had cut down everything thicker than a toothpick,” leaving a blank canvas upon which the couple could realize their personal vision for their homestead. Following organic gardening principles, Rabbi Gendler planted trees and tended a large vegetable garden, while Mary landscaped the grounds and cultivated the flower gardens and fruit trees, a division of labor he says was aimed to ensure both *shalom bayit* and *shalom gan*.

After Rabbi Gendler’s retirement as a congregational rabbi and Jewish chaplain at Phillips Academy in Andover, MD, the couple set to work on their Berkshires home. Moving through the abode as Rabbi Gendler led me to his study on a lower floor for our interview, I was struck by the number of discrete seating areas throughout the house. (Later, Mary Gendler would show me similar “rooms” she devised out of doors.) Some take advantage of a mountain vista or a garden view, but it took only a bit of imagination on my part to recognize that each area had been fashioned by the Gendlers to have a specific identity. It instantly comes through that the couple took care to imagine the life that would be lived in the rooms, had imagined the way the natural beauty surrounding the house would work on the feelings and perceptions of the people inside it, and had then provided surroundings in which those experiences might unfold.

No doubt these impressions were in part a product of my immersion in Rabbi Gendler’s essays, collected in a volume titled *Judaism for Universalists*. His home made me think that he and Mary have made real a passage from his 2001 essay “Through the Zen Garden of the Hebrews,” in which he describes the Zen garden as representing “the persistence

of nature unvanquished, thus speaking to the deep desire of so many...for a proper balance between the naturally given and the humanly devised. In short, all the virtues in a single beckoning image!”

Not only that, as Mary points out, “we’re only five minutes from the Price Chopper.” All the virtues, indeed.

I’d come there to talk about ideas with the rabbi, and maybe felt that I was a bit shallow by being so distracted by real estate. I found myself groping for the word that distilled my impressions of the house and its distinctive personality; that word came to me when Rabbi Gendler pointed me to a couch in his study that faces out toward the hills. He said: “This is where you should sit. This way, you’ll enjoy the view while we talk.” At that moment, the word I was looking for came to me – “functional.” With the rabbi’s considerate entreaty that I sit where I would enjoy the view, I realized that the house and the land and the ideas were all different manifestations of a world view that aims to elevate and nourish the spirit.

“Functional” is also a good way to think of Rabbi Gendler’s work both on the page and off – he is not solely a man of ideas, but an activist, as well. He marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1960s, and will next year mark the 10th anniversary of his and Mary’s post-retirement involvement with Tibetan exiles via the group Strategic Nonviolent Struggle. The couple played a central role in the founding of the Active Nonviolence Education Center in Dharmasala, India, and on their last visit there, were able to introduce two of their grandsons to the Dalai Lama. The Gendlers have traveled the world, and visited its most important religious sites, and have integrated what they experienced into a holistic and ecumenical vision of Jewish life.

Judaism for Universalists, with its wealth of insights on how to reconnect to religious practices and thinking tied to the forces of nature, deserves space on every Jewish bookshelf here in the Berkshires. It is also fascinating and instructive to read Rabbi Gendler’s essays about his involvement in politics, activism, Zionism, pacifism, and religious ecumenicism. As Rabbi Gendler’s achievements are well known in this Jewish community, I chose to use our time together to ask about his experience of living in the Berkshires, along with some impressions of how to enrich the practice of Judaism by connecting to the natural beauty that surrounds us.

The Jewish Berkshires

In the Jewish Berkshires,

it seems to Rabbi Gendler that “there is a natural egalitarianism. The severe malady called ‘macheritis’ doesn’t afflict our lives.” While those of us working with the Federation have found that the geographic distances that separate the various congregations in Berkshire County sometimes make it challenging for Jews to connect, Rabbi Gendler finds a virtue in that separation.

“Because we are so spread out, our unity and our effectiveness is more dependent on the spiritual,” he says. “I think of a Jewish community being both social and spiritual. In a close community with geographic proximity, the social will get you by – you’re friendly with people, you bump into them. When we’re more spread out, there is necessarily less of that. And the spiritual – that is, the sense of Jewish purpose, the sense of dedication to the divine – actually plays

“Ma’asei beresheit,’ the works of creation. Every Friday night in that grand toast to the Creator, the Kiddush, we celebrate the work of creation. We live among that – dazzlingly!”

a more important part in our connectedness. And that I believe is even among people who don’t think of themselves as particularly religious.

“I think we’re blessed in that we have companionship with one another, but we also have to live a good part of our daily lives separate from one another. And then the sense of unity is much more dependent on our religious or philosophical outlook.”

Reconnecting with the Natural World of Torah and Traditions

A recurring theme in *Judaism for Universalists* is the disconnectness between Judaism as it is presently practiced and the meaningful role of the natural world and its rhythms in Torah and religious literature. Part of the reason for that, Rabbi Gendler acknowledges, is a product of centuries of Diaspora life and its uncertainties, which works against the development of a sense of rootedness. Another cause is the urban and cosmopolitan orientation of Jewish life in recent centuries.

In the Zen garden essay, Rabbi Gendler bemoaned “the failure of Judaism to comprehend the natural realm,” and chafed against the assurance of historian Salo Baron that “the distinct contribution of the Hebrew Bible was the dominance of nature by history.” In an earlier 1971 essay “On the Judaism of Nature,” Rabbi Gendler wrote about his conviction that “contemporary Judaism, if it is to be a living religion, must [have]...a

renewed emphasis on those many nature elements that lie dormant, neglected, sublimated, and suppressed within the tradition.” He recognized then “a profoundly felt need among many people for a renewed relationship to *khey ha-olamim*, the Life of the Universe.”

So many members of the Berkshires Jewish community have relocated here from other places, and bring with them different ideas of religious practice and communal life. Once here, what we have in common is the natural beauty of the region, plus the opportunity to re-examine scripture through that lens. “We share proximity to nature,” says Rabbi Gendler. “Among Jewish sacred texts, nature is included – I mean that literally. ‘Ma’asei beresheit,’ the works of creation. Every Friday night in that grand toast to the

Creator, the Kiddush, we celebrate the work of creation. We live among that – dazzlingly! I feel a lot of people out here are affected by the beauty of creation. We feel it suffuse our spirits. And that is actually an added dimension of fellowship.

“In a funny way, when we come together Jewishly, let’s say at a service, we bring ourselves and simply by being there we say to ourselves and to the world, ‘Life is not an accident. There is genuine purpose in this world.’ And we’re here to align ourselves with that divine purpose and serve as witnesses to it.”

Letting Go in Retirement

Rabbi Gendler also offers some thoughts for people who, like he and Mary, relocated to the Berkshires upon retirement. “Mary and I internally define ‘retire’ as redirection of energy,” he says. “Presupposition – you still have energy to redirect and that you will direct that energy, you won’t simply let it trickle away. We’ve been blessed to have ended our work when we were ready to do it. That was 20 years ago.

“At retirement, every interest, every set aside impulse is now a contender for cultivation. Interests you didn’t have time for, now you have time for – where will they lead? All of them can be enriched by, nourished by surroundings of astonishing natural beauty and also intimations of the past history of Hawthorne and Melville. They hung out here – wow! There are historic



Rabbi Everett Gendler in his study

vibrations we can tune into.

“If we can take those fresh invitations to expand our horizons, and we bring the fullness of ourselves – and I don’t mean that as an abstraction – I mean whims, fantasies, impulses, fleeting notions. Yes, the mind is a monkey, a mischievous monkey. Capture any one of those fantasies that traipse across your awareness. Follow it out. What does it yield? [Retirement] is an opportunity to re-appreciate and reabsorb the fullness of the ‘tzelem Elohim,’ the divine image, the richness of our divine endowment. People discover talents they have forgotten or that they didn’t know they had.

“What was once a distraction now is a lead, an intimation, possibly a fresh discovery – wow! That, with the support of these divine surroundings, we blossom afresh.” As he put it in a 1997 essay “Not Tired, Merely Retired”: “Turning 65 became a signpost, not a stop sign.”

Now 87 years old and dealing with nagging health issues, Gendler says, “As I slow down, life speeds up,” and krechtes a little about the 3 month winter “*galus*” (exile) to Sarasota that he is now forced to take to escape the harsh Berkshires winter. He is working on translating the work of his “shtetl rabbi,” having picked up the project after 60 years, and is also planning to return to India next fall for the 10th anniversary of the Active Nonviolence Education Center. As active as he remains, he also stresses the importance of acceptance.

“It is important to let go in any directive sense,” says Rabbi Gendler on the stage of life he is experiencing. “On the other hand, mentally, preserve it all. It is now recorded and sealed – and so it was. Savor it. Appreciate it. It was imperfect...by definition. All of what we do is imperfect. But it was. I think it is possible to let go and retain. It seems to be the case. Yes.”

Judaism for Universalists is published by Blue Thread Books, and is available for sale at jewishcurrents.bigcartel.com, Amazon.com, and other outlets.