

[Rabbi Everett Eugene Gendler](#), of blessed memory, died of natural causes at the age of 93 in Sarasota, FL. Known for his vision, his optimism, and his sense of both whimsy and deep spirituality, Rabbi Gendler was born on August 8, 1928, in Chariton, Iowa, and moved to Des Moines at age 11. He attended the University of Chicago, where he studied Social Work and Philosophy, and moved to New York City in 1952 to study at the Jewish Theological Seminary, from which he was ordained in 1957. He served as rabbi at various congregations throughout Central and South America (1957-1961), the Jewish Center of Princeton (1962-1968), and Temple Emanuel of the Merrimack Valley (1971-1995). He was also the Jewish Chaplain and teacher at Phillips Academy Andover (1977-1995). In 1964, he married the love of his life, Mary (née Loeb). They shared 58 years together and had two daughters, Tamar Szabó Gendler and Naomi Gendler Camper.

His early years in Iowa had a profound impact on Rabbi Gendler, whose deep love of the natural world and farming was ignited by the sweeping cornfields. During his teenage years in Des Moines, Rabbi Gendler's interest in nature began to merge with his growing commitment to activism and the Jewish teaching of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), he worked with the American Friends Service Committee and learned about nonviolent direct action, began reading poets like Henry David Thoreau and ee cummings, and became involved in the Jewish youth group at Tifereth Israel Synagogue, where he gained a great appreciation for the prophets. Rabbi Gendler once said that Amos was a favorite prophet because, "He knew how to draw a crowd and then lead in unexpected and often controversial directions." It's an interesting observation, as people who knew Rabbi Gendler could have used this same explanation to describe him.

While he was often on the margin of mainstream society, Rabbi Gendler quickly established himself as a leader and visionary in the progressive Jewish community and was consistently ahead of his time on social, religious, political, and environmental issues. He became involved with the Civil Rights Movement in 1955, when he spent a summer at the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. He was a conscientious objector, and instead of serving in the military during the Korean War, he requested and was granted an alternative assignment working at a small congregation in Mexico City. After two years in Mexico, he worked at several congregations in Central and South America. In 1962, the Jewish Center of Princeton hired him as rabbi, and during the first week on the job, he traveled to Albany, GA, to participate in a civil rights prayer vigil protesting segregation. Rabbi Gendler was one of 75 inter-faith and inter-racial clergy involved in the largest mass arrest of clergy in American history. Rabbi Gendler didn't eat for the 2.5 days he was in jail and missed his first Friday night Shabbat service at his new job.

He stayed in contact with those he met in Albany, which included Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, Ambassador Andrew J. Young, and Wyatt Tee Walker, to provide support and help from afar and on the ground, as needed. He played a critical role in involving American Jews in the

Civil Rights Movement. In 1963, he led a group of 19 rabbis from the Rabbinical Assembly to support the Children's Crusade in Birmingham, AL, he was named inaugural chair of the Rabbinical Assembly's newly established Committee on Racial Justice, and he gave talks about the importance of the Jewish community supporting the Civil Rights Movement throughout the U.S. It was at one of these lectures in Kansas City, MO, where he met his future wife, Mary Loeb. Rabbi Gendler and Mary traveled to Selma, AL, on March 8, 1965, and participated in the second Selma march: *Turnaround Tuesday*. A few days later, he helped persuade Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel to attend the third and most-famous march from Selma to Montgomery. Rabbi Gendler's civil rights work overlapped with his anti-war work, and he, Rabbi Heschel, Dr. King, and others held a vigil at Arlington National Cemetery in February 1968 to protest the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Rabbi Gendler would see Dr. King one more time on March 25, 1968, when he conducted the last public interview Dr. King gave, 10 days before his assassination. Rabbi Gendler continued his nonviolence work by protesting the U.S. government's nuclear weapons program, and he was an early proponent calling for equality for Palestinians as well as justice and peace in Israel.

Throughout the Jewish community, Rabbi Gendler is best known as the "Father of Jewish Environmentalism." Influenced by his friends, Helen and Scott Nearing, he became involved in the environmental and conservation movements early on and wrote extensively about the Jewish duty to preserve and conserve the Earth. Rabbi Gendler drew attention and focus on seasonality, our deep connection to the natural world, and the phases of the moon. He modeled for the Jewish community advocacy for conservation and environmental concern. An avid organic farmer and vegetarian, he incorporated these concepts into his rabbinical practice, teaching, and writing. His contributions to the Jewish environmental movement are vast. He invented the world's first solar eternal light, wrote dozens of articles about Jewish environmentalism and vegetarianism, and gave hundreds of lectures on the topic. He also drew upon his knowledge of Jewish mysticism and revived ancient agrarian traditions such as counting the Omer (with very tall alfalfa that came from cropping his front yard, much to his neighbors' chagrin), Birkat Hachama, the Tu b'Shvat seder, adding corn stalks and gourds from his garden to his sukkah, to name just a few. He made his love of the moon and poetry obvious to all of those around him. His friends, students, and congregants will attest that Passover seders with Rabbi Gendler were replete with poetry and concluded by going outside to gaze at the full moon.

In the 1960s, he was involved with various alternative residential and religious communities. He and Mary lived at Ivan Illich's Centro Intercultural de Documentación in Cuernavaca, Mexico and at the inter-racial inter-religious living center Packard Manse in Stoughton, Massachusetts. He was a teacher at and an early member of Havurat Shalom and a founding member of the Alternative Religious Community in Marblehead, Massachusetts. He was an important contributor to numerous progressive Jewish liturgical prayer books, journals, and anthologies.

Rabbi Gendler was appointed by then-Head of School at Phillips Academy Andover, Dr. Ted Sizer, to serve as the school's first Jewish Chaplain, as part of the Catholic-Protestant-Jewish "tri-ministry" at Andover. Highly visible on campus with his decidedly un-preppy light blue VW bus, he gained a loyal following during his 25 years at the school. Former students mention that he changed the direction of their lives, served as a second father figure while they were at boarding school, showed them that there was no "one way" to be Jewish, was approachable and patient "to a fault," and was, for many, the first vegetarian they had ever met. (He regularly plied students of his 8 a.m. classes with seaweed crackers to help energize them for early morning classroom learning.) These comments echo those made by congregants at the synagogues where he worked.

Following his retirement in 1995, Rabbi Gendler and Mary traveled frequently to Dharamsala, India. With the support of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, they helped establish the Active Nonviolence Education Center, which provides community education work on Strategic Nonviolent Struggle to Tibetan exiles. Drawing upon his lifetime of work with strategic nonviolence, they developed a curriculum that is still taught today.

Rabbi Gendler said that he offered the following advice to his students and congregants: "Clarify your vision, then live it." By doing this himself, he led a full, meaningful life, and he made a difference not only to those who knew him but also to society more broadly. Although he was skeptical of the spotlight, he was the recipient of several awards, recognizing his contributions to Jewish environmentalism and social justice, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, the Presidents' Medallion from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and the Human Rights Hero Award by the T'ruah Foundation. In addition, in 2013, his lifetime of work was recognized through the creation of the [Gendler Grapevine Project](#), a six-year initiative designed to celebrate and perpetuate Rabbi Gendler's life work and serve as a permanent repository of his articles and teachings. Rabbi Gendler published his first book, *Judaism for Universalists* at the age of 87, and his second, *The Passionate Pacifist: Essential Writings of Aaron Samuel Tamares*, at the age of 92 in 2020. He was truly an inspiration. A lover of poetry, music, and gardening, he spent his retirement enjoying live music at Tanglewood, tending his organic fruit and vegetables, showing off his solar panels and wood stove, and reading poetry.

Rabbi Gendler loved his family. He and Mary had two daughters, Tamar and Naomi, and they created a tight-knit family, who regularly gathers for holidays. The Gendlers spent summers camping in the Berkshire Mountains and attending outdoor concerts at Tanglewood. Rabbi Gendler and Mary moved to Great Barrington in 1995, where they warmly opened their home to their grandkids, extended family, former students, and friends.

Rabbi Gendler is survived by his wife of 58 years, Mary Loeb Gendler; daughters Tamar Szabó Gendler (Zoltan Szabó) and Naomi Camper (Clarke); five grandchildren, Laszlo Gendler, Hannah Szabó, Phineas Camper, Julius Camper, and Alida Camper; his sister Annette Isaacson; and many nieces, nephews, friends, and students. He was preceded in death by his parents Sara (née Whiteman) and Max Gendler. To offer condolences, please email everettgendler90@gmail.com. In lieu of flowers, please send donations to [The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts](#) or [HIAS](#).