



Continuing the Journey

RABBI EVERETT GENDLER REDIRECTS HIS STEPS

BY THERESA PEASE

When Phillips Academy's first Jewish chaplain processes onto the platform in front of Samuel Phillips Hall next month to offer Hebrew words of benediction at commencement, it will be for the last time.

Rabbi Everett E. Gendler's 19 years at Andover have been but one leg on a holy journey that has taken him all over the world. At 66, he will retire this spring to follow other roads.

In his spiritual meanderings, Gendler has strolled the hills of Tennessee, where with a work unit of the American Jewish Society for Service he helped weed a leech-filled lake. He has walked with members of the American Friends Service Committee, from whom he learned the effectiveness of a non-violent approach to social transformation, and with Mexican pagan villagers, from whom he learned the power of the connection between religion and the forces of nature.

In the 1960s, he marched repeatedly with members of the

Top of page: On a Berkshire hill, Rabbi Everett Gendler waves a palm branch in celebration of the autumn feast of Sukkot, the Festival of Tabernacles. (Photo by Mary Gendler)

Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Alabama, where he became well-acquainted with Martin Luther King Jr. and found himself locked up in the Lee County Stockade. He has hiked the beaches of Rio de Janeiro while serving a Portuguese-speaking congregation there; trekked in Dharamsala, India, to join in fellowship with exiled followers of the Dalai Lama; trod circuitous paths to mosques in Muslim countries to hear the calls to prayer from the dusty minarets. More recently, his feet have crossed the railroad tracks in former Nazi death camps at Auschwitz and Birkenau.

"I have been described by more than one person as Gendler the Jewish Quaker," he smiles.

THE PATH PREPARED

A descendant of Eastern European Jewish peddlers, Gendler was born in rural Iowa. After earning a B.A. degree at the University of Chicago, he stayed on for graduate studies in philosophy and social work before deciding to enter Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He was ordained in 1957.

The panoply of experiences

along Gendler's spiritual pathway—in Mexico, in Rio, in Tennessee, in Cuba, in Princeton, N.J., and at an ecumenical, multiracial center in Massachusetts, among other, often exotic locales—perhaps uniquely enabled Gendler to bring a treasure trove of wisdom to the multicultural PA community. But he found his way to Andover by accident when Temple Emanuel, a small, independent-thinking Jewish community in nearby Lowell, put out the call for a half-time rabbi in 1971. Five years later, the rabbi began to split his time between the Lowell temple and Phillips Academy, while his wife, Mary, completed her doctoral degree in psychology.

THE NOURISHING CYCLES

The arrangement was meant to be temporary, since the academy was really seeking a full-time Jewish chaplain who would live on campus. But the match was such a good one that Gendler has continued for nearly two decades to commute the 15 minutes each day from a tiny "expandable Cape" house in West Andover, the only home the Gendlers have ever owned.

There he and Mary, for four years clinical director of Jewish Family Services in Lawrence, have raised two daughters, Tamar '83 and Naomi '86. There they have also hand-cultivated 8,500 square feet of land where they grow five varieties of sweet corn each summer, along with squash, beans, potatoes, soybeans and other staples of their vegetarian diet. The rest of their three-acre property yields up berries, apples, peaches and hay.

Noting the couple's determination to be in touch with what he calls the nourishing cycles of nature, the rabbi says that the satisfaction of tending his garden is profound. "For all the drudgery and the toil," he reports, "working the land carries with it a joy and an elevation of spirit, an amazement that things actually blossom and ripen and are available for food. These are marvelous gifts," he says.



The rabbi says he'll redirect his energy "while there is still a plentiful supply." (Photo by Gus Freedman)

ON CAMPUS

At Andover, Gendler's teaching repertoire includes Introduction to Biblical World View, Introduction to Eastern Religions, Responses to the Holocaust, and Non-Violence

in Theory and Practice, a study of the philosophies and practices of Gandhi and King. Of the latter, whom he came to know moderately well while working in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, he recalls, "Martin Luther King had a presence and a kind of warm calm that felt deeply grounded. He was a thoughtful, sympathetic, considerate, cautious individual, immensely courageous and determined. I felt his presence powerfully, and his loss was immeasurably painful."

Extending ecumenicalism outside the classroom, Gendler is adviser both to the Jewish Student Union and to the Muslim Student Union—an unusual combination, he admits, explaining, "I happen to be fond of Islam as religious practice. I love the sound of the chanting of the Koran. The Arabic is powerful to my ears, very affecting, and I am moved by some of the verbal imagery. Elements of Muslim worship—the bowing, the prostration, the kneeling—compel me greatly."

SMALL SHARINGS

If the Muslim students are surprised to have a rabbi for their adviser, they don't show it. Indeed, students of all religious backgrounds seek Gendler out as a friend and mentor.

Those easy interactions with students and faculty—"small sharings," he calls them—are among the things Gendler will miss most after retirement, though he adds wisely, "Actually, whatever it is I am thinking about at any given moment is what I think I will miss the most."

Then why go?

He pauses before answering, "Both Mary and I are in good health. We still have a lot of energy and a lot of interests.

Probably a good time to redirect energy is while there is still a plentiful supply of it."

While the Gendlers are largely casting their fates to the spiritual wind, there are "a few delightful fixities" in their future plans. They will begin retirement with a few weeks of tenting out beside a stream in the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts. Then they will head East with an uncertain itinerary that may include stops in Thailand, in Bali, in Tibet, in India.

One disappointment the Gendlers are facing is that, because of air travel complications, they have had to set aside plans for an August visit to Japan for the 50th anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They had hoped to join a group of Buddhist monks and others who will be concluding an eight-month peace walk that began at a gathering last December in Poland.



At Auschwitz, Gendler wears traditional Jewish phylacteries during an interfaith prayer service. (Photo by Mary Gendler)

LIGHTING THE DARKNESS

On that occasion, which marked half a century since the final gassings at Auschwitz, the Gendlers were present, along with

some 200 Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Shintoists, American Indians, Quakers, Catholics and Christians of many other denominations from around the globe. There were even children of Nazis, the rabbi says, noting, "Their encounters with the children of holocaust victims were among the most moving. Their quest for understanding, recognition and forgiveness was indescribable."

The four-day convocation began on the first night of the Feast of Lights, so the Gendlers carried with them 50 boxes of Hanukkah candles, as well as 1,800 pieces of metal, glue and 250 tongue depressors from which each participant could make a menorah, or holiday candelabrum, to light the darkness around the former Nazi death camp.

The parallel event in Hiroshima, Gendler hopes, will take the world's attention away from current debates about whether dropping the A-bomb was necessary or justifiable, and

refocus it on "what it means to cause the immediate incineration of 100,000 people."

Underscoring the importance of giving testimony to "the urgent need for the resolution of human struggle by more respectful means," the retiring chaplain says, "To mark that anniversary with the Japanese, wherever we may be on the planet, is our way of affirming human solidarity. As Elie Wiesel has put it, the development of nuclear weapons means that the ovens have become portable, and that all people are potential Jews. We must raise our voices together to say 'never again'—not only to the holocaust, but to the mass destruction of human beings."

Donald L. Shapiro '53 is spearheading a fund to honor Rabbi Gendler. Known as the Everett E. Gendler Fund, it will support speakers, teachers, performers and programs to "enhance the spiritual lives of students and faculty and promote concern for religious understanding, justice and peace."



Above, Rabbi Gendler (right) joins in solidarity with the Dalai Lama. At right, he shares a moment with the rector of Wat Suan Mokh, a retreat center in Thailand. (Photo by Mary Gendler)

