

I lost a friend this week. All of us did. Rabbi Albert Plotkin was a good friend to every Jew and to every Jewish institution in Arizona. He came to Congregation Beth Israel in Phoenix in 1955. It must have been quite an adjustment after growing up in South Bend Indiana, attending Notre Dame, and preparing for the rabbinate at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. Rabbi Plotkin watched Phoenix and this state grow from a distant outpost to a major capital, and through his nurturance, the Jewish community grew as well. He transformed his congregation into an elegant campus of Jewish life, and somehow he had energy left over to help start this temple as well as our sister synagogues in Flagstaff, Sedona, and Yuma. The ark behind me, the lectern before me, the very chairs you are sitting in, were gifts to us from Congregation Beth Israel, thanks to Rabbi Plotkin. He founded the department of Jewish Studies at ASU and taught undergraduates there until just a few years ago. AIPAC and the Jewish Federation and the Jewish Community Center all owe a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Plotkin. He of course would tell you that it was all due to his wife Sylvia. Sylvia Plotkin was a powerhouse. Fiercely intelligent, socially skilled, and generously motivated to serve the Jewish Community, Sylvia was the perfect partner to Al's huge heart and selfless spirit. He held the spotlight, she had his back. Together the two of them raised generations of Arizona Jews. Al used to joke that he spent more years in the desert than Moses. I always admired his patience. He operated with full trust that in the long run, things would work out for the best. So he avoided

confrontations and overlooked disagreements. His vision was strategic, based on his belief that given enough time, despite occasional ups and downs, the members of his community would do the right thing. This made him one of the most beloved leaders I have ever seen. One evening the two of us went to Chompie's together for dinner. He knew almost everyone in the place, and they knew him and rather than duck out quietly, they came by our table to say hi. He must have performed the weddings and even the bar mitzvahs of half the people there, and the warmth with which he was greeted was genuine. Just last week I stayed overnight at Rabbi Plotkin's house to attend a Rabbinic conference. In the morning, as Al and I got into my car, the letter carrier across the street called out, "Good morning, Rabbi." I knew she didn't mean me. I'm not that kind of rabbi. I don't know if they make them like that anymore. Rabbi Plotkin was gifted with qualities we rarely see in one person. Because Rabbi Plotkin was short in stature, he was easy to underestimate. Because he had a ready laugh, you could miss his seriousness of purpose. Because he had the common touch, his keen intelligence wasn't obvious. Because he found fighting pointless, he could be taken for a pushover. Can you imagine having the guts to invite Martin Luther King to speak from the bimah in Phoenix, Arizona in 1966? Can you imagine accepting the Arizona Opera's invitation to sing on stage the role of the King in Turandot? Can you imagine carrying on with good cheer and confident energy after the loss of a wife, and then a daughter, to cancer? Last month we drove

out to California together for the conference of the Pacific Association of Reform Rabbis, of which Rabbi Plotkin was a former president. The whole way I peppered him with questions, and he entertained me with stories about his rabbinic classmates and career highlights and shrewd judgments about people we both knew. I valued his friendship particularly because he had nothing to gain by befriending me. But as I said, he was a good friend to everyone. He was a very savvy, very devoted leader who never left the desert but instead transformed it into a flourishing garden of Jewish culture. His greatest legacy, in addition to the many institutions he built, will be in the many lives he touched. Children and hospital patients, clergymen and politicians, strangers and friends all drew strength and inspiration from the loving example of Rabbi Albert Plotkin. Zecher Tzaddik Livracha - may the memory of this good and righteous man forever be our blessing. AMEN.