



Kerry Baker

January 30, 1951 - August 23, 2021

On Monday, August 23, 2021, Kerry Baker, longtime Austin rabbi and father of three, passed away at age 70.

Rabbi Baker was born on January 30, 1951, in New Rochelle, NY. After graduating from Colgate University and attending Hebrew Union College (HUC), he received rabbinic ordination in 1977 and was awarded an honorary doctorate from HUC in 2002 for his dedicated service as a rabbi.

He served pulpits in Plattsburgh, NY and Seattle, WA, directed the Santa Barbara Hillel, and was the founding director of the Jewish Education Association in Portland, OR, which later merged with Hillel Academy to become Portland Jewish Academy. He came to Austin in 1987 to serve as the executive director of the Texas Hillel Foundation at UT-Austin and after 10 years founded Congregation Kol Halev, Austin's post-denominational congregation for progressive worship. In 2009, drawn to share Judaism with a wider audience, he created a website, everybodyneedsarabbi.com, to help all spiritual seekers gain access to and learn from Judaism as a global wisdom tradition.

Rabbi Baker was known for his commitments to social justice and interfaith work, and for his affection for Jewish humor. He performed the first state-sanctioned same-sex marriage in the state of Texas in 2015 and participated in Austin's Abraham Walk, an interfaith dialogue initiative. He devoted a significant part of his career to making Judaism accessible to all as a frequent guest speaker in many faith communities and through his website. In addition to his other leadership roles, he was the "official" rabbi of the Kerrville Folk Festival for many years. Two mainstays of his time in Austin were "Coffee and Conversations at Casa de Baker," a monthly open house at his home for encouraging connection and community, and the Torah study class that he led every week, covering a few verses in depth at each meeting: the class began with Genesis about 30 years ago, and had recently begun wading into Leviticus.

Kerry was preceded in death by his father, William Baker, his mother, Estelle (Wintman)

Boxer, and his stepfather, Herman "Hy" Boxer. He is survived by daughter Ilana Hamilton, granddaughter Rowan Hamilton, grandson Lark Hamilton, son Benjamin Baker, daughter-in-law Elisa McCool, Gail Sherman (mother of Ilana and Ben), daughter Emily Baker, Lynda Baker (mother of Emily), sister Bess Singer, and niece Billie Singer.

A private funeral service was held at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, August 23, 2021, at Eloise Woods, with Rabbi Steve Folberg and Cantorial Soloist Sarah Avner officiating. A recording of the ceremony is available in the video portion of this tribute page.

Virtual shiva minyan services were conducted by Congregation Beth Israel, where Rabbi Baker was a member, with Rabbi Kelly Levy and Cantorial Soloist Sarah Avner officiating; by Congregation Kol Halev, which Rabbi Baker founded, with Rabbi Cantor Robbi Sherwin and the Rev. Dr. Sid Hall officiating; and by Kol Tzedek West Philadelphia Synagogue, where his son Ben and his daughter-in-law Elisa are members, with Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari and Rabbi Monica Gomery officiating.

Contributions in honor of Rabbi Baker's memory may be made to the Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood, or the Democratic Party, which are organizations that he supported, or to any organization that supports social justice or interfaith dialogue.

Cemetery

Eloise Woods Natural Burial Park

115 Northside Lane

Cedar Creek, TX, 78612

Comments



“ A webcast video has been added.



Austin Natural Funerals - August 24, 2021 at 04:01 PM



“ I am a 4th generation Jew from a small south Texas town where there was a tiny synagogue a handful of families. We were not very observant so Judaism for me was mostly either boring or as a lousy student, intimidating. In my late 30s something I was invited to a Seder at Hillel by UT. I was pretty much counting the minutes that we would be leaving until the Rabbi started talking. Kerry Baker really got my attention. The sermon he served up resonated very deeply because of his focus on inclusivity galvanized in social justice causes. This was the first time I'd ever been shown my life and the reality of our modern world through the lens of being a Jew. It was like this benevolent human being picked me up like a child in order to look through a telescope.

I was spellbound by his wisdom and the warm welcome of his ever accessible way of being. This was a totally different experience and approach to Judaism than where I had come from. I was compelled to follow Kerry to Kol Halev to be a part of that loving community and show my support for as long as I was able. To see Kerry Baker in public after a long period of time was always as though no time has passed. Truly a lovable human being and mensch of the highest order. No doubt he is resting in peace.

To Lynda and Ben, and the rest of the family who I have not had the pleasure to meet, please except my deepest condolences. With love, Ben Livingston

Ben Livingston - October 22, 2021 at 09:50 AM



“ Kerry, Lynda and I shared a transformative spiritual weekend together many years ago! How vividly I remember both of them! I am sad to know of his death and send Lynda and his whole family my genuine sympathy. Lynn Stahl in San Antonio

Lynn Stahl - September 12, 2021 at 09:01 AM



“ My deepest heartfelt condolences on the passing of Rabbi Kerry Baker go out to Lynda, Emily, Ben and his wife, Elana and to all the many extended family and friends who held Kerry dear in life. I was so happy to sing at Kerry and Lynda’s wedding and remember the joy and excitement of everyone witnessing the start of their next chapter together in beloved and funky Austin. How very much bringing together of people and joy in celebration did Kerry accomplish!! Probably easily as much as the time he spent helping others navigate life’s hardships and pain. When my elderly uncle was dying in Austin and I was there to help, Kerry and Lynda so lovingly helped me get through it. Their home became a refuge, a counterpoint to my visits to hospice. Rabbi Kerry Baker will be missed but remembered by all who knew and respected and loved him. May his memory be a blessing and may he rest in eternal peace. And let us say amen. ...Judy Bressler

Judy Bressler - September 11, 2021 at 06:37 PM



“ 4 files added to the album Memories Album



Lynda Baker - September 07, 2021 at 04:40 PM



“ 1 file added to the album Memories Album



Lynda Baker - September 07, 2021 at 04:31 PM



“ I met Kerry through Lynda; we have been friends since 1978 when she moved to Texas. Kerry was my friend, too, and a colleague and companion on my road to ordination in the Episcopal church. Their home was always a place of welcome, great coffee, good food, and stimulating conversation. Through Lynda, Kerry hired me as a part-time assistant at Kol Hlev in 2008. What an education in Jewish faith and traditions! I am forever grateful for our working time together. When I moved back to Texas in 2019 upon retirement, Kerry and I met several times for coffee and conversation. Always so engaged in social justice and current events, he made me feel smarter and more connected. I miss my good friend. May he rest in peace.

Anne Matthews - August 28, 2021 at 11:01 AM



“ I've always been sort of a renegade Jew, neither observant nor very identified with Jewish life, and resistant to its authority. That changed when we moved to Austin in 2000 and joined Kol Hlev. Kerry's welcoming warmth and wise, eye-opening commentary at services drew me in, week after week. One Shabbat, he asked the congregation to raise a hand if they'd ever been told they weren't Jewish enough - that somehow they didn't measure up as Jews. I think everyone raised their hands. This was a revelation to me, and a surprisingly huge relief, as he assured us we were all Jewish enough. This was Kerry's genius; he found these corners of experience and normalized them, welcomed them, so that we could understand Judaism in a broader, more universal and accepting way. This was evident in nearly 2 decades of Torah study as well.

Kerry's influence in my life and the life of my family is significant, and he lives on in our hearts. Our deepest condolences to the family.

Diane Graves - August 27, 2021 at 08:55 AM



“ Couldn't agree more!

Ben Livingston - October 22, 2021 at 09:54 AM



“ Our thoughts are with all of you. Martha and I will cherish Kerry marrying us before it was legal. It gives us great joy to tell people Rabbi Kerry Baker married us. His memory is a blessing.

Diane and Martha Byram - August 27, 2021 at 07:37 AM



“ I did not know Rabbi Baker well at all... but the very few interactions I had with him left a delightful impression. Many years ago I accompanied a young mother to his house for a study session. I felt as if I didn't know him, the group, the texts, etc. well enough to be there... but he was welcoming and inviting, and he made me feel as if I belonged. And he made me feel that way the other times I saw him. Thank you, Rabbi Baker.

Sandy Bootz - August 26, 2021 at 08:00 PM



“ My memories of Kerry include his interesting and thoughtful sermons when he was the rabbi at Hillel, his support of New Jewish Agenda - very compassionate and radical - especially for Texas! And, his blessing of our marriage (even though he did not support interfaith marriage - he was very supportive of our family and made my parents so happy), and his blessing of both our children.

leela fireside - August 26, 2021 at 10:36 AM



“ Kerry was a special friend to me. Even though we'd live completely different lives, in the last few years we discovered that we had so much in common. It's easy to see what made him such a good rabbi. I'll miss our marathon coffee talks.



Martin Thomas - August 25, 2021 at 07:25 PM



“ When we moved to Austin, my new boss introduced us to Kerry and Lynda because they were the only Jews she knew. As it turned out we all became close. When Kerry decided to start up a new congregation, the four of us, after sufficient wine and spread out over the furniture and floor, decided to come up with a name. Kerry came up with “ Kol halev”, and we all knew it was perfect. And the congregation was perfect for us too. I've never been part of a congregation that found a place in my heart like Kol Halev did. Kerry was a deeply spiritual human being and the congregation reflected that.

Kathi Cramer - August 25, 2021 at 07:24 PM



“ I send my deepest condolences to Rabbi Baker's family. I met Rabbi Baker through Hillel while I was in college at the University of Texas. He officiated at my mother's interfaith funeral and my brother's interfaith wedding. He was our go-to guy for this interfaith family. I really appreciated his ability to bring everyone together.

Miriam McKinney - August 25, 2021 at 07:12 PM



“ I knew Kerry as a deeply thoughtful and knowledgeable rabbi and person. The first time I met with him in his office at Hillel was to talk about finding a rabbi to officiate my wedding to a non-Jewish person. This was in 1994, before anyone in Austin was willing to perform the ceremony. And although Kerry referred Sergio and me elsewhere, I left with the impression that this was someone I could talk to again in the future. That future arrived when my 11-year-old daughter announced she wanted to have a bat mitzvah. Kerry was her tutor and our family's guide to most things b'nai mitzvah, as I had never had a bat mitzvah myself.

One of the things that always struck me about Kerry was his depth and sense of humanity, and how he used his great intelligence and knowledge of the Torah and other Jewish thought to inform his conversations and sermons about being a human being. I wish that I could remember more specifically, but I do recall a feeling of being moved and captivated in the way he could tie things together in delivering a compelling message.

When I learned more about Yom Kippur, I consulted Kerry about a deeply personal situation in which I owed someone a profound and painful apology. He helped guide me through what that would look like, how I would need to extricate my ego and my own needs from the apology and focus on naming the ways in which I had hurt and disregarded the other person. This conversation helped me move toward shedding a great burden.

Kerry and I were not in touch that much over the last 10 or so years, although we always had a warm conversation when we ran into each other. After my mother died in early 2019, Kerry called me and arranged to come to my house. We talked, just the two of us, for quite a while, and his kindness and compassion were helpful to me in my terrible grief.

I send my deepest condolences to Kerry's family. He was a remarkable human being, appreciated and loved by many.

Susanna Sharpe

Susanna Sharpe - August 25, 2021 at 10:50 AM



“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Stephanie jasuta - August 25, 2021 at 12:18 AM



“ Rabbi Baker 33 years ago at my son's home bris.

Stephanie jasuta - August 25, 2021 at 12:19 AM



“ Am sad to hear of the loss of Kerry Baker. He was one of the most thoughtful rabbis that Texas Hillel has had. Ver down to earth and approachable.

Naomi - August 25, 2021 at 08:33 PM



“ I feel so lucky to have gotten to know Kerry as a childhood friend of Emily's. I spent a lot of time at Casa de Baker growing up and he always made me feel safe and cared for. I also learned a lot about Judaism from him and it really expanded my worldview. I'm so grateful to Kerry for my friendship with Emily and for the kindness and comfort he brought to my childhood.

Lisa Moomaw - August 24, 2021 at 09:39 PM



“ In 1997, Kerry Baker asked me to meet him at his office at Texas Hillel. We had already known each other from being members of the same congregation, Havurah Shalom, in Portland, Oregon, where both his son, Ben and my daughter, Jessica were born the same year. We had a great bond even before this meeting: He brought me into the life of the Kerrville Folk Festival, doing Shabbat services with him a few years before that. He knew that Beth Israel, where I had been a cantorial soloist, had decided to hire an invested cantor, and he wanted to talk to me about coming on board as his music maven for this great new idea for a congregation he had: one that would be post-denominational, contemporary in music and practice, and be a place that was a geshet, a bridge, to an open-tent form of Judaism. That was Congregation Kol Halev - the voice of the heart. He promised me three things: That he would mentor me; he would trust my heart and he would always support me. I never forgot those words. He brought me on at Kol Halev from that very first service at Sri Atmananda school on December 17, 1997, and we worked, side by side as partners, for the next 10 years, and we studied together after that. He never broke those promises to me.

Kerry challenged me in a way that I never expected: introducing me to new and old music, incredible musicians, and Jewish text that expanded my mind. Because of him, I became an award-winning Jewish composer. The first Jewish song I wrote, a version of Shema Yisrael, was written for Kol Halev. We started the first rock Shabbat in Austin's history - only the third of its kind in the country. We continued to push the envelope with creative, one-of-a-kind b'nai mitzvah, services and much more. He had an impish grin, especially when he changed things up at the last minute! With his encouragement, I became ordained cantor, and then a rabbi. His brilliance and strength pushed the boundaries of what I thought possible in Judaism, and I will be forever grateful for who Kerry was to the Austin Jewish and music communities, and to my life. I send my love and deepest condolences to Lynda, Ilana, Ben, Elisa & Emily and to all who loved and respected Kerry Baker. Baruch dayan ha'emet - blessed is the True Judge.

Rabbi Cantor Robbi Sherwin
Parker, Colorado/Sun Valley, Idaho

Rabbi Robbi Sherwin - August 24, 2021 at 09:34 PM



“ Kerry and I were neighbors who became friends when he served at Hillel and I served as Senior Pastor at the University Baptist Church. Over the years we had many rich conversations about theology, pastoral leadership, city and state politics, and more. His sparkling wit and intelligent insight made every chat a joy. I will miss my friend and rabbi, and those conversations. I pray God's peace in every remembrance to his friends and family. Thanks for sharing Kerry with all of us because indeed, everybody needs a rabbi.

Larry Bethune - August 24, 2021 at 09:05 PM



“ so sorry to hear of his passing -- I have wonderful memories from my Austin years, ranging from fun games of basketball to meaningful conversations and services. He was always approachable, passionate, and open-hearted and his memory will be a blessing.

Larry Lesser

Larry Lesser - August 24, 2021 at 05:36 PM



“ So sorry to hear this. I remember so many times when my family would go down to Hillel to hear one of the Rabbi's services and delight in it. We all became fans of his. From time to time after that, we would see him or attend a service or attend a class. He was a real mensch, very intelligent and a real asset to our community. Last year, I attended an online class on Zoom on the Prophets and it was wonderful to keep connected during the time of the Pandemic.

Irene Konig - August 24, 2021 at 01:27 PM



“ a spiritual mensch...RIP

hdeitz - August 24, 2021 at 10:21 AM