Rabbi Neil Kraft z'l

(13 September 1950–27 March 2020)

Rabbi Daniel Smith

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There was a huge outpouring of grief when Rabbi Neil Kraft passed away a week before his retirement was due. A spokesperson for the synagogue described Neil as the 'People's Rabbi'. Neil was very popular and many expressed their sense of personal loss. A large number of individuals and families used similar adjectives to describe his warmth and humour, care and kindness. He was a man of integrity and kept his word. He was deeply faithful both in his religious life and in his relations with others.

He was a genuine person sincerely concerned for the welfare of others. He was interested in everyone he met, and quickly able to connect and to help people feel they had found a new friend after only one meeting.

Neil grew up near Boston, Massachusetts in an actively Jewish home. His mother was principal of an afternoon Hebrew School. His summers were spent at Camp Yavneh whose slogan was 'Camp Yavneh welcomes & embraces Jews of all denominations'. Throughout his life Neil welcomed and embraced (physically as well as emotionally) Jews of all denominations and indeed people of other faiths and none. The camp's aim was to instil a love of Judaism and a love of the Hebrew language, and Neil kept those values all his life. In these early years he developed Hebrew and teaching skills that later served him as a Hebrew teacher and as a rabbi.

Neil gained an MA in Jewish education and started rabbinic training at Hebrew Union College. He completed his rabbinic studies at Leo Baeck College and was ordained in 1988. He served at Woodford Liberal Synagogue (1985–1989) and South London Liberal Synagogue (1990–2000). Then, following a short stint as Director of Education at West London Synagogue, he came to Edgware and District Reform Synagogue in 2002 where he served as my Associate Rabbi for eighteen years. He was much loved and respected by the community and by his fellow staff

members. I take this opportunity of saying a deep-felt thank you for his years of devoted service and friendship. I could not have asked for a more dedicated, caring and supportive colleague. He was always helpful to me and indeed to the whole community. There are vast numbers of people who have their own private reasons for gratitude for his support and his *Menschlichkeit* in important times.

Neil loved pastoral care, teaching and services, and did as much of these rabbinic activities as he could. He hated committee meetings and communal politics and avoided these as much as possible.

He was idiosyncratic. On every Shabbat and festival he would wear a different tie depicting a picture or symbol connected to that day's Torah portion. As a child cooking with his grandmother Neil developed culinary skills, and he developed a lifelong passion for recipes that was expressed in the synagogue magazine in his regular section called 'Kraft's Kooking Corner'. Every Sukkot he acted as bartender in the Sukkah serving his famous Etrog Vodka made from the previous year's etrogim. On Purim he dressed in outrageous costumes and served his Chocolate Vodka.

Bnei Mitzvah classes loved him for his humour and ability to banter. The old and the sick felt they had someone on their side after a pastoral visit from him. He had great sensitivity and emotion, and frequently cried in Yizkor or funeral services as he recalled those who had passed away.

One of his rabbinic colleagues suggested that we had a '*lamed vavnik*' among us (one of thirty-six people of justice and compassion who feel the sufferings of the world and for whose sake the world continues). That description carries truth. Neil felt the sufferings of others and tried to take on some of their burden and alleviate their pain.

In his last article for the synagogue magazine Neil wrote of his belief in the power of community which we all have in us.

It is in our relationships to one another. It is in the meaning we find in embracing our neighbours and turning them into our friends. It is in the power we find in giving the gift of Torah and community to our children and to our children's children. It is in the work we do together to transform our world through our shared commitment to a life of learning, worship, and acts of lovingkindness.¹

Neil loved his home life and was a loving husband to Susannah and a wonderful father to his sons Elie and Oscar. We wish them good memories. The memory of this Tzaddik is a blessing.

Amnon Daniel Smith is Rabbi Emeritus of Edgware & Hendon Reform Synagogue where he served as Senior Minister for twenty-six years, past Chairman of the Reform Assembly of Rabbis, and was founding Chairman of the Raphael Centre, a Jewish counselling service.

Note

1. *LeDor VaDor Magazine*, March/April 2020.