

Funeral for Doug Bender
January 4, 2026 at Congregation Shaarei Kodesh
Rabbi David Baum



I want to begin by reading the words of my colleagues, rabbis who were very close to Doug and Diane.

I spoke with Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove this week of Park Avenue Synagogue. Although he hadn't talked to Doug and Diane for years, he said he cherished the start they gave him when he ran an overflow service for Bnai Torah. He fondly remembered both Doug and Diane.

Remarks in memory of Doug Bender z"l - Rabbi Ari Sunshine, senior rabbi of Shaareith Israel in Dallas Texas.

I first met Doug and Diane 24 years ago, when I was a senior rabbinical student at JTS, the Jewish Theological Seminary. I was one of six senior students who came down to South Florida for a week to teach in various different synagogues and other Jewish institutions as an outreach effort on behalf of JTS. Doug and Diane were kind enough then to open up their home for a full week to six strangers they had not met, all of us rabbis-to-be, hosting our group for the entire stay. And while the opportunity to teach Torah to a good number of people in South Florida would have certainly been fulfilling enough, the bond I formed with Doug and Diane was the real gift of that experience.

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We had deep and meaningful conversations about Torah, Judaism, JTS, shuls, the rabbinate, the future of our Conservative Movement, and plenty of baseball and other sports mixed in, and became fast friends. We remained in touch after I was ordained that spring and took my first job in Charlotte. Doug and I would catch up from time to time with phone calls, and we'd usually talk about how my work as a rabbi was going, how things were going at Shaarei Kodesh, how our families were doing, and, of course, baseball too. Jen and I visited Doug and Diane multiple times in the next couple of years when we were down in the Miami area, and I stayed with them when I came to visit my ailing grandfather in the early summer of 2004. During that trip, my grandfather somewhat unexpectedly passed away, and of course Doug and Diane welcomed me to stay with them as long as I needed through the funeral and were incredibly supportive of me in my time of loss.

Over the years, as my family and I moved from Charlotte to Maryland and then to Dallas in 2017, we have still kept in touch and chatted periodically, and were delighted to find out that, small world of small worlds, the Benders had close relatives who are active members of my shul in Dallas, Diane's brother Doug Sheena and his wife Ellen and their boys Alex and Benny. So in these last number of years we've had the pleasure of celebrating Benny's Bar Mitzvah together, as well as seeing each other during at least one Pesach visit they made to Dallas.

From that first time we met in January of 2002, I knew that Doug was a special guy and that he would be someone with whom I would want to remain in touch. He was outgoing, warm, menschy, a great kibbitzer, and was someone who would do anything he could to be there for people he cared about. Doug was a committed Jew, a dedicated shul lay leader, and someone who loved shul and loved rabbis. I just happened to be one of the fortunate rabbis who got to know him well and call him a friend, and for that I will be forever grateful.

I was shocked to hear of Doug's sudden passing this week and know that his time on this earth ended way too soon. Sending love and hugs to Diane, to Adam, Andrew, and Michael—who I still remember as “Mikey” from when we played catch in the street those many years ago!--and their families, to Doug, Ellen, Alex and Benny, and the rest of the extended Bender and Sheena families. Yehi Zichro Baruch, may Doug's memory continue to bless us all, just as his presence and his warm smile illuminated our days during his life.

Rabbi Matt Berkowitz, the president of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem:

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First and most importantly, my heart goes out to Diane and their whole family, the Shaarei Kodesh community, and indeed the whole Jewish community of Boca Raton. Doug will always have a very special place in my heart. He was my first meaningful connection to the South Florida Jewish community. As soon as I began teaching for JTS, Doug was my biggest fan -- so enthusiastic about JTS reaching beyond 3080 Broadway. More than that -- his warmth, wit, sense of humor and Texan charisma were infectious. I always felt his love, openness and care.

Indeed, Doug's life can be understood as reflecting many of the values expressed in Parashat Vayehi, which focuses on legacy, moral responsibility, and the impact one leaves on future generations. Like Jacob in his final moments, Doug's actions emphasized the importance of living with integrity, strengthening family and community bonds, and passing on values through example rather than words alone. Vayehi reminds us that a meaningful life is measured not by power or status, but by faithfulness, perseverance, and concern for others, qualities that Doug consistently demonstrated in how he treated people and approached his responsibilities. In this way, his life echoes the parashah's central message: that the true measure of a person is the values they embody and the blessings they leave behind for others.

Eulogy written and delivered by Rabbi David Baum

Doug always had a flare for the dramatic, and the week he left us is a testament to that, not because it was New Year's Eve, but because his death came between two of the most important parshiot in the Torah: Vayehi and Shemot. Vayehi, literally and he lived, isn't about life, rather, it is about death and legacy. Jacob gathers his sons around him to give them final blessings before he left earth.

This was Jacob's second chance. At the beginning of the story, Jacob was destined to live an ordinary life, but fate or God stepped in the way. At the end of his life, despite the difficult times he went through, he had his second chance with all of his sons, including his beloved Joseph.

When I think about Jacob and the end of his life, I think about Doug. Doug didn't have the death bed scene like Jacob, but he left a legacy that will stand the test of time for generations.

We spent his last Shabbat on earth together - in a humble storefront at CSK. Doug was at CSK almost every Shabbat morning, and if he wasn't with us, I knew he was with Max and Quinn.

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On Friday night, he was outside talking to our very talkative daughter. And on Shabbat morning, he was there again. It was last Shabbat that Doug heard his last sermon ever, a sermon on second chances.

I asked, Have you ever had a second chance in life?

I don't mean a small one, I mean the kind of second chance where you thought—deep down—that maybe you didn't really deserve it... and yet it was given to you anyway.

And on the other side of that question:

Have you ever been the one who gave someone else that second chance?

Not because they had earned it.

Not because it was easy.

But because something in your heart told you: If not now, then never.

Today, we honor a man whose work built this place, our second chance shul in Boca Raton. Without Doug, I likely wouldn't be here at CSK today.

I'll never forget the first time that I spoke to Doug Bender. It was 17 years ago. I was in my tiny New York City apartment and I received a call from a loud and very talkative Texan from Boca Raton. We had a short conversation in terms, only about an hour long. Doug was seeing if I was interested in being the rabbi of a very unique congregation. He waited until the next conversation to tell me that he was in the store front across from my gas station.

At the end of our conversation, I asked him, "Mr. Bender, why'd you call me?"

He said because you have what the Rabbi's like to call the crown of a good name - a *keter shem tov*. The quote is from the book the Ethics of Fathers. In the passage, "Rabbi Shimon said: There are three crowns—the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship—*וְכֹתֵר שֵׁם טוֹב עוֹלָה עַל גְּבוּיָהֶן*—and the crown of a good name rises above them all."

And that is what Doug valued more than anything: reputations. It is how he lived his life. Not many people knew this, but Doug went to almost every funeral we had for a member of CSK, whether there were 200 or 2 people there, and he showed up to almost every shiva minyan. I never asked why, but I imagine it was because he wanted to be remembered as someone who showed up for others, both in life and in death.

It wasn't just Doug, it was his wife Diane. During that interview weekend, both Doug and Diane took care of us, but Diane's job was to take care of Alissa who was 7 months

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pregnant! They made us feel at home immediately. We knew even before the job was offered the Bender's would be like family to us, and that is what they became over these last 17 years. The Bender family reputation spoke for itself.

The Keter Shem tov, the crown of a good name, is not about being boastful though. Doug was a humble man in many ways. I know that you wouldn't know that from his public speaking. He was an incredible public speaker. One Shabbat, he was supposed to give the dvar torah, but he forgot. It didn't matter, he got up and gave a masterful dvar torah. My father in law was sitting next to me, and commented, "I don't remember anything he just said, but that was the best speech I've ever heard."

He didn't speak for himself, he spoke for us, for our community. Believe it or not, Doug exemplified the quality of Anavut, humility.

For instance, Doug hated when they called CSK Doug Bender's shul. Because he built it for us, not him. After he was president, he never held another board position, but was always involved. He thought it was a younger generation's turn.

Doug was one of the most invested Jewish leaders in our youth. He always talked to our teens, and they kept in touch with Doug into their 20's. He would often go to our kids soccer and football games, even though they weren't his kids. If you saw Doug on Shabbat, you'd notice he always wore the same kippah. It was the kippah from Yossi Pessah's bar mitzvah (which I'm wearing today). Doug was close with Yossi, like he was with the other teens. Yossi passed away at 19, and I will never forget seeing Doug break down in front of the family. His love of our Jewish youth wasn't an act; it was ingrained in his soul.

Doug loved Judaism, the Jewish people, and the Jewish future, but more than anything, Doug loved his family.

On Jacob's deathbed scene, the rabbis envisioned a different conversation. The midrash says that Jacob had doubts about the next generation: would they follow the same God that my ancestors followed, or will they be lost to Egypt in a generation?

The midrash says that he gathered all of his sons together, and he said, "will you follow the God of Israel." Together, the sons say in unison, the words of the Shema, Shema Yisrael, Hear us Yisrael or Jacob, the Lord is our God, and Lord alone.

At that point, Jacob takes his last breath, knowing that he could rest after his people's destiny is assured.

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Doug may have had a lot of surrogate grandchildren, but he loved his three beautiful granddaughters more than anything in the world: Max, Quinn, and Olivia.

And this brings me to this week's parashah, Shemot, or names. It is the names of our descendants that carry on our legacy. Doug cared deeply for our people, and for this country.

I want to return back to my first conversation with Doug. During that first conversation, he told me about the But Fors that keep CSK going. He spoke about Amy, Dara and Nicole who scrubbed the storefronts floors on their hands and knees.

But the truth is, but for Doug Bender, we wouldn't be here. There likely wouldn't have been a CSK - every simcha we've had is because of Doug. I will forever be grateful, and so should each person who is blessed to be part of our community, past, present and future.

So today, as we say goodbye, we do what our tradition has always taught us to do. We do not only mourn a life that has ended — we commit ourselves to the life that continues.

Doug loved synagogue life, he loved morning minyan. We can honor Doug by being that person at morning minyan, to show up when no one else will.

May Doug's keter shem tov, his crown of a good name, live on through his children, Adam, Andrew and Mikey, and through his granddaughters Max, Quinn, and Olivia, and through every person who walks through the doors of this community that he helped build.

Doug, thank you for building this community for us, when you didn't have to. Thank you for giving us a gift that we can never fully repay to you. But we will repay you by living your legacy.

By living with your best keter shem tov, the crown of your good name
By showing up when no one is watching
By giving second chances
By building something that will outlast us.
Yehi zichro baruch. May Doug's memory always be a blessing.