

PUBLICATION

Faith: RBG – May Her Memory Be a Blessing

Authors: Jill Menuskin Steinberg

October 08, 2020

There is a Jewish teaching that says that those who die just before the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) are the ones God has held back until the last moment because they were needed most and were the most righteous. And so it was, that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg died as the sun was setting, marking the beginning of Rosh Hashanah. Such people, like Justice Ginsburg, in Jewish teaching are known as a Tzadek or the female Tzadeket. The Hebrew word "tzedakah," which is often translated as "charity," but it is more accurate to say "righteousness." Tzedakah can take many forms (including monetary donation) but it's important to note that tzedakah is not just a contribution given to be kind or nice to those who need it, it is to be viewed as a balancing of the scales, an active working towards justice. To use a simple example, one should donate to the local food bank not to gain favor with God or to be nice to those with less than ourselves, but because it is unjust for anyone to be without food, especially while others have plenty. Correcting injustice, balancing the scales, evaluating the distribution of power and creating equity is tzedakah, the work of righteousness.

When Jews speak of righteousness, it is never with the idea of an eternal reward. We work to be good humans to others and ourselves because justice and peace are their own rewards. We don't know what happens next, but we know what happens here, and that is enough. The pursuit of justice is one of the highest callings of Judaism. The ideas of justice and sustainability are inextricably linked in Judaism. A system that is unjust cannot sustain, and a system that is unsustainable cannot be just. As Justice Ginsburg once wrote, "The demand for justice runs through the entirety of the Jewish tradition. I hope, in my years on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States, I will have the strength and courage to remain constant in the service of that demand."

Justice Ginsburg was a thoughtful person who worked tirelessly to create a more just world, one that would perpetuate equality and access. Hanging in her Supreme Court chambers was an artist rendering of a biblical phrase from Deuteronomy, "Tzedek, Tzedek Tirdof" which means, "Justice, Justice Shall You Pursue." Last year she also wore that quote woven into one of her jabots, or collars, worn on her Supreme Court robes. Ruth Bader Ginsburg's life and career were the embodiment of that tenet. A life in the pursuit of justice.

In Jewish teaching, the proper thing to say about her passing is "May her memory be for blessing." When we say that, the blessing implied is this: it is up to those who bear her memory to keep her goodness alive. We do this by remembering her, we do this by speaking her name, we do this by carrying on her legacy. We do this by continuing to pursue justice, righteousness, and sustainability.

May her memory be for blessing.

May her memory be for revolution.

May we become a credit to her name.