

Congregation Beth Shalom

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Remembering the life of Eva Leah Gunther

(November 18, 1984 - August 5, 1997)

On Tuesday, August 5th, twelve-and-a-half-year-old Eva Leah Gunther's life ended when she was tragically struck by a car while visiting Charlotte, North Carolina for her first Junior Olympics competition in the martial art "taekwondo." A member of Congregation Beth Shalom, Eva was preparing for her Bat Mitzvah this coming November 22nd. The congregation deeply mourns the death of this beautiful young girl and extends to her parents, Anne Krantz and Mark Gunther, her eight-year-old sister Sophie, and her grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins our most profound sympathy and support. What follows are excerpts from Eva's eulogy, delivered by Rabbi Alan Lew on August 8 at Sinai Memorial Chapel.

Eva Gunther was born November 18, 1984 at Mt. Zion Hospital, right across the street from where we are presently gathered. Only twenty minutes after her parents arrived at the hospital, Eva came rushing into this world and immediately started nursing. So it was that her life began in a way that would characterize it always — with a rush to "get out ahead of life." She would determine to do a thing, and she would stick with it until she had mastered it. This was Eva — the pioneer, the bravest, the first — the one who was always rushing forward.

She held nothing back in her personal relationships either, an extraordinary number of which were characterized by unconditional and undying love. She felt closest emotionally to her oldest friends — and once she loved someone, she never stopped loving them. On the day her sister Sophie was born, Eva poured herself into the hospital room, flowed into the room with exuberance, and asked to hold the baby. From that day forth, Eva loved Sophie with unwavering support and guidance — a fierce and open love with no sense of competition, only pride.

She attended Presidio Hill School and was the quintessential student there, a perfect reflection of the school's values — creativity,



self-expression, and individual focus. Her parents gave her permission and the space to be who she was, and as a result she was an absolutely original human being. She would always reach out to the new child in class, and even the school staff found itself leaning on Eva for support. When things were bad and they needed a hug, they would seek out Eva because she gave the best hugs. She was very clear that when she grew up she wanted to be a teacher. Her ability to learn and teach flowed out of her talent for relationships and the value she placed on them.

One of the most extraordinary vehicles for both learning and teaching in Eva's life was taekwondo which she studied for the past seven years. She loved it — the meditation, the discipline, the open-heartedness, and the challenge. In March, 1995 she tested for her brown belt — a transcendent experience — over an hour of continual movement going through all the forms with utter and complete concentration. This would be an incredible achievement for anyone but for someone her age, doubly so.

She was scheduled for her black belt test just after her Bat Mitzvah, and once you're a black belt, you're a teacher. But Eva was already a teacher, and so upon learning of her death, the studio where she trained delivered an honorary black belt to her family.

Eva always wanted to have a Bat Mitzvah, and she was very clear and relaxed about doing what she needed to prepare for November 22nd. She wanted to invite everybody — her family, school, taekwondo and Beth Shalom friends. Her Jewish identity was part of her core. Every Christmas, she would accost shopkeepers for not giving equal time to Chanukah. And she once said about Fiddler on the Roof, "You know what I like about this movie? Everybody's Jewish." She had a way of accepting all the parts of herself. Eva expressed Jewish values deeply in the way that she lived. She embodied strength with kindness and compassion. She insisted the right be the way that she was — righteous and just — but she made this demand without a hint of anger, venality, or even jealousy.

With any death the element of the incomplete is always present, but in this case it is overwhelming. The fact that Eva was looking forward to completing both her Bat Mitzvah and her black belt training in the coming year raises this element to a particularly poignant level. And of course there is the agony of thinking about what she would never experience, what her adolescence would have been like, what kind of adult she would have become, what incredible things she would have achieved.

Nevertheless, since Eva accepted her own life so completely on its own terms, she challenges us now to do the same and to understand that her life was perfect as it was. There are no alternative realities. Nothing is possible in this life except what actually happens. And Eva's life was, in fact, a perfect

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circle. We bring it to a close across the street from where it began. She died the way she lived — rushing out ahead of life, she rushed out onto that street in Charlotte the way she rushed out of the womb and the way she leaped forward into every moment.

The rabbis of the Talmud tell us: *ca' tzif v'reshut b'yado* — everything is predetermined and we have free will. It took the entire history of the universe to produce this life and this death as well. Every moment of our lives arises out of an endless and inevitable chain of causes, yet we are free to respond with a purity of intention or not, and that choice changes everything. Eva Gunther chose to live with a purity of intention which was extremely rare. And because of the accumulated power of this choice, she continues to alter us profoundly.

She was and will always be the child teacher, paving the way and teaching by example — a great light in a small body, in a brief life... a human

being who was deeply in touch with her essential being, remained fiercely true to it, and showed us all what a powerful thing it could be to live that way. In her father's words, she was "a natural force, a river flowing, a beacon of righteousness. She was a rock of strength, an ocean of wonder, a continent of care, a mountain of love."

And she remains so even now, still radiant, still reaching out to us, still rushing ahead of her life, and now finally beyond it altogether. She really was a gift. And even though we know we must give her back, we can't help crying out — we don't want to let go. But deep down we all know that she changed us forever while we had her, and she continues to change us even in her leaving. Eva was an irrevocable gift. She entered our lives very deeply, and she will live with us always, *aleyah hashalom*, may she rest in peace.