



# Board of Commissioners of Cook County

118 North Clark Street  
Chicago, IL

## Legislation Text

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File #: 22-2199, Version: 1

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### PROPOSED RESOLUTION

#### HONORING THE LIFE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF RABBI DOUGLAS GOLDHAMER

**WHEREAS**, Rabbi Goldhamer, founder of Bene Shalom Synagogue in Skokie, died of heart failure on February 3, 2022 at Evanston Hospital. He was 76; and

**WHEREAS**, Rabbi Goldhamer was born in Montreal, the son of Harry and Jean Goldhamer. His father, born in Germany, immigrated to Canada before World War II, as did his mother, who came from Russia. Rabbi Goldhamer got his bachelor's degree in political science from Montreal's Sir George Williams University and a doctorate in medieval philosophy from the University of Chicago; and

**WHEREAS**, in 1945, when he was 30 days old, doctors used radiation to remove a birthmark from one of his hands. But they got distracted and left him exposed to the radiation for too long. The whole left side of his body was burned with radiation burns. It caused severe pain and required more than a dozen surgeries. In later years, as he reflected on that time he saw there was a reason for him to have all of those surgeries and all those radiation burns - the reason being for him to be sensitive to other people; and

**WHEREAS**, Rabbi Goldhamer founded Congregation Bene Shalom with the Hebrew Association for the Deaf in 1972. Though not deaf himself, he began visiting Chicago to serve deaf members of the Jewish community when he was a student at Cincinnati's Hebrew Union College. These students began teaching him sign language. For several years in the 1970s, he communicated the news in sign language on WMAQ-TV during the "Today" show; and

**WHEREAS**, Bene Shalom began with only 11 families and about \$125 in the bank. Rabbi Goldhamer wanted deaf members of the Jewish community to feel welcome and included. Today, it remains the only full-service synagogue serving the deaf Jewish community in the United States; and

**WHEREAS**, during services, Rabbi Goldhamer would address his congregants in English, Hebrew and sign language. When the *shofar* was blown at Rosh Hashanah, deaf worshipers were made part of that experience, feeling the vibrations from the simultaneous striking of a kettle drum. Deaf people, he once said in a Chicago Sun-Times interview, "hear with their eyes and their hearts;" and

**WHEREAS**, among his many students at Congregation Bene Shalom was Oscar-winner Marlee Matlin, the Morton Grove native who won "Best Actress" in 1987 for the movie "Children of a Lesser God." He helped her study for and celebrate her *bat mitzvah*. In her 2003 autobiography "I'll Scream Later," Matlin wrote that she prepared with Rabbi Goldhamer "for two or three years . . . studying the Torah and working on my speech. I'll never forget learning about my religious history, but more than that, really connecting to my faith. Understanding that it was a very real part of who I am, beyond the Friday-night *Shabbat* dinners and Hanukkah candles and presents." On hearing that he died, Matlin said: "Rabbi Goldhamer helped me realize a full and inclusive experience when it came to my Jewish heritage. His temple was fully integrated, deaf and hearing alike, and it was because of him that I was able to become a *bat mitzvah*. His passing is a huge loss, but his legacy lives on in every one of us who was able to be in his presence;" and

**WHEREAS**, in furtherance of his mission, Rabbi Goldhamer established the Hebrew Seminary thirty years ago at the same location to educate rabbis for the deaf and hearing communities. The seminary has prepared rabbis from all traditions, Reform to Orthodox and in between. Among Rabbi Goldhaber's core values was inclusion and pluralism; and

**WHEREAS**, Rabbi Goldhamer met Peggy Bagley, his wife of 41 years, in 1980 as they walked their dogs at Barry Avenue and Halsted Street. Over the years, they adopted many dogs from the Orphans of the Storm animal shelter; and

**WHEREAS**, Rabbi Goldhamer taught classes at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. He enjoyed painting, and his works were exhibited at galleries. He looked forward to breakfasts at Annie's Pancake House in Skokie. He liked the music of Sam Cooke and fellow Montrealer Leonard Cohen; and

**WHEREAS**, with his wife, Rabbi Goldhamer wrote the book "Healing with God's Love: Kabbalah's Hidden Secrets." He also co-wrote "This is for Everyone: Universal Principles of Healing Prayer and the Jewish Mystics"; and

**WHEREAS**, Rabbi Douglas Goldhamer was buried with the little things he used to give away to help others. At his funeral, he was dressed in his customary tweed suit and saddle shoes. His wife Peggy Bagley tucked \$5 in his pocket because he used to pull over his car to give money to people who were down on their luck. There also were some coins that he liked giving to kids when they beat him at air hockey. Finally, there was "some cat food and some Milk-Bones," his wife said, "in case he meets some furry friends along the way;" and

**WHEREAS**, in addition to his wife, Rabbi Goldhamer is survived by his brother Dr. Paul Goldhamer. Asked at one point what his philosophy was, he said it came down to just three things: "Be kind. Be kind. Be kind."

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED**, that the Board of Commissioners of Cook County, on behalf of the 5.2 million residents of Cook County, honors the life, work, and contributions of Rabbi Douglas Goldhamer, and herewith expresses its sincere gratitude for the invaluable contributions he made to the Citizens of Cook County, Illinois; and

**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED**, that a suitable copy of this Resolution be spread upon the official proceedings of this Honorable Body and that an official copy of same be tendered to the family of Rabbi Douglas Goldhamer and to Congregation Bene Shalom.