When Simon was born in 1938 in Mumbai, the truth is he wasn’t the first Sargon. Of course, his father was named Benjamin Sargon, but if you know something about the history of Mesopotamia, you know that scholars estimate that there have been Sargons around for about forty-five centuries. So I thought maybe we could learn something about Simon by looking at his antecedent Sargons.

One of them is mentioned in the Bible, in the Book of Isaiah. He is known as Sargon II, an Assyrian King of the 8th century BCE who took power by violent coup, and then completed the defeat of the Kingdom of Israel. That did not seem like the most noble exemplar, so I decided to look further.

About 1200 years before Sargon II, there was Sargon I, which is a pretty long time to go without a King Sargon. And to make matters worse, Sargon I did not leave much of a footprint. He shows up in ancient lists of Assyrian kings, but that’s about it. Undeterred, we search on.

And that’s what brings us to an Akkadian king of the 24th century BCE known as Sargon the Great. Now we’re getting somewhere. Because Sargon the Great was just that – a successful warrior, a model and powerful ruler who was known for listening to his subordinates. He creates a dynasty, and creates a model of leadership for centuries of Mesopotamian kings to follow.

But while Sargon the Great gets us closer to what our Sargon means to us, it’s really not close enough. Because none of those Mesopotamian kings were the valedictorians of their graduating class at Brandeis, or earned a graduate degree at Juilliard. None of them taught at
Hebrew University or the Ruben Academy of Music in Jerusalem. And even if pianos had been invented, they would never have played with Simon’s skilled and silken touch.

But most important, as best as archaeological evidence indicates, none of those ancient rulers ever made it to Dallas, Texas. And for all of our Sargon’s international influence – the compositions and commissions played and sung by diverse artists all over the world, the students taught in countless undergraduate and graduate programs not only for decades at SMU, but in cities and countries across the globe, truthfully – selfishly – what makes this Sargon different – even more than all the impressive honors and awards and academic recognitions – is that this Sargon is ours.

This Sargon is Simon – the Simon and Bonnie and Olivia who made Dallas home, the Simon who when he arrived as music director in 1974 helped make this congregation feel like home to all of us.

A spiritual home: surely to the members of the remarkable choir, but to all of us. With the choir, he brought a strong legacy to new heights – of music in prayer, of music in performance, of bringing the power and beauty of this Temple choir to sacred spaces all around the globe. And long before we had chavurot or Shema groups at Temple, Simon nurtured the choir as a loving and caring community.

From my perch, I will tell you that for all his international stature, it was here at Temple Emanu-El, Shabbat after Shabbat, rehearsal after rehearsal, year after year, that Simon’s talents shone most brightly.

His gifts as conductor and composer have brought incomparable warmth and expressive depth to the prayers of our people. He was the first to show us how prayers sung in Hebrew could touch our hearts. He brought the sound of art song and folk song; European village
melodies and the sounds of an Israeli landscape. His music opens meaning, and opens hearts.
He is a teacher in every moment.

This week’s Torah portion brings us a curious verse: Eleh toldot Noach; noach ish tsaddik. These are the generations of Noah – Noah was a righteous person. The verse is curious because in the Torah, after the phrase “These are the generations of,” you usually expect a genealogy, a list of descendants. But instead, after “these are the generations,” we get “Noah was a righteous person.”

Why, our rabbis asked? Because toldot, “generations,” does not refer only to our biological generations, but to what we generate with our lives. And Noah generated righteousness.

So rather than look back to Sargon II or Sargon I or even Sargon the Great, I think tonight we should say: Eleh toldot Simon – these are the generations of Simon Sargon, what he generated. Not only the beautiful family that he and Bonnie brought into the world - Olivia and her husband Michael, and their beautiful children Juliana and Adam. But this is what he has generated, what he continues to generate with remarkable vitality and creativity:

Music that stirs the heart and lifts the spirit;

Light that shines forth from his deep understanding of music and text, and that illumines our own paths of faith;

Ardent students and dear friends whom he continues to nurture through his gifts of mind and heart.

His setting for Psalm 8, which we will soon hear, is just one example. In this setting, and in so many other ways, he has given us yareach v’kochavim, enosh v’elohim – moon and stars,
the human and the divine. He has given us Elul whispers and the shadows of the Shoah, and he has helped us to sing and pray with deepest joy.

So, Sargons of old, you can keep all the royal titles you want. Simon and Bonnie, you are better than great: you are ours, and how deeply we are blessed in you.

And now, in some small reflection of all the ways you and your family have brought blessing to us, it is our privilege now to offer blessing to you …