

IN MEMORIAM

JOHN D. RAYNER

Hans Sigismund Rahmer (John Desmond Rayner), rabbi: born Berlin 1924; ordained rabbi 1953; Minister, South London Liberal Synagogue 1953–57; Associate Minister, Liberal Jewish Synagogue 1957–61, senior Minister 1961–89 (Minister Emeritus); Lecturer in Liturgy and Rabbinic Literature, Leo Baeck College 1966–2003, Director of Studies 1966–69, Vice-President 1969–2005; Chairman, Council of Reform and Liberal Rabbis 1969–71, 1982–84, 1989–92; President, London Society of Jews and Christians 1990; CBE 1993; Honorary Life President, Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues 1994; married 1955 Jane Heilbronn (two sons, one daughter); died London 19 September 2005.

Leo Baeck College-Centre for Jewish Education mourns the great loss of our teacher, rabbi and Hon. Vice-President Rabbi John Rayner on 19th Sept 2005/15 Elul 5765. Rabbi Rayner, Hon Life President of Liberal Judaism was a former Director of Studies at the College and senior lecturer in Rabbinics for over forty years. He taught generations of rabbinic students rabbinic codes, liturgy and Progressive Jewish thought and practice. His mastery of rabbinic texts, scholarship and his precise and insightful mind provided the College and all its faculty and students with a towering intellect that continues to be unsurpassed. Coupled with an absolute integrity and a passion for the ethical imperative in religious life, Rabbi Rayner was an archetype for Progressive Jews everywhere. He sought to achieve the highest aspirations of intellectual honesty and moral rightness and yet was most unassuming in his kind and generous relations with all; congregants, students and colleagues alike.

Though a perfectionist with a keen eye for detail, Rabbi Rayner exhibited a sense of humour and fun which was easy to uncover behind the rabbi and scholar. As a lover of language and literature he was widely read in the Humanities as well as all Jewish subjects. As the Senior Minister and Rabbi Emeritus of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue and a leader in the World Union for Progressive Judaism, he represented the intellectual traditions inherited from his mentors Rabbi Israel Mattuck and Claude Montefiore. Rabbi Rayner wrote of these founders of Liberal Judaism including Lily Montagu:

I think it is fair to say that our founders were *anshei emet* – *people of truth* (Exodus 18:21) in a special sense. They carried fastidiousness about truth to the nth degree and yet it required no effort on their part for such was their nature. They could no more dissimulate, prevaricate or equivocate than commit murder. But what concerns us is not their personal integrity so much as that they applied it unflinchingly to matters religious.

Such can be said of John Rayner too.

Rabbi Rayner compiled and edited the Liberal Jewish prayerbooks from the 1960s to the 1990s which served as models for all subsequent prayerbook revisions in the Progressive Jewish world. The largest synagogue body of Jews in the world, the Union of Reform Judaism in U.S.A., continues to use a revised version of Rabbi Rayner's *Service of the Heart*. *Service of the Heart* was unique for its time in that it utilised common English for translations of the Hebrew prayers, deleting 'thee' and 'thou' from the liturgy. It incorporated newly written English additions to the *siddur*. He also made significant alterations to the received Hebrew texts drawing upon alternative and new renditions to create a firmer balance between particularism and universalism. He therefore provided a greater integrity and meaning of worship for Liberal Jews. Subsequent prayerbooks included the *mahzor Gate of Repentance* and a revision of *Service of the Heart* entitled '*siddur lev chadash*' used in all Liberal synagogues today. He also edited a Passover *Haggadah* and several books on Jewish history and practice as well as a series of sermons given as Senior Minister of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue. He wrote widely and controversially about the need for an ethical Zionism critical of Government policies. His critics always accorded him the moral high ground however to which he would not bend. He was honoured with a C.B.E. for services to interfaith relations and awarded honorary degrees from Hebrew Union College in the U.S.A. and the Abraham Geiger College in Germany.

Rabbi Rayner served on the Academic Board of the College advising a series of Principals and Directors on the direction of the College including the awarding of validated degrees and the recent merger with the Centre for Jewish Education. As always Rabbi Rayner was concerned first and foremost with academic standards and quality of education. He viewed the College as an important guardian of rabbinic and scholarly endeavours but gladly accepted its wider role especially if it would benefit the congregations and individuals of the Liberal and Reform Movements. Rabbi Dr Michael Shire, Acting Principal of the College poignantly remarks that

We have lost a *gadol hador*, a giant of our generation who cannot be replaced. Now there is no guide to the definitive Liberal view on issues of moral and *halachic* import affecting the Jewish People today. Our moral anchor has been cast off but we have inherited from him a legacy of

ethical values, adherence to integrity of thought and action and an intellectual discipline to which we aspire. We will miss him as a teacher and scholar who always gave the maximum to every effort and enjoined others to do the same.

Rabbi Rayner had been seriously ill for two years and though homebound, he continued to take an active interest in the affairs of the College and the students of which he was very proud. The College presented him with a bound volume of faculty and student memories for his eightieth birthday from colleagues in over a dozen countries. Prayers and readings from his writings were recited on the day of his death in the College.

Michael Shire

I first met John sixty-six years ago, on 11th August 1939, when he came to join our family in Sunderland, having come out of Germany on one of the last Kindertransport trains from Berlin. Most of the children on that train were younger than John and many were crying. He was a confused, frightened fifteen year old. He recalled that the morning sun shone as the train crossed into Holland and freedom, the air seemed fresher and the grass greener than he had ever seen. Freedom, he said, was tangible and tasted sweet.

To understand John's feelings, we must remember that John's father was a patriotic German who had fought for his country in the First World War and had been severely wounded and later became a respected member of the staff of the Deutsche Bank in Berlin. In 1938, he had been arrested by the S.S. and when released seven weeks later, he had been so badly beaten up that John did not recognise the dishevelled and dirty skeletal figure whose clothes hung off him, standing outside the house, asking to come in.

When my mother went to say 'goodnight' to John that first night he was with us, she kissed him and said, 'You must be very proud to be Jewish'. Since my father was a Church of England priest, I think she felt it important that John should know we welcomed both him and his Faith into our family. He called my parents Uncle Will and Aunt Muriel, and my elder brother and I treated John as another brother. Even after sixty years, John vividly remembered his first breakfast with us in England. Cornflakes, a boiled egg, and toast, butter and marmalade. Delicious and unfamiliar luxuries for him. And it was not long before we discovered his happy sense of humour, often used at his own expense. Such as the then current German joke, 'If only we had some eggs we could have eggs and bacon, if we had some bacon'. Surely particularly appropriate from one of his Faith!

John was accepted as a boarder at Durham School, where he was determined to enter fully into all the school's activities. This of course included daily chapel services. His early maturity was clear when he discussed the problem with my father. John naturally felt he could not join in saying the Christian creed. My father entirely agreed, except for the opening words 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth'. And as my father also pointed out, Church of England services use the Psalms of David and have readings from what we refer to as the Old Testament. And many of the prayers and some hymns are acceptable to both Faiths.

John's life must have been particularly difficult, since only occasionally was he able to send or receive twenty-five word Red Cross messages with his parents, until these ceased in December 1942 and he had to fear the worst. I doubt if I was of much help to him, largely through lack of understanding of what he must have been going through. After Dunkirk, John was rounded up like all Germans, whether refugees and anti-Nazi or not. He could no longer stay with us in Sunderland, an important shipbuilding town and port, and even for a term had to change schools to one in the depths of the country. However, the Headmaster of Durham School was soon able to have him removed from the Enemy Alien category – surely an insult to John and the rest of the genuine refugees – and take him back as a pupil. John thrived at Durham and it was clear that he had a brilliant mind and was a good athlete. He won various prizes, including the English Essay Prize – not bad for one whose native tongue was not English – and became Captain of Athletics and a School Monitor. He went on to win an Open Exhibition to Cambridge.

After Durham School, he was eventually able to join the Army, was commissioned and served with distinction in Egypt, Palestine and Austria, ending up as a captain. On demobilisation, he went up to Emanuel College, Cambridge, where he gained a first class degree.

Throughout this time and while he was training to be a Rabbi and afterwards, my parents kept in close touch with John and he would stay with them when he could. He also had many deep and theological discussions with my father who was something of an academic too. When John was ordained, my father, who was by then a bishop, was privileged to be present and gave him his *Tallit* – probably a unique event.

It was surely particularly appropriate that it was Her Majesty the Queen, the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, who invested John with the insignia of a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, for his work in furthering understanding between our two Faiths.

Finally, I have looked for some words that may sum up at least part of John's approach to life and his Ministry. They were written to people in Corinth almost two thousand years ago by a Jewish man named Saul who was born in Tarsus

and lived in Israel. In translation they read, ‘And now abide Faith, Hope and Charity’ – in the sense of loving and caring for ones fellow mortals – ‘but the greatest of these is Charity’. Truly John was a Righteous Man.

Michael Stannard

Already having written three obituary pieces about John, I wondered if there was anything I could usefully add to this evening’s tributes. But Jane’s instruction was to talk about John as a colleague. Having worked with him for fifteen years at the LJS and then keeping in constant touch after he became Rabbi Emeritus in 1989, – I suppose it could be said that I got to know John better than most people.

It was a Seventeenth century French society hostess who penned the famous remark that no man is a hero to his valet; or, she might have added, to his Associate Rabbi. But so many were John’s virtues, and so few in comparison his defects, that when several years ago I came across the remark in the Talmud of the great Babylonian teacher Mar Samuel on hearing of the death of his friend and colleague Rav – ‘Behold, the man is departed of whom I stood in awe’ – I knew then that if it ever fell to me to deliver a eulogy about my dear friend, *that* would be the quotation I would use.

We all stood in awe of John. His commanding presence, his dignified bearing, his powerful intellect and the eloquence with which he expressed ideas, his insistence on ethical behaviour, set him apart and gave him a special aura. He bestrode our narrow world of Progressive Judaism like a colossus. He was always utterly fair to me as his junior partner, sharing equally the big occasions and major sermons, as well as the more mundane round of funerals, hospital visits and administrative duties.

But the ancient rabbis, using the example of Moses, whose burial place is unknown, warned us against the tendency to make a god of any human being after their death. If anything, John’s qualities stand out all the more because of the common human faults he overcame in order to achieve them. I’m not talking about his scars as a child of the Holocaust. But it might surprise many here who remember John’s equable temperament and calm rationality in debate to learn that he had to teach himself to control a fiery temper. Even late in life it sometimes would come to the surface when another person stubbornly failed to appreciate the logic of an argument – about the Middle East, say, or the nature of God – that to John was blindingly obvious. There was one rare blip on the otherwise impeccable moral compass of this man who would account for every last half litre of petrol and every paper clip when submitting his expenses. If embroiled in a controversy, he had a weakness for sending

letters marked 'Private and Confidential' which the recipient might reasonably assume meant just that, only to discover later that John had distributed them to other colleagues, bemused newspaper editors, members of parliament, communal bigwigs and anyone else whom he wished to persuade of his rectitude. As another dear friend, Rabbi Albert Friedlander, may he be remembered for blessing, affectionately remarked in a tribute on John's eightieth birthday, 'It's not that John is always right, but he's never wrong'.

Moral courage was one of his admirable attributes. I remember occasions when he would stand up and not give in to Sir Louis Gluckstein, the silkily formidable 6' 4" tall president of the LJS, and I would marvel at his bravery. But along with that, John could also be a poor judge of character, too easily gulled by mediocrities who flattered him. He was regularly out-manoeuvred in the grubby world of communal politics, because he naively assumed that others were motivated by his rigorous principles and passion for righteousness.

But how trivial such minuses were against his pluses: his utter dedication to the needs of congregants; his meticulous preparation of every lecture, study session, Confirmation lesson, funeral oration and sermon. Week in week out, John was the best preacher in any synagogue, of any denomination, and probably of every religion, in the country.

A few years ago, on one of our pre-*Kol Nidrey* walks, he and I got to considering what inscription we would wish to have on our tombstones. We agreed that we would like the ambivalent and enigmatic wording: 'To the best of his abilities, he did what he could', because that conveyed our awareness, no matter what public recognition or human appreciation we might achieve, that by absolute divine standards, we all fall short.

John fell less short than anyone I have ever known. Behold the man is departed of whom I stood in awe.

David Goldberg

About a year or so ago Professor Eric Friedland and I decided to write a tribute to John as a liturgist, saluting the groundbreaking work that he had done, with Chaim Stern, and acknowledging the breadth of his liturgical scholarship.

As part of the process we drew up an extended list of questions, which I then had the pleasure of asking John: the answers that he gave – which went far further than the mere liturgical – cast a fascinating insight into the work that produced *Service of the Heart*, *Gate of Repentance*, *Haggadot*, *Funeral*, *Shiv'a* and *Selichot* books and, the apotheosis of his endeavours, *Siddur Lev Chadash*.

How did it all start, I asked, where did this encyclopaedic knowledge come from? The answer was simple: *I wanted to lead a course in liturgy at the LJS*

and decided I needed to learn more about the subject. His original students cannot have known where that was going to lead!

No tribute – let alone a four minute one – can do adequate justice to John's role as a liturgist, his sensitivity as a linguist, and his deep and prayerful spirituality, but in *Siddur Lev Chadash* they all come together, and if one single prayer book has to be his monument then let that be it.

Working with him on that text, and having him as a consultant, with Eric, on its *machzor* sibling, as Andrew Goldstein and I did, was an unforgettable experience.

John set the highest standards for himself, and expected others to rise to the challenge accordingly. When we failed he was gentle, and set about rectifying our shortcomings himself. He also evinced huge modesty as an editor, as in many other things, so that in *Siddur Lev Chadash* for example, he insisted that almost all the passages that *he alone* had written were labelled New or Editors in the notes; so when you read those notes in future after a prayer moves or inspires you, substitute the initials JDR for those entries.

Another major recipient of his scholarship, his humanity and his integrity, was the Leo Baeck College – which he served with the greatest distinction for over forty years as a senior lecturer, as Vice President and as one time Director of Rabbinic Studies – and the generations of rabbis that he taught. He cared passionately about his students and made every effort to put them at their ease in his presence; he was relaxed with all of us and instantly on first name terms, and in his text courses he was gentle with our faltering and flawed reading. As a dissertation supervisor he was encouraging and meticulous, quickly reading chapters and commenting on them in minute detail; and though he was often constructively critical, always there was a preface that acknowledged the good things and sweetened the pill that followed.

To receive John's *semichah*, as Alex Wright and I did in 1986, was to be blessed beyond words, and to be aware that you had been initiated into a *shalsholet haKabbalah*, a chain of rabbinic ordination, that included David Einhorn, Kaufman Köhler, Israel Mattuck and above all John himself. It meant so much at the time, but it means even more today.

There is a text in *Pirke Avot* in the name of Joshua bar Perachyah which states: *Asey lecha rav, u-keney lecha chaver ...* 'find yourself a rabbi and get yourself a friend'. It was John's greatness as a rabbi, and as a man, that he could fulfil BOTH roles: he did it for so many of us, and in abundant measure, and for those to whom this applies it makes his loss irreparable but the gain from his love and friendship immeasurable.

Zecher tzaddik livrachah.

Amen.

Charles D. Middleburgh

There is a comment in *Talmud Berachot* (18b) that seems appropriate as we gather together in John's memory.

It is based upon a phrase in Ecclesiastes (9:5): 'For the living know that they shall die'. That seems obvious but Rabbi Hiyya once explained its deeper meaning to R. Jonathan when they were walking together around a cemetery: the phrase applies to those righteous who, in their death, are called living.

Many centuries later, at the funeral of a noted rabbinic scholar, Leon of Modena (1571–1648) gave an extraordinary eulogy basing it, he said, on a story he had read in a non-Jewish book – in itself a characteristically daring admission. Rabbi Leon says he will show how this Christian story agrees with the rabbinic statement.

The story Leon tells goes like this.¹

A young man does not know whether he is alive or dead and decides to travel from country to country to find the answer. Wherever he goes, people laugh at him.

In Egypt the sages tell him that since death is the cessation of activity, he is alive by day and dead by night.

In Persia, they explain that he is alive when active, but dead when idle.

According to Leon, the wise men in Greece could not agree amongst themselves and in Italy they said that whatever the young man proposed they would be able to demonstrate the opposite!

The young man then met a warrior who said, 'If you like, I will kill you and then you will know the difference.'

Finally a monk explained, 'I am alive because I consider myself dead.'

The young man did not understand these words, so when he came across a cemetery he decided to stay the night. He has asked the living; now he will enquire of the dead. So he opened a coffin and removed a corpse and eventually heard a spirit speaking who asked him what he thought; did he believe he was alive or dead?

'Alive,' said the young man.

'How do you know?'

'Because I see, hear, eat, walk.'

'Ah,' said the spirit – 'that is proof that you are dead.'

'How is that?'

'Because the living do not need senses or movement ...'

The youth asked: 'If that is so – who is alive?'

The spirit answered: 'The one who does not see, or hear, or speak or walk ...'

'Then,' asked the youth, 'how can I live?'

'By dying,' said the spirit.

‘And you,’ asked the young man – ‘are you alive or dead?’

‘Dead,’ said the spirit, ‘as long as I am talking to you.’

The young man answered, ‘If so, go to life,’ and closed the coffin. He now understood what the monk had said.

The next morning he returned to his home, and his reply to all who asked him was: I am dead so that I may live.²

John, I think, would have enjoyed Leon of Modena’s ingenious distortion of the original Christian story so that the monk’s emphasis on the renunciation of the world is used to illustrate the Talmudic aphorism, The righteous are called alive in their death.

What makes us sad is that he is not here with us, to comment, to correct but most of all, to challenge with his own daring.

But what does it actually mean, that the righteous are called alive in their death?

It means that we continue to measure the world by their standards.

This is not memory, as we usually understand it, but *presence*.

John’s writings, his words and deeds remain present with us. We hear that punctilious, crisp, slightly accented voice, hiding the passion and dry humour in intellectual rigour.

- We are still tested by the ever present ethical honesty as, for example, we hear again John’s compelling voice and argument in the debate as to whether it was right for the Leo Baeck College to allow gay and lesbian students to study for the rabbinate.
- His unwavering dedication to the bringing together of the two movements, Liberal and Reform remains alive.
- Most of all his passionate, fearless and righteous commitment to prophetic Judaism to the necessity that we should recognise both the suffering of the Palestinians and their rights in the Land of Israel continues to challenge us now.
- His intellectual genius shines out in his booklet the *Principles of Progressive Jewish Ethics*, a guide for generations to come which he wrote in two weeks.

Truly, the righteous are called living in their death.

Most of all, I appreciate the absolute honesty he called for in these past two years of his illness.

John constantly sets challenging and loving standards for us all as rabbi, teacher, friend and companion, and, no doubt, also as father and husband.

It was initially because of John, and Jane, whose hospitable Sunday lunches in Streatham affected my whole life, that I became a rabbi.

We grieve with his family, who had to share him with all of us and with so many others. We hope that the pain of parting will recede and that John's constant and refreshing appreciation of every moment of life, the savouring of every breath, his absolute trust in God, the life of the Universe will remain with us to support and nourish and challenge us all.

the righteous are called living in their death –

Keyn yehi ratzon – so may it be.

Notes

1. Rabbi M. Saperstein, *Jewish Preaching: An Anthology 1200–1800*, Judaica Vol. XXVI, Yale, 1989, pp. 99–100.
2. Without attempting fully to understand or explain this challenging story, it may be helpful to recall Cato's remark, as quoted several times in her writing, with approbation, by Hannah Arendt, as, for example, her closing sentence to *The Human Condition*, (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1958, 1998): 'Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself'.

Jeffrey Newman

Three weeks before his death, I went to see John. He told me that the cancer in his liver was growing and that he had been advised that his death was imminent. I had to control my feelings at the news. I asked him as he reflected on his life, what he felt was his greatest achievement. He replied that he hoped that he had done his work with integrity. I told him that while this was without doubt true, I felt it was his courage in facing whatever life might bring and seeking to overcome the bad – as illustrated by the way he faced his illness and disability for the last two years; how he greeted everyone with a smiling face and looked at the bright side, taking the view that he was fortunate to be alive and things could be worse.

This attitude was part of his character. I said to John that he was possessed by an enormous will to live, and *that* will was based on his faith that life was good. He was an 'ay sayer' as opposed to a 'nay sayer'. I told him of the close of James Joyce's *Ulysses* when Molly Bloom in one unending sentence speaks of her life which is interspersed with 'yes's' and ends with 'yes I said yes I will yes'. John always said yes to life and to everyone.

He said that he had been lucky in his life, to which Jane and I suggested that he had not been altogether lucky; after all he was a child of the Holocaust with all the loss that that had entailed and that he had made his own luck. With one thing I had to agree – when he said that he was lucky to have had married Jane.

No human being has ever given her husband more love, devotion and support than Jane gave John through the good and bad times, as have his children Jeremy, Ben and Susan and grandchildren Lev and Max of whom he was so proud.

After I left, I thought, how in spite of the deep differences between us on certain issues which at times had led to angry exchanges, how close I felt to him. For my part, it was because he had been such a good friend when I needed him, but also because I respected him. I sometimes thought he was arrogant, but that was due to the passion he had about his convictions; he felt that they came from a higher place and that it was his duty to express them with vigour. Sometimes I thought he was naïve, but I realised that this was due to his optimism about the nature of humanity. He believed that not only life was good but also that human beings were basically good and he also believed in the power of reason to persuade others as how to live. Others who had experienced what he had become cynics. He chose not to be one. Without the optimism based on his faith in God and Man, he would not have had the courage and the will to be the messenger and teacher of truth, understanding and compassion.

John was an extraordinary man. He was appreciated and praised during his life – and that is good. The qualities of his character and the integrity and courage with which he shared his beliefs will remain an inspiration for those of us who had the privilege to know him.

Sidney Brichto

Rabbi John Rayner was the towering intellectual, educational and pastoral presence of the Liberal Jewish movement. The American Rabbinic scholar, Abraham Joshua Heschel, observed: ‘There are three ways to mourn. The first is to cry,’ and we weep at our loss of John. ‘The second is to grow silent,’ and we have had the opportunity to reflect on John’s contribution to our lives and to the strength of Liberal Judaism. ‘The third is to transform sorrow into song,’ and we pledge ourselves to be inspired by John’s example to promulgate the notes of a compassionate, honest, sincere, rational and graceful Liberal Judaism so that its music may be appreciated by more Jews in the United Kingdom, Europe, Israel and around the globe.

In *Siddur Lev Chadash* (page 529) the following *b’rachah* is one of the selected Concluding Benedictions. The *Talmud* (*Berachot* 12a) tells us that it was spoken by the outgoing to the incoming watch in the Temple. Rabbi John Rayner kept a vigilant and dutiful watch over Liberal Judaism and he has bequeathed that task to us.

‘Miy sheshicayn et sh’mo babayit hazeh, hu yashkiyn b’naychem ahavah v’achavah v’shalom v’rayoot’.

‘May the One whose presence dwells in this house, cause love and harmony, peace and friendship to dwell among you’.

Danny Rich

John Rayner was the leader of Liberal Judaism in Great Britain, the more radical and innovative wing of Progressive Judaism in this country, established in 1902, and a worthy successor of its early leaders Israel Mattuck, the Hon Lily Montagu and the scholar C.G. Montefiore. Shaped by his childhood in Berlin and the towering figure of Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leader of German Jewry, he was deeply rooted in the critical rationalism of the liberal progressive wing of German Jewish life and thought.

Rayner’s contribution to Anglo-Jewish life became a foundation of contemporary Judaism. While American Reform Judaism had an impact, particularly in the rabbis who came to Britain and formed the British Progressive tradition – indeed, John Rayner himself studied at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati – Rayner adopted his own approach which owed more to Europe than to the United States. His rationalism and universalism never permitted a parochial stance, and he became deeply involved in the interfaith dialogue.

He was born Hans Rahmer, in Berlin in 1924, and arrived from Germany on one of the last Kindertransports in 1939. When it became almost impossible for Jews to attend German schools, he had attended the secular Jewish Theodor Herzl Schule in Berlin – two of his rabbinic colleagues in London were fellow students (Harry Jacoby was one and I was the other). Hans was sent to Durham School and lodged in the holidays with a Christian clergyman, William (later Bishop) Stannard. His parents, meanwhile, were killed in the death camps. Stannard encouraged his religious avocation and encouraged him to go to Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he read French and German, then Philosophy, then Hebrew and Aramaic. He changed his name to John Rayner in 1943 when he joined the Durham Light Infantry, leaving the Army four years later with the rank of captain.

Ordained a rabbi by Rabbi Israel Mattuck in 1953, he found his first congregation in the Liberal Synagogue in South London (1953–57) before establishing himself at the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in St. John’s Wood, first with Rabbi Leslie Edgar and then from 1961 until his retirement in 1989 as its senior rabbi and as the leader of Liberal Judaism.

Rayner’s impact upon Progressive Judaism at the end of the twentieth century may be seen in three distinct areas: in its theology, history, philosophy, liturgy

and ethics; as a leader within the Jewish and general society; and as a prophetic preacher who confronted his community with sometimes brutal honesty. When in October 2003, his Yom Kippur sermon on the topic ‘*Ashamnu*’, ‘We have Sinned’, expressed his belief that the Israeli government had strayed a long way from the prophetic teachings of justice and compassion, some of his closest friends and members attacked him fiercely. Rayner did not retreat an inch.

When one rabbi noted that the prophets were also nationalists in their time, Rayner used the American philosopher A.N. Whitehead’s concept of the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: one must not over-use one strand of the totality to express the totality. The universality of prophetic social justice reached well beyond peoplehood and endured through the ages. Rayner’s own commitment to the State of Israel was evident before the State came into being. He stood alongside Israel’s voices for peace, such as Judah Magnes and Martin Buber, striving to untie all the inhabitants of the land within that vision.

Rayner’s special areas of instruction at the Leo Baeck College/Centre for Jewish Education were liturgy, rabbinic codes and history. Here, he stressed the importance of the biblical and rabbinic tradition, but emphasised that the Emancipation of Europe had a parallel impact upon Judaism as the Destruction of the Temple in 70 CE: ‘The superstructure needed to be substantially modified. The time had come once more for a paradigm shift. The post-Emancipation age requires a new kind of Judaism’.

John Rayner brought this insight into the total rewriting of the Liberal liturgy. In due course, he realised that there had been a similar ‘paradigm shift’ in Jewish thought after the Holocaust and this became part of the new liturgy: *Service of the Heart* (1967), *Gates of Repentance* (1977) and *Siddur Lev Chadash* (1995) were jointly produced with Rabbi Chaim Stern but clearly the expression of Rayner’s beliefs. In due course, through Rabbis Stern and Sidney Brichto, they also helped shape the American Reform liturgies.

For decades, Rayner remained silent about the tragic dimensions of his own life before publishing any autobiographical material. Nevertheless, the centre of his texts is a strong universalism, an emphasis upon reason, and a re-statement of a tradition which moves from Kant to Hermann Cohen and to Leo Baeck. His most recent works summarise this: *An Understanding of Judaism* (1997), *Jewish Religious Law: a progressive perspective* (1998) and *A Jewish Understanding of the World* (1998). These books stress that Progressive Judaism is the way to the future. They challenge traditional Judaism which cannot see that *Halacha* – Jewish law does exist in Progressive Judaism. Liberal and Reform Judaism cannot just pick and choose from the past; the structures of the old tradition continue to exist in modern Jewish life. However, as Rayner’s exposition of Jewish history also shows, they fuse together with modern Jewish insights to create a pattern of faith in God and the creation of new customs and ceremonies.

This vision guided his work as leader of Anglo-Jewry. It explains his role in helping to establish the Leo Baeck College and serving as its Director of Studies, Lecturer, and then Vice-President from its beginning in 1966 to the present, shaping its curriculum and influencing each new generation of rabbis. Initially, a parallel theological college had been set up within the Liberal Jewish Synagogue and Rayner supervised its merger with the Leo Baeck College in a very short time.

The Liberal movement saw him as its intellectual leader, and he eventually became the Life President of the ULPS (Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues). He also served as the Chairman of the Conference of Liberal Rabbis and chaired the Council of Reform and Liberal Rabbis. In his interfaith work he was the co-chairman of the London Society of Jews and Christians, and also played a significant role in the Council of Jews and Christians. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, describes him as ‘a man of deep integrity and ethical principals who followed his conscience with determination and courage’.

He was, too, a prolific writer. His other books include *The Practices of Liberal Judaism* (1958), *Guide to Jewish Marriage* (1975) and *Judaism for Today* (1978, with Rabbi Bernard Hooker); an excellent history written with Rabbi David Goldberg, *The Jewish People* (1987); and a wide variety of lectures in the fields of Zionism, history, theology, the Bible and Commentaries, and related topics.

John Rayner was the soul of kindness and a stern man of dialogue who permitted no errors in others or in himself. Any texts submitted to him were subjected to an exacting grammatical examination alongside the demands for intellectual clarity. The love for humanity, and for his people and faith were combined in him, and he followed the words of his great teacher Leo Baeck: ‘We have too little Judaism ... the greater Judaism is our special strength. Judaism must not stand aside when the great problems of humanity are at stake ... we are Jewish for the sake of humanity’.

Writing at the end of his life about the benefits of old age, Rayner noted that ‘there are compensations. Negatively we become accustomed to our mortality and less afraid of dying – although, like Woody Allen, we should still prefer not to be there when it happens. Positively, though we have less to look forward to, we have more to look back on’.

The great teachers of Jewish life are seen within a *shalshelet ha-kabbalah* – a ‘chain of tradition’ where the past flows through the present into the future. In that sense, John Rayner continues as an important part of the Jewish future.

Albert H. Friedlander z”l

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