

RABBI RICHARD G. HIRSCH z"l - OUR GREAT LEADER
my mentor, my friend – a note of personal mourning

Rabbi Richard Hirsch – Dick to his friends (everyone!) – died today August 17 a few weeks short of his 95th birthday. I spoke with him briefly, a week ago (it was a struggle on his part because he was in the ICU and had a pipe down his throat) But he wanted to speak to me because he told me very directly “Leslie, my time has come and I want to say good bye to you” He said some other nice things. I choked and I choke as I write this. For this two minute conversation will stay with me the rest of my life as one of the greatest privileges I have ever had. The passing words to me of a great Jewish leader who I was honoured to have as a mentor and as a friend

Our Progressive Jewish movement was theologically founded by great rabbis such as Abraham Geiger in the early 19th century, followed by counterparts in the United States in late 19th and early 20th century. Great institutions in the United States such as the UAHC (now UPJ), HUC and CCAR followed. Fledgling movements started around the world before the Shoah. A WUPJ was created by Lily Montagu and Rabbi Leo Baeck in 1925. But this WUPJ was, until the fifties or at best the sixties, in reality a conference convening organization where like minded Progressive Jewish leaders met – in London, Berlin, Paris or Amsterdam

The WUPJ as we know it today, as a functioning international organization binding together national Progressive organizations in 50 odd countries, with its advocacy, educational and developmental functions, was the creation of Rabbi Richard Hirsch, its first professional leader

Great leaders DO have vision. They DO have focus. They DO have courage.

And great Jewish leaders DO have ethicality, as they DO have humanity

And they have the ability to take their followers where they do not always want to go (think Moses)

Richard Hirsch had all the above. He was the quintessential DOER. Because as great rabbis from Leo Baeck to Abraham Joshua Heschel have emphasized, the essence of Judaism is in the DEED.

Rabbi Hirsch didn't always get it right. He wanted his own way He would listen to other views with courtesy but then do what he felt was right anyway. He nagged. He instructed “this is what I want you to do “He neglected Europe (perhaps because his instinct told him it would come along fine at its own pace without much help). He understood that a strong presence in Israel was a necessity both in its own right but also to give legitimacy to our movement. What courage he had to move his family from New York to Jerusalem in the early seventies! He felt that Russian Jewry was a moral imperative. He understood that to be a great Progressive Jewish leader you had to be a great Jewish leader in the broadest sense – and hence his many connections with a broad range of Jewish institutions especially the Jewish Agency where he was held in huge respect. And as a Jewish leader you were expected to be “a light unto the nations “– because that was and is the moral imperative of Judaism. And hence his participation in the US Civil Rights movement and friendship with the Rv Martin Luther King and participation in a host of other causes when he led the Religious Action Centre in Washington.

Richard was “with Bella”. This phenomenal woman to whom he was married until she died two years ago, came to him via an almost unbelievable journey of deprivation and suffering, and grit, determination and courage during the Shoah years. A true love story which he has documented very beautifully.” This Leslie (Bella said) is the shawl your mother gave me when we visited Port Elizabeth. I wore it for special occasions” How honoured my mother would have felt! How honoured I felt.

And did Dick Hirsch ever understand the power of “le dor vador”!! If he put his arm around you and invoked the memory of your parents – with absolute and total sincerity, the deal was done. Great organizations need to be funded. Dick also believed in the power of bricks and mortar – “it shows you are here – permanently” He believed in ledor vador as the central theme of Jewish continuity and that was so

often his penetrating message to his audience. And there was never a parasha that Dick could not turn into a sermon that would leave the congregation profoundly moved, often to tears. Because he understood the power of emotion but he also spoke from a background of deep rabbinic scholarship

Rabbi Richard Hirsch was not my mentor in any formal sense. We did not have mentoring discussions, as I have done in a role reversal so frequently in my career. I observed. I took in (I like to think) by osmosis As I began to understand through experience in many organizations over the years, what constitutes successful leaders, I knew that it was my great fortune in life to have Rabbi Richard G Hirsch as a mentor. And as the years went by, and I used to call him and visit him (and Bella) in their retirement, first in Israel, then in Florida, the mentor became simply a great friend.

I of course realized the end was in sight. But how painful it is for me not to have Dick Hirsch anymore to call, to visit, to schmooze with, to listen to with reverence to the many stories (some endlessly repeated) And if this is my pain, how much so for his family to whom I wish long life and many blessings from his memory

*A great Jewish leader, a giant of Progressive Judaism has left us
How we will miss him! We must honour his memory as he would demand of us – by doing!*

Leslie Bergman