

A great leader dies — and with him, a whole generation

Social justice or Zionism? One man's career showed that they were infinitely compatible.

By Jeffrey Salkin

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Rabbi Richard Hirsch, longtime leader of Reform Judaism in the United States, Israel and worldwide, has died at the age of 95.

But this death was not his alone. Rather, it marks the end of an era in Reform Judaism, an era in which great leaders shaped the intellectual, moral and political fabric of our movement.

Those leaders were all born within a few years of each other, from approximately 1919 to 1926:

- Professor Eugene B. Borowitz (1924-2016). The foremost liberal Jewish thinker of this past generation.
- Rabbi Balfour Brickner (1926-2005). Former senior rabbi at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York City. Former staff member for the Reform movement. A liberal Jewish icon who fought for a woman's right to choose and for greater interreligious understanding.
- Annette Daum (1925-1988). A community educator and interreligious activist.
- Jane Evans (1907-2004). She was a decade older, but a powerhouse who directed the work of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, now Women of Reform Judaism.
- Rabbi Eugene Lipman (1919-1994). Former senior rabbi at Temple Sinai in Washington, D.C. A lion of social justice and spokesman for a Judaism of depth.
- Rabbi Alexander Schindler (1925-2000). Former president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and perhaps the leading figure of non-Orthodox Judaism in the last quarter of the 20th century.
- Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf (1924-2008). Former rabbi at KAM-Isaiah Israel in Chicago. Former Jewish chaplain at Yale University. One of the great Jewish preachers and essayists of our time and an iconoclast who put social justice and the love of God into the center of his work.
- Albert Vorspan (1924-2019). Former director of the Commission on Social Action for the Reform movement. Funny, passionate, charismatic — his words, which he thunderously delivered at gatherings of the Reform movement, could make you take to the streets. He was the mentor of thousands of Reform Jews, and one of the most beloved figures in the movement.

As you can see, that Greatest Generation of Reform leaders was a mixture of pulpit rabbis, movement professionals and intellectuals — sometimes in the same person.

These men and women provided a presence that filled my youth, my young adulthood and decades of my career. To sit at their feet was a gift and a blessing. It helped define who I was as a Jew, as a rabbi and as a human being.

They were all classic liberals, in the 1960s-1970s sense of the term. Anti-war, pro-choice, pro-civil rights, anti-nuke — you knew where they stood, and you were challenged by what they taught.

But to Richard Hirsch, born in Cleveland in 1926. He was the founding director of the Religious Action Center in Washington. He helped pass the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. He organized Jewish participation in the March on Washington (Aug. 28, 1963) and the Jewish response to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to Selma, Alabama. The Religious Action Center in Washington essentially became King's Washington office.

That was act one.

Act two happened in Israel. Hirsch and his family made aliyah in 1973. He successfully exported his passions to Israel, where he became the executive director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and the true architect of Reform Zionism.

But, beyond that: He personally made sure that the international headquarters of the Reform movement would be in Jerusalem. Because he knew, deeply and intuitively, that this was the source of every value that we hold precious.

That was Dick Hirsch's full-throated Zionism. In his essay "A Theology of Reform Zionism," in Gil Troy's book, "The Zionist Ideas," he wrote:

... The State of Israel represents the return to the Land of Israel and the restoration of the Jewish people's sovereignty. ... The eternal covenant between God and the people of Israel is inseparable from the Land of Israel.

In the Diaspora, Jewish life is voluntary. A person is free to decide on Jewish identity and the extent of participation in, and support of, the Jewish community. In Israel, Jewish identity is compulsory. By virtue of living in a Jewish state, the individual Jew is obligated to identify as a Jew ...

In the Diaspora, Jewish activity is confined to what is defined as the private sector: the home, the synagogue, the Jewish community. Judaism is a private experience observed in life-cycle events, the Sabbath and holidays. ... In Israel, everything is Jewish: from economy to culture, politics, the army, and the character of society. In the Diaspora, Jews tend to distinguish between universal and particular concerns. In Israel, every issue is both universal and particular. It is impossible to separate between humanness and Jewishness. ...

Too many would create an artificial and harmful dichotomy between the concern for the universal, and the concern for the particular; between the concern for the world, and the concern for the Jew; between the concern for social justice, and the love of Zion.

For Hirsch, there were no such dichotomies. He lived in the often bewildering crosswalk of "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" and "If I am only for myself, what am I?" He never dreamed that he would have to choose, one over the other.

Consider how Natan Sharansky described Hirsch:

At a time when there are voices calling for the disengagement of the Jewish people from Israel, here is a leader who understood very early on that there is no future for the Reform Movement and for the Jewish people without a strong

Israel. At a time when so many think that human rights and Zionism pull in the opposite direction, here is a leader who proves by his own life that the struggle for Zionism and the struggle for human rights are one and the same.

No surprise, then, that the president of Israel, Isaac Herzog, eulogized Hirsch:

Rabbi Hirsch was a genuine Jewish pioneer. He charted his own remarkable course based not on popularity or prestige, but on his unclouded intuition, his broad understanding of shifting realities and his deep connection to the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

On a personal note, I will miss him: Our many visits together in Israel, when he insisted on making time in his frenetic schedule to spend time with me, sharing his passions, hearing about my life and dreams; our few visits at his final home in Boca Raton, where he was diminished and yet powerfully whole in spirit; his speeches and writings that always pushed me and challenged me.

I shall miss him. We shall all miss him. How powerful that his son Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch has inherited his voice, and has made it his own.

I am imagining that room in the World to Come: Borowitz, Lipman, Annette Daum, Dick Hirsch, Vorspan — all of them.

I hope that God can handle it.