

Rabbi Richard Hirsch (z'l)

The death of Dick Hirsch marks the end of an era. During the 1960's, there was much speculation over who would succeed Maurice Eisendrath (z'l) as president of the UAHC. Five members of the senior staff were in the mix: Alex Schindler (z'l), Jay Kaufman (z'l), Balfour Brickner (z'l), Al Vorspan (z'l) and Dick Hirsch.

Each of the five went on to have distinguished careers. Alex led the UAHC/URJ for 23 years, creating avenues for addressing challenges posed by America's pluralistic society. Jay became president of B'nai B'rith International and died much too young. Balfour continued to lead the URJ's interfaith activities before leaving to become a successful congregational rabbi. Al continued to be our movement's conscience before dying this past year at age 95. With Dick's passing, all are now gone

Reform Judaism today stands on the shoulders of these great leaders. But Dick's role was unique in that he was a primary builder of Reform Judaism in both Israel and the United States. In the early 1960's he was an integral member of the team that created the Religious Action Center in Washington and became its first executive director. The RAC concretized our movement's commitment to social activism, giving it a physical presence in the nation's capital with direct access to those holding the levers of power. And he did so as a *religious* leader representing the *Religious* Action Center. When he appeared before a House or Senate committee testifying for or against a piece of proposed legislation, he saw himself as following in the footsteps of the biblical prophets speaking truth to power. He never forgot that with all the *isms* vying for primacy in Washington, the *ism* he represented was *Judaism*.

In 1973, Dick left Washington to make *aliyah*, becoming president of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and moving its headquarters to Jerusalem. The move brought our movement closer to Israel and enhanced its status in the international Jewish community, expanding our identity from being a North American phenomenon to being a worldwide Jewish movement.

By happenstance, the timing of the move proved to be consequential. Dick arrived in Jerusalem weeks before the Orthodox launched their first concerted effort to exclude non-Orthodox converts from the Law of Return. In an era before the internet, e-mail, texting and Zoom, he somehow managed to mobilize Reform Jews and our supporters throughout the world to voice their objection. The Orthodox initiative failed.

Dick also brought with him a commitment to build a strong Reform Judaism in the Jewish State. Even a partial list of his extraordinary achievements in Israel is beyond the scope of this brief recollection.

Through it all, Dick remained a *mensch* in every sense of the word. Even those who hate Reform Judaism and vilify it in slanderous terms respected Dick for his integrity and unfailing decency. Some even dared to call him a friend. When he was awarded the honor of participating in the annual Yom Ha-atzmaut celebration in Jerusalem, there was controversy over his being listed as "Rabbi". But there was little opposition to Richard Asher Hirsch's participation.

Dick and his beloved Bella raised four outstanding children. One of them, our colleague Ammiel Hirsch, jokingly describes himself as the "black sheep" of the family because he chose to become a rabbi. The other three are physicians (one of them, Ora, is now a college president.) Our sympathy goes out to them.

The word "unique" is often abused by being applied in an overly generous manner. But not so when applied to the life and career of Dick Hirsch. The Jewish world today has two population centers, Israel and America. No other Reform Jewish leader contributed as much to both of them as did Dick Hirsch. Thanks to

the brilliant work of his successors, David Saperstein and Jonah Pesner, the RAC today stands as our North American movement's most visible and strongest component. And *Yahudut Mitkademot*, Israeli Reform Judaism, proceeds with its slow but steady growth, with its commitment to social activism exemplified by the Israel Religious Action Center (patterned on the RAC), and by the presence of its former executive director, Gilard Kariv, as a member of the Knesset following his historic election as a representative of the Labor Party.

The title of Dick's first book, "From the Hill to the Mount", is a concise statement of his unique legacy to the Jewish people. He ascended and established himself as a leader on both. It's unlikely that we'll see his kind anytime soon, or ever again.

ה' זכרו ברוך

May his memory be for a blessing

Rabbi Ira Youdovin