

## IN TRIBUTE TO RABBI RICHARD G. HIRSCH

Rabbi Dick Hirsch was a great man. Greatness as in G'dolei Hador, a category of human beings reserved for the very few in each generation who actually impact and change the course of history by their actions. Great people have not always been recognized as such in their own generation – Dick Hirsch was. He carved out his greatness one powerful stroke at a time so that over the course of his almost 95 years the monuments of his greatness were there in plain sight for all to see.

I knew Dick for over 35 years, nearly 14 of them as a colleague at the World Union for Progressive Judaism. He was an “institution builder” (a phrase which he liked to use to describe the elite). If you weren't an institution builder, in Dick's eyes you simply didn't have the total package.

Dick had the total package. He never stopped working yet he never took his eyes off of HIS Bella z”l and HIS children. His love and respect for Bella was total, he was all in after his first hello at summer camp. He knew she was right even when he thought differently and did what he thought he needed to do. His love for and awe of his children was as close to idolatry as any good Jew would dare go.

He mellowed quite a bit over the decades I knew him but he never stopped working, never stopped being aggravated over things he didn't agree with. He never stopped believing that he was right and so he needed to persuade, cajole, convince others to listen to him, to follow him. And we did.

Dick's lasting, historic contribution to the Jewish People in general and to Reform Judaism in particular was his fierce Zionist commitment. As an institution builder and as a Zionist, he understood two things: he needed to live in Israel and he needed an institutional base from which to impact Israel and the Reform movement he so valued and believed in. That merger took place in 1972 when Dick and the Hirsch family moved to Israel and Dick became the head of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Over the next 4 decades Dick Hirsch, more than any other single individual, laid the foundations of Progressive Judaism in Israel and brought the North American Reform movement into active involvement with Israel and Zionist institutions in the country. Dick's ability to build institutions and impact the course of Reform Jewish history and Israel was ultimately based on the simple fact that he did what he believed was necessary to do. He inherited an institution (World Union for Progressive Judaism) which was, at the time (1972), a minor, ineffectual organization with a noble history but without active leadership, financial resources or a vision for the future. Dick moved the organization to Israel because he believed that was necessary to do and because he fought harder against the push-back it faced from Reform leaders in North America.

Dick raised money for the World Union's projects in Israel and later in the Former Soviet Union because he knew that unless he was able himself to bring the financial resources his vision required, he would always be dependent upon others and ultimately would fall short of all he wanted to accomplish. Great people are great because what they believe in and want to do, they actually accomplish. Dick measured success by what he accomplished – and to accomplish what he wanted, he needed a vision, an institution and funding. As Executive Director of the World Union, all three came together.

This is not to say that Dick accomplished all that he did alone. Far from it. He knew that he needed not only money from donors but their passionate support and advocacy. He knew that institution building required relationship building as well. And with Bella at his side, always at his side, Dick established life-long friendships with some of the most influential, talented and in many cases wealthy North American leaders in the Reform movement. Dick didn't fake these friendships – he sincerely and honestly respected and cared for his volunteer leadership partners who believed in him and in his vision. Without these men and women, Dick would not have been able to succeed. Without Dick, these men and women would not have found the way to become a partner with greatness – to help shape Reform Judaism and Israel the way Dick and they wanted.

Dick also needed colleagues, men and women who worked with him to accomplish a shared vision. Like donors who became Dick's friends and supported him by contributing their wealth, many of his colleagues also became life-long friends and joined together with Dick by contributing their professionalism, their talents and their commitment to a

mutually important agenda. Unlike many executives who hesitated to hire accomplished colleagues for fear of being shown up – Dick sought out talent and took personal nachas from their accomplishments. I also believe Dick never worried about being shown up because, frankly, he didn't think that could ever happen!! He didn't want Yes-People around him. He enjoyed a good argument over strategy and objectives – he never squelched debate or disagreement. But in the end, if it was important to Dick, he did what he decided to do.

Over his many years of active leadership in the Reform movement, not everyone connected with Dick in a personal way. His focus on getting the job done meant playing hard ball when necessary. He made unpopular decisions which angered others. He was prepared to anger others if getting what he wanted required it. I never saw Dick shy away from a fight – a fight which if Dick won, would get him that much closer to his objective. As immodest as Dick was with regards to getting his way, he championed old-fashioned modesty and values when it came to matters of personal conduct. He lived in the same apartment in Israel for decades and never thought it needed renovation, he drove the same car for decades, he wore the same “Ben Gurion” modest slacks and white shirt outfit every day to work. He would blush if he heard a dirty joke and the most racy foul language I ever heard him use was invoking God's name with a simple requested action.

There never was, nor will there ever be, another Dick Hirsch. I will miss him tremendously, though I know he is always going to be a part of me. I will miss his questions about my family -my children and grandchildren who he always asked about in every conversation. I will miss his agitated conversation about what the World Union needs to do now and why what it is doing is not really what it should be doing. I will miss his amazing memory for conversations he had 50 and 60 years ago. I will miss his stories about the other Reform giants of the past who he outlived and thus with whom he always had the final word. I will miss his commitment to Israel and to Reform Zionism – there simply is no one around to take his place. And I will miss his laugh – a laugh communicating the humanity of this great man whose legacy will endure for all time.

Rabbi Joel Oseran  
September 16, 2021