

## **Anu Banu Artza...**

“We have come to the Land in order to build, and to be built up”

For Rabbi Richard Hirsch, whose death we now mourn, these words were more than an empty slogan. He lived them. He came to the Land, built it, and was built up by it.

Rabbi Hirsch – known to his countless friends and colleagues around the world as Dick – lived out the foundational drama of the return of the Jewish people. In the words of the psalm, he was as a dreamer – an alert and practical dreamer. In parallel to the great drama of the Zionist movement, Rabbi Hirsch worked tirelessly for the fulfillment of a specific denominational vision – the creation of a flourishing and creative Progressive Jewish voice in Israel.

Dick Hirsch built a home, both as a passionate Zionist and as a founding father of Israeli Reform. In both cases, he acted in the spirit of a line from one of Abraham Shlonsky’s poems:

The walls of my house do not serve as a barrier between me and the world

Rabbi Hirsch was a great believer in the institutions of the State and the Zionist movement, but his commitments were not a barrier separating him from the wider world. His commitment to the growth of Progressive Judaism was global in scope. As the founding director of the RAC in Washington DC, he demonstrated time and again his belief in the dignity and rights of all persons. In his work for Reform Judaism, he always showed a sensibility that went beyond denominational barriers. The house he built had distinct foundations but not walls of separation.

Dick Hirsch built a new home. He built institutions. He built vision. He built relationships based on will, hope and love. He belongs to the generation of builders of the Reform Movement in Israel. Some five years ago I eulogized Rabbi Robert Samuels and described him as Bob The Builder. Now we bid farewell to Dick The Architect.

Many of the newer generation of Israeli rabbis did not have the opportunity to get to know Rabbi Hirsch. For those of my generation and many others, he was an almost perennial presence and a guiding force. Never shy to disagree, he offered loving advice and unwavering interest and affection. Whether or not we knew him personally, any of us who see ourselves as working for an open and humane Israeli Judaism, a Judaism of deep roots and high hopes – we are all operating within the house that Dick (along with partners and contemporaries) built.

In this week’s portion (Deuteronomy 22.8) we are taught:

When you build a new house you should build a railing for your roof

A number of Hasidic readings link the motif of a new house to this period in the Jewish calendar, Thus for example in *Degel Machane Ephraim*:

‘When you build a house’ refers to the period of the New Year, a time for awakening, when the world will be rebuilt like a new house...

In these days we are called upon to participate in the construction of a new house – even as the world seems covered in smoke and ash, bleeding and out of control, ailing and anxious. There is internal spiritual work to be done, and physical, practical work as well. There is a house to be built.

Rabbi Hirsch remained closely involved with the work of Reform in Israel even when physical distance and medical challenges kept him far away. He saw in the leadership of Reform Judaism in Israel (and around the world) the fulfilment of his vision. Each career path contributes to a greater construction. To build a new house is to enter the House of Parliament (and this is a good opportunity to wish a speedy recovery from COVID-19 to our colleague MK Gilad Kariv); to build a new house is to become appointed as the Executive Director of the Association for Civil Rights in Israel (and congratulations are in order to our colleague Noa Sattath). New houses, new centers of Reform Judaism in Israel, are being formed from our kibbutzim in the desert to the Northern border, as well as in a variety of educational and other initiatives. In all these, Reform Judaism builds and is built.

“When you build a new house you should build a railing for your roof” – the Hebrew word *ma’akeh*, translated here as railing, appears only once in the Hebrew Bible, and many interpretations have been offered to explain it. One, provided in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Mordecai Hacoen of Safed, suggests that the word spells *ma’akeh* spells out the initials of *mitkayem al kiddush hashem* - which means something like “existing on the basis of the sanctification of God’s name.” When you build a new house, he is suggesting, remember what you are building it for. The edifice must have purpose at its cornerstone. The buildings we build must be surrounded by railings, ringed by commitment, blessing, hope and meaning.

Let’s hope that in this season of reflection we will be able to build and to be built both on the spiritual and the physical planes. Let’s hope that our building and our building up will serve as a testament to the memory of Rabbi Hirsch – a passionate Jew, a loving person, a visionary architect. May the homes we build be ringed by *kiddush hashem*, sanctification of that which is greater than any of us.

Let’s build a new house.

Rabbi Michael Marmur, PhD

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