

'One of the great leaders'



THE entire Progressive world has been in mourning for Rabbi Richard (Asher) Hirsch, a founder of Reform Judaism in Israel who dedicated his life to our global movements and causes.

From 1962 to 1973 he founded and ran the Religious Action Center - the legal and public arm of the American Reform Movement (URJ) - and fought for the Civil Rights Act of the United States in 1964.

In 1972 he became President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ), moving to Israel the following year and establishing the WUPJ headquarters in Jerusalem.

That Zionist act, of transferring the main office of the World Union from New York to Jerusalem, was perceived as one of the most significant decisions of Reform Judaism in the 20th century.

At the same time, he greatly expanded the number of countries in which there was a Progressive Jewish presence - a number that now totals more than 50 nations - and played a particularly effective role in building Progressive Judaism in the former Soviet Union.

Even after stepping down as WUPJ President in 1999, he continued to be a spokesman, teacher and mentor for Progressive Judaism and Progressive Jews - becoming Honorary Life President of the WUPJ and regularly addressing the World Union's events and conferences, including this year's Connections.

Speaking about his incredible contribution, Israeli Knesset member Rabbi Gilad Kariv said: "Rabbi Asher Hirsch has been one of the great leaders of all generations - a man of vision and fulfilment, learning and practice, who has had an impact on the arenas of Jewish and Zionist life for the past 50 years.

"He was one of the founders of Zionist Reform Judaism. His commitment to liberal and egalitarian Judaism comes with a deep concern for Klal Israel and a deep respect for every Jew and Jewish community - even in a reality of controversy. In Israel, we look back upon the scope of Rabbi Asher's work and leadership and his deep commitment that continued tirelessly until his last breath.

"We have lost a teacher, a leader, a rabbi and, above all, a friend."