

Hesped for Rabbi Dow Marmur z”l

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Rabbi Yael Splansky

Moreinu HaRav, Dov ben Mordechai v'Tziporah, died on the day our calendar calls us to remember how the Tablets of the Law were shattered at Sinai, how the *Tamid* sacrifice was no longer offered up in Jerusalem's First Temple, and how the protective walls of the Second Temple were breached. The day Dow Marmur breathed his last, was a day of collective loss and vulnerability. Without his insightful teaching of The Law, we are diminished. Without his steadfast service and sacrifice, we are diminished. Without his fierce and loving protection, we are diminished.

Twenty-four years ago, Dow invited me to come to Toronto to be his Assistant Rabbi. I went to learn from the best, from a *G'dol HaDor*. To learn how he took Reform Judaism and Reform Zionism seriously, how he took congregational life and Shabbat seriously, how he took God seriously.

At his retirement party in 2000, Rabbi Marmur said it was more important for him to be admired than loved. So I come today as a *shlichah* to deliver the boundless admiration, gratitude, and yes, the love, too, from thousands of congregants, students, colleagues and friends from abroad. A number of

representatives from Holy Blossom Temple's leadership are with us today and I know many more are joining through the livestream. I pray that Fredzia and the entire Marmur Family can feel the embrace of Dow's congregations in England and Canada. You shared him with us for so long, and now, we hope you will take comfort in knowing that the communities he built endure and the relationships he cultivated endure -- across the many miles and the many years.

The flood of emails point to his ongoing influence. One congregant writes: "Rabbi Marmur was the reason I returned to synagogue-life." Another writes: "Rabbi Marmur told us to move closer to The Temple, so our children could be part of the community, so we did!" Another says: "It's still his voice I hear when certain passages are read on the High Holy Days." Another explains: "It is no exaggeration to say that my entire life was changed at Rabbi Marmur's Shabbat Morning Torah Study table." And: "With his unique blend of tradition and modernity, Rabbi Marmur challenged us to do more and better." To these I will add my own expression of gratitude and love for my mentor, *Rabi uMori*: "Rabbi Marmur's encouragement has meant the world to me. In time, I came to believe I could carry Holy Blossom Temple into the next generation, because HE believed I could."

Dow could be tough, but we also witnessed again and again that he could be tender-hearted when someone – when anyone -- was in their hour of need. We

could count on him to be direct, honest, and fair, but also keenly intuitive and attentive. And although Dow was serious, he was also seriously funny. We laughed twice as hard at his witty commentaries on the human condition, because they came from him. We all have a lexicon of memorable “Marmurisms” to draw from for just the right circumstance.

It was thrilling to watch Dow strategically guide the congregation to do what was right. Just three examples among many... Under his leadership, Holy Blossom established Out of the Cold. Every Thursday evening, the hungry, the homeless, and the lonely were invited guests for a warm meal, warm hospitality, and a good night’s sleep. At the beginning, some congregants raised concerns; neighbours protested. But Rabbi Marmur and his partners held fast to the mitzvah, and decades later, the Out of the Cold program is a point of pride for the Holy Blossom community.

In the 1980’s and early 90’s, when the AIDS epidemic was raging and young Jewish men were dying, most people only spoke in whispers. But Rabbi Marmur and a mission-driven team of women at Holy Blossom got to work. They established support networks for people living and dying of AIDS and for their loved ones. They raised funds to cover medical bills and funeral costs. They created a third seder with its own Haggadah. Most importantly, they turned the

whispers of fear and shame into a full-throated call for dignity, humanity, and eventually, justice and pride.

This memory of Rabbi Marmur's inter-faith and intra-faith work comes from Rabbi Micky Boyden: In the late 1960's, Dow was the rabbi at Alyth Gardens in London and courageously invited a group of German Christian teenagers with their Lutheran minister to visit the congregation, to build bridges between Jewish and German young people born after the Holocaust. A Jewish chaplain who had accompanied the British forces in liberating Bergen-Belsen, wrote a letter to *The Jewish Chronicle*, publicly criticizing Rabbi Marmur's initiative. True to character, Dow invited the Orthodox Rabbi to address the audience. And to his credit, he came. I'll never forget the visiting Rabbi's first words: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to apologize."

Rabbi Marmur called for intellectual honesty in Reform Judaism and recognized the autonomy of the individual. At the same time, he insisted that the needs of the community must take precedence over the needs of the individual. He delivered this counter-cultural message consistently in sermons, in writings, and in one-on-one counseling. While the congregation was sometimes reluctant to receive this message, they accepted his stance and yes, they admired him for it. Dow often said with a smile, "They thought they were getting an English gentleman, but what they really got was a Polish Jew."

Slowly and steadily, Rabbi Marmur brought Holy Blossom Temple to its place on the traditional wing of the North American Reform Movement. Although he had no patience for inter-denominational politics or false piety, he was devoted to *Klal Yisrael* and to tradition, so long as it came with substance and mutual respect.

Dow's remarkable life unfolded against the backdrop of the most dramatic decades of Jewish history. His life's work was to pursue Jewish living "Beyond Survival." He insisted that continuity for continuity's sake was not enough. A masterful teacher, he spoke with the rare authority of knowing AND believing.

Now Rabbi Marmur couldn't sing very well, so he would SPEAK his prayers. When he wasn't on the bimah, he'd sit with the congregation each Shabbat. (This is rare practice for most retired rabbis.) He'd fold his arms, close his eyes, and lift his chin slightly, as if to see the words pass by before him. This is how my Rabbi sent his prayers Godward. From Poland to Siberia to Uzbekistan, from Sweden to England, from Canada to Israel – his prayers accompanied him through every life's trial and triumph. Dow's prayers and his books were his finest companions, second only to his beloved Fredzia.

When I visited Dow and Fredzia two short weeks ago, he was full of life, full of inquiry and good guidance, as always. Last week at his bedside in the hospital, I searched his writings and found the following excerpt from his book

entitled, Choose Life. I will conclude with his wisdom, so we can hear his voice, guiding us through our grief.

“Religion cannot prove the truth of the statement that God revives the dead, even though the liturgy says it. The belief must be taken on trust, albeit a trust based on reasonable arguments.

These derive from our experience of this life, which seems to point to purpose and meaning beyond itself. Most of us feel, even though we cannot prove it, that it would be absurd to assume that life ends with death. For the purpose and meaning of my life to make sense, I may have to assume that my life, in some unfathomable way, continues beyond the grave. Death, as ~~Eugene Borowitz has put it,~~ may mean living in another way, existing on another level than that which binds us to our bodies.

In the absence of hard evidence one way or the other, our belief becomes a matter of decision. Even though I cannot prove life after death, I hope for it, because the arguments against such hope, though serious, are neither convincing nor conclusive. While our metaphors may differ from those of earlier ages, our language testifies to an inescapable need to reach out to what is beyond our grasp.”

This is our prayer at this hour. May God, for Whom nothing is beyond reach, watch over and protect Dow Marmur's extraordinary *neshamah* for all time. *Zichrono livrachah*. And may his memory be for blessing. *Amen*.