

Obituaries

Rabbi Dow Marmur

Reform Rabbi who inspired an intellectual and ethical expression of Judaism

HEWAS one of the *G'dolim*, the greats of his generation. Since his generation was that of the Shoah, the defiant determination, scholarship and humanity of Rabbi Dow Marmur combine as an astonishing testimony to the rabbinic and human spirit.

Marmur, who has died aged 87, was born in Sosnowiec in 1935 and spent the first four years of his life with his parents Max and Zipporah — members of the socialist-Zionist party, Poale Zion — in the small town of Jaslo in Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now south-east Poland. When the Germans invaded in 1939, the family fled to Lwow (today Lviv in Ukraine) but were promptly transported by the Soviets to Siberia. After more than a year struggling to survive, they “escaped” to Uzbekistan where, from the age of seven, the young Dow helped feed the family by selling soap on the streets of Fergana. When the war ended the Marmurs were repatriated to Katowice. Only in 1948 did they finally manage to join his father’s sisters in Gothenburg, Sweden and nine years of living in constant fear came to an end.

In Sweden, Dow Marmur completed his schooling and went to work for the Israeli Legation. In 1954 he met Fredzia Zonabend, a survivor of Ravensbruck, marrying when he was 21 and Fredzia 20. They were inseparable, mutually supportive and interdependent for the next 66 years. Marmur continued to work as a diplomat for the Legation but was encouraged to study. Feeling that something was lacking at the University of Stockholm, he enrolled at Leo Baeck College, arriving only 12 months after its foundation in 1956.

His early years in England proved difficult. At a time when he needed stability the College was little more than a hope; its two initial students, Michael Leigh and Lionel Blue, were very different from Marmur, the Polish survivor, not least because English was their native language. But one of his teachers in particular made a lasting impression: theologian Ignaz Maybaum, a refugee rabbi from Germany who with his wife became the young couple’s role models.

Rabbi Marmur’s first pulpit was South-West Essex Reform Synagogue in Ilford where he succeeded its first rabbi Dr Alan Miller. Marmur partnered the young synagogue chair, Bernard Davis (later to become chair of RSGB and today the Reform Movement’s oldest living former chair) in developing a community with clear contemporary Jewish values. He inspired many women and men in search of an intellectually and ethically sustaining expression of Judaism with spiritual and societal values consonant with the needs of the modern world. Whilst there, he inspired a remarkable number of future rabbis, amongst whom are Hillel Avidan, Tony Bayfield,

Henry Goldstein, Maurice Michaels, Michael Standfield, and Jackie Tabick.

Marmur was assiduous in his pastoral work which he coupled with uncompromisingly intellectual sermons, intensive study groups and considerable writing. At an early stage in his career, he took on the editorship of RSGB’s journal, *Living Judaism* and edited two books of essays on the subject of Reform Judaism.

In 1969 Marmur joined Jews’ College-trained Rev Philip Cohen at the North Western Reform Synagogue, Alyth Gardens — succeeding him as rabbi three years later. Rabbi Marmur transformed the community into a powerhouse of British Reform, his influence extending far beyond the walls of Alyth. He was the first British Reform rabbi to embrace Jewish day schooling and dispatched two prominent leaders of Alyth, Peter Levy and Neil Benson to find a site for what would become Akiva School.

The two succeeded far beyond Marmur’s expectations and the Manor House site in East End Road, Finchley would eventually become the Sternberg Centre for Judaism — housing not only Akiva School but RSGB, Leo Baeck College and a synagogue, now New North London. In

1982 Marmur published *Beyond Survival: Reflections on the Future of Judaism*. This pioneering work argued that Jewish survival as a distinctive people is not enough; it must be survival that gives intellectual and theological underpinning to post-Shoah Jews, Judaism and the Jewish God.

In a mighty blow for British Reform, the Marmurs — Dow, Fredzia and their three children Viveca, Michael and Elizabeth — left Britain in 1983 for the more expansive, less embattled Jewish world of North America. Rabbi Marmur had been headhunted for the position of Senior Rabbi at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, and anticipated the respect and willingness to be rabbinically led, as articulated by the leadership. But his initial hopes were soon blunted by jealousies and resistance to change. Eventually, Marmur prevailed and went on to inspire the same love, admiration and respect amongst his Canadian congregants

that had marked his time in the UK. This revealed once again an insistence on an intellectually and spiritually satisfying adult Judaism which was influenced by Franz Rosenzweig’s Lehrhaus adult Jewish learning model at Leo Baeck College.

Attendance at his Shabbat morning Torah study sessions was renowned. His telling aphorism was, “our grandparents practised Judaism for the sake of their parents; our parents for the sake of their children; now let’s practise Judaism for ourselves”. This was particularly challenging because of the philosophy which underpinned it. The community was wedded to North American Reform emphasis on the freedom of the individual to choose their own expression of Judaism. Marmur responded by insisting that the needs of community took precedence over personal autonomy.

Just as at South-West Essex and Alyth, so Marmur’s Reform Judaism emphasised *g’milut hasadim* (deeds of loving kindness) as well as Torah study. Long before they became widespread, Marmur pioneered what were often seen as counter-cultural projects — every Thursday evening inviting into Holy Blossom the poor and needy for, as a con-

gregant put it, “a warm meal, warm hospitality and a good night’s sleep.”

Even more challenging was the response he led to AIDS. Marmur and a mission-driven team at Holy Blossom established support networks for people living with and dying of AIDS, funded medical bills and funeral costs and created a third seder with their own Haggadah. “They turned the whispers of fear and shame into a full-throated call for dignity, humanity and — eventually — justice and pride.” Rabbi Marmur also continued the interfaith reconciliation work he had begun, also controversially, at SWERS.

Marmur became a highly respected figure throughout Toronto, teaching at university and contributing to public debate through the press. It was there he published *The Star of Return*, the most important Reform contribution to a theology of Israel yet written. His parents had been Zionist activists; he had worked as a diplomat with the Israeli Legation in Stockholm; when the Marmurs retired from Holy Blossom they finally “returned home” to Jerusalem — though for some time spending half the year in Toronto and half in Jerusalem.

He retired after a brief spell as President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism but continued to enrich the lives of his many friends and admirers worldwide, with regular bulletins tracing the hopes and frustrations of life in Israel, attempting to reconcile Israel’s desire to be a people and nation like any other with the prophetic ideals of justice and compassion for all people.

Dow Marmur’s autobiography *Six Lives* traces his journey through Poland, Uzbekistan, Sweden, Britain, Canada and Israel, encapsulating the narrative of 20th century Jewry. It’s also the memoir of a survivor who expressed the hope of offending no-one but told the truth as he experienced it, assessing people whom he encountered from childhood onwards with a very un-British frankness.

He leaves Fredzia, his wife of 66 years, who recently suffered a severe stroke, and three children: Viveca, a retired palliative care nurse, Michael, a rabbi and scholar, Elizabeth, a former actress, three Israeli grandchildren and two grandchildren who are graduates of their grandfather’s Akiva School.

Marmur challenged British Reform to be uncompromising in its intellectuality and seriousness of theology. A man of deep kindness, unflagging in his pastoral work, he nevertheless had no truck with those who would trivialise Judaism or set the bar of Jewish life too low. Rabbi Dow Marmur was a truly great man. He was my rabbinic father and his death leaves me utterly bereft.

RABBI PROFESSOR TONY BAYFIELD, CBE,
FORMERLY HEAD, MOVEMENT FOR REFORM JUDAISM

*Rabbi Dow Marmur: born
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Rabbi Dow Marmur: challenged the British Reform movement to be intellectually and theologically uncompromising, and put community above personal autonomy

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