

RABBI MORDECAI WAXMAN - AN APPRECIATION

Arthur H. Rosenbloom

I think of him frequently, but especially so on the High Holidays. Mordecai Waxman, Rabbi of Temple Israel of Great Neck, entered my gangly socially underdeveloped 15 year old life in 1949. Newly arrived to Great Neck, I was drawn by his magisterial pulpit presence and his rapier wit. But I also recall with great fondness, his avuncular arm draped around my shoulder as we walked on Shabbat from the synagogue to his home, during which he asked me what I planned to study in college and whether I'd consider a career in the rabbinate. Shabbat lunch was filled with heated discussions of politics and culture. Ruth Waxman, a professor of English at a nearby university never played the subordinate rebbatzin role that was typical in those days. Ruth gave as good as she got in the cut and thrust of the arguments of the day and offered a collateral benefit — the best home baked cookies in town.

A few years passed and I found myself on an undergraduate committee charged with responsibility for finding a rabbi to speak at the University's annual Religion In Life Week program. Rabbi Waxman (in the more than fifty years I knew him it was never Mordecai or, perish the thought, Mordy), accepted my invitation. Clad in a Harris tweed gray sports coat, leather patches at the sleeves, he fit naturally into the informality of the dorm room disussions. The next day in the living room of the Kappa Sigma fraternity house (a place that few Jews ever entered) he was part of a panel of clerics. The speaker preceding him, a bible thumping Protestant preacher, concluded his remarks by turning to him saying "I'm sorry Brother Waxman, but there's no place in the hereafter for those who haven't accepted Jesus." Every inch the feared University of Chicago debater he'd been, Rabbi Waxman rose and said "Reverend, I thank you for that enlightenment because it demonstrates precisely the difference in our religious outlooks — in the Jewish religion our rabbis tell us that there is a place in the Kingdom of Heaven for the righteous of all nations." His next comments were interrupted by a standing ovation.

Mordecai Waxman's pulpit remarks demonstrated his love for word play, some of it bilingual. Inveighing against parental permissiveness, he spoke scathingly of adolescents with "whims of iron." Explaining the addition of a beard he'd acquired on a European vacation and with a twinkle in his eye, he observed that the rabbi had returned from abroad "*mit a bord*". An unabashed Anglophile, he claimed he'd heard an old Jewish Brit render the ad "Have a peg of John Begg" into "nem a schmeck fun John Beck."

There was great substance to the man as well. In a pre-Rachel Carson era, he cited Deuteronomy Chapter 28 verse 23 (part of the Tokheha), "The skies above your head shall be copper and the earth under you iron," as a warning against despoliation of the environment. He ran a tight ship, brooking no noise during synagogue services and would always pick a good time for his zingers like just before achilu-la-ayl (praying for the ability to pray) on Yom Kippur. But he also had a softer and more reflective side. "Much can be forgiven to genius" he said speaking of the dissolute life of Dylan Thomas. And while we argued over the presence in the world of a personal God (his faith was unbending), he always encouraged me to challenge, to question and to study the roots of our faith.

Rabbi Waxman was an important presence in my life and in the lives of the countless numbers who came to know him over the fifty five years he could be found at the synagogue. He brought to Temple Israel Will Herberg (Martin Buber's U.S. disciple) Abraham Joshua Heschel (for an anti Vietnam War speech) and Yigael Yadin, then Israel's top archeologist. He was a taste maker par excellence.

Mordecai Waxman presided over the milestone events of my life, the brit milot, b'nai mitzvot, weddings and funerals in my family. He married me twice, quipping on the second occasion, that we could that day thank God for many things, among them the opportunity for a second chance. Most importantly, he caused me to take Judaism seriously. Thus, while his public persona (as President of the Rabbinical Assembly, head of a rabbinic delegation to confer with the Pope and author of Tradition and Change, an explication of mid-20th century Conservative Judaism) was writ large, the private moments we shared over the long years of our association remain the most precious to me.

I last saw him a few years ago on an evening when he was honored by the Jewish Theological Seminary for his lifetime of service. Physically frail and hobbling on a walker, he spoke of his rabbinic years with passion and clarity and, if you closed your eyes, your mind's eye could picture him as he had been. At the conclusion of his remarks, I greeted him and, after exchanging pleasantries, he said what he'd always said to me at the conclusion of our conversations - "Don't be a stranger — come visit."

On the day of his funeral at Temple Israel, I made it a point to arrive especially early but I was already too late to find a seat, save in the rear of the balcony. A procession of family, friends and professional colleagues including Harold Kushner and other rabbis he'd mentored as juniors at Temple Israel, rose to recall their time with him. A JTS classmate remembered how one fall the newly minted Chicago BA had talked his way into the Dean's office at Harvard Law School requesting admission for that year, / even though he hadn't applied and the semester had already begun. He was accepted on the spot. I'm delighted that he thought better of his choice and followed in the distinguished rabbinic tradition of his family.

There are lives that touch one's own in ways that make a profound difference and so it was with Rabbi Waxman and me. Often, when I think of him, the words with which he used to introduce the Mourners' Kaddish return. Evidence of his life lives in me and "abides as a loving benediction."