

Remembering a Great Man – Rabbi Gunther Plaut On His Fifth Yahrzeit

For The Jewish Ledger March 2017

I am writing these words calling to mind the fifth yahrzeit of Rabbi Gunther Plaut. He passed away in the winter of 2012. As someone who served as his Assistant Rabbi in Toronto for the six months before his retirement and then had the opportunity to watch him in “retirement” for the next five years, I remain in awe of my teacher.

Rabbi Plaut was Rabbi Plaut. Although we live in an age of informality, I never called him by his first name, Gunther. Hardly anyone else did either.

Why?

Not because he insisted on the formal title, but because he was a man of such stature. He was a giant. A grand smile, boundless energy, and brilliance. He was Rabbi Plaut.

In Toronto, when the Free Soviet Jewry movement was galvanizing world Jewry, Rabbi Plaut was the person who spoke at major rallies. When the PLO was at its terrorist peak, Plaut was one of the most fearless and outspoken defenders of Israel anywhere. When he “retired,” he became Vice-Chair of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. In keeping with his convictions, Rabbi Plaut was also the public leader who brought Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to Toronto for his first Canadian appearance in the mid 60's.

The Rabbi's life was in some sense quite charmed. He led congregations in Chicago and St. Paul before arriving in Toronto. While living in Minnesota, he became friendly with two locals who were destined to become national figures (much like him). They were Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale.

In St. Paul and Toronto, the Rabbi also expressed his love for art. I remember, in particular, the art exhibits that were organized at our Toronto synagogue. They would take place on a regular basis under his auspices. They were a proud and beautiful part of the Plaut approach towards life.

But it didn't have to be this way. Life could have been totally different since Rabbi Plaut was actually born in Germany and grew up in the shadow of emerging Nazism. He only escaped and survived because he was offered a United States visa to study for the rabbinate in 1935. That visa brought him to freedom at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati where he was ordained in 1939.

And, through it all, Rabbi Plaut was a scholar. For three decades, he rose at the crack of dawn every day to work on what would become his greatest work. In 1981, he published the first modern Torah Commentary in English. Nothing like it existed anywhere in the world. For decades, the only access many English-speaking people had to Torah was a one-volume commentary created by Rabbi Joseph Hertz, Chief Rabbi of Britain. But that text was written 50 years earlier and assumed a world before Hitler and Israel. It also ignored the world of modern biblical learning.

Rabbi Plaut changed that. Suddenly, there was a book that drew upon archeology, linguistics, feminism, folklore, Shakespeare, the Koran, the New Testament and traditional Jewish commentary. Other commentaries have followed but Plaut's work was the first. He was the pioneer.

He was president of the Toronto Jewish Federation. He served as president of the Reform movement's rabbinic association, the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

He was at the center of great times for the Jewish people, but never forgot how to be a decent person.

For me, that meant he was a generous mentor. I can recall an occasion (less than a year after my ordination) when a major death took place in Toronto. One of our leading congregants was shot. It was a huge communal event, and Rabbi Plaut had known the family for years. The senior rabbi was out of town so technically I was the one to do the funeral. Rabbi Plaut could have easily suggested that he should take the lead. If he had done so, I'm sure I would have stepped back. But he never said a word. He encouraged me to be the rabbi of the congregation.

On another occasion, I was working late at the Temple. It was after 10 p.m. There was a knock on the office door. It was Rabbi Plaut. He had flown to Manhattan early that morning, attended various meetings, and now he was back at the Temple in Toronto. He didn't look the least bit tired. It had been a good day, he told me. He was

brimming with life.

After all, as the title of his autobiography read, there was always “unfinished business” to accomplish.

That's how I will remember him. Alive, charismatic, scholarly, and dedicated to justice. It was an honor to have known him. He enriched the whole Jewish world.

Mark Shapiro,
Rabbi Emeritus,
Sinai Temple, Springfield, MA