Tribute to Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple: Leader of Traditional Judaism in Australia

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by Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton, Chief Minister of The Great Synagogue, Sydney

Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple loved tefilla, Jewish liturgy. He enjoyed writing prayers, preparing guides to the service and planning special occasions. He arranged the memorial service for his predecessor, Rabbi Dr Israel Porush in 1991, and over thirty years later I selected Psalms for the service in his memory. As I did so I reflected on how appropriate they were:

> *The teaching of the Lord is his delight, and he studies that teaching day and night.*
>
> *He is like a tree…whose foliage never fades*
>
> *The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance*
>
> *"Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."*

Rabbi Apple was a constant student and teacher of Torah, from the bookshelves of Melbourne University Library religion section that he worked his way through as a student, to the pile of Jewish books that he read on the deck of the ship that carried him from Australia to his training at Jews' College in London in 1958, to the weekly instalments of Oz Torah that are still appearing on Facebook.

That passion did not fade in old age. Although he slowed down physically, he retained his intellectual vitality and continued to write on classic and contemporary issues to the end. I always knew that any email I sent him would receive a swift, precise, informative and helpful reply.

As he told his last Neilah service as Rabbi of The Great Synagogue in 2004, he was grateful to God 'for casting my lines in pleasant places'. He was happy at The Great Synagogue, for its ethos and traditions and for the wider role it encouraged. He worked hard, very hard in fact, for his thirty-two years there, as he had done during his thirteen years in the Bayswater and Hampstead Synagogues in London, and as he continued to do after retirement.

God saw his dedication to avodat hakodesh, his sacred work, and rewarded him with long life, with honour, and ultimately what was most important to him, children, grandchildren and great grandchildren following in the way of Torah and mitzvot.

Rabbi Apple was not destined for the rabbinate. His parents were synagogue goers Melbourne, but not Shomer Shabbat. Under the influence of mentors especially Dr Samuel Billigheimer and his own inclinations he adopted full halachic observance. As a university student in Arts and Law he started teaching others. He left for England in 1958 and it became clear over the next two years that he was set for a career in the pulpit.

The early Rabbi Apple, Rev Apple as he was in those days, was formed by a series of rabbinic models. Rabbi Jacob Danglow of St Kilda Synagogue remained an exemplar of a dignified minister who gave thoughtful sermons. In London, Chief Rabbi Brodie, Dr Isidore Epstein, Rabbi Kopul Kahana and others represented the different elements of the ideal rabbi, both more modern and more traditional, as teachers and as preachers. In his early positions he showed his energy and imagination. He started a range of initiatives for all ages at Bayswater between 1960 and 1965 and at Hampstead between 1965 and his appointment in Sydney in 1972.

It was during this period that Rabbi Jonathan Sacks came under his mentorship. Rabbi Apple officiated at Rabbi Sacks' wedding because, as Rabbi Sacks' wrote 'Elaine and I knew that he was a very special human being. More than anyone else he care for Jewish students. He spoke our language. He was accessible, understanding, generous and wise. We loved him then. We love him now'.

That reveals a side to Rabbi Apple which is different to the more formal and reserved image often associated with him, but which was always revealed to those he mentored throughout his time in Sydney, the youngsters he took under his wing, the people who saw him in informal moments. He certainly felt that he had left The Great warmer, friendlier and less starchy than he'd found it. Rabbi Porush believed the same about himself too, and both can be correct, if we compare what they inherited and what they bequeathed.

When Rabbi Apple arrived in Australia all the major rabbis of the community shared his style of dress, of speech, of attitude. The followed the ideal of the cultured western European rabbi. Some of the young rabbis present at the end of his career had rejected this model of Torah Im Derech Eretz, a combination of Jewish and wider culture and a religiously-motivated engagement with the world. Rabbi Apple was aware of this and wryly contrasted their disapproving attitude with their continued and continual requests for his help and advice, which he gave generously and which often solved their problems. He did share with the new generation a preference for the rabbi as scholar and teacher over the old Anglo-Jewish model of pastor and functionary.

In Sydney his courage showed itself. In his last Neilah sermon at Hampstead he had been booed for calling for the end to their mixed choir. The choir at The Great Synagogue became all male at his insistence a year after he arrived. At the same time, as someone who was guided both by halacha and an inclusive ethos, he greatly expanded the role of women within

the synagogue, most notably the Shabbat morning individual bat mitzvah, women on the Executive and through his support of the Sydney Women's Tefillah Group. He made other major changes at The Great Synagogue; he introduced the Priestly Blessing and Israeli pronunciation into services.

Is there a paradox here? Was Rabbi Apple a traditionalist or a progressive? In a sense he was both. He was a Jewish religious leader at a time of transformative change. Sydney and Sydney Jewry altered more between his arrival and his retirement than in any other period of a similar length. When it came to substance, Rabbi Apple did not fear change. As well as his innovations within the synagogue, he pioneered and championed aboriginal reconciliation, interfaith dialogue with Muslims as well as Christians and he publicly favoured a Republic in the 1990s. That is because although his external forms remained traditional, and he loved and upheld the dignities, decorum and historic practices of The Great Synagogue, inside he possessed a marked progressive streak.

As someone raised in the 1940s, trained in the 1950s and who found his rabbinic style in the 1960s and 1970s, by the early twenty first century, he was bound to reflect the world in which he was formed, even as he helped to create the new world that we have inherited. What insights into both worlds we have lost now he is gone.

Rabbi Apple kept himself amazingly busy. Within The Great Synagogue he was a totally involved rabbinic leader. In any document relating to the Synagogue and its running, his handwriting is literally all over it. There were streams of booklets, and of course all the namings, marriages, funerals, and services week in and week out. His congregational efforts were not confined to the Synagogue building, but included his home, in his family surroundings. He was steadfastly supported by loyal colleagues and responsible and hard-working Boards.

Outside the Synagogue he was involved in a blizzard of organisations, the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the Australian Jewish Historical Society, the Sydney Beth Din, military and police chaplaincy, the universities, Mandelbaum House, the Bord of Jewish Education, the State and national rabbinical associations, interfaith bodies, freemasons and more. In what spare time he had, he wrote. His copious writings on history and Torah will be a lasting legacy.

What did Rabbi Apple achieve? He found The Great Synagogue large and strong and he left it large and strong. He guided many individuals, from a member who needed help to heads of government and state. He made a huge contribution to very many organisations, but ultimately his contribution was less formal. He said in that Neilah sermon in 2004

> *I have tried to build not edifices but attitudes, not buildings but bridges, not institutions but ethics. If Australians and Australian Jews are a little saner and more tolerant because I happened to be here, then I am content.*

We can answer that his efforts were successful, through ceaseless restatement of the ideas he believed in most: truth, tolerance, respect, integrity, dignity, reason and faith, he made his impact. He should be content and Australian Jewry should be grateful.