

Rabbi Dr Yaacov Herzog: Rabbi and Diplomat

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The centenary of Chaim Herzog's birth also provides an opportune moment to remember his younger brother, the renowned Rabbi Dr Yaacov Herzog, who blended Jewish scholarship with a successful career in diplomacy and politics.

Born in Dublin in 1921, he studied Law at London University before following his parents in the late 1930s to Mandatory Palestine, after his father was appointed Chief Rabbi. He received rabbinic ordination from the distinguished Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer (d. 1953), published a commentary on sections of the Mishnah and was part of the Hagganah's intelligence service. Despite his extensive commitments, Yaacov Herzog remained a rabbinic scholar and lecturer.

Following the War, he assisted his father in his attempts to rescue orphaned Jewish children.

He became a valued advisor to David Ben-Gurion and subsequently to other prime ministers. He served as a diplomat in the United States and as ambassador to Canada, where he completed his PhD in International Law. His wife Pnina (d. 2005), a pharmacist by training, assisted Yaacov in his endeavours and represented the State of Israel at the World Health Organisation.

Perhaps the most outstanding of his many accomplishments took place at McGill University in Montreal in January 1961, the 'Herzog-Toynbee debate'. British historian Arnold Toynbee, lecturing at McGill, had scandalously described the Jewish people as a "fossil of history" and compared the State of Israel's actions to Nazi oppression.

Despite many naysayers, Herzog challenged Toynbee to an almost immediate debate and spent much of the next 48 hours in preparation, even though his expertise was not in history.

He resoundingly defeated Toynbee and forced the historian to retract his shameful comments. This gave great pride to Canadian Jews and many

others were inspired to try to emulate his achievements for the Jewish people. As his brother Chaim was to do at the United Nations 'Zionism is Racism' debate in 1975, Yaacov Herzog managed to represent the Jewish people as a whole.

Perhaps due to the passage of time, this debate has receded from public consciousness but, sadly, it remains vitally relevant for contemporary challenges which Israel and the Jewish people face. It has been preserved on YouTube and in Michael Bar-Zohar's highly informative work, *Yaacov Herzog: A Biography*, which includes a recording on CD.

In 1965, Herzog was selected to succeed Chief Rabbi Brodie in London. Reluctant to leave Israel, but aware of the significance of the position, he accepted. Tragically, he never took office since his health began to decline. He continued his work in government but passed away aged only 50 in 1972, widely and deeply mourned.

Sir Isaiah Berlin, in a tribute printed in the posthumously published *A People that Dwells Alone: Speeches and Writings of Yaacov Herzog*, described Yaacov Herzog as "one of the best and wisest, most attractive and morally most impressive human beings I have ever known" (p.15).

Shortly before Yaacov Herzog's passing, David Ben-Gurion, as cited by Bar-Zohar (p.351), wrote the following to him on 23 January 1972: "I pray to the God of Israel that they will be able to cure you and make you well again. You have a great past, and I believe you have a still more important future...There are not many men as important as you, and do not despair. Get well, Yaacov, the country and the Jewish people need you".

The Yaacov Herzog Centre for Jewish Studies at Kibbutz Ein Tsurim is dedicated to his memory.

