

# Ernest Levy of Glasgow

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

From 1968 until 1971, I was the rabbi of the largest community in Scotland, the [Giffnock and Newlands](#) Hebrew Congregation of Glasgow in Scotland. It was my first full-time job, fresh from Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem. For those who might not realize it, Scotland and England are two very different countries! I drove up the motorway from my mother's home in London, past Birmingham, Manchester, and Carlisle, and over the border at Gretna Green (where young couples once went to elope) in my small, secondhand white [MG Midget sports car](#), and into the magical world of Scotland with its lowlands and highlands and islands and seascapes and landscapes and dramatic shifts in scenery (and its rainy climate).

I was full of naïve idealism and raw enthusiasm. The community I found was overwhelmingly warm, hospitable, and welcoming. The synagogue was just about to move from a cramped wooden synagogue on May Terrace into a huge, modern complex at the Glen. My residence was a grand house on [Eastwoodmains Road](#) that was graced with a large and elegant piece of modern art on its front lawn, thanks to Mark Goldberg. And I set about shaking up, revolutionizing, and energizing my huge and expanding community. I was in heaven.

It's a pretty universal rule that synagogue business brings out the worst in people. Synagogue life everywhere and anywhere is a minefield of politics and vested interests. I was really fortunate to have successive presidents, Baruch Mendelson and Dr. David Granet, who were the exceptions to any negative rule about synagogue presidents! And I survived and thrived because I was also fortunate to find a guide, a chazzan in place, who was one of the nicest and wisest and kindest human beings I have ever encountered, Ernest Levy.

Ernest had grown up in post-war Hungary with all of its traumas, as well as his own. He had no thought of being a chazzan. But the failed 1956 revolution, gave him the opportunity to escape. With an elder brother already in the business, and with a sweet, light voice (and a trace of a lisp) he became chazzan in Giffnock, instead of a motorbike-riding engineer in Budapest. Ernest was a cynic with a black sense of humor. He had experienced enough of human nature to know what deceits and subterfuges humans were capable of and yet enough love remained so that he really did devote his life to people, because he really cared. He very rarely spoke about his painful past. Much later, long after I had left Glasgow, was he able to open up and do a lot to educate people about the Holocaust.

At the time Glasgow Jewry was torn apart by a bitter rivalry between Reverend Dr. Cosgrove of [Garnethill](#), the old cathedral synagogue of Glasgow up by the university, was in decline because of a population shift to the southern suburbs, and Rabbi Dr. Wolf Gottlieb, scholar, polymath, rabbi of Queens Park where my father presided thirty years earlier, and Av Bet Din. Cosgrove stood for compromise and pliability, Gottlieb for the law and authority. [Cosgrove](#)

[was a Jewish representative to the non-Jews](#). Gottlieb was the Lord Protector of Judaism for the Jews. They were both significant and, in their very different ways, great men. But they demeaned each other because their ideological differences descended into petty rivalry. They would jockey for position, priority, and seniority, even to the point that they once managed to accidentally push each other into an open grave one cold, sodden autumn in [Glenduffhill Cemetery](#). Ernest always warned me not take sides. He counseled independence at all costs.

He was a great mimic. He could predict the content and the style of old-school rabbis from the decaying, older parts of town and the itinerant preachers and collectors who were always welcomed into Giffnock to ply their trade, and given respect, but that did not mean one could not make fun of their views, their foibles, and their illusions. Many were rigid and fundamentalist, confident in their learning, but with no idea how ineffectual their words were to the average Glaswegian. Ernest could prick the largest bubble. It only took a wink, a seemingly naive question, to demolish any pretension.

He and I were the new team, the new world of open ideas and open minds, reaching out rather than expecting everyone else to come in. We worked together all the time, in synagogue and at the endless weddings, bar mitzvas, funerals and shivas at which we jointly officiated. We knew whom to encourage amongst the members and who needed to be put in their places. We had a similar vision of Jewish life—welcoming, light, and appealing, with humor and tolerance, rather than dark, forbidding and exclusive.

We did not always agree. He was a professional musician and I an amateur. I loved really good choral music, but I had no patience for synagogue choirs of second-rate voices. I wanted streamlined services, but he needed to spend time justifying his cantorial role. We compromised, though once or twice I overstepped the mark. There were other characters there I loved and worked well with. But Ernest was in a class of his own.

I left Glasgow reluctantly, only because [my father's legacy](#) called me away. Ernest stayed, beloved and respected till the end. One man, one job, one city, one community; whereas I always moved on. But wherever I went I never forgot the wonderful times I spent in a remarkable community and with friends I have kept in touch with to this day. Ernest travelled with me, in a way, wherever I went. And whenever we met, as we did on occasion, we would both reminisce and laugh at those glory days of our youth. [Ernest died last week](#). May his memory be a blessing.