

Doctor David Granet of Glasgow

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It is very hard for one generation to fully understand the zeitgeist and the unique circumstances of another. This is certainly true of Jewish life which has become increasingly polarized. Whether one approves or not, life in most Jewish communities today is very different than it was fifty years ago. I am reminded of the famous Greek Heraclitus, who argued that one could not step into the same river twice. The name of the river might be the same but the waters are constantly changing.

Dr. David Granet, who died recently, was a past president of Giffnock and Newlands Hebrew Congregation, in a suburb of Glasgow in Scotland. It was my first appointment in the rabbinate. He was typical of a particular generation of Jews who rose from hardworking immigrant families and retained a profound loyalty to Judaism, even if they did not have the benefit of a rigorous, Talmudic education. Their Judaism was very different than the one we see around us today, but they helped build Jewish communities and lead them.

Glasgow was essentially a community of immigrants from Lithuania who arrived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They settled around the Gorbals, the warren of dark-stoned, forbidding tenement buildings on the poor south bank of the River Clyde. There the younger generation flourished, shining in the schools, winning the prizes, and pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps. As they grew richer, they moved to the more elegant suburbs.

For the early generations life was tough. It was almost impossible to adhere to one's old religion and survive in the cutthroat world before Welfare State Britain. Only the brightest had any chance of getting a good education. Parents compromised to feed their families. Most of them managed to stay loyal to their roots while adapting to a new world. Those who succeeded there became some of the wealthiest and most successful Jews in the land.

David Granet's father was a tailor, a very good one, who soon built up an impressive clientele. In his old age he made me the finest suit I ever wore! David was bright, handsome, and charming. He excelled in school and at sports. He became a doctor and opened a practice in the Gorbals, where he was known for helping the poor. He became a Grand Master of a Jewish Lodge and a Justice of the Peace. He married the beautiful and highly cultured Adele, the daughter of the formidable Fanny Black, the Grande Dame of Glasgow Jewry, a combination of queen and tycoon who was a powerful force in the city. In those days being Jewish meant combining one's religious affiliation with public service.

When I arrived in 1968, fresh from yeshivah, David, who at that stage was the vice president, took me in hand and became my mentor. Giffnock was then the center of Jewish life in Glasgow. It had over 1,000 members and was in the throes of moving from cramped premises in May Terrace to a huge, spanking

modern complex at The Glen. But the community was saddled with debts and it was David who stepped up to deal with the restructuring and reorganizing.

The community was divided, as is usually the case. There was a small hard core of very Orthodox Jews led by the larger-than-life, lovable President Baruch Mendelson and his irascible, aggressive brother-in-law Phil Glickman. The Jesner family, four brothers, was the powerhouse of the religious community. A handful of other Orthodox families and professionals ensured that the synagogue had a fully Orthodox character and provided all the necessary services. Being the largest Jewish community nearest to Gateshead, Glasgow was constantly receiving rabbinic emissaries, and it supported yeshivahs and institutions regardless of whether their ideals or versions of Judaism matched.

The vast majority of the community was not Orthodox. They contributed to charities, turned up for weddings and bar mitzvahs, as well as the High Holy Days. But otherwise they worshipped at the Jewish Golf Club, Bonnyton, every Saturday, rather than in the synagogue.

It was my job as a young rabbi to meet the needs of both sides of the community, though I did believe that the less religious needed me far more than the pious ones. So I got a lot of flak for being too modern for the God Squad and too Orthodox for the rest. It was David who mediated, smoothed the way, and covered my back all the time. He encouraged me to go to places that other rabbis shied away from. He warned me against getting involved in communal or rabbinical politics and rivalries. At the same time, he supported my bringing Lubavitch to Glasgow to temper the Lithuanian coolness with some Chasidic warmth, and my recruiting other talented young professionals to bolster the educational institutions.

I admired his suave, gentle, elegant manner, as well as his strength and his wisdom. I fell in love with his family. He was the sort of Jew that is fast disappearing. He would turn up religiously at the synagogue on Saturday mornings but then go off to Murrayfield to watch his beloved rugby. He was a committed Jew who devoted himself to seeing that Jewish Glasgow thrived. He was a proud Scotsman who loved the distinctive culture that differentiated Scotland from England. He was a man who enjoyed life, who respected tradition, and above all was a good, caring human being. So what if there are inconsistencies? We are all inconsistent in our different ways.

There were other warm, hospitable, and good people like him in Glasgow. That's why I loved the community and spent some of the most rewarding and enjoyable years of my life there. Its Jewish population has shrunk over the years from 15,000 in my day to some 4,000 today, mainly through emigration. Its decline and the changing face of Jewry in general have made the Glasgow Jewry that I recall a mythical Shangri-La that looks like passing into oblivion, together with the giants that I recall with love and gratitude—mythical heroes of a prehistoric age. It was men like David Granet who kept Judaism alive, far more than many transient rabbis I have known. May his memory be a blessing.