

# Toby

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In my youth, school teachers were divided into two categories: non-Jewish, who were invariably competent and well trained, though often boring; and Jewish, who were mainly refugees or misfits who had found their way into education by accident or necessity. They were either terrible or inspirational (sometimes both). Amongst the latter was one man I am indebted to for giving me a love of history and teaching me how to read from the Torah and conduct services. To this day, I have very fond memories of Reverend Alexander Tobias, known to his students at Carmel College as Toby.

Alexander Tobias was born in Birmingham, England in 1916. He studied at Jews College and went on to get postgraduate degrees in history and Jewish studies and a doctorate from London University. He was a brilliant scholar with a photographic memory and a delight in art and music. He specialized in the Jewish calendar and was regarded as a world expert.

He started his career in the rabbinate as acting minister of Edgware Synagogue in London. From 1945 to 1951 he was the minister at Brixton. But he was not cut out for the life of a community minister; he had a nervous breakdown. In 1951 he found his way to Carmel College where he became a teacher of history, English and Jewish studies in the preparatory school for younger boys.

He suffered from seborrheic dermatitis. His head was covered with flaking skin and red blotches. His gown and jacket were flecked like snow. He had a nervous tic. All brought on by nerves and tension. Sadly, he had no classroom control, no authority. But he got on well with individuals. He was an eccentric, but a lovable one.

His nemesis was Mendel Bloch. He too, was a former minister of religion. An irascible, pompous man. He disliked Toby. Perhaps he envied him, because Toby was loved while Bloch was feared. We all knew about their rivalry. Toby would often collar us and say, "If you happen to see Mr. Bloch anywhere, do not give him my regards."

Toby had his favorites. He cared for vulnerable pupils, the waifs and strays. He had a private language, and he would greet his acolytes with strange words such as as malabush, malagesh, maladendo—and kaprush when he gave a favored pupil's cheek a healthy pinch. He lavished attention on those who wanted either his warmth or his knowledge. He had pupils round to his apartment on Shabbat and invited them to inspect his extensive library and his collection of Rembrandt prints. He used to point out that Rembrandt's great painting known as *The Night Watchmen* could not possibly be that because there were no lanterns in the painting. Nowadays it is agreed that it was a guild portrait.

He would hold forth on historical events with paradoxical truths. "Boys, no one woke up one morning and said, 'Goody, goody, the Renaissance has

arrived.'" Or, "Boys, the Dark Ages were not really dark." It was through these small idiosyncratic nuggets of knowledge that some of us came to be inspired. If someone's interest in history flourished, he would find old out-of-date editions of English history books in secondhand bookshops and give them to those he thought might appreciate them. I only wish I had kept mine for memory's sake. But I still have the Carmel College Song Book he compiled of what we sang around the Shabbat and festive tables, with his notes and an "official" version of the school song.

Of all my teachers of Jewish studies at school, apart from my father, Toby was about the only one I learned anything from. He made the Talmud come alive. He taught us how to read from the Torah. To navigate and make sense of the intricacies of the liturgy, its secrets and pitfalls. He insisted on accuracy of both text and tune. He had a few senior pupils of great ability whom he taught how to calculate the Hebrew calendar and become experts themselves.

He gave extra lessons to small groups outside the classroom. He also had a few senior pupils of great ability whom he taught how to calculate the Hebrew calendar and become experts themselves in the intricacies of cantillation and grammar.

He loved the atmosphere of Carmel, its beautiful grounds, his apartment in the Old Mill House above a trout stream that flowed down into the River Thames. He relished the Friday evening discussions that Jewish members of staff enjoyed in the headmaster's house. His expertise in so many fields, as well as his wit and humor, were respected and sought. It must have been a welcome respite from the lack of respect shown him by so many ignorant youngsters in the classroom. Toby admired and loved my father (not uncritically); after his death Toby no longer felt as valued or wanted at Carmel.

His loneliness (he never married, and we never heard of any relatives) contributed to his feeling that he had to move on. I heard it said that he was pushed. In fact, leaving the school was good for him. In 1963 he was offered a position in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. There he brought his encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish books and manuscripts to bear on its famous collection. In New York and an academic environment, his gifts were recognized and respected.

Yet he missed Carmel and his favorite pupils. Until his final year, he continued to correspond intensively with several of his Carmel boys—asking for the latest gossip, advising them on career choices, personal matters and making recommendations. Some visited him in New York and even brought their sons too meet him. He always complained that he didn't get enough correspondence or that pupils he had particularly lavished attention on did not always reciprocate. But his love and concern for his Carmel surrogate family continued until the end of his life. Eventually he retired from the JTS and was 80 years old when he died in 1996.

He was fond of Oliver Goldsmith's famous poem *The Village Schoolmaster*. I am sure he identified as a Jewish equivalent. So many teachers go unappreciated,

not just in Jewish schools. Some are just bad teachers. But many others toil away in their thankless positions and try their best to educate, if not inspire. I can think of quite a few I knew at Carmel and elsewhere who were not stars of the classroom, but still influenced a lot of young minds. It is to them, with gratitude, that I dedicate this blog post.