

Carmel College

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have a childhood memory of a meeting in our London home at this time of the year, at the end of the month of Sivan, 70 years ago. My father, Kopul Rosen, the Principal Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues in London, was preparing to open his brave experiment in Jewish education, Carmel College. He had established a charitable foundation that bought the estate of Greenham Common, outside Newbury. During the war it had been General Eisenhower's headquarters.

My father was the Principal Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues in London. But he was feeling frustrated by the politics and formality of the rabbinate. His first love was education. He wanted to create a residential school that offered a rigorous secular academic education, as well as a Jewish one. Athens and Jerusalem. Its graduates would go to Oxford and Cambridge and study in famous yeshivahs in Israel.

The residential boarding school was modeled on the great English public (private) high schools that dated back 500 years and were examples of a rigorous classical education. In the 19th century, Arnold of Rugby transformed these dull academic institutions into vibrant centers of robust Christian values. They combined study with sport and culture to prepare young Britons to go out to govern the Empire. The result was an elite meritocracy that continues to dominate British politics and the upper classes.

Inevitably such influential schools attracted upwardly mobile Jews. Particularly those, rapidly adapting and assimilating into British life despite the prevalence of antisemitism. Many of the most talented Jewish young men went to public schools, where the chances of their Judaism surviving in any tangible sense were remote. There were a few Jewish houses at several public schools that provided limited accommodation for Jewish practice. But in the opinion of my father, they created little ghettos within the wider community. His concern was that where a Jewish child felt set apart, inferior in some way, this would damage his sense of Jewish identity and leave him feeling that Judaism was secondary. A Jewish child needed the security of a supportive environment, whether at home or at school, for the confidence to go out into the world as a proud Jew. If homes could not, at least schools might.

Anglo-Jewry, indeed most of Western European and American Jewry in the 20th century, was dramatically collapsing. There were, it is true, isolated pockets of religious resistance. But in general, the urge to succeed, the attractions of assimilation, the sense of being under constant assault either ideologically or literally, had created a palpable sense of insecurity in Jewish life. A need to hide or disguise, rather than to stand proud. And the rise of the Marxist and socialist movements also undermined religious identity.

At that time there was hardly any full-time Jewish education altogether in Britain. There was the Jews' Free School and the Avigdor Schonfeld schools, with a few hundred at secondary level. No sign yet of the explosion of state-supported Jewish day schools in the UK that emerged under the Conservative Party in the late 70s and 80s.

Carmel College was designed to address this general issue of Jewish education being seen as regressive, narrow-minded, and a barrier to success in society. But as a boarding school it was also an attempt to compete with the public schools. To offer to young Jews a sense of being the majority. Where they could represent their school in sports and intellectual competitions and keep shabbat and festivals, if they wanted to. To be the core of the school and its society, rather than the periphery. To be proud Jews as well as proud citizens.

Kopul Rosen was a magnetic, charismatic personality. He had stature and good looks. He was a brilliant orator. He was completely at home in secular culture, music, sport, and art. While his Talmudic training in Mir, the great yeshivah of Lithuania, gave him the pride and confidence to stand tall, fearless of antisemitism on the one hand and religious zealotry on the other.

He was also a passionate Zionist. First in the Habonim youth movement and then in the religious Zionist movement. Zionism and Judaism were the twin ideological passions of his life. He had fought for Zionism in the public arena—as a highly impressive and effective witness, according to Bartley Crum, one of the American representatives at the hearings of the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry into Palestine in 1946. So that the school he created was one that saw Israel as essential for Jewish survival and growth.

Carmel College opened its doors in September 1948 with only 24 pupils. It grew and took over the nearby Thatcham House as a junior school. But when the US Air Force returned to Greenham Common, it had to move. In 1953 it bought an estate outside Wallingford on the banks of the Thames. It grew and attained academic and sporting success way beyond its numbers.

If the secular side flourished, the Jewish studies were not so successful for two reasons. Carmel ran according to Orthodoxy, but most pupils came from non-observant Jewish backgrounds. For them and their parents, the secular studies were more important to their future lives. The religious side was an optional extra. It mattered less than the social benefit of a Jewish community. In addition, finding good Jewish studies teachers with professional qualifications was very difficult.

The one thing that compensated was the presence of Kopul Rosen over Shabbat and festivals. His passion for singing and for teaching Torah suffused the atmosphere of the school and gave the students a taste of the Jewish experience over and above the information. It was this, together with support from a handful of other Orthodox teachers, that remained with the pupils more than anything Jewish they were taught at the school.

For most of the week Kopul Rosen was absent, raising money to keep Carmel afloat. It was a very expensive operation. A hundred acres of grounds

bordering the River Thames and buildings for accommodation, teaching, laboratories, and sports. It had an exceptional teacher-pupil ratio, and teachers were paid above the norms. There were maintenance, cleaning, grounds, laundry, and medical staffs. And of course, kosher catering was expensive.

Anglo-Jewry was always reluctant to support Carmel. Some argued it confined Jews to too narrow a world that would inhibit integration. On the other hand, Carmel had a much wider range of pupils of different backgrounds and from around the world than most other schools did. Its graduates went on to international universities and companies and had little trouble getting on with their peers, without needing to confine themselves to exclusively Jewish company.

Carmel was always fiercely independent. But this was a disadvantage in that it had no specific constituency to appeal to for support. It was not part of any denomination. Too Orthodox for the left wing of the community and too modern for the right. Communal causes and Israel appealed more to wealthy donors. And although Carmel charged high fees, a large proportion of its students were on scholarships or reduced fees.

Carmel always faced the challenge of whether to only accept academically outstanding pupils or to widen the net for the sake of educational plurality. In the end, it was a mix, academically and socially which most educators regarded as beneficial. Scholarship pupils tended to provide the academic cream. While the school always tried its best to raise the attainment level of those not so gifted. For all of its success, many Jewish parents still preferred more selective non-Jewish schools.

For the first 14 years of the school, Carmel struggled from paycheck to paycheck. It was not until Kopul Rosen's premature death in 1962 that sympathy money flowed in, and the school achieved, for a while, economic stability and built a modern campus. Despite the difficulties of the early years, the spirit of the school was astounding, exciting, and pioneering. Whatever limitations it had, this was what made those years so memorable.

You can get a flavor from a well-researched history of Carmel under Kopul Rosen entitled *Carmel College in the Kopul Era: A History of Carmel College September 1948-March 1962*, by former pupil Dr. Chaim Simons.

Most graduates of those years at Carmel left with similar levels of religious observance to what they came in with. Some became more committed, others less. For most, the comradeship was for a lifetime, as was a sense of Jewish identity in its widest sense. Carmel produced rabbis and secularists, academics and professionals, businessmen and sportsmen, and a sprinkling of felons too. A surprising proportion ended up in Israel. Most married into the faith. Some did not. One can argue about measures of success. Some of its pupils became much more committed. Most had a taste of Jewish life they would not otherwise have had and an added Jewish dimension.

After Kopul Rosen's death, Carmel continued, grew, changed, and brought in girls. Its numbers fluctuated, and it went through three headmasters before

closing in 1997.

Why did the school close? There were several factors, both external and internal. The world in which Carmel was founded was one in which boarding school education was considered an ideal. Over time that changed. Besides, Jewish families in general were reluctant to send children away from home. When Carmel started there were few Jewish day schools. But soon the main Jewish centers in Britain would be well served by good Jewish day schools subsidized by the state. Many of the pupils who came to Carmel came from abroad and from Jewish communities in upheaval. Over time such situations reduced. When Carmel started, Israel was still embryonic and uncertain. The dynamism of Jewish life and education that Israel became provided many more alternative institutions of Jewish education at every level.

As an exclusive institution, its costs became prohibitive. Academic results began to level off. Carmel always depended for support on a handful of unique governors and donors. Anglo-Jewry has shrunk to almost half its numbers of 70 years ago, and the community became more polarized. So the supply of pupils and supporters reduced. In the end Carmel's debts sank it. No one stepped up to the rescue.

In 1960 Kopul Rosen had already acquired a lease on land in Israel outside Zichron Yaakov to set up a version of Carmel there. It was going to be called Nahum College after Nahum Goldmann, the president of the World Jewish Congress who had lent his name to the project. So Kopul had already seen the way the wind was blowing in the Jewish world. But the vision of a Carmel in Israel ended with his death. I alone of his children live outside Israel.

The Jewish Diaspora was always transient. The great academies of Mesopotamia, of Egypt and Rome, of Spain, of Bari and Otranto have all gone. In their stead new academies have mushroomed, and no one can be pessimistic about Jewish survival now.

Carmel was built on land that once saw Jews before they were expelled in 1290. In the Diaspora, Jews come and go. Who knows where Anglo-Jewry is going now? The Talmud uses the expression, "Time plays with us," and sometimes we have to go with the flow. "It is the hour that maketh the man." Carmel was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I am not sad at Carmel's disappearance. However much one may regret its closure, it was a noble experiment. Even if the Jewish world has changed dramatically since, for better and for worse, Carmel remains an example of how it is possible to combine the best of both worlds, both academically and religiously. To be a citizen of the world and a committed Jew.