

# Kopul Rosen 1913-1962



by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen



On March 1st several hundred pupils of Kopul Rosen will gather at his graveside on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem to remember him on the 50th anniversary of his death. He was the most charismatic person I have ever encountered; a learned, fervently Orthodox, open-minded rabbi, intellectual, musician, sportsman, artist, wit, and orator. He was well over six feet tall, darkly handsome and engaging with a warm attractive smile, arresting dark eyes, and an imperial beard. On the other hand, he did not suffer fools gladly. His anger was fierce and his moods frightening. He dominated my life, and I desperately wanted his attention and love.

He was born in London in 1913 to a modest family of Eastern European immigrants from Radomsk. After his primary school education in Notting Hill, the family could not afford secondary education, and he went to study at Etz Chaim Yeshivah in the East End. His extracurricular activities included a passionate involvement in the Zionist movement, teaching Cheder, guest preaching (even then he was in great demand), and furthering his own broad intellectual, literary, and musical education.

He was encouraged to go to study at the great Lithuanian Yeshivah of Mir. Mir had a profound impact on him, both in learning and in the person of Rav Yerucham Levovitz, the greatest Mussar preacher of the generation, who inspired him to become a rabbi. Kopul returned just before the outbreak of the Second World War. He acquired another mentor, Rav Dessler, and was soon appointed the first rabbi of the Higher Crumpsall Congregation in Manchester in 1939.

He immediately became a sensation. He combined his strong Eastern European religious scholarship, with powerful spirituality, and a fluency and passion that had simply not been encountered previously in Anglo-Jewry. His rise was meteoric. Within two years in 1944 he was invited to become the Communal Rabbi of Glasgow.

In 1946 he was invited to become the Principal Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues in London. His impact on London Jewry too was powerful and immediate. When Chief Rabbi Hertz died, Kopul, although only 33 years old,

was regarded as the most exciting prospect to succeed him. But the conflicts of the Hertz era led the United Synagogue leadership to opt for a safe pair of hands instead of a charismatic mercurial individualist, so they appointed Israel Brodie instead.

By 1948, Kopul had grown disillusioned with the rabbinate in general and the Federation in particular. As the President of the Religious Zionist movement, Mizrahi, he was also feeling uncomfortable at the entry of religion into politics in the new State of Israel. He was increasingly alienated from communal affairs. He had always felt that education held the key to Jewish survival and Anglo Jewry was not noted as a community of scholars or its Jewish academic institutions.

His dream was to build the equivalent of the English public school combined with the intensity and learning of a traditional yeshivah. He founded Carmel College at first at Greenham Common outside Newbury and later at Mongewell Park. In 1949, he resigned his communal positions and moved with his family into the school.

From the start, he encountered opposition. The community at large at that time was convinced that a Jewish school amounted to segregation and would inhibit successful integration into English society. As for the small but growing ultra-Orthodox community, they thought that Kopul's wider cultural and intellectual aspirations were too unorthodox for them. The lack of funding was a constant strain on Kopul and his ever-supportive wife Bella (who once pawned her engagement ring to provide breakfast for the pupils). But slowly the school grew and gained a serious academic reputation. Its success during the late fifties slowly began to attract support. Carmel grew and became one of the premier schools of the Jewish world.

Kopul was perceived by many as an Achilles withdrawing from communal life to his tent in the countryside. He held the Jewish establishment in scant regard. His lessons and talks often betrayed his impatience with the ignorance and lack of religious conviction that characterized postwar Anglo-Jewry. He had no patience for the growing fundamentalism and narrow-mindedness to which he believed the Orthodox community had fallen prey. He enjoyed sharing his criticisms with his pupils, who he hoped would usher in a new era of enlightened Jewish stewardship. Nevertheless, he was always in demand as a public speaker throughout the Jewish world, raising funds for Israel and Jewish education. His legacy is still remembered particularly in Australia and South Africa.

He threw himself into his school and into close relationships with many pupils. Some found the force of his personality too intense. But his own enthusiasms and example reflected his ideal of a tolerant universal Jewish education. He himself played sport, cricket and soccer, but swimming was his first love. He delighted in Carmel's success in rowing and dreamed of his pupils going to Oxbridge as athletes whose religious commitment would cause the annual boat race to be postponed. He encouraged music, art, intellectual enquiry, while at the same time trying his best to get his pupils to live and master the Jewish tradition. His made all the religious occasions at Carmel unforgettable. His mellow singing voice and religious enthusiasm suffused

them with authenticity and spirituality.

For various reasons, Carmel never lived up to his original ideal. Too few of its pupils cared for an intense religious way of life and the quality of the Jewish education never matched the secular. But nevertheless it did have a powerful influence on many who remember his example and personality with great affection and gratitude.

Kopul was seriously injured in a boating accident 1959, just as he started to negotiate the next dream on his list, the establishment of a school in Israel. He was hospitalized and invalided for almost a year. At the same time the impending retirement of Chief Rabbi Brodie was seen by many to be an opportunity to give Kopul the position he had been denied 13 years earlier. He was not enthusiastic and told his inner circle that he had no wish to leave his beloved school for the straightjacket of communal politics. He never recovered from his accident and died in March 1962, at the age of 48. They don't make 'em that way anymore. His memory sustains me and has always been a blessing.