

Raymond Dwek

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am not a great fan of “awards”. Too many of them are given for the wrong reasons to the wrong people. But here is one I am delighted with. Here is the official citation:

“Professor of Glycobiology at Oxford University Professor Raymond Dwek has been honored with the CBE for services to UK/Israel scientific collaboration. One of the most distinguished biochemists in the UK, Professor Dwek has been a major force in furthering UK/Israel scientific collaboration for over a decade. A key element of his work is promoting peace through science. He has made significant medical advances, invested enormous time and effort in sharing the UK’s science excellence with the international community, all of which has brought many benefits for the UK and Oxford University.

Professor Dwek has excelled in science, education, teaching, business innovation for the commercialisation of research and outreach to the community. He is internationally recognised as the founder of glycobiology (the role of sugar in biological processes). He pioneered the field with the US company, Monsanto, who awarded him \$50m for development. His research has led to significant changes in the clinical treatment for Gaucher’s disease and he has developed new technologies for antivirals for HIV and Hepatitis C. He co-chairs the UK-Israel Life Sciences Council to increase scientific collaboration. Together with Oxford University, he initiated collaborative work on water development and biotechnology with both Israelis and Palestinians. He has encouraged and inspired young biologists and promoted women in science. He has raised £60m for joint studentships with other countries and research successes have brought £100m to Oxford University, including two new buildings. He has maintained the UK’s position at the forefront of innovative international science.”

Raymond and I were both pupils at Carmel College. He was a year senior to me and head boy to my ordinary prefect. He was clever, a good sportsman, and a great organizer; he doesn’t need me to sing his praises as either an outstanding scientist or a committed Jew. His award is richly deserved. Incidentally, my brother David is also a CBE for his services to interfaith understanding and cooperation and that’s deserved too.

Non-Brits may well wonder what the fuss is about. The truth is the Old World loves what are deridingly called “gongs”. Whereas in the USA brilliance or achievements are usually recognized in a monetary fashion, in nearly bankrupt Europe they prefer medals, sashes, and decorative titles.

Orders of chivalry originally began in medieval times, linking power to religion. The monarchy awarded knighthoods and other titles to those who won battles and stole land and possessions for the crown. These titles were hereditary and qualified the highest ranks, the lords (who more often than not were the illegitimate offspring of amorous kings, favorites of queens, or simply private bankers), to sit in the House of Lords and have a say in the running of the country. There were different levels of appointments. The main orders were "the Most Honourable Order of the Bath" for senior military officers and government officials, "the Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George" for diplomats, and later "the Royal Victorian Order" for those who had personally served the royal family (and we won't ask how). Offices of heralds, and experts in etiquette, and manuals explaining who got priority or how to address them proliferated, and it all became part of what people either loved or hated about aristocratic and "class" societies.

As Britain expanded into an empire, more and more people needed recognition. So King George V established "The Order of the British Empire" in 1917, with five classes in civil and military divisions. There were "Knights of the Most Excellent Order of the Grand Cross of the British Empire" (GBE), "Knights of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire" (KBE or DBE), "Commanders of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire" (CBE), "Officers of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire" (OBE), and down at the bottom, "Members of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire" (MBE).

Many Britons have declined such awards on the grounds that it is dated, reminiscent of a class society, and no longer relevant. Others object because most of the awards are pro forma for people who just sit out their jobs. Many are political, rewarding party members and supporters. And no doubt some out of pique! Nevertheless, I do feel less negative about the whole thing when people I know and admire get recognized.

In Raymond's case, there are some other considerations that make it special. Notoriously, the Civil Service is biased against Israel. This explains why the Queen has never been allowed to visit Israel. So when an award is made for involvement in and support of work in Israel, particularly at a time when it is so excoriated by the mass of British society, this is quite remarkable. But I am also delighted that recognition is made of all the hard work and resources that Israel devotes to trying to help the Palestinians too. You wouldn't know it from reading the media. Here you have a devoted Jew, a top British academic working with an Israeli University to improve the health and quality of life of all the inhabitants of the area, Jew and Palestinian. I think that deserves a whole lot more than a CBE, but it's a start!