

# Eliyahu

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This is a sad story. For obvious reasons, I am changing names and certain details to protect the memory of a brilliant, flawed person.

Eliyahu was one of the most amazing and talented people I have ever met. It was in 1968. I was a young rabbi appointed to the largest synagogue in Scotland and something of a celebrity in northern Europe for my youthful and controversial approach to rabbinic leadership. As a result I had been invited to go on a speaking tour of the Scandinavian Jewish student societies.

I started in Copenhagen. Took the ferry across to Sweden and Lund University, then drove to Stockholm and from there flew across to Finland. Eliyahu was the Chief Rabbi of Finland. Stocky, dark complexioned, with a thick, black, bushy beard. He had twinkling, alert eyes. He was charismatic and compelling. He looked Charedi outwardly, but as soon as I entered his home I realized he defied category. His wife wore a very kosher wig, and his lively children were playing all kinds of musical instruments. His apartment was filled with books of all sorts and a serious Jewish library. There was art and pottery, a harpsichord he had built himself, and a highly eclectic collection of books and artifacts. Conversation ranged from the rabbinic, across a broad spectrum of cultural and philosophical subjects.

He had been born in Russia, into a completely committed communist family. He had been a child prodigy and got caught up in the resurgent sense of Jewish identity in the aftermath of the Six-Day War. Anything he was interested in, he threw himself into with passion and dedication. He moved to Western Europe, graduated from university, and was working as a journalist when he decided to try for the rabbinate. He studied hard, and with his formidable brain and intense curiosity he mastered a very wide spectrum of practical rabbinics, ritual slaughter, and circumcision, as well as the arcane details of Jewish law and responsa. All was now lodged in his photographic memory. He was a true polymath. He had married into a very religious family. He had changed his name to that of a well-known Lithuanian rabbi from a previous generation. One would never have guessed that he had not been brought up in the Charedi world from childhood.

He told me about his life in Finland—how hard it was because very few of the Jews there were religiously committed. They wanted him, as the rabbi, to make life easy for them, not to make demands, to be prepared to accept whatever marriages they contracted, and to facilitate conversions without expecting too much. He showed me special programs he had created to teach Hebrew to adults and children and explain the intricacies of Hebrew grammar. Altogether, he was a remarkable polymath in two worlds. I was taken with him. We exchanged numbers and agreed to keep in touch. I returned to Glasgow.

A year later he got in touch with me. He said he had reached crisis point with his community. He was not prepared to compromise, and he had to leave.

Did I have a job? I spoke to the president of my community and got him to agree to invite Eliyahu to become our Director of Education for adults and children in the community. He moved with his family to Glasgow, where he impressed everyone and was a great success. But within a year I left Glasgow to become headmaster of Carmel College, the residential high school near Oxford that my late father had founded.

At the end of my first year, Eliyahu called me up and said he wanted to move from Glasgow; he asked if I could find a job for him at Carmel. Something was not working, but he was reluctant to tell me what. I trusted him and did not press him. He and his family, now with six children, came down south.

He immediately threw himself into boarding school life with enthusiasm. He revised the teaching programs for Hebrew studies in language, history, and Torah. He developed his own teaching aids and textbooks. He learnt how to canoe on the Thames and qualified as an instructor. He became an expert in identifying edible mushrooms, as opposed to poisonous ones. He took expeditions of pupils on treks along Grim's Dyke with his rucksack full of chemicals and testing kits to use on the fungi and other plants they encountered, to see if they were toxic. And he and his wife had an open home for pupils eager for a warm, Jewish, family atmosphere out in the wilds of Oxfordshire. After school hours he held philosophy workshops with the older students, on Kierkegaard and other Scandinavian thinkers. He was a phenomenon.

Yet it became clear that he was far from perfect. He had difficulties with boundaries, constraints, and the disciplines of a very English "public school". We parted company. He moved with his family to the very Charedi community of Stamford Hill in London. We kept in touch off and on, despite the unpleasantness of our parting.

A few years later, he was working as a shochet, a ritual slaughterer—first in London, and then he took up work in the USA. One day I received a letter from him. He told me he was living in Chicago, working for a large kosher meat processing plant. His letter went on to say that the whole of the kosher meat trade there was controlled by the Mafia. Even the most ultra-Orthodox of rabbis was up to monkey-business, and he was going to use his experience and contacts from his days as a journalist to publicize it all. I was surprised, of course, but thought nothing more of it.

A month later I heard that he had been shot dead in his hotel in Chicago. I made contact with a rabbi in Chicago. I sent him a copy of Eliyahu's letter. He promised to look into it. But eventually he told me there was nothing to be done, no clues, no suspects, the enquiries had reached a complete dead end. The riddle of Eliyahu's death (to my knowledge) was never solved. I lost contact with his family. I had no idea what happened to them. I often remembered that extremely talented, charismatic, but deeply flawed individual. What a senseless, sad loss. And I was left wondering what had happened to his children.

A few months ago I got a call out of the blue from Eliyahu's son who I had last seen thirty-five years ago. He had seen a blog of mine in Israel and was

in New York. He wanted to meet. We had coffee together. He told me that all Eliyahu's children had done well, grown into fine, committed examples of good ethical Jews, with families of their own. He told me that after leaving Carmel, Eliyahu had actually disappeared out of their lives altogether. They never saw him again. It was their remarkable mother who had brought them up and even encouraged them to revere the memory of their father. If ever one doubts the importance of a mother in the bringing up of children to be loyal to father and faith, I can think of no better example.

Eliyahu's son gave me closure, that his genius and commitment to Torah passed on to another generation. So that, for all his faults and failings, the memory of the father is still very much alive.