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MOSHE ZEMER - AN APPRECIATION

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MOSHE ZEMER – AN APPRECIATION

Walter Jacob

We congratulate Moshe Zemer on his seventieth birthday through this volume. These essays by friends and colleagues recognize his work in Israel and our joint effort for the Freehof Institute. They deal with halakhic decision making and its ethical implications, as well as the broader realm of rabbinic studies.

Moshe has been one of the pioneer Reform rabbis in Israel in the second generation which sought to actually establish a movement rather than just individual institutions and congregations. Moshe, who emigrated to Israel in 1963, has spent virtually his entire rabbinate in Israel. Born in Los Angeles, a graduate of the University of California, with his rabbinic education at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, he very early became interested in helping the growth of Reform Judaism in Israel. He is the founder of three of our congregations, first Emet VeAnavah in Ramat Gan, then HaSharon in Kfar Shmaryahu, and finally Kedem Synagogue-Bet Daniel in Tel Aviv. The establishment of each of these congregations encountered the usual difficulties placed in our way by the religious establishment. Obtaining a site, occupancy and building permits, and everything else was difficult. Moshe never gave up and poured energy and devotion into the growth of these congregations; they have flourished and continue to be important for the growth of Reform Judaism in Israel.

These struggles were interrupted by many happier moments especially after he met Ilana, who would become his wife in 1965. Their three children, Hilla, Moriah, and Barak and their four grandchildren have provided much happiness.

Moshe understood that the Reform movement needed not only congregations and a network of institutions such as kindergartens and schools, but also an intellectual foundation appropriate for Israel. He

continues to provide it through his halakhic writings. They are based on a century and a half of such efforts in North America and Europe and have been expanded by Moshe to provide the Israeli movement with a strong foundation. His voice along with a handful of others has demonstrated the historic diversity of the *halakhah*. He has fought for pluralism in the Israeli halakhic realm. Moshe's editorials and short pieces which were published in *Ha-aretz*, *Davar*, and other papers brought Reform *halakhah* to a broader reading public. These pieces stressed the flexibility of the *halakhah* through the centuries from the beginning and showed that the *halakhah* could accommodate major changes in the contemporary world.

During these years, Moshe proceeded with formal halakhic studies as he worked for a doctorate, which he received from the Hebrew Union College in 1991. At the same time he lectured in rabbinics at the Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. This enabled him to meet with both the Israeli students preparing for the Reform rabbinate in Israel and with the American students who spend their first year of study in Israel, and he gained disciples.

In the late 1980s, Moshe at the same time as I sought to widen the interest in *halakhah* within the Reform movement. He came to Pittsburgh with the idea of some kind of halakhic setting that would meet the needs of Israel and perhaps the United States. We were both very much on the same track because I, after a decade and a half as chair of the Responsa Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, had just proposed a new committee or commission that would provide a halakhic foundation for the practical issues facing us.

We decided that an independent institute would be the proper route as it could move quickly, with a minimum of structure and no bureaucracy. As Solomon B. Freehof, who had done so much for Reform *halakhah* had just died, we sought and received permission to use his name for the institute, founded in 1989 with its initial meeting in London. We have sponsored one or two seminars subsequently

each year in North America, Israel, and Europe. Our membership, which soon became international, provides the funds for our publications and supports halakhic efforts in Israel. Interest in the Institute among colleagues and lay people continues to grow.

Most of the symposia, regularly held since 1989, have been planned jointly. Twelve volumes, the results of the symposia, have been published by the Institute since its founding – in other words a volume each year. The editorial process, setting up, publishing, and distribution, as well as handling the organizational finances, membership, and the associated inquiries proved cumbersome at a distance, even with e-mail, so I have done all of this. Nancy Berkowitz, who copy-edited many volumes, and Barbara Bailey have been helpful. The *HalakhaH*, which appears three times each year, is also handled by me in Pittsburgh.

Moshe spent considerable effort through the years on his book, *Halakhah Shefuyah*, which is a fine introduction to Reform *halakhah* and has received good reviews. Published in Israel in 1993, it was soon translated into German and English (1999). This volume has helped the understanding of Reform *halakhah* and we are indebted to Moshe for this significant effort. Moshe has published almost a hundred essays on halakhic topics in Israel and North America and has contributed to most of the volumes of the Freehof Institute.

Moshe continues to be active not only with the Institute but also with frequent lectures on halakhic topics for leading institutes in Israel. These presentations published in journals and the Israeli press have helped to establish an intellectual foundation for Reform Judaism in Israel. As we celebrate Moshe Zemer, we hope for his continued involvement in Reform Judaism in Israel and in the Solomon B. Freehof Institute of Progressive *Halakhah*. May the years ahead be good and productive and be happy for him and his family.