Rabbi John Rayner was born in Berlin on 30 May 1924. He died in London on 19 September 2005, having made a significant contribution to the cause of Liberal Judaism in Great Britain. As Senior Rabbi of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue (LJS) for nearly thirty years, and Emeritus for nearly sixteen years until his death, his influence on the congregation which he served was immeasurable. He was the leading exponent of Liberal Judaism in Great Britain, seeking throughout his life to strengthen and reconstruct the Liberal Jewish movement in Britain that had been founded by Claude Montefiore and Lily Montagu and led by Rabbi Israel Mattuck, the LJS’s first rabbi.

He was born Hans Sigismund Rahmer, the younger child of Ferdinand and Charlotte Rahmer, and was fifteen when he said goodbye to his parents and boarded what was to be one of the last of the Kindertransport trains to England.

He lived, at first, with Will and Muriel Stannard and their sons, and then with Hugh and Elizabeth Wilkinson, both men ordained Christian clergy. In his memoir *Before I Forget*, published for his family and friends in 1999, he wrote: ‘From them I learnt much about religion at its best, but was never persuaded by Christian doctrine, and remained loyal to Judaism inwardly and, when opportunity occurred, outwardly’ (Rayner 1999: 36). In witnessing a liberal kind of Christianity, particularly at Durham School where he was a pupil, he ‘wished that there was a liberal version of Judaism that had all the virtues of liberal Christianity without the Christianity’ (Ibid.: 37).

John Rayner first became aware of Liberal Judaism when he attended the Liberal Synagogue in Hope Place, Liverpool in the 1940s. There, the lay minister, Monty Yates, discovered that John had a good knowledge of Hebrew and sometimes invited him to read the Torah. He met Rabbi Israel Mattuck, the first rabbi of the LJS in London and began to read his books and pamphlets and to build a connection with other exponents of Liberal Judaism and with the LJS’s youth group.

**Alexandra Wright** was ordained by Rabbi John Rayner in 1986 and is currently the Senior Rabbi of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue in London.
As an ‘enemy alien’, he was not liable to call-up, but eventually in 1943, his application to join the infantry was granted. Out of necessity, he changed his name from Rahmer to Rayner. He served in Great Britain and Egypt, and attended an education officers’ course on the summit of Mount Carmel and, after the end of the war, in Austria. It was at this time that he finally discovered and confirmed that his parents had been deported by cattle-truck and had died somewhere in Eastern Europe.¹

In October 1947, John took up an open scholarship at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, in Modern Languages, switching to Moral Science after a year. It was during his time at university that he attended the International Conference of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, at which one of the speakers was Rabbi Dr Steven Schwarzschild, who had been a fellow pupil at school in Berlin. The six years he spent at Cambridge included a period of training for ‘religious ministry’, during which he studied Hebrew and post-biblical Hebrew literature.

John was ordained, with the title of ‘Reverend’, by Rabbi Israel Mattuck in 1953. His first congregation was South London Liberal Synagogue, where he worked for four years before being ‘called to urgent service at the centre of the Liberal Jewish movement’ (the LJS). (Copy of the Monthly Bulletin of the South London Liberal Synagogue No. 313, July 1957, reproduced in Rayner 1999:87).²

When the senior minister of the LJS, Rabbi Leslie Edgar, was advised to reduce his workload on medical grounds, John Rayner was invited to succeed him in the post. He accepted on the condition that he would be given two years’ leave of absence for further study at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, where he obtained s’mikhah in April 1965. He returned to the LJS, where he remained as senior rabbi until he became rabbi emeritus in 1989.

In his role as a congregational rabbi, he responded to the many communal duties of preaching, teaching, adult education, weddings, pastoral interviews, hospital visits, funerals, memorial services and tombstone consecrations. John Rayner was proactive in encouraging the LJS to embrace a number of changes, such as the use of more Hebrew, more singing and congregational participation. He introduced Selichot services, a Tikkun Leyl Shavuot and special services for Israel Independence Day and Tish’ah b’Av (Ibid.: 124).

He was appointed honorary director of studies of Leo Baeck College from 1966 to 1969, during which time he restructured the academic curriculum of the college and began to teach Jewish Liturgy and Codes, a role which he continued to fulfil until just before his final illness.

Nearly six years after his death, on 4 July 2011, to mark the centenary of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue, the LJS in conjunction with Leo Baeck College and Liberal Judaism held a symposium of lectures and discussion
entitled, ‘A Reflection and Celebration of the Life and Work of Rabbi John D. Rayner.’ The day conference, held at the LJS, provided the opportunity for some fine scholars and John Rayner’s former colleagues and friends to examine the intellectual and spiritual contributions he made to the cause of Liberal Judaism, to interfaith dialogue, progressive Jewish liturgies and the debate about Israel. Sadly, Rabbi Dr Moshe Zemer, who had agreed to deliver a paper on John Rayner’s contribution to progressive Jewish *halakhah*, was too ill to travel from Israel to London. He subsequently died in October 2011.

In 1998, the New Jewish Initiative for Social Justice published a booklet by John Rayner, entitled *Principles of Jewish ethics from a progressive point of view*. In the preface, John Rayner wrote:

> Its purpose is to serve as a ready-reference guide to the main principles of Jewish ethics as stated in, or inferred from, the classical sources of Judaism, chiefly Bible and Talmud, occasionally with a particular slant from a modern, progressive point of view…

> …this is not a programme of social action. It is, rather, a classified enumeration of ethical principles which may serve as guidance in the formulation of a Jewish contribution to social policy. (Rayner 1998b: 3)

This publication of seventy-five pages, including a bibliography and divided into eleven sections covering personal, social, family, educational, economic, medical, media, legal, political, international and environmental ethics, in many ways represents the distillation of John Rayner’s life-long labour as ethicist. In all his writings, lectures, in the liturgies that he produced for the liberal movement, in his sermons and in his religious vocation, his primary task was to teach and exemplify in his life that Judaism is most fundamentally an ethical monotheism. ‘Whatever else may also be required of those who wish to worship God, right conduct heads the list. Indeed, it belongs to a higher order of importance than anything else. Without it, correct belief and correct ritual are futile’ (Rayner 1998b: 8).

This passionate conviction that ethics and integrity are central to every aspect of Jewish life and worship is particularly evident in the major contributions John Rayner made to progressive Jewish liturgy. A series of new prayer books, beginning with the *Haggadah shel Pesach* in 1962, which he co-edited with John Rich, and *Service of the Heart* in 1967, continued the poetics and lyricism of Rabbi Mattuck’s earlier liberal prayer books, but also broke with them to reinstate the traditional structure of the daily, Sabbath and festival prayers. *Gate of Repentance* followed in 1973, a new version of the *Haggadah shel Pesach* in 1981 and *Siddur Lev Chadash* in 1995, all co-edited with Rabbi Chaim Stern.

Professor Eric Friedland’s lecture ‘Rabbi John D. Rayner: Liturgist as Correspondent’ is a tribute not only to a personal friendship between the two men, but
also to the moral probity that lay at the heart of the creation of these new liturgies for the twentieth century. Conscious that he had to hold together the radical and conservative tendencies which existed within post-war Liberal Judaism, John Rayner took steps to reinstate traditional material, to innovate and acknowledge the influence of the Shoah and the establishment of the state of Israel without compromising his faithfulness to liberal principles, which included a changing shift towards universalism in the liturgies of the new prayer books.

Rabbi Dr Charles Middleburgh’s article, “… and a New Spirit I Will Put Within You”: The Contribution of Rabbi John D. Rayner to the Creation of Liberal Prayer Books’, examines the influences on, and the processes and outcomes of the creation of these new prayer books of the post-war liberal Jewish movement, which influenced a generation of progressive Jewish liturgies, not only in Europe, but especially in the United States.

A significant role played by John Rayner throughout his professional life was representing Liberal Judaism to the non-Jewish world. This was performed through an extensive programme of lecturing and speaking, as well as a limited amount of broadcasting on radio and television. Richard Harries’s lecture, ‘The Integrity of John Rayner and Interfaith Relations’, examines John Rayner’s late-adolescent experiences of living with the Stannard and Wilkinson families and the influences that this might have had on his approach to dialogue and interfaith relations. He acknowledges John’s unwavering rationality, his belief that truth is not relative and the conviction that Judaism has a role to play, together with Christianity and other faiths in ‘repairing the breaches’ in a world that he considered to be broken, but not unredeemable. Richard Harries begins the process of scrutinising John’s theology particularly in relation to the Shoah. He repudiated utterly a belief in an interventionist God who directs human actions. He saw God in the role as Teacher, not Dictator. Richard Harries draws on some of the prayers and readings in Siddur Lev Chadash (1995) in a preliminary attempt to construe some of John’s views on theodicy and suffering.

Professor Avi Shlaim’s lecture ‘Rabbi John Rayner, Ethical Zionism and Israel’ studies a number of sermons and lectures, many of them highly topical at the time they were written, in order to underline John Rayner’s approach, not as political commentator, but as an exponent of Jewish ethical values. Avi Shlaim shows how John Rayner looked at Israel’s military engagements in the context of halakhic categories of war, Israel’s history as a persecuted people who have known what it means to be demonised and excluded, and, above all, within the framework of Judaism’s ethical principles.

Rabbi David Goldberg offers a more personal, confessional remembrance of John Rayner who was his colleague at the LJS for many years, acknowledging that, ‘when the history of Progressive Judaism comes to be written in a hundred
years’ time, his legacy will be ranked alongside the likes of Abraham Geiger, Kaufmann Kohler, Isaac Mayer Wise, Claude Montefiore, Israel Mattuck, Leo Baeck, Solomon Freehof and Gunther Plaut’.

But in spite of this acknowledgement and tribute, David Goldberg also delivers a critique of his colleague in three areas, including the field of theology. He labels John Rayner as a ‘conservative’ theologian, who re-affirmed the classical beliefs of progressive Judaism’s founders without leading his flock to more radical pastures of theological expression. However, I think it is true to say that John Rayner sought, throughout his life, to harmonise the tendencies of a more traditional form of worship with a more radical expression of an inclusivist theology.

Professor Marc Saperstein’s lecture, ‘John Rayner as Preacher: The Sermon in Response to Historical Events’, begins with an examination of the remarkable record that John Rayner kept throughout his professional life in which he noted and cross-referenced more than one thousand sermons. Professor Saperstein has chosen to highlight sermons that respond to significant historical events, both in Israel and in the Diaspora. While many sermons suffer from the limitation of being relevant only to the day on which they were delivered, Marc Saperstein notes that John Rayner’s sermons remain crucially germane to our own times. Never having listened to John Rayner preach, Professor Saperstein concludes that John Rayner was a man of remarkable ‘prophetic courage’, clarity and moral integrity.

A significant omission from this collection of papers is a lecture on John Rayner’s contribution to progressive Jewish religious law. In many ways, this was his great passion: to explore an ethical or liturgical question from a halakhic point of view. As well as the publications of sermons and lectures, the collection of essays and articles entitled Jewish Religious Law: A Progressive Perspective (Berghahn Books 1998) reflects a true appreciation and knowledge of rabbinic sources and their application to questions of contemporary relevance. In spite of his lifelong attempt to reconstruct rabbinic halakhah consistently with progressive Judaism’s own principles, John felt that progressive Judaism had never satisfactorily settled its relationship to halakhah.

John’s starting point in this subject was always the verse from Deuteronomy: V’attah yisrael, mah Adonai elohecha sho’eil me-imach (And now, Israel, what does the Eternal One your God require of you?) (10:12). This, he said, was the most important of all questions from a Jewish religious point of view, ‘for how, from such a point of view, can there be anything more desirable than to know how God wishes us to live, and therefore how to make the best possible use of our abilities and opportunities?’ (Rayner 1998a: ix).

The Pharisees and subsequent generations of halakhists had devoted themselves to answering that question exhaustively, but their answers were
based on various assumptions, such as the inerrancy of Scripture and a belief that the written and oral Torah had divine authority. John recognised two opposite attitudes towards halakhah among progressive Jews. ‘Some’, he said, ‘without questioning the system, have simply gone along with it when it suited them and ignored it when it did not. Others have explicitly or implicitly rejected it as something that belongs to Orthodoxy but has no place in Progressive Judaism’ (Ibid.: ix).

John based his vision of a reconstructed progressive approach to halakhah on the historical changes that had occurred within Judaism. Judaism was not a monolith; while the fundamental principles of prophetic Judaism — belief in a Creator God who demanded justice and compassion for all humanity, the principles of truth, justice and peace — remained primary constants, the institutions on which biblical Judaism was based were not permanent. The Temple, the Priesthood, sacrificial worship, the Land — all these were lost with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. In the years preceding and following that catastrophe, Judaism was reformulated and reconstructed, its institutions of home, family, Beit Ha-Midrash and synagogue, changed and developed to provide for the needs of a diaspora community, for whom memory and hope were the twin lights that determined not only the daily practices and rituals of life, but beliefs as well.

In the first essay in the book, entitled ‘Progressive Judaism’, he unfolds the historical stages of Jewish life that brought about both continuity and change, concluding that:

the Emancipation produced a crisis of such magnitude that it has no parallel in the history of Judaism other than the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Once again Judaism was shaken to its foundations. Once again, the foundations stood firm. But once again the super-structure needed to be substantially modified. The time had come once more for a paradigm shift. (Ibid.: 11)

What did he mean by that phrase ‘paradigm shift’? The post-Emancipation age, he wrote, requires ‘a new kind of Judaism, as different from Rabbinic Judaism as Rabbinic Judaism was from Biblical Judaism, yet retaining the permanent values of both’. (Ibid.: 11) John followed in the footsteps of progressive halakhists and theologians, such as Rabbis Solomon Freehof, Walter Jacob, Moshe Zemer and Eugene Borowitz, all of whom as progressive Jews have dedicated themselves to the application of halakhic decisions to progressive Jewish questions. That does not mean that rabbinic halakhah is accepted as a sine qua non of living a progressive Jewish life, but that it is, at the very least, acknowledged as the most significant framework of Jewish life throughout the ages. John never wearied of pointing out that ‘The Halachah is the answer of Pharisaic Judaism to the question, “What does the Eternal One
And we can witness the way in which Rabbi Rayner applied those requirements to a range of practical and specific questions, including the intention, language and posture of prayer; medical ethics, including organ transplantation, medical confidentiality, euthanasia; as well as topics on Jewish identity. And employing the rigorous intellectuality which marked him out as one of the most distinctive intellectual scholars of Liberal Judaism, he sought to sift exhaustively through biblical and rabbinic sources and to use them to reach conclusions worthy of the primary prophetic values of progressive Judaism.

John Rayner combined two rare qualities. On the one hand was the unreserved and eloquently articulated vision and understanding of Judaism and the world, expressed with clarity, sense, sometimes with passion, but always with truthfulness and an incorruptible moral integrity. To a whole generation he communicated his profound concern about the world — about its sustainability and the extent of human exploitation of the environment, about Israel, about the economic climate of our times and many other issues that remain of permanent relevance.

The greatness of that leadership and expression of vision lay not in the need to dominate or govern, on the contrary, his humility and modesty held him back from that vocation, but in his ability to bring about change in thought and in action, initiated with restraint and persuasion, bringing about integration and unity among those suspicious of change and development. It was the combination of diffidence and humility, with a razor-sharp intellect and a way of presenting argument, that nearly always won his case.

This serious and often awe-inspiring aspect of John’s character was leavened by another dimension, his shy warmth and legendary sense of humour. There were many moments of surprise, laughter and wit, still warmly and affectionately remembered and indeed missed by all those who knew him. He was a man of deep humanity, compassion, integrity and luminous moral courage. In turning now to our lectures, we honour our teacher and rabbi whose memory is cherished and whose influence will, we pray, long endure on the earth.

your God require of you?”'. (Ibid.: 33). That, he said, is the most important of all questions,

and the attempt to answer it has stamped upon Judaism certain characteristics which we rightly applaud. First, its practicality, its foremost concern with deed rather than creed. Secondly, its comprehensiveness, its determination that all aspects of life, not just some of them, shall be guided and sanctified by religion. Thirdly, its specificity, the fact that it does not content itself with general exhortations, but goes into detail. Finally its intellectuality, for to evolve and constantly bring up to date such a system requires an enormous expenditure of effort. (Ibid.: 33)
‘A Celebration of the Life and Work of Rabbi John D. Rayner’

References

Rayner, John D. 1999 *Before I Forget, An Illustrated Chronicle of a Twentieth Century Life*. This was a privately copied memoir ‘not for publication but partly for private distribution to a few relatives and friends and partly for my own benefit’ (Preface, p. 2). There is no city or publisher.


Notes

1. In *Before I Forget*, John has written the name ‘Riga’ by hand, as the place where his parents were murdered. However, there remains some doubt about this, and their final destination has never been fully established (personal communication from Jane Rayner).