Figure 1 Lionel Blue. Portrait by Gary Italiaander – www.italiaander.co.uk. Used with permission.

Editorial

In Memoriam Rabbi Dr Lionel Blue OBE,
6 February 1930–19 December 2016
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The memoirs and tributes to Lionel Blue z'l in this issue reflect the many dimensions of his life and work, yet a common thread runs through them. All who have written testify to his warmth and generosity of spirit, the support and advice that was always readily available, his openness to people of all kinds and persuasions.

Born in the East End of London to working-class Jewish parents, as a child Lionel observed the Battle of Cable Street and later experienced the disruption of life when evacuated during the Second World War. A Marxist during his studies at Balliol College, Oxford, he regained his religious faith through an encounter with Quaker spirituality. He became one of the first students at the newly created Leo Baeck College, being ordained in 1960. After serving at the Settlement Synagogue and Middlesex New Synagogue, he accepted the newly created post of European Director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) at the invitation of the Hon Lily Montagu. His reflections on this are to be found in the 'Interview' and his article 'Religion and Organisation' from 1965 in this issue.

He became Convenor of the Beth Din, the Religious Court, of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain (RSGB) from 1971 to 1988, which he describes in his 1980 article 'Convening'. Incidentally, he himself created the title 'Convenor', preferring its positive and active sense to the former, more bureaucratic 'Clerk of the Court'. Lionel was a paradoxical choice for the role as an antinomian in his relationship to Jewish law. But perhaps for that very reason it worked extremely well. While he conscientiously fulfilled what he considered the rather quaint formalities, his legacy was to bring humanity and empathy to the very sensitive areas of people's lives that the court had to deal with. He wrote about the role:

It is a strange job, even for a Yiddisher boy, and I have a card on my desk which reads 'If you believe in me I exist'. This applies, of course, to the Beth Din and to all religious jobs and perhaps to religion itself...

On the challenges, he wrote:

One area of Jewish life needs more attention and it is not in the past but in the present. Greater attention and understanding should be given to the relationships people actually enter into today and to the people themselves, their needs and their possibilities. ... I do not think Law, especially status law, can be worked out without the help of counselors, social workers and above all the people. The result might be more complex and less tidy, but it would be truer ...¹

During this period, Lionel was invited by Rabbi Dr Werner van der Zyl, then Chairman of the Prayer Book Committee, to do some draft translations for the new Sabbath and Daily Prayer Book of the Reform movement. As Lionel recalled it, he said: 'Lionel, you are an Oxford graduate, could you do a translation in modern English?' This led to his co-editing the volume that appeared in 1977 and subsequent editions for the festival seasons, notably for the High Holydays (1985). One result of his work was to abolish the 'thee's' and 'thou's' of current translations, despite considerable objections and opposition. But Lionel argued that addressing God in prayer should be something comfortable and familiar, not kept in a separate compartment of life. His view succeeded and he became the composer of contemporary prayers that speak to the reality of our life, and which have lasted into new editions of the prayer books without losing their relevance or impact. The new dimensions to Jewish spirituality that he brought to this work are evaluated in this issue by Eric Friedland.

Lionel first began to broadcast on the BBC in 1967, leading to a highly popular, regular radio slot that lasted for three decades, and he hosted a television series *In Search of Holy England*, in 1989. This public exposure gave him an audience that enabled him to publish a variety of books: autobiographies, anthologies and spiritual guidance based on his personal religious journey. A bibliography has been compiled for this issue by Dr Annette M. Boeckler. He was awarded Hon Doctorates by the Open University and Grey College, Durham. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1994.

When someone lives as long as Lionel, we are inclined to remember only the most recent parts of his life and forget what lies before them. Moreover, certain aspects, like the fact that he was a gifted artist, are easily overlooked, so we are delighted to be able to include in this issue reproductions of three of his paintings.² In Lionel's case, the popular image is largely based on his extraordinary success as a radio rabbi, and it is very easy to consider him in rather cosy and sentimental terms. But that is to do him a disservice. Lionel had a phenomenal intellect, but he chose to use it to speak clearly and simply about the things that he

thought were important. His comprehensive understanding of European history and politics served him in good stead during his years as the European Director of the WUPJ. With little in the way of budget, travelling in second-class trains throughout the continent, he helped create a congregation in Brussels and supported other fledgling communities. Perhaps most significantly, through a series of annual youth conferences he inspired an entire generation of young men and women to study for the rabbinate at Leo Baeck College. Out of that same work, he opened up the Jewish world to interfaith encounters and challenges, including creating the Standing Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims in Europe, decades before any other organization recognized the presence and significance of a growing Muslim population.

For many years Lionel taught at the Leo Baeck College, a class originally designated as 'Liturgy'. Despite his work on Jewish prayer books, however, it was clear that he was not interested in classical scholarly approaches to the topic. Instead he taught a subject with a variety of titles over the years in which he could address prayer itself at a far more personal level, in the light of his own religious journey. In her article, Rabbi Alexandra Wright expresses the unusual nature of his class.

My first memory of Lionel was sitting in a class he taught – a mixture of Prayer and Spirituality and Comparative Religion. For all other classes, the bibliography included Hebrew or Aramaic dictionaries, Hebrew concordances, a Hebrew only Bible, Hebrew commentaries, guides to learning Talmud and books on Jewish history. For Lionel, we had to purchase the Hindu scriptures – the 700 verse Bhagavad Gita, the Qu'ran and Julian of Norwich.

To which one could probably add the New Testament, Lao Tse, Vivekananda on Yoga, Soloviev's 'Antichrist' and C.S. Lewis's 'The Screwtape Letters'.

Lionel was a very anxious person and yet he always found the courage to take on issues he felt strongly about. He was a breaker of taboos. Recognizing that Jews could learn something from Christian spirituality, he took his students and colleagues on retreats in monasteries. Understanding that after the Shoah Jews had retreated into our own voluntary ghetto and were locked into emotions that were damaging, he crossed a physical and emotional boundary by going to Germany, and he helped young Jews make the same journey through the first post-war Jewish youth conference in Berlin in the 1960s. In the wake of the Six-Day War and the triumphalist and inflated emotions of the Jewish world, Lionel saw the need to challenge Diaspora communities to enter a dialogue with Islam as our responsibility to make a potential contribution to finding peace.

Of course, there was another aspect to his life, one that had to be concealed for many years of his active rabbinate: the fact that he was gay. It nearly prevented him from finishing his rabbinic studies, partly because of the negative teachings within Judaism itself, and partly because of the criminalization of homosexuality in British law. At one time, he broke off his studies and fled to Amsterdam, where a more enlightened society provided social meeting places for gays. This proved to be a lifeline for him, and he was able to finish his studies when Rabbi Dr van der Zyl, the founder and director of the College, went over to Holland to persuade him to return. When his enormous radio popularity meant that a newspaper wanted to out him publicly, despite all the risks, Lionel had the courage to go public himself. He was the first rabbi to come out as gay and his example empowered clergymen of other denominations to do so as well.

Lionel often spoke about the dual minority status he experienced as Jewish and as gay. In 1981, he gave the Michael Harding Memorial Lecture for the Gay Christian Movement on the topic 'Godly and Gay'. He spoke about what he called the 'religious vocation of gays'.

Jews, gays, and other minorities are always tempted to deny what they are and how God made them, in order to be accepted. Religious groups have been among the worst in penalising the courageous truth and rewarding the opportune falsehood.

If gay people examine their lives, they can thank God for many things which they can use for the growth of goodness within them, and for the well-being of others.

Through gay people God heals some of the divisions of the world. The difficulties and rejections, which gays experience transcend the division of race, religion, colour and class, as any gay gathering can show...

Society has not given gays their self-respect ... What they have they have earned. It has come from the decency and trust that God creates in them with their consent. The sanction of their gay relationships was not provided by a law-court or a Prayer Book or a church blessing, but by such inner trust and faith as the parties could invoke. Such do-it-yourself religion cuts away the frills, and exposes the real price of sharing a home and a life. In a packaged society, such plain and simple truth is rare and valuable.³

This issue of *European Judaism* honours a man who was part of the founding circle of this journal, who is celebrated here as a friend, a rabbi, a visionary and, with all his human frailties, a spiritual teacher and valued companion on our own life's journey.

Rabbi Jonathan Magonet

Notes

1. From *Living Judaism* (Spring 1980), 8–10.
2. A self-portrait painted probably during his studies at Oxford University; the Battle of Cable Street, based on his childhood memories of the event; a funeral at Hoop Lane Cemetery, from his time as a congregational rabbi.
3. Lionel Blue, 'Godly and Gay', Fourth Michael Harding Memorial Address, published by the Gay Christian Movement, 1981; reprinted in *Jewish Explorations of Sexuality*, ed. Jonathan Magonet (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995), 117–131.