

Joseph Kalir
1908-1988

PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, EMERITUS

B.A., University of Berlin; Rabbinic Ordination, Hochschule fur die Wissenschaft
Des Judentums, Berlin; Ph.D., History, University of Wurzburg, 1935
California State University, Fullerton From September 1970 to January 3, 1985
Birth: December 2, 1908; Death: September 10, 1998

A story from his graduate school days illustrates Joseph Kalir's lifetime of commitment to his convictions. He was admitted into the doctoral program in history at Wurzburg, one of Europe's oldest universities, on a full scholarship. However, his brother-in-law, though also accepted there, received no financial support. Joe insisted that his scholarship be split with his wife's brother. He risked losing the award for himself, but eventually university officials relented and the two shared the funding.

That commitment to his principles continued when Joe decided to leave the Orthodox Judaism of his forebears and study at the liberal Hochschule under such renowned scholars as Martin Buber and Leo Baeck.

The real test for him came in 1938 as the black night of National Socialism closed in upon the Jewish people in Germany. By this time, Joe was serving as rabbi of a congregation in Bochum, Westfalia. The Gestapo began arresting members of the synagogue and Rabbi Kalir would go to the regional Gestapo headquarters to plead for their release. A strange friendship developed between himself and the Nazi commandment, Hans Wnuk, who advised him to "take a long vacation to Switzerland." The commandment knew that the orchestrated persecution later known as "Krystallnacht"—the night of broken glass – was imminent and wanted to protect Rabbi Kalir and his young wife Hilda. The Kalirs did set off on a vacation, but in Berlin they became aware of the increasing severity of Nazi anti-Semitism and returned to Bochum and their congregation just before the start of Krystallnacht. Rabbi Kalir directed that several congregants take copies of the Torah scroll to their homes for safe keeping. Only his copy survived the Holocaust.

Shortly thereafter, Joe was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp near Berlin. He spent six weeks there under gruelling conditions while Hilda went daily to Comandment Wnuk's office to plead for his release. Eventually, it worked and Joe – weighing 90 pounds – was released. The Kalirs were allowed to leave for Palestine where they arrived on the SS Galilee in February 1939 just before the British closed the country to further Jewish immigration.

The Kalirs spent the next 16 years in Palestine where daughter Shula was born in 1940 and the State of Israel in 1948. During the war that followed Israel's declaration of statehood, the Kalirs were literally pinned down at times in their Jerusalem apartment as bullets screamed past. While in Israel Joe wrote three books in Hebrew, Sare Tzavah M'Yisrael, (Jewish Soldiers of Renown) (two volumes, 1942 and 1943); and Mimandat Lamdinah (From Mandate to Statehood) (1949). He helped found the Israeli radio station, "Kol Zion Lagolah/Voice of Zion to the Diaspora" and worked as a teacher.

In 1955, another turning point. The Kalirs decided to leave Israel for Sweden where Joe swerved as rabbi in Goteberg for three years. Then, on Thanksgiving Day, 1957 the family moved to Boston where Joe became professor of Bible, History and Philosophy at Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline. He left there in 1965 and served as temple educator of Temple Beth Sholom, Santa Ana until 198 when he joined the CSUF faculty in Religious Studies.

For the next 17 years, Professor Kalir earned a reputation as a teacher of Jewish Studies who was "tough but fair," who expected much of his students and gave much in return. He had a dry sense of humor and thrived on students' questions. He served as acting department chair from 1983 to 1984.

Joe always spoke warmly of his Religious Studies colleagues and would invite them to share Passover Seder meals with his family.

Joe published numerous articles and one book, Introduction to Judaism, (1980) during his tenure at Fullerton. He was also a guest on the Merv Griffith Television Show. After his retirement, he continued writing and was working on a Torah commentary at the time of his death. On his grave are inscribed words from the Torah's Book of Genesis (5:24), "He walked with God." Indeed, he walked with God across continents and in the midst of the most momentous events in the modern history of the Jewish people – the Holocaust and the birth of the Jewish state. His was a walk of profound courage and commitment to his principles.

Submitted by
Benjamin J. Hubbard
Professor of Religious Studies
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