

HESPED BRIAN FOX

BEN FOX: Eulogy for my Father

Dear Mum, Mim, Shira, Mishi, Dear Rabbis, Friends,

My father, Rabbi Dr Brian Douglas Fox, Member of the Order of Australia, BA MAHL DD, Moreinu HaRav Dov Berel ben Yosef HaCohen V'Chava, was an incredible person. He was born in 1943 in London when it was being bombed by the Nazis during the Blitz. His grandparents and great grand parents had been Polish and Russian refugees and they were tailors in the East End.

During the war, his father Joe was off fighting the Japanese and his mother Eve and older brother Roger stayed in London while dad was sent to a Jewish orphanage in the countryside. After the war they came back together but the trauma of that time left scars that would never heal. Dad always had a strained relationship with his brother. They mostly spoke cockney English at home but there was also a lot of Yiddish, and dad learned Yiddish from his parents who only spoke it when they didn't want the boys to understand. Joe and Eve were keen to leave London. They associated it with poverty and hardship and wanted a new life. They had become Progressive Jews as teenagers and were ready to enter modernity. The refugee life was left behind and they had joined the middle class.

When dad was 8 years old they came to Sydney as 10 pound poms, but they didn't like it here so they moved on to Auckland. Dad loved his upbringing in New Zealand and he always had a fond place in his heart for the country, and in particular for Maori culture which he admired. My grandparents founded the Progressive movement in New Zealand and dad was the first Progressive barmitzvah there. He was heavily influenced by three people who visited him in his youth- Rene and Sol Etzioni were shlichim or emissaries for the Habonim youth movement sent out from Israel and they turned him into a passionate Zionist and from then on he had a dream to one day live in Israel, which eventually did happen. The other one was a visit by John Levi from Melbourne, then a student rabbi, and that was when dad decided he wanted to become a rabbi. He was 13 when he made that decision.

Dad studied Psychology and Education at Auckland uni, then went on to his rabbinical studies. It started with a year in Israel and I heard endless stories about that year and the huge impression it made on him. This was 1968, so just a year after Jerusalem had been reunited after the 6 day war and everyone was still in awe at Israel's victory. He had a motorbike with a side-car which would barely make it up the road to Jerusalem and he made life-long friendships there with a wide range of people, from his rabbinical teachers to ordinary Israelis in shops. Several times I was taken around to these shops and people remembered him from those days- really, how could you ever forget him?

Dad then went on for another 5 years at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio and in his last year he met mum, then known as Dale Myers. 6 weeks later they were married, without family present, in Cincinnati. They then moved to Melbourne where dad took up the position of rabbi at the Leo Baeck Centre. Mim and I were born in Melbourne and, while I don't remember much of the '70s, dad was working hard for the Jewish community.

Together with Rabbi John Levi and the hard work of the Progressive community, they set up the King David School (practice for the Emanuel School), and Netzer, our hugely successful youth movement. Netzer has since become the world Progressive youth movement and absorbed into itself similar movements around the world who took on the name Netzer.

After a year in Israel in 1979, we moved to Sydney and dad took up his position here, at what was then known as Temple Emanuel. Shira was born here and later Mishi. The Emanuel School was started basically on our kitchen table and I was witness to all the hard work and late nights that went into setting it up. I was recently at Emanuel School's speech night and it is certainly a legacy that dad would be proud of. It has gone from success to success to success. I was there in year 5 on its first day in 1983 and I can't believe where the school is at now.

There were many other successes along the way.- Dad was very supportive of the Masorti or Conservative movement being set up. He believed that ideologies and titles were restrictive and Jews should be free, within reason, to move around and be creative with their Jewish life. But dad's biggest achievement in Sydney, I believe, was that he brought the Progressive movement into the mainstream of the Jewish community. My impression is that before he came to Sydney the movement was small and seen as radical. Now, our rabbis are rabbis of the whole community, not just the Progressive community.

Along the way dad had the support of many people. He brought in wonderful rabbis to share the workload with, and he motivated people with a combination of stirring speeches and sermons and old-fashioned kicks up the posterior. His sermons were mesmerizing and I remember sitting here on Yom Kippur and just not really believing that it was actually my dad up there saying these things.

He was on the cutting edge of where society was going. He gave sermons pushing for aboriginal and gay rights way before others were. He was active in interfaith work, and pushed for better relations with other faith communities. Above all, he had this amazing ability to connect to anyone. With two and a half Maori words, he could convince a Maori that he was one of them. This was the same with Arabic and French. He knew enough Yiddish to convince even the most anti-Progressive of Orthodox rabbis that he was dinky di and he was good friends with a number of Orthodox rabbis in Sydney and my parents were regularly invited to their homes.

In the late '90s dad wanted to lead the World Union for Progressive Judaism, and when this didn't happen, he decided he wanted to go back to England. He always had a lot of nostalgia for English life and he had cousins and close friends there. My parents moved to Manchester with Shira and Mishi, and for 12 years dad did what he had done here- he gave a vision of the sort of community he wanted, he gave inspiring sermons, he built institutions, and he opened people up to a different kind of rabbi. A rabbi who didn't take no for an answer.

His health though had different plans. He was diagnosed with Parkinsons disease 12 years ago and it began with a slight tremor. Knowing that things would get increasingly difficult in the future, my parents decided to retire and they could finally fulfill a lifetime dream, and move to Israel. They had a very happy 3 years in Jerusalem and I only wish I had been there with them. I lived in Israel for 12 years but left before they got there. They made a decision

to return to Sydney because this is where their children and grandchildren were. With great joy they saw their clan grow and in the end there were 7 grandchildren: Sivan, Noah, Clemmie, Mae, Kai, Razi and Audrey. You are all unique in your own ways, you all have parts of him in you and you made him proud. I am sure that in your lives you will live in ways that will continue to make him proud- ethical, socially-active members of both the Jewish community and the wider community.

Three months ago dad's Parkinson's took a decline, the medications stopped being effective and he went into full-time care. I want to thank all those who supported us through this difficult time- the carers, the doctors, the friends, the rabbis- we cannot express our thanks enough for your help and support. We now go into a new stage of life, without one of the cornerstones of our family.

My father was everything to me and I will miss him for the rest of my life.
Thank you.

MIM FOX

Dad was king of the dad joke and had lots of lines that would be repeated often. One of his lines was when someone would ask "What should I call you? Rabbi? Brian? Rabbi Fox?" he would answer, "call me whatever you like, just don't call me late to dinner". Lots of people called him lots of things. We called him dad and growing up with Brian Fox as your dad, there are lots of stories to share.

The story that started it all is the story of how Brian and Dale, now Dina, met and fell in love. It was Cincinnati 1970, dad was there for Rabbinical School at HUC, the Hebrew Union College. Mum was there doing her medical residency at the Jewish Hospital Cincinnati. One night they both attended a Jewish Singles Club party. As mum was mingling she heard a very loud man speaking with an Indian accent in the group next to her. She thought nothing of it until she heard that same man say that he was actually from New Zealand. She leaned over, tapped him on the arm, and said she was from Australia and they started chatting. At the end of the party they said goodnight and that was the end of the story, until a week later when she got a call from a friend telling her that the man she had met that night, Brian, was interested and she HAD to go out with him. She responded coolly, I'm already dating someone else and I've no time as I'm busy with my residency. The friend kept pushing and finally gave mum the number of the house where dad was staying. Mum called and agreed to meet dad for coffee in the cafeteria at Jewish Hospital on her break from work.

As mum says, that coffee laid the foundations of the values and ideals with which they would live their lives together. He told her he wanted to have a home full of children, pets and visitors. She had come from a quiet house so this sounded wonderful. They talked about the Jewish home and education they would give their children, and he told her they would have an interesting life. Instantly she saw that he was emotional, loud and quick to laugh. This was the opposite to anything she had grown up in and she loved it. She told him she intended to practice medicine throughout her life, a brave statement for a woman in 1970. He had grown up in his mothers hair salon in Auckland, he had always seen women working and had enormous respect and love for his own mother Eve. Although he felt he needed Rabbinical permission to marry a woman with a profession, this did not become an issue. As Ben said, 3 months later they were married. It turned out they were the only single Australasians in Cincinnati at the time and so once they got together they were written up in the local Jewish newspaper. In mums memory they were also one of the first double professional couples in the Rabinette, after the Dean of Hebrew Union College himself.

The promises they made to each other at that first coffee were true throughout their marriage and kept going into our childhood home. All of us remember our house as being full of guests, there were always different faces at the Shabbat dinner table, at Havdallah singing along with guitars, or staying with us for periods of time. Indeed, taking people in was one of the features of our house, with surrogate children being regularly brought into the fold. As promised there were lots of children, lots of pets, and lots of noise. One of the ways dad used to keep track of us, especially when we were travelling and at busy markets all over the world was to use a distinctive whistle. If ever we heard the whistle we would know that dad was looking for us and we would straight away try and find him. Ben now uses that same whistle with his kids.

When you walked into our house in Vivian Street the first room on the left was dads study. That room was floor to ceiling lined with books and you couldn't see the top of the desk for all the books and paper. After that study was no more dad would always make sure that every house had a replica study for him in it. As a kid you always knew when high holidays were coming as dad would be holed up in there, busy writing his sermons. Dad never thought he was academically inclined, due to his hatred of exams. But eventually he was awarded a Doctor of Divinity from Hebrew Union College, proving him wrong.

As a Rabbi of a large congregation dad was always busy working, but all of us remember precious time when he prioritised his relationship with us individually. Monday was his day off and he would often take us out of school, one at a time, to spend the day with him. On those days we have memories of doing activities with dad like bowling and going out to lunch. If I was sick I remember he would rush home in the middle of the day still in his suit from whatever busy Rabbi activity he had been doing. He would have stopped off at the newsagent on his way and had for me a bag of magazines, comics and always his favourite chocolate, a Mars Bar.

Some of my favourite memories of dad the Rabbi were here in this synagogue. If babies would start crying in the service dad would go over and quietly take them from the struggling parent. The baby would then fall asleep in his arms while he continued the service. Rabbis are always really busy while running a service but dad would always take a moment for silent prayer. I have a strong memory of him sitting in his usual chair deep in meditative prayer in the middle of the service.

Apart from Mondays dad would also occasionally steal Wednesdays to go antique shopping. He loved hunting for antiques and second hand goods. I remember when he decided to learn how to bind books and how to reupholster furniture. His instinct was usually to try to repair the broken item, not replace it, although he willingly sought out the experts when he didn't have the skills. This love of reusing, repairing and sometimes hoarding has been passed on to us all.

When dad would suddenly have a free evening he would call out, who wants to go to the movies? And whichever child was home and free would go along with him. We all have memories of going to the movies with dad, whether it was at a local cinema, taking Shira up to the Blue Mountains for an Imax screening, or the Encore Cinema in Devonshire Street where he loved to watch the classics. Dad and I both fell in love with the film Casablanca and for my 16th birthday he rented out the Encore Cinema for me and my friends to watch that film. For my dad it was a dream come true. Another dream of dad's was to be on the radio. When Woody Allens Crimes & Misdemeanours came out in 1989 dad was invited to discuss the interfaith themes of the movie on radio. In the film Woody Allen takes his daughter to the movies and so dad brought me along to participate in the interview. I was 14 at the time.

Dad taking us weird and wonderful places was a regular occurrence. Mishi remembers her trip with him to New York to go to the first North American Conference of Rabbi's for Human Rights. She was the only person there not a Rabbi and dad was proud to have her there with him. Shira remembers dad taking her off to the mountains just to see the snow, she remembers skipping with him through the streets of France, eating marzipan. Ben remembers Shabbat mornings in Jerusalem when dad would take him to go and explore tiny synagogues in the Old City. And I remember accompanying him to the Bicentennial event at the Opera House, where dad and I had lunch with Prince Charles and Princess Diana.

There are so many stories of this larger than life man who could convince anyone to join him in whatever the latest dream was, bundle you into a huge hug when you were distressed, or impart words of wisdom in crucial moments that it turns out none of us can forget. So, from all four of us, the noisy kids in that house in Vivian Street, here are some of the life lessons we learnt from our dad:

- If you're having an ideological discussion and it gets heated, it's your ideas that are being attacked, not you. If someone leaves the discussion in tears, as inevitably will happen, it will be resolved quickly and with love.
- You are not your behaviour, you are always worthy of love and pride.
- Whatever you want to do, whether it's Aliyah at the age of 18 or multicoloured hair, he will not only give you his support, he will defend you to anyone who questions your decision.
- Always speak out if you see domestic violence, racism or sexism. Even if you're walking or driving past it on the street, even if you're going to be at personal risk, and even if it embarrasses your children, you should speak out.
- If you have a huge mouth an apple will take 2 bites to eat, and if you want a piece, it will come straight from that same huge mouth. Similarly half an orange can be turned into a makeshift kippah with a spoon.

Finally, in Mishi's words:

When he would focus on you, you were the whole world.

When he invested in you, you were limitless.

When he advocated for you, you were unstoppable.

And when he hugged you, you were completely enveloped in his love.

Thank you.

RABBI JOHN LEVI

WHERE CAN I BEGIN? ROBYN AND I ARE BEREFT. IT IS THE MOMENT WE FEAREWE MUST BEGIN, OBVIOUSLY, WITH DINA/DALE THE LOVE OF BRIAN'S LIFE.

IT WAS OBVIOUSLY QUITE SIMPLY A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN BECAUSE. BY SOME MIRACLE, THIS BOY FROM AUCKLAND AND THIS GIRL FROM SYDNEY MET IN CINCINNATI AND FELL IN LOVE. BRIAN WAS A STUDENT AT THE HEBREW UNION COLLEGE DALE HAD CHOSEN TO DO POST GRADUATE WORK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI.IT WAS BESHERRT.IT WAS A MARRIAGE, A PARTNERSHIP THAT TOOK THEM TO MELBOURNE, SYDNEY, MANCHESTER, JERUSALEM AND BACK TO SYDNEY.IT IS THE GEOGRAPHY OF A LOVE AFFAIR. BRIAN AND DINA GAVE THEIR CHILDREN WINGS TO FLY

BEN, MIM, SHIRAH AND MISHI AND THE GRANDCHILDREN ..WE MOURN WITH YOU. WE WEEP WITH YOU.

BRIAN WAS A VERY PRECIOUS PART OF THE LIFE OF OUR FAMILY. HE HOVERED BETWEEN BEING A CHOSEN ADOPTIVE BROTHER, A BELOVED COLLEAGUE, A FRIEND AND THE SOURCE OF CONSTANT INSPIRATION.

IT WAS HARDLY A SECRET. IN THE GOOD WEEKEND PUBLISHED ON 27 AUGUST 1994 THE AUSTRALIAN NEWSPAPER PUBLISHED A FULL PAGE ABOUT US I EXPLAINED " ANY CLERGYMAN GETS BATTERED PHYSICALLY . PEOPLE PROJECT THEIR HOPES AND FEARS ON TO YOU AND ITS VERY WEARING AND CAN BE A TERRIBLE TRAP AS SOME CLERGY CAN TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THAT ROLE. RABBI FOX HELPS ME TO DEFLATE PRETENSIONS-AS DO OUR WIVES AND CHILDREN WHO ARE OUR STERNEST CRITICS." BRIAN WAS MORE PRACTICAL. HE SAID "A FELLOW ONCE SAID TO ME: YOU TWO ARE DANGEROUS. YOU COULD DO ANYTHING TOGETHER. THANK GOODNESS YOU'RE RABBIS."

BRIAN WAS BORN IN LONDON IN THE MIDST OF THE BLITZ. HIS FATHER SERVED AS A SOLDIER IN NORTH AFRICA AND EUROPE.EAST LONDON WAS BOMBARDED AND BRIAN WAS SENT FOR SAFETY TO THE MAUD NATHAN JEWISH CHILDREN'S HOME. IT WAS A ROCKY BUT MEMORABLE BEGINNING TO LIFE. AT WARS END THE FAMILY MIGRATED TO NEW ZEALAND WHERE HIS FATHER BECAME A ROVING GOVERNMENT ADVISOR TO THE FARMING COMMUNITY AND BRIAN UNDOUBTEDLY INHERITED HIS FATHER'S LOVE OF NEW ZEALAND AND ITS PEOPLE.

T WAS 1959 AND I BECAME THE FIRST STUDENT RABBI OF TEMPLE SHALOM . HE CONGREGATION OWNED A BLOCK OF LAND AND A BLACKSMITH'S FORGE SO WE HIRED A HALL IN THE CITY.FOR THE HIGH HOLIDAYS . BRIAN'S FATHER WAS THE CANTOR, BRIAN'S BROTHER ROGER PLAYED THE HARMONIUM AND BRIAN AND I LED THE PRAYERS.HE WAS TOO GOOD TO LEAVE IN AUCKLAND.

AND SO EVERY SUMMER THEREAFTER BRIAN CAME TO AUSTRALIA TO STAY AT OUR HOME, JOIN IN OUR YOUTH CAMPS, MAKE A HOST OF FRIENDS, PAINT THE HOUSE, LOOK AFTER THE CHILDREN AS THEY CAME ALONG, LOOK AFTER THE DOGS, ANSWER THE PHONE , DRIVE THE RABBI'S SECRETARY MAD BY PUTTING ON A BIZARRE ACCENT EVERY TIME HE PHONED THE RABBI'S OFFICE...AND DESPITE EVERYTHING HE DECIDED TO BECOME A RABBI.THE FIRST NEW ZEALANDER TO BECOME AN ORDAINED RABBI.

IT WAS A LONELY PATH...A PIONEERING PATH..ESPECIALLY AS HIS PARENTS CHOSE TO HAVE A BROGEZ WITH THE CONGREGATION AND THE CONFLICT LITERALLY TORE THE TEENAGER APART AS HE STUDIED AT THE UNIVERSITY, CONDUCTED SERVICES AND CLASSES FOR THE TEMPLE AND

WORKED ON THE WATER FRONT PREPARING FOR HIS STUDENT LIFE IN AMERICA. HE LEFT CINCINNATI HAVING BEEN ORDAINED WITH A HOST OF FRIENDS ..BOTH STUDENTS AND FACULTY...AND MOST IMPORTANT WITH A WIFE.

RABBI BRIAN FOX BHL , MA AND DR DALE FOX ARRIVED IN MELBOURNE IN 1972 TO BECOME A MEMBER OF THE VICTORIAN UNION OF PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM AND THE RABBI OF THE LEO BAECK CENTRE IN THE SUBURB OF KEW. AT HIS FORMAL INDUCTION RABBI DR SANGER PERCEPTIVELY SAID "A GOOD RABBI SHARES THE JOY, THE SORROWS AND THE ANXIETY OF HIS PEOPLE ; HE IS ABOVE ALL A HUMAN BEING, A MENSCH" .BRIAN TRANSFORMED THE LEO BAECK CONGREGATION. HE WAS AN INTEGRAL OF THE EARLIEST YEARS OF THE KING DAVID SCHOOL. IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE THE OBSTACLES THAT WE ENCOUNTERED ALONG THE WAY.

THE LAST TIME BRIAN WAS IN MELBOURNE HE WAS SHOWN THE ENTRANCE GARDEN TO THE SCHOOL HALL WHICH HONOURS HIS NAME... WHEN BRIAN SAW IT HE WEPT. BRIAN HAD A TENDER HEART.. AND HE CARED INTENSELY ABOUT CHILDREN AND IN DUE TIME HE DISCOVERED THAT HE HAD BECOME AN EFFECTIVE FUND RAISER AND IN SYDNEY HE PUT INTO PRACTICE THE LESSONS HE HAD LEARNED IN MELBOURNE.

MANY OF US WILL REMEMBER THE DEDICATION OF THE EMANUEL SCHOOL. WITH TED WAXMAN AND BRIAN'S BELOVED COLLEAGUE CANTOR MICHAEL DEUTSCH SANG. BRIAN LED THE PRAYERS AND THE PRIME MINISTER, THE RIGHT HONOURABLE ROBERT HAWKE, BEGAN HIS SPEECH WITH THE UNFORGETTABLE WORDS "MY DEAR ARCHBISHOP FOX " ...SOMEHOW IT SEEMED RIGHT....

THE WORLD WAS CHANGING. WORDS WERE NO LONGER ENOUGH. RABBIS HAD TO BE MORE VISUAL. THE TWO OF US INVENTED THE OBJECT LESSON BARMITZVAH. THE CHILD WOULD STAND THERE ON THE PULPIT AND THE RABBI WOULD REVEAL AN OBJECT. A BICYCLE BELL, A EGG TIMER, A BOOK WITH BLANK PAGES AND BEST OF ALL A TALKING PARROT..A TOY PARROT THAT COULD FLAP ITS WINGS AND REPEAT THE LAST WORDS IT HAD HEARD. IT WAS SENSATIONAL. AND BECAUSE WE WERE IN KEW AND IN ST KILDA OR IN SYDNEY AND MELBOURNE WE COULD USE AND DEVELOP THE SAME OBJECT TO SUIT THE CHILD.

BRIAN WAS A GRADUATE OF THE HABONIM YOUTH MOVEMENT IN NEW ZEALAND SO HE KNEW HOW THINGS WORKED AND HE TURNED OUR CONGREGATIONAL YOUTH GROUP INTO NETZERITS A LONG STORY ...AND NETZER BECAME A JEWEL IN THE CROWN...WITH BRANCHES AROUND THE WORLD... BRIAN AND I WERE IN JERUSALEM TOGETHER AND WE NEEDED A SHALIACH FOR NETZER. WE WALKED INTO THE JEWISH AGENCY AND FOUND THE OFFICIAL WHO WAS IN CHARGE OF ALLOCATING YOUTH MOVEMENT EMISSARIES. HABONIM HAD A SHALIACH . BNAI AKIVA HAD A SHALIACH, BETAR HAD A SHALIACH....WE HAD , MEMBERS... WE FOUND OURSELVES SITTING IN AN OFFICE THAT WAS DOMINATED BY A HUGE PHOTOGRAPH OF MENACHEM BEGIN...WE EXPLAINED WHAT WE NEEDED TO A VERY UNFRIENDLY OFFICIAL...WE WERE GETTING NOWHERE....SUDDENLY TO MY HORROR I HEARD BRIAN SAY 'WELL WE ARE WASTING OUR TIME SPEAKING TO YOU. WE SHALL WALK OUT". THEY WERE THE MAGIC WORDS .SUDDENLY THE CLOUD LIFTED . ANGO SAXON MANNERS COULD ONLY GO SO FAR AND BRIAN WAS MUCH TOUGHER THAN I WAS. WE GOT OUR SHALIACH WE WERE IN BUSINESS.

WHEN IT CAME TIME TO MOVE FROM MELBOURNE TO WOOLAHRA WHICH IS A STORY ON ITS OWN, BRIAN CAME UP WITH BRILLIANT PLAN. WE KNEW THE DEPARTURE WOULD BE PAINFUL. THE CONGREGATION HAD TAKEN BRIAN AND DALE TO THEIR COLLECTIVE HEARTS. HOW COULD THEY JUST SAY GOODBYE ? SO BRIAN INVENTED THE FOX ROAST. EVERYONE COULD STAND UP AND COMPLAIN ABOUT HIM. IN HIS PRESENCE . IT WAS A WONDERFUL RELEASE OF TENSION AND SORROW. OLD WOUNDS WERE HEALED. PARTING BECAME SWEET SORROW.

BRIAN WAS DELIGHTED TO DISCOVER THAT HE HAD BECOME A FUND RAISER PAR EXCELLENCE. BRIAN WAS ALWAYS PERSISTENT. OUR MENTOR. WAS THE REMARKABLE ISADOR MAGID WHO PATIENTLY EXPLAINED TO US THAT PEOPLE ARE PLEASE D TO BE ABLE TO BE GENEROUS.

BRIAN'S RABBINIC ARRIVAL IN MANCHESTER WAS A MOVE I NEVER CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD. IT CERTAINLY WAS A MEASURE OF TRUST IN HIS COLLEAGUE RABBI JEFFREY KAMINS.HIS COMMUNAL WORK HAD BEEN HONOURED IN AUSTRALIA WITH AN AM..HIS RABBINIC WORK WITH A DOCTOR OF DIVINITY.

IN MANCHESTER HIS ARRIVAL WAS AKIN TO A BOMBSHELL. MOST ENGLISH RABBIS WERE WELL BEHAVED, QUIET AND POLITE. SUDDENLY THEY FOUND THEMSELVES WITH A RABBI WHO NEVER FAILED TO CHALLENGE THEM..TO TELL FUNNY STORIES. TO SPEAK PLAINLY ABOUT ISRAEL AND THE

ZIONIST DREAM.. IT WAS ALL PART OF PLAN TO MOVE TO JERUSALEM.
THE SYDNEY PART OF THIS STORY WILL NOW BE TOLD...

Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins

It was a cold winter's day in February 1989 as I sat in the morning service at HUC-JIR, where my professor of commentaries, Rabbi Ed Goldman was sitting next to me. A visiting rabbi from Australia was giving the D'var Torah that day and Rabbi Goldman said to me, I think you should meet him, I think you would get along well. Rabbi Brian Fox was visiting the United States with the president of Temple Emanuel, as it was known in those days, looking for an assistant rabbi. I had California in my sights, no intention of anywhere beyond that, but thought I had nothing to lose in a conversation. Now interviews of graduating rabbis with congregations in the United States require power suit and an ability to tolerate arrogance and gamesmanship from the interviewers. So, the next day, with nothing at stake, I showed up in a pair of cords and a jumper (I think I called it a sweater in those days) and had the most delightful conversation with Brian and Heinz.

Brian was warm, engaging, genuine and open. The interview was a proper conversation among equals of what were the congregation's needs and what were my interests. There was absolutely no game playing or BS. The next night they called me from New York and invited me to come to Sydney in April for an interview. It was suddenly real, and I was open to the opportunity. A couple of months later I came for a magical few days in Sydney where I was absolutely wined and dined by the community under Brian's guidance. I was the beneficiary of some good luck – the previous year the community had brought out Gary Robuck for an interview and he had chosen to take a position as assistant rabbi at North Shore Temple Emanuel in Chatswood. They gave me an offer I could not refuse – although I almost did.

Upon return to Los Angeles I realised how far Sydney was from my family in Los Angeles – especially in the days before internet, when a phone call cost two dollars a minute – and the uprooting signified by the move. But I told my then partner Bobette, who had not come with me for the interview in Sydney, of this wonderful community, where the senior rabbi wanted to give me as his assistant not just the menial jobs, but every opportunity that existed within the rabbinate – from education, to pastoral care, to equal opportunity in the pulpit. Brian believed in leadership by empowerment, and it's a model I've tried to emulate. But what impressed Bobette most, and what sealed our decision to come was the following incident: after the Friday night service, some visitors from overseas introduced themselves, and immediately Brian invited them home to Shabbat dinner – there was always more room at their table, in their home, Dinah and the four children – Ben, Mim, Shirah and Mishi -

always able to accommodate. Brian lived the values of Judaism with sincerity and enthusiasm. He loved and could be loved in a free way, able to relate to everyone.

Brian had so many passions, first and foremost his family. It's hard to put the others in order – there was Jewish education, Israel, interfaith and communal affairs. Even before he had started at Emanuel in the final months of 1979, his CV read "Over the years Rabbi Fox has worked extensively both with aged and youth as well as doing interfaith work in Melbourne where he was Chief Minister of the Leo Baeck Centre. He was Guest Lecturer at the Universities and Theological Colleges both in New Zealand and Australia and in Victoria on the State Zionist Council, B'nai Brith and the Youth Council of Victoria."

Soon after his arrival here he established a Youth Committee, which within months had morphed into Netzer, already holding a sports day in April and Netzer Camps and a leadership program happening in May. At the same time, at the April 1980 AGM Brian had put forth the idea of a Liberal Jewish Day School. He had only been here for a few months, and already Netzer had been born and the groundwork for Emanuel School laid. Three years later, in July, 1983, The Emanuel School was officially opened.

At the synagogue, Brian demonstrated unbelievable energy and drive. Among other things, within his first year here he had introduced the new Siddur, Gates of Prayer, and proposed the adoption of a new machzor, Gates of Teshuvah; advocated for greater inclusion of women in services, including the adoption of a Bat Mitzvah service for girls instead of group confirmation; introduced the congregation's first ever Selichot service and a second day Rosh HaShana service as a children's service; implemented a once a month 6:15pm Friday night family service, and hosted with Dinah over 200 people in their home to celebrate Sukkot, something they did annually, in addition to their weekly Shabbat hosting.

Outside the synagogue, Brian was always involved with communal activity, interfaith work and social justice projects. In 1984, the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies formed a Public Relations Sub-committee to bring Christians and Jews together in the same forum; Rabbi Brian Fox was the first chair of that committee, along with the Community Relations and Advisory Committee. He was also heavily active and at times President of the NSW Council of Christians and Jews, which he helped create at the end of 1988. A few months before, in May of that year, the Board of Deputies under the guidance of its then president, Professor Graham de Vahl Davis, proposed that the Jewish community join the Ethnic Communities Council, reversing a previous position that Jews were only a religion and not an ethnicity; Rabbi Fox was one of the original four Board representatives to the ECC and active for many years. That same year, two members of NSTE, Tom and Eva Rona died tragically in a car accident, their will left funds for the preservation of Aboriginal culture. So began, with Tranby college, the Rona-Tranby oral history project that supports an oral history program for Indigenous Australians, in which Brian played an active role.

Brian was not only involved with interfaith and ethnic affairs, but actively worked to bridge the gap with the Orthodox rabbinate. He worked tirelessly for communal harmony, particularly in Israel defence and advocacy. However, he was never shy to come forward and protect liberal values as they were known in that day – causing controversy in the 1980s when he endorsed the possibility of some forms of euthanasia, and he always strongly

advocated the right of Cantor Michael Deutsch to participate equally in Shoah remembrance activities, unfortunately strongly opposed by the Orthodox community. He always stood up for what he believed in, no matter what the risk.

With all this accomplishment, including the hiring of Rabbi Jacqueline Ninio in 1998, Brian decided that it was safe to hand over the congregation to the team of the time: Rabbi Ninio, Cantor Deutsch, Cantor Toltz and me. After his sabbatical spent in Manchester in 1999, Brian decided to return to England from where he hailed. Before he departed here there was one more Fox roast, and then he moved on. He loved the challenge of beginning again and building up a community where there was a need, bringing his experience, enthusiasm and leadership to Cheshire Reform Congregation in South Manchester.

Once again with his dynamic energy he turned his attention to interfaith work, with both Christians and Muslims, running a weekly religious studies discussion group at Mishi's school with a preponderance of Muslim students, teaching on a monthly basis a group of nuns in Wales, and more. He also travelled to towns outlying Manchester on a Saturday afternoon, gathering isolated Jewish people together for an hour of Torah study, discussion and singing, and the meal of Seudah Shlishit. He created as always programs to engage youth, young adults and the elderly; he continued to engage in Holocaust remembrance, communal activities and Israel advocacy. With his love of music, he hired an exceptional music director in Manchester who helped transform the services at the synagogue. And of course, with his irrepressible energy, determination, vision and power of persuasion, he spearheaded a successful campaign to erect a new synagogue for the community. When Rabbi Fox arrived at the synagogue they had two demountable buildings. When he left they had a beautiful building for learning and worship. He also left them with amazing stories, experiences and a deep love for him as well.

But Brian always wanted to make aliya, and in 2012 he was able to fulfil his lifelong dream and move to Jerusalem. However, family eventually took precedence, and in 2015, he and Dinah decided to move back to Sydney where most of their children had resettled, eventually all coming back, grandchildren too, the whole family in the same place again for the first time since the 1990s. This has allowed all of them to be together on a weekly basis, as well as for festivals and family occasions. It has given us the opportunity to enjoy having Rabbi Fox back at Emanuel, a faithful participant in prayer, learning and other activities nearly every Shabbat and so many other times as well, just months ago celebrating the Yamim Noraim and Sukkot with him. His Parkinson's caused him to deteriorate, but even in these last days he continued to sing Hebrew songs with his family by his side.

The synagogue was Brian's home – he loved it whether as a serving rabbi or as a congregant – for the prayer, the community, and the simple joy of engaging with other human beings.

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Rabbi Danny Schiff

He is gone.

Brian – the irrepressible, unforgettable whirlwind of enthusiasm and energy whom we loved, has breathed his last.

And we are bereft.

It is at moments such as this that we always looked to him for comfort and consolation. And he never let us down. How many times did he walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death, holding us, hugging us, saying what needed to be said? In our darkest hours, he was always there – the reassuring presence who helped us through, and who pointed us towards the light. He would never give in to voices of pessimism or be beaten down by sorrow. How deeply we miss his spirit and his presence already...

And on our happiest days, at times of greatest joy, who could celebrate with us like Brian? His exuberance, his sheer love of life, his genuine delight at each and every simcha, lifted us higher. Brian knew how to laugh, and he knew how to cry, and he knew how to communicate his love for people, and he did all three without hesitation – with each one of us. Brian was one of those rare individuals who was equally effective at connecting with older people and young, and everybody in between. Indeed, when you were with Brian, he had the ability to make you feel like you were the center of his concern, and that your story was what mattered to him most ... because it did.

Brian was always himself. He was utterly genuine. He didn't alter his words or calibrate his reactions to try to be something he was not. Sometimes it got him into trouble, but, in truth, it was one of the secrets of his undeniable appeal. He stood for what he stood for. He expressed himself the way he expressed himself. Unashamedly, and with power and conviction. And what he stood for, and the way he conveyed it, was simply inspirational.

Let me state this as plainly as I can: I am a committed Jew today because of Brian Fox. I was a teenager when he came into my life. Without him, I would barely have had an interest in Jewishness, let alone become a rabbi. It was Brian who lit the spark of Judaism within me. It was Brian who fanned that spark into a flame of passion. Were this just my personal story it would not be worth recalling, but the truth is that my story is the story of hundreds of others... hundreds of others who became passionate about Jewish life and its beauty, because of Brian's passion... hundreds of others who devoted their lives to Jewish causes because of Brian's dedication... hundreds of others whose love for Israel swelled because of Brian's love for Israel... hundreds of others who took up the cause of Jewish day school education because Brian made the case so eloquently... hundreds of others who became better human beings because Brian called upon us to be better human beings.

It is not enough to speak of how many lives he touched. Brian didn't just move people – he moved people to take action to transform themselves and to build vibrant communities of learning and practice. Many rabbis are good at talking. But Brian was a doer. He used his amazing sermonic gifts to activate people, and he was the rare rabbi whose leadership created transformational institutions that will stand the test of time. It wasn't always easy. The path wasn't always smooth. But Brian was persistent and resilient and ever hopeful about what tomorrow would bring.

He is mourned today by the three communities in which he left his mark. In Melbourne, where he gave new life and dynamism to the Leo Baeck Centre, was the unstoppable force behind the founding of the King David School, and laid the groundwork for the establishment of Netzer. In Sydney, where he spent two decades strengthening the Emanuel Synagogue, creating and building the Emanuel School, and served in leadership positions on the ECAJ, the Zionist Council, and the Council of Christians and Jews. And in Manchester, where he roused the community to build a brand new synagogue, and initiated a host of vibrant programs.

Wherever he served, Brian became a builder of the Jewish future. And he was such an effective builder because he was also a good fundraiser. What was it that made him so good at getting people to give money to worthy causes? Brian understood that fundraising is all about relationships, that people give to somebody they know and trust and like and believe in and who can present a worthy and uplifting project. We knew Brian. We trusted him. We believed in him. We liked him. And it didn't hurt that he was very funny, always with a joke at the ready, that he was unendingly mischievous – perpetually on the edge of saying something risky – that he was compassionate, and caring, unendingly

warm, generous and kind. Yes, Brian was charismatic and magnetic and charming. It was hard to say “no” to Brian. Small wonder that he was treasured by numerous colleagues and that he had many dear friends around the world.

Brian enjoyed late night conversations about God and theology and all things Jewish. He loved debate and discussion and wrestling with issues. He stood for open inquiry and welcomed differing viewpoints. For Brian, life was filled with the God of Israel, the people of Israel, and the land of Israel. He dreamed of making aliyah, a dream he was able to fulfill from 2012 to 2015. He was an avid collector of Jewish art and Jewish books, particularly antiques which he delighted in discovering. For Brian, Judaism wasn't a job. It suffused his life; his commitment was total.

And there was another commitment that was also total: his commitment to Dina and the family. Dina, through the decades he loved you more and more. You grounded him. You were his rock of certainty. He was so proud to have you at his side. You shared so many wonderful moments together, and you gave him strength and courage when life was tough. He knew just how lucky he was.

Ben, Mim, Shira, and Mishi, you and the grandchildren were the light of his life. He spoke of each of you with such satisfaction and contentment. You made him feel complete. How natural it was that the family would come back together again in Sydney over the last several years. Even though he loved Israel, it was more important to live out his life near all of you.

Every Friday night when they were growing up, Brian would bless each of his children around the Shabbat table. In fact, a friend of Ben's wrote these words: “It is because of your father that I bless my children at the Shabbat table, [just] like he used to do to you...”

There are, of course, no coincidences in Jewish life. This is the week that we read VaYechi, that part of the Torah that tells us about the very first blessing of children in Jewish history, and how we should continue the practice from generation to generation. And Jewish tradition compares a teacher to a parent, because a teacher also prepares us for how to face life.

And so today we know this: Brian didn't just bless his own children every Shabbat. Through all the years, he blessed us all. He blessed us with his blessings. He blessed us with his teaching. He blessed us with his wisdom. He blessed us with his passion. He blessed us with his humanity. He blessed us with his being. He blessed us with his exceptional erudition and wit, with his charisma and his love.

We all say farewell to our cherished teacher, our beloved rabbi, our friend. We were blessed to have had you in our lives.

Rabbi Ninio:

Rabbi Fox was a remarkable man and a force for goodness and compassion in this world. He was passionate about Judaism, learning and he inspired so many of us with his energy, enthusiasm, wisdom and impossible optimism. He was dynamic and believed anything was possible and when you were with him, he helped you believe that too. His loyalty was unwavering and he gave so many of us the wings to fly with his support and love. He was deeply spiritual, a builder, a dreamer and he set the foundations for the Jewish future. I saw him guide and nurture so many, comfort and counsel, he was empathic, emotional. He was generous, giving freely to all in need and had a heart which was open and warm. And none of us will ever forget his humour, the cheeky twinkle in his eyes, his wonderfully terrible jokes. But for all his love and devotion to community, his family were his greatest passion. He loved them fiercely and his pride in each of his children, their achievements and the people they have become in this world was unparalleled. He adored Dinah and the love which shone in his eyes when he looked at her increased with every year. They had the most wonderful, deep soul connection which was moving in its intensity and inspiring. My heart goes out to all of you in your deep grief at his loss too soon.

Rabbi Fox was a luminary, his light shone brightly and strong and the world is a little darker without his presence. May we all continue to shine his light with our words, our memories and as we continue to be inspired by the man he was, the way he lived his life and the blessings he brought to us all.