

The book of Joshua

At 96, Rabbi Joshua O. Haberman still believes the future depends on Jewishly educated adults

DECEMBER 9, 2015 BY DAVID HOLZEL

Rabbi Joshua O. Haberman was not thinking about what he would do after he retired, when a congregant from Washington Hebrew Congregation whom Haberman barely knew phoned and asked him to lunch.

It was the early 1980s and Haberman, then in his 60s, had led the Reform congregation since 1969. As the two men ate, the congregant said that he would like to do something for the synagogue.

“Not wanting to embarrass the gentleman with a suggestion beyond his means,” as Haberman put it recently, he asked the man if he would be willing to furnish a wall of bookshelves for the congregation’s library. The man saw that his rabbi had misunderstood him.

“He said, ‘I’d like to write you a check for a million dollars,’” Haberman recalled.

There were only two conditions: Haberman must never reveal the man’s identity, and that the rabbi must use the money “for what you think would do the most good for the Jewish people.”

In those days, Haberman was “obsessed” with the “vast amount of ignorance” of Jews about Judaism and the “devastating loss of young people after their bar mitzvah.”

He concluded that childhood was the wrong time to teach Jews about Judaism beyond some Bible stories, and that they could only study Jewish texts deeply and meaningfully as they moved toward adulthood.

So Haberman, who retired as rabbi from Washington Hebrew Congregation in 1986, took the million-dollar check and started the Foundation of Jewish Studies, a nonsectarian organization offering scholarly lecture series and tours that would “appeal to the sophisticated Jew.”

Thirty years later, Haberman, 96, sits in the sunny living room of the Rockville high-rise where he lives with his wife, Maxine. They spend part of the year in Israel. He is a courteous man, his manners influenced perhaps by his early life in interwar Vienna.

Haberman has been closely involved with the foundation since the beginning. And last month the foundation honored him by naming its signature lecture series “The Joshua O. Haberman Distinguished Scholar Series” at an event where he retold the story of the anonymous benefactor.

When Haberman started the foundation, “most synagogues didn’t have adult education budgets,” said Lauren B. Strauss, the foundation’s director. “He wanted something that could be used by the whole community. It was Jewishly ecumenical.”

It’s clear from Haberman’s writings and speeches, and from spending time with him, that Judaism for him is an intellectual pursuit first.

“You can’t believe in something unless you know something about it,” he said. This explains his obsession over education. And it also explains his love of study, of teaching at area universities and of writing books. In his latest, *Facing the Crises of Life*, he recommends looking to Psalm 55, where it says, “Throw your burden on God,” as a way of relieving stress.



RABBI JOSHUA O. HABERMAN SAYS THAT CHILDHOOD IS THE WRONG TIME TO TEACH JEWS ABOUT JUDAISM. PHOTO BY DAVID HOLZEL

Rabbi with open arms

His birthplace, Vienna, was a city of 2 million people, including 200,000 “very assimilated” Jews. Haberman recalls the “torments of boredom” he endured as a boy in religious school.

In his speech to the Foundation for Jewish Studies last month, Haberman gave two reasons why adult Jewish education is important. One is that it is a way to cope with internalized anti-Semitism. (Asked in an interview what remains with him from growing up in Austria, he said, “The viciousness of anti-Semitism. I was constantly exposed.”)

The other reason is that Jewish education is a way to reverse “the deep crisis of faith with which post-Holocaust Jews must deal,” he said. “Because the fact of the matter is that Jews are in danger of becoming a Godless people.”

Haberman was studying at the University of Vienna and the city’s rabbinical seminary in 1938, when German tanks rolled into Austria and annexed it to the Third Reich. He escaped to the United States, where Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary in Cincinnati, had invited him to complete his studies.

Ordained in 1945, he led congregations in Mobile, Ala., Buffalo, N.Y., and Trenton, N.J., before coming to Washington.

In 1969, Washington Hebrew Congregation was a bastion of classical Reform. “It was highly assimilated,” Haberman said. “It stood out as anti-Zionist or non-Zionist. The leadership told me that they expected changes.”

“Josh came to a congregation that was classical Reform,” affirmed Rabbi Bruce Lustig, Washington Hebrew Congregation’s current senior rabbi. “He made it mainstream.”

“I moved it from assimilation to strong Jewish affirmation, with a Hebraicized religious school, a pro-Zionist [orientation],” Haberman said.

He also wanted to establish relationships with rabbinic colleagues, regardless of what type of Judaism they belonged to. It was an approach that Washington attorney Paul Berger, a longtime friend, said was unusual.

“I can’t underscore the importance of the senior rabbi of Washington Hebrew Congregation opening his arms to the community,” said Berger, who worked with Haberman on the Foundation for Jewish Studies and what became the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School. “He’s dedicated to the unity of the Jewish people.”

“He encouraged me when I was starting out, when we could have been seen as miles apart,” said Rabbi Shmuel Kaplan, director of Chabad Lubavitch of Maryland. He said the two of them met at an event at the Jewish Community Center in the early 1970s. “I was a newcomer.”

Haberman said that Kaplan asked for assistance. “I said, what can I do? I’m a Reform rabbi.” But Haberman nevertheless used his network of contacts to find a donor to support Kaplan.

Warm words for Christianity

Haberman has also contributed to improving relations between the Jewish and Christian communities.

“I see Christianity as a Jewish sect,” he said. “I believe eventually there will be unification. It will take a while, but there’s no rush.”

In a 1993 interview with the *Catholic Crisis Magazine*, Haberman spoke of ecumenism as “based upon advances of scholarship which have brought Jews and Christians to a profound meeting of the minds, still realizing their important differences. We recognize now many common traits and items of faith central to both Judaism and Christianity.”

He said the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the United States “is matched by a comparable resurgence certainly within the Jewish faith. The common element is a rejection, finally, of the excesses of modernism and secularism. ... Evangelicals were among the first to sound the alarm and say that this is a moral problem, too. I agree, as a Jew.”

Is Islam ready to unify with Judaism and Christianity?

“Unfortunately not yet,” Haberman told WJW. “Today Islam is led by its militants, although the vast majority of Muslims don’t want warfare.”

But Haberman is a patient man. And he’s not one to close a book. “You cannot write a finished history of the Jews,” he told the audience at the Foundation for Jewish Studies. “The reason is that Jewish learning always is ‘to be continued.’”

“His energy at 96 is boundless,” Berger said. “It’s focused and seeks to be constructive.” Haberman doesn’t worry about running out of ideas for books, classes and sermons.

“I’ve been a rabbi for 71 years.” Haberman said. “There’s always new material.”

