

RABBI WALTER JACOB



Rabbi Walter Jacob passed away at his home in Pittsburgh, PA, on October 20, 2024, at the age of 94. Dr. Jacob was born on March 13, 1930, in Augsburg, Germany, the 17th generation of a 400-year rabbinical dynasty. His father, Ernest Israel Jacob (1899–1974), was district rabbi of Augsburg and was deported to Dachau concentration camp for several months after Kristallnacht in 1938. His

grandfather, Benno Jacob (1862–1945), was considered one of the great biblical commentators of liberal Judaism.

With the help of American relatives, his family (Walter, his father Ernest, mother Annette Loewenberg Jacob, and brother Herbert) was able to flee Nazi Germany to London in 1939, and immigrated to the USA the following year. In 1943, the family settled in Missouri. Walter received his B.A. from Drury College (1950), was ordained a rabbi, and received a Master of Hebrew Letters (1955) and a doctorate (1961) from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, OH. Beginning in 1955, and with the exception of 2 years (1955-57), serving as an Air Force chaplain in the Philippines, Dr. Jacob spent his entire, lengthy rabbinate at the storied Rodef Shalom Congregation in Pittsburgh (founded in 1856), where he progressed from Assistant to Associate to Senior Rabbi (succeeding the legendary Solomon B. Freehof in 1966 and for the next 30 years), and finally (until his death) to Rabbi Emeritus and Senior Scholar. To all his constituencies at home, nationally, and internationally, especially in Germany, Rabbi Jacob was recognized for his rare combination of intellect, compassion, and pastoral care. His lengthy tenure at Rodef Shalom provided him the opportunity to serve multiple generations (as many as five) of the same families. His dry sense of humor and the twinkle in his eye invited both congregants and colleagues to turn to him for guidance, support, and inspiration. All too rare in today's polarized world, he embraced others even as they had different perspectives from his own.

Rabbi Jacob's influence was felt far beyond Pittsburgh. From 1992 to 1994, he served as President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and from 1990 to 1994 as Vice President of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, the largest Jewish organization worldwide. He was also an overseer of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, chairman of the Publications Committee of Hebrew Union College Press (1976-1999), and chairman of the Associated American Jewish Museums.

Throughout his life, Dr. Jacob sought to combine tradition and renewal. He was particularly committed to making Halakhah (Jewish Law) relevant for Reform Jews. From 1967-1990, he chaired the Responsa Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, helping to shape the future of the Reform movement in the U.S. and beyond. In 1991, he co-founded and became the first chairman of the Solomon Freehof Institute of Progressive Halakhah. He edited three volumes of Reform responsa, a small fraction of the total of 43 books and over 1,200 learned essays, sermons, and articles, which he authored.

Also important to Rabbi Jacob was interfaith work. Through his book, *Christianity Through Jewish Eyes*, and as an Adjunct Professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary from 1968 to 1974, he became a prominent voice in Jewish-Christian dialogue. From 1981 to 1985, he was president of the Religious Education Association of America. He formed close relationships with Pittsburgh's Catholic bishops and other religious leaders.

In 1958, Walter Jacob married Hamburg-born Irene Gitta Loewenthal, who also had several rabbis among her ancestors. For the next 54 years, until Irene's death in 2012, the two were inseparable. The couple had three children, Claire Helene, Kenneth Gabriel, and Daniel Benjamin, all of whom predeceased their parents. Dr. Jacob is survived by nieces and nephews from the United States, Israel, and elsewhere.

Rodef Shalom's Biblical Botanical Garden, designed by Irene, opened in 1986, and enthusiastically cultivated by the Jacobs and many volunteers, is the largest of its kind in North America. Dr. Jacob shared his wife's passion for horticulture and, following her death, he worked tirelessly to ensure that the Garden endures as a loving and living memorial to Irene. Also shared by the Jacobs was a love of classical music, art, live theater, the outdoors and travel. On one trip, Walter, lacking any rodeo experience, fell off an ostrich, but recovered sufficiently to lead High Holy Days services while sporting a cast.

Much of the last third of Rabbi Jacob's life was devoted to helping rebuild postwar German Jewry. On a visit to that country in 1996, he realized that there was not a single rabbinical seminary for the rapidly growing Jewish community. This was the impetus for him to found, in 1999, the Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam. Its first three "made in Germany" rabbis were ordained in 2006 and they have been followed by dozens of other graduates. Although he felt a deep bond with all those who had lost family members in the Holocaust, Dr. Jacob always believed that more was needed than grief and mourning. On the 75th anniversary of the start of WWII, in 2014, he said: "We are realists-memories haunt us, just like the horrors of our time-but we will never be pessimists. Even on this day of dark memories, we look to a bright future." The following year, when German Chancellor Angela Merkel accepted the Abraham Geiger Prize from him in 2015, she emphasized "what a great gift it is that there is once again a diverse and rich Jewish life in Germany."

Walter Jacob was recognized for his achievements in too many ways to mention them all: honorary doctorates from Hebrew Union College and Drury College; an honorary professorship from the State of Brandenburg; Commander of the Equestrian Order of St. Gregory the Great by Pope John Paul II; the Israel Jacobson Prize from the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany in 2003; naming of the Abraham Geiger College in Potsdam as the "Walter Jacob Building"; honorary membership in the Liberal Rabbinical Association of Germany; the Grand Cross of the Order of the Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany; and the Pursuer of Peace Award from his own Rodef Shalom Congregation.

Dr. Jacob's 2018 biographer, Eric Lidji, characterized Walter as a leader who achieved great things with humility and patience. The Rabbi himself once said that he wanted to "create and think of a Jewish world that links us to the past but is ready to embrace a future that we cannot yet imagine."

For all his efforts to create a better world, Rabbi Jacob has earned the right to eternal rest. May his memory be for a blessing.

Services at Rodef Shalom Temple, 4905 Fifth Avenue (at Morewood), on Tuesday, October 22, 2024, at 1 PM. NO prior visitation. Interment at West View Cemetery. Contributions may be made to the Rodef Shalom Biblical Botanical Garden, 4905 Fifth Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15213. Arrangements entrusted to **RALPH SCHUGAR CHAPEL, INC.**

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