

RABBI W. GUNTHER PLAUT, z'l
HOLY BLOSSOM TEMPLE
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In the first chapter of the Second Book of Samuel, when David learns of the death of Saul and Jonathan, he proclaims, "They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions".

And two chapters later when David learns of the death of Avner, he declares to his soldiers, and to all of Israel; "Know well that a Prince and a great man of Israel has died this day".

W. Gunther Plaut, father and husband, son and grandfather, brother and uncle; eminent man of letters; a rabbi of the word and the deed, was swift like the eagle, strong like the lion. He was a prince and a great man of Israel, and now he has died.

The eagle soars above all, the lion is mighty on land. One is master of the skies, the other will never yield the ground. Each is esteemed by the Bible, one bearing the next generation on its wings, the other a symbol of pride and courage.

Moreinu HaRav, W. Gunther Plaut was our teacher, our rabbi. He soared above us, scoping out our history as Jews. And, he stood his ground, reminding Jews of our responsibilities born of that history. Eagle and lion, Rabbi Plaut embodied grace and power, the privileges and sorrows we've known, no less, the obligations incumbent on the fortunate.

Holy Blossom Temple felt that he was ours, and rightly so. But we also knew that he wasn't ours alone. From the first, Gunther Plaut was a man of the world and so he would always be. A middle-European driven by the gathering storm of extremism into the arms of America, he became a patriot twice-fold, first in love with America, then enamoured of Canada.

He knew how to adapt to the new and to embrace the many. A rabbi to his congregations, in Chicago and St. Paul, finally in Toronto, Rabbi Gunther Plaut was a man of the larger community: As activist, animator, spokesman, and leader. Many claimed him as friend and as moving spirit -- no wonder the lamentations in quarters near and far these past few days.

Moreinu HaRav: Gunther Plaut was foremost our teacher of Torah. In his hands the Bible opened itself up to those who had put it down, his elucidations making a complex text alive with meaning.

He loved, Rabbi Plaut did, to teach and to preach -- and he did so as few have or will. With verve and vigour, with substance and style he held us -- his congregation, his rabbinic colleagues, his community — in his (intellectual) hand.

For this was a most serious man, one whose inner world was sustained and stirred by learning; a rabbi who brought the ideas and intellectual excitement of his rabbinic forbearers to the congregation and beyond.

He was a teacher par excellence, most often a preacher without parallel.

It is of such a rabbi that the tradition has conceived the notion of a *Rav Muvhak*, one's distinct rabbi, one's primary teacher. Such a teacher -- his presence, his spirit, his mind -- shines forth a clear light, illuminating the way, the path one should walk, even how one should think.

For many Rabbi Gunther Plaut was such a *Rav Muvhak*. He taught out of his biography and out of the story of the Jews. He taught out of the Book, the Torah which he made his and ours. He taught as the Senior Rabbi of this congregation, and as our Senior Scholar. He taught out of his writings and activism. He taught from the bima, the classroom, the lecture hall, the rally platform. Always, the spirit of this *Rav Muvhak* shone through: a bright light of intelligence, experience, Torah learning.

Rabbi Plaut instructed about living and dying. About how to live as a Jew in the modern world. About the centrality of the State of Israel for the Jews. He preached responsibilities to one's own, and no less, to others. He lived what he spoke: for Gunther Plaut, the word was the deed, for he knew the texts of the Jews as he did the Jews.

He had faith but he understood those without. He was a liberal Jew at one with traditionalists; a European who made North America his home; a Jew in dialogue with the Christian, the Muslim, the Sikh, the Hindu and the religiously unhoused. He wrote many books and played many sports. Gunther Plaut uniquely reached across many divides. And he did so out of his theology.

He wrote:

“I believe I was created as a Jew to be God's tool. I believe that my purpose on earth is to serve not only my people, but to serve humanity and do so as a Jew. Others may see only themselves and their goals, private and national. We Jews see our goals as more than private goals.”

This public man served the Jews and humanity out of his personal experience and that of his people's story. He did so with distinction and urgency. His achievements, his bridging of divides -- social and religious, ethnic and racial -- were born of his and our past. Gunther Plaut brought pride to his congregation and his community, the public he sought to serve.

But ultimately he belonged singularly to his family. To Jonas and Selma (Muti) Plaut; to his late brother Walter and his family; most of all to Elizabeth, she who made Gunther a

rabbi of both word and deed, she who was his anchor, this warm, intelligent, no-nonsense common sense woman; and to Judith, Jonathan and Carol, who cared for both parents with unflagging loyalty and the fiercest of protection; and he belonged to Daniel and Amy, Deborah and David; to Steven and Jeffrey.

The Rabbis of Old, Rabbi Plaut's teachers and ours, took note of these words in that love poem, the Song of Songs: "The lips of those that are asleep, they move gently."

Which they, the Rabbis, took to mean, "His lips move from a place of eternal rest and speak to us through the book."

The eagle has landed, the lion has lain down, but *Moreinu HaRav*, W. Gunther Plaut will long speak through the Book -- the Torah of his life, the Torah of his teaching.

Family and Friends, Congregation and Community, a Prince, a great man of Israel, has now died. We are sad and impoverished, yet we are grateful and buoyed: the man, our rabbi is gone, but his Torah will long live. May his memory and his life be for a blessing.