

Rabbi Jacob Halpern z"l (1924-2018)

Rabbi Jacob Halpern was one of the greatest leaders of the Jewish Community in the world in the 2nd half of the 20th century and he was the personal mentor of nearly 1,000 Jewish community leaders. Rabbi Halpern was not defined by the fact that his parents were murdered when he was a teenager or that he was a Holocaust survivor of Auschwitz, Plaszow and Mauthausen. Rabbi Halpern was never a victim, rather he proactively defined his life after liberation from concentration camp by quickly becoming a Rabbi, studying at Yeshiva University despite little knowledge of English, becoming founder and principal of Hollis Hills Jewish Center within 5 years of liberation, teaching at the Yeshiva of Flatbush, being assistant director at Camp Masad for ten years, a Hebrew speaking camp in the Pocono Mountains, becoming principal of Jamaica Jewish Center, simultaneously founding, with his wife Gilda Halpern, Camp Columbia and Mid-Island Hebrew Day School, a Jewish camp and Jewish Day School that changed the lives and Jewish community for thousands of Jewish students, many of whom are today's leaders of the American Jewish community, then made Aliyah to live in the Holy Land, all by age 45. In Israel, Rabbi Halpern's first job was the director of Machon Greenberg, the premier teacher's institute for teaching hundreds of teachers from North America and South America to return to their home countries to teach Hebrew and Judaism. Rabbi Jacob and Gilda Halpern returned to the US briefly for 3 years to be principal and curriculum coordinator at Beit Shraga, a Hebrew day school in Albany, New York before returning to Israel where Rabbi Halpern served as the executive director of the global education department of the Jewish National Fund headquartered in Jerusalem, from where he visited Jewish Hebrew day schools in more than 40 countries to show them how to create and grow the best Jewish student programs in the Diaspora and become essential integral parts of their communities, just as he did himself in so many communities. Before retirement, Rabbi Halpern and his wife Gilda became principal and curriculum coordinator of one more Jewish day school, the Eliyahu Academy in Louisville, Kentucky, tripling the size of the school within a short number of years. After formal retirement, Rabbi Halpern taught classes in Elderhostel and at local synagogues in Southern Florida as well as contributed lectures and fellowship with clerical colleagues from around the US at the Interfaith Retreat every summer at Wild Acres in North Carolina.



One can summarize Rabbi Jacob Halpern's life by saying that he was a Talmudic scholar who personally mentored 1,000 Jewish community leaders, was a Rabbi's Rabbi, a devoted husband of 69 years to Gilda Halpern, his equal in Jewish community stature, loving father of Marc and David Halpern, dedicated grandfather of Ronen, Tal, Jodi, Mia, Oz and Jonathan and their growing families.

The true impacts of Rabbi Jacob Halpern's proactive initiatives on people and Jewish communities around the globe are indescribable. It is miraculous and inspirational to think that Rabbi Jacob Halpern transformed his life, that so many times hung by the narrowest of threads in the Krakow Ghetto, Auschwitz, Plaszow, Mauthausen, Guzen and a death march to save dozens of lives in these death camps, then create strong Jewish institutions from thin air in the United States and around the world.

The legacy of Rabbi Jacob Halpern is much stronger global Jewish community that he built one mensch at a time, that assures the continuation of the Jewish people in the world and in Israel, its homeland. We all celebrate the life and tireless 93 years of work of Rabbi Jacob Halpern as we mourn our loss. Each of us should each honor the life and work of Rabbi Jacob Halpern by doing what we can to pay it forward to strengthen the Jewish community and long unbreakable Jewish heritage wherever we are and whenever we can. Rabbi Jacob Halpern will be watching from above and be proud as each of us continues his legacy and embraces it as our own going forward.

A man's life is not measured by monetary wealth, fame or power. A man's life is measured by the positive impact he has on other people. Rabbi Jacob Halpern leveraged every grain of his gift of life to raise people up, build communities by building their leaders and become the STRONGEST link to propel the Jewish community for the next 4,000 years, despite the most horrific attempts to wipe out the Jewish people.

On Passover, we celebrate "WE **WERE** SLAVES." As child, Jacob heard the message loud and clear that in every generation someone will try to wipe us out and then the survivors will get back up, dust themselves off and rebuild. He heard that at age 1, 2, 3, 4...17 until the Nazis marched into Krakow. When Jacob was ripped from his parents and thrown into literal slavery for 3.5 years, he was already pre-programmed that at the very moment of liberation, it was time to rebuild. That's exactly what he did. Actually, he burned down a bank in Linz, Austria and took down the Nazi flag as a souvenir in the first 24 hours to get it out of his system. But then he started rebuilding. All of us are the product of that rebuilding, not just us, his children and grandchildren. That's true greatness, true leadership and the highest form of community service.

You are a product of Jacob and Gilda Halpern if you were a student or staff at any of the many Jewish schools, Jewish camps, Jewish teachers institutes or global Jewish leadership programs led tirelessly by Jacob and Gilda Halpern. Now pay it forward so you to can be part of that legacy, part of that grand multi-generational mission.

Watch a short 6-minute video at <https://vimeo.com/103605165> about Jacob Halpern finding his brother Aron after liberation in 1945 followed by pictures and film of Jacob and Gilda from the 1950's through the 2010's.

If you want to learn more about the life of Rabbi Jacob Halpern from birth through the end of the Holocaust, then his 69-year love affair with his wife Gilda, please watch the inspirational 2+ hour documentary, "A Story Worth Telling", compiled, filmed and edited by his grandson, Jonathan Halpern, by clicking on the following links:

- Chapter 1: Halpern Family History <https://vimeo.com/103840307>
- Chapter 2: Shadow Covers Krakow <https://vimeo.com/103847615>
- Chapter 3: Behind the Locked Gate <https://vimeo.com/103899824>
- Chapter 4: Home Becomes a Memory <https://vimeo.com/103899821>
- Chapter 5: Into the Depths of the Machine <https://vimeo.com/103899823>
- Chapter 6: From Survive to Thrive <https://vimeo.com/103899822>
- Epilogue: A Love Story - Jacob and Gilda Halpern <https://vimeo.com/103588792>

- Tribute to Rabbi Mayer and Sarah Halpern in Plac Zgody (Ghetto Heroes Square in Krakow) - Parents of Jacob and Aron Halpern <https://vimeo.com/72237508> (8 powerful minutes by Jonathan Halpern)
- Rabbi Jacob and Gilda Halpern, Children and Grandchildren <https://vimeo.com/57337656>

Honor the memory of Rabbi Jacob Halpern by paying it forward and mentoring at least one Jewish student between age 5 and 95. As Jacob and Gilda's lives have proven, the continuity of the Jewish people depends on such mentorship. Now do a big mitzvah and help someone change his or her life.