

In Memory
Dr. Gary Tobin 1949 – 2009



The Israelite community mourns the passing of Gary Tobin, a *Mench* whose love of the Jewish people extended to Jews of color around the world. While many praise his many accomplishments as president of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, we remember him most fondly for his unique and steadfast commitment to acceptance, inclusion, and appreciation of the racial and cultural diversity that already exists among Jews but is seldom acknowledged.

The belief that “all Jews are responsible for each other” כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה is almost universally held. Yet, in practice the phrase “each other” generally applies to Jews who look like me, think like me, and practice Judaism like me. Part of what distinguished Dr. Tobin from other Jewish scholars, philanthropists, and community organizers, is that his acts of loving kindness (*kessid*) were so broadly distributed between gentiles in need, the mainstream of American Jewry, and among marginalized Jewish communities. He clearly understood that all these aspects of his life’s work were necessary and interrelated. If the larger mission of Judaism is to “repair the world,” Dr. Tobin paid special attention to repairing the racial rifts that alienate Jews from each other.

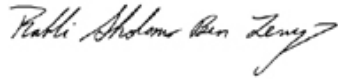
What we appreciated most about Dr. Tobin is that he took the cause of Jewish diversity so seriously. As a demographer he believed that greater acceptance was necessary for growth and that growth was crucial for Jewish survival. However, whereas others wanted to grow by essentially cloning themselves, he was prepared to accept the fact that an expanding Judaism would be variegated and ultimately stronger because of the individual threads of its tapestry. More importantly, he did not just espouse this controversial notion as a pious religious platitude or detached academic hypothesis. Dr. Tobin literally embraced Jews of color; he visited congregations, met with rabbis, and made a heroic effort to know and understand. He and his lovely wife, Diane, adopted a black child who is being raised as a Jew; hence, his commitment was personal rather than rhetorical. His efforts to build these bridges also allowed for Jews of color to interact with each other in ways that had not existed on their various islands of isolation. His many conferences, symposia, and forums did more to advance the cause of Jewish brotherhood across racial lines than any individual or organization since the civil rights era.

Dr. Tobin’s efforts culminated in an organization devoted to Jewish inclusion called Be’chol Lashon (In Every Tongue). Their outreach activities helped Jews of color in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, the United States, and other parts of the world. Dr. Tobin tried valiantly to be helpful without being paternalistic, to encourage integration of Jews of color while respecting our legitimacy, autonomy, and integrity. This balancing act was not easy and he was not always successful. Occasionally, we had sharp differences about approaches to our common goal. Yet, we admired him because he was courageous enough to step out on the tight wire of racial politics in Judaism. Gary once told me that the interests of Jews of color were not “on the radar” of most Jewish

organizations and contributors. He fought to bring us to their attention. He faced criticism both from those who saw his efforts as Jewish “missionary work” and from those who thought he did not insist on Orthodox conversions aggressively enough. This was an ideological mine field and until the very end of his life Dr. Tobin was trying, as well as anyone could, to make the right steps.

The Talmud says, “You are not expected to complete the work and yet you are not free to evade it.” (Avot 2:16) Dr. Tobin did not complete the task, but he certainly did his part. Like Dr. Jacques Faitlovitch (1880-1955) in the early twentieth century and Rabbi Irving Block (1923-2002) at the middle of the twentieth century, Dr. Tobin was a prophetic voice in the wilderness to this generation. We thank Hashem for putting such a fire in his soul. We pray that the Creator will comfort those who mourn. And it is our fervent prayer, that Diane Tobin, Rabbi Capers Funnye, and all the affiliates of Be’chol Lashon will continue his work that it may never die.

“May their souls be bound up in eternal life”



Rabbi Sholomo B. Levy
International Israelite Board of Rabbis, President