Joseph Kalir  
1908-1988
PROFESSOR OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, EMERITUS

B.A., University of Berlin; Rabbinic Ordination, Hochschule fur die Wissenschaft  
Des Judentums, Berlin; Ph.D., History, University of Wurzburg, 1935  
California State University, Fullerton From September 1970 to January 3, 1985  
Birth: December 2, 1908; Death: September 10, 1998

A story from his graduate school days illustrates Joseph Kalir’s lifetime of  
commitment to his convictions. He was admitted into the doctoral program in history at  
Wurzburg, one of Europe’s oldest universities, on a full scholarship. However, his brother-  
in-law, though also accepted there, received no financial support. Joe insisted that his  
scholarship be split with his wife’s brother. He risked losing the award for himself, but  
eventually university officials relented and the two shared the funding.

That commitment to his principles continued when Joe decided to leave the Orthodox  
Judaism of his forebears and study at the liberal Hochschule under such renowned scholars as  
Martin Buber and Leo Baecck.

The real test for him came in 1938 as the black night of National Socialism closed in  
upon the Jewish people in Germany. By this time, Joe was serving as rabbi of a congregation  
in Bochum, Westfalia. The Gestapo began arresting members of the synagogue and Rabbi  
Kalir would go to the regional Gestapo headquarters to plead for their release. A strange  
friendship developed between himself and the Nazi commandment, Hans Wnuk, who advised  
him to “take a long vacation to Switzerland.” The commandment knew that the orchestrated  
persecution later known as “Krystallnacht”—the night of broken glass — was imminent and  
wanted to protect Rabbi Kalir and his young wife Hilda. The Kalirs did set off on a vacation,  
but in Berlin they became aware of the increasing severity of Nazi anti-Semitism and  
returned to Bochum and their congregation just before the start of Krystallnacht. Rabbi Kalir  
directed that several congregants take copies of the Torah scroll to their homes for safe  
keeping. Only his copy survived the Holocaust.

Shortly thereafter, Joe was arrested and sent to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp  
near Berlin. He spent six weeks there under gruelling conditions while Hilda went daily to  
Comandment Wnuk’s office to plead for his release. Eventually, it worked and Joe –  
weighing 90 pounds – was released. The Kalirs were allowed to leave for Palestine where  
they arrived on the SS Galilee in February 1939 just before the British closed the country to  
further Jewish immigration.

The Kalirs spent the next 16 years in Palestine where daughter Shula was born in  
1940 and the State of Israel in 1948. During the war that followed Israel’s declaration of  
statehood, the Kalirs were literally pinned down at times in their Jerusalem apartment as  
bullets screamed past. While in Israel Joe wrote three books in Hebrew, Sare Tzavah  
M’Yisrael, (Jewish Soldiers of Renown) (two volumes, 1942 and 1943); and Mimandat  
Lamdinah (From Mandate to Statehood) (1949). He helped found the Israeli radio station,  
“Kol Zion Lagolah/Voice of Zion to the Diaspora” and worked as a teacher.

In 1955, another turning point. The Kalirs decided to leave Israel for Sweden where  
Joe swerved as rabbi in Goteberg for three years. Then, on Thanksgiving Day, 1957 the  
family moved to Boston where Joe became professor of Bible, History and Philosophy at  
Hebrew Teachers College in Brookline. He left there in 1965 and served as temple educator  
of Temple Beth Sholom, Santa Ana until 198 when he joined the CSUF faculty in Religious  
Studies.
For the next 17 years, Professor Kalir earned a reputation as a teacher of Jewish Studies who was “tough but fair,” who expected much of his students and gave much in return. He had a dry sense of humor and thrived on students’ questions. He served as acting department chair from 1983 to 1984.

Joe always spoke warmly of his Religious Studies colleagues and would invite them to share Passover Seder meals with his family.

Joe published numerous articles and one book, *Introduction to Judaism*, (1980) during his tenure at Fullerton. He was also a guest on the Merv Griffith Television Show. After his retirement, he continued writing and was working on a Torah commentary at the time of his death. On his grave are inscribed words from the Torah’s Book of Genesis (5:24), “He walked with God.” Indeed, he walked with God across continents and in the midst of the most momentous events in the modern history of the Jewish people – the Holocaust and the birth of the Jewish state. His was a walk of profound courage and commitment to his principles.

Submitted by
Benjamin J. Hubbard
Professor of Religious Studies
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