

Rabbi to the Queen

Reflections by Rabbi Mark Winer

For over twelve years, I was the “Rabbi to the Queen.” At every British State Occasion during that period, I was the officially designated rabbi and representative of British Jews in Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral - such as the Jubilee Fiftieth Anniversary of the Queen’s Accession to the throne in 2002, and the Services of Solidarity with the United States after 9-11.

My royal role came with my position as Senior Rabbi of the West London Synagogue of British Jews, the largest and oldest non-Orthodox synagogue in Europe.

Born in Utah and raised in Texas, I was not what normally one would expect in such a role. But there I stood at all of those State Occasions, wearing my huge specially woven tallit, my proper British tailored robe, and my Kipah. The Orthodox Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks was not permitted to participate by his own Beit Din of the United Synagogue.

On all of those special occasions, I had the opportunity of meeting with her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. She was always extremely gracious to the clergy. I learned to bow appropriately and not to speak to her until she spoke to me. My personal time on all of those occasions was no more than 15-30 seconds, so I learned to make the most of my time with her. Every time I met with the Queen, she magically locked gazes with me - as if I was the only person in the world - before she moved on to the next person. I was struck by her personal warmth, human



Rabbi Mark Winer (left) receives MBE from the Princess Royal, Princess Anne, at Buckingham Palace.
Photo: Courtesy Buckingham Palace.

concern, and sense of humor - in contrast to her more formal public appearances.

My wife Suellen and I met with the Queen on two specific occasions. Since the Queen and Suellen were both 5’2,” they spoke eye to eye, while I towered over both of them.

One notable occasion of our meeting with Her Majesty was the three hundred fiftieth anniversary celebration of Jews returning to England under Oliver Cromwell in 1656, after having been expelled in 1290. At the service of celebration, my friend the Bishop of London Richard Chartres spoke about the greatness of the Jewish contribution to British history. I spoke of the greatness of

Great Britain to the Jews since 1656. The Queen, in speaking with me after the service, laughed that what she so loves about Modern Britain is that the most English Bishop speaks for the Jews, and that the most American rabbi speaks for Britain.

On the occasion of her Jubilee service at Westminster Abbey, the BBC noted that I was the only American participating in the service. Calling me in for an interview, the interviewer asked me, “Rabbi Winer, since your ancestors rebelled against King George III in 1776, how do you feel about now celebrating Queen Elizabeth II?” I responded, “Sir, in 1776, my ancestors were

being chased around the steppes of Russia by the Cossacks. Long live the Queen!”

When Queen Elizabeth II appointed me a “Member of the Order of the British Empire” in 2014, her official proclamation honored my “service to interfaith dialogue and social cohesion in London and the United Kingdom.” I became the only American-born rabbi in British history to be inducted into the “Orders of Knighthood.” Interviewed by CBS before my induction at Westminster Abbey, I was asked what I was thinking about in receiving such an honor. I responded to the interviewer, “I am thinking about my impoverished immigrant grandmother who left her shtetl at age 13 in the Czarist Empire and arrived in 1911 at Ellis Island.”

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Rabbi Winer served as a congregational rabbi at Temple Beth David in Commack and the Jewish Community Center/Congregation Kol Ami in White Plains. He was the president of the National Council of Synagogues before becoming the senior rabbi at West London Synagogue in 1998. On the international scene he was involved in the issues that led to the Treaty between Israel and the Vatican, negotiated the release of Ethiopian Jews, helped resolve the dispute over the Carmelite in Auschwitz.

Rabbi Winer was born in Logan, Utah, December 16, 1942 and was raised in Dallas, Texas. He is a graduate of Harvard, received a PhD from Yale and ordained as a rabbi in 1970 at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in NYC.