

SQUADRON LEADER DAVID DATTNER OBE AFC  
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AGED 89

### DEDICATION TO THE EXTREME

The life of David Dattner can be typified as a life of dedication. Not ordinary dedication, for he moved in a world where many were and are nobly dedicated, but dedication to the extreme. He was dedicated to people: to helping, caring for and nurturing people, Jew or non-Jew, young or old. He was dedicated to Judaism. He was also dedicated to fulfilling his responsibility in whatever task he was given.

David was born in London in 1922 to parents who were wealthy until 1929 when, like so many, they became virtual paupers. He described his father as nominally observant, but his mother as very Orthodox. They belonged to the Adath Yisrael ultra-orthodox Synagogue in Finsbury Park, North London, where they lived. They sent David to the Avigdor school. In school and at Shul the young David came in contact with Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld, who impressed him both for his sincerity of belief and also his realism. At some point in David's youth, he 'saw the light' as he expressed it, and became a deeply religious man. But this was to be expressed in very unusual circumstances.

When WW2 broke out Dattner joined the RAF, where he was to remain for 25 years. He started as a gunner, then became gunnery leader, responsible for all the guns in the squadron, and eventually reached the rank of Squadron Leader, gaining the Air Force Cross. He served in Nos. 614, 14 and 39 Squadrons. His war experience included flying adventures in Europe and in North Africa, and, aided by his knowledge of Yiddish, catching a German spy. However he was also captured and tortured by the anti-Semitic Ustashi in wartime Croatia.

At the start of the 1948 War of Independence he dreamed of joining the IDF, but this did not materialise. He continued as a professional officer in the RAF, now focusing on air-electronics. In the dignified officers' Mess, while others ate gourmet food, he maintained a kosher diet of vegetables. He prayed three times a day, wearing Tefilin in the morning prayers, and observed Shabbat. When he could attend a synagogue he did; but sometimes he had to spend even Yom Kippur alone.

Then came the Suez Crisis of 1956, when he and other Jewish airmen based in Malta were faced with the dilemma of what to do if Eden decided that they should bomb Tel Aviv. Would they refuse and have to face court-martial? Dattner was a loyal high ranking British officer; but he could *never* do anything to harm Israel. Fortunately the order came to attack Egypt instead. (In fact the British High Command had decided to excuse Jewish personnel in the event of ordering an attack on Israel, but Dattner did not know this).

In the 1950s two new vistas of dedicated activity emerged. The first was RAF Mountain Rescue. While stationed in Aldergrove, Northern Ireland, Dattner was told, with another officer, to start a Mountain Rescue team responsible for locating missing airplanes and their often badly injured crew. From a novice climber ('like an elephant', he would say) he soon headed the Kinloss Mountain Rescue team, covering the Cairngorms. Gwen Moffat in *Two Star Red* tells us "He inspired unswerving devotion in his team". Eventually he became Inspector of RAF Mountain Rescue for the UK and further afield. This was heroic work indeed, for which David was awarded the OBE in 1954. In the citation he was commended for working 'often in conditions which no ordinary person could endure'.

The final area of Dattner's dedication was to people, and particularly to youth. While still in the RAF he would take off the occasional Shabbat to visit his mother, who was then living in the strictly orthodox, and charming, Glen Hotel in Westcliffe. (It was here that the writer first met him, almost sixty years ago). Dattner became involved with the local Bnei Akiva, training them in a Jewish component of the recently launched Duke of Edinburgh Award. In this context David would take a group of Jewish kids up the Pyrenees, and when they reached the top he would get the boys to put on Tefilin. This was a practical way to communicate the idea that you can be a dedicated Jew everywhere.

At the same time David was concerned for some of the most troubled youth in the country, who were generally not Jewish. These were the juvenile delinquents who were incarcerated in Approved Schools. David would visit schools and develop a remarkable bond with the boys and their families. David had a unique power to reach the heart of a person, whoever he or she might be. I had the privilege when I was about 14 to travel with him round the country, visiting families of delinquents in their slum homes in towns like Newcastle. His charismatic presence and his words brought practical help and even more, solace and inspiration to go on. This was as regards the understandably anxious parents. But I also met some of his delinquents: hard youths I would have been frightened to pass in the street, who turned to butter when David was around. David helped me step out of my own Anglo-Jewish stereotypes and realise that each of these individuals, indeed *every* individual everywhere, is a living human being with hopes and fears and longings. A Lubavitch saying tells us: "words that come from the heart, enter the heart." David was sensitive to the reality of others, and hence he was able to speak from the heart, and his words entered their hearts. When he was interviewed for an article in the *Jerusalem Post* in 2002, he was able to say "I have never had a kid I couldn't get through to".

A remarkable activity which I did not witness, but which David would sometimes share with me, was how he would go for walks late at night in a rough area of a city. He would meet a gang of youths roaming the streets looking for someone to beat up or for any kind of trouble. David would start talking to them. As he explained it, sometimes he began by mentioning another 'hard man', a delinquent the boys on the street might know. Or, somehow, he caught their interest. He would talk with them and, I imagine, they had a different night from usual on that occasion. Who knows what inner sparks of humanity and conscience were revealed? Never was he attacked. Indeed, all his years working with delinquents (and everyone else) he would never lock his doors, and never locked his car. Nothing was ever stolen from him.

Driving up and down the UK, in an amusing succession of cars, to reach out to delinquents and their families, or to a variety of Jewish kids and *their* families (including the writer), holding a full time job in the RAF, together with Mountain Rescue and mountain climbing with a wide variety of groups of kids – there was something for which David did not have time: sleep. For many years, he slept only 15 minutes a night, although he would supplement this with a 30 minute nap in the day (in the bath!). My wife introduced him to Professor Ray Meddis who was doing research on people who did not need sleep. My belief is that a person dedicated to the extreme, *cannot* sleep.

Of course there is another element missing from David's life, which he regretted: marriage. Somehow, it did not work out. But being a bachelor enabled him to be all the more dedicated for the benefit of others.

In 1965 David left the RAF. He had been told he could reach the rank of Wing Commander, but no higher: because he was Jewish. A Jew might have relatives in other countries, which could make him a risk. (He did not mention the question of Israel, but perhaps that was really what they meant). One of the last training courses he took in the RAF was a special session, lasting several excruciating days, training an officer to withstand torture. Did he take that because he was thinking of being in Israel (as he always was) and wished to be ready for a possible military post? He visited Israel, and had a discussion with the Director of Social Services about starting an Approved School there. Again, this did not work out.

David now began working formally in Approved Schools in the UK, beginning with a Catholic institution. To facilitate this new career he gained a diploma in Education, writing a long dissertation on the history of Anglo-Jewry. He soon became Principal of St Leonard's Childrens' Home in Hornchurch, with 150 children. His goal was, as he put it "to inculcate mutual respect". In 1976 David became head of Finnart House in Weybridge, the only Jewish Approved School in the country (only two of the 50 inmates were Jewish). When this closed down, Dattner was at last ready for Aliyah to Israel, and to a final, flourishing stage in devoted caring for young people.

Around 1982 David took up a post defined as 'English Teacher' at the newly founded SOS Childrens' Village in Arad. Here he was dealing with 100 children, mostly 9-14 years old, many of them orphans or from deprived homes. Far more significant than the class instruction is the after-school interaction. In the evenings 10 or 20 kids would pile into his small living room, drink gallons of pop, crack sunflower seeds, and watch videos. David wanted to be buried in Arad, and at his funeral his former pupils spoke of how he was not judgmental, that he accepted them as they were and made them believe in themselves.

Over the years, especially in the 90s, many of the children were highly traumatized due to members of their families being killed by Arab suicide bombers. David worked at counselling and helping each child individually. Writing for an RAF Mountain Rescue publication he speaks of the trauma, fear and unsettled lives of the children, and tells how in his counselling work, he would often tell stories about the work of the mountain rescue personnel, “how bravely, but not always fearlessly, they go about their dangerous work, often in impossible weather conditions and how they cope with their fears. The children listen avidly and I’m certain this has a balming effect”.

Thus the various dimensions of David’s life fitted together, one fuelling the other. In a sense, he was living several lives at once. His final years were spent in Nightingale House, where, although increasingly incapacitated, he dedicatedly took part in the Synagogue services, and in his small but comfortable room, volumes of Torah teachings were always close to his hand. David Dattner lived a life of dedication to the extreme, which brought blessing to many, many people. At the same time he always had a very close relationship with his family. He is survived by his beloved niece Andy, her husband Roy Abrahams and their four children Ben, Sasha, Lauren and Tanya.