



Rabbi Yechiael Lander

October 6, 1927 - February 5, 2026

Rabbi Yechiael Lander, Educator and Jewish Community Builder, Dies at 98

Rabbi Yechiael Lander, a rabbi, educator and communal leader who helped shape Jewish life through youth movements, campus engagement, interfaith work, and innovative educational initiatives, died on Feb. 5 in South Hadley, Mass. He was 98.

Rabbi Lander was known for nurturing Jewish communities rooted in learning, dialogue and collective responsibility. Spanning decades, his work reflected a deep commitment to building Jewish identity by cultivating relationships and fostering institutional life.

His experiences and outlook were captured in his memoir, *Reminiscences: From the Prairies to Paradise*, which traced a journey shaped by migration, intellectual inquiry and sustained engagement with Jewish communal life. He expressed his lifelong commitment to Judaism in various ways over the course of his life—first as a Yiddish-speaking orthodox Zionist Folkshule boy, then as a leader in the Habonim Zionist youth movement, a pioneer in building the Israeli kibbutz Geshar Haziv in the State's infancy, followed by synagogue administration while earning his MSW at UCLA, and eventually rabbinical school at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, where he helped establish the first year training program in Israel for all incoming

students.

Rabbi Lander devoted the bulk of his career to building Jewish life on university campuses, encouraging students to explore their heritage alongside and informed by academic inquiry. He ensured that religious services were available for students of all Jewish backgrounds, practicing “trans-denominationalism” even before the term had been applied to Judaism. He volunteered for the Clergy Consultation Services to counsel women navigating unplanned pregnancies, and to assist those who chose termination in obtaining a safe abortion, which was illegal at the time. At Smith College he helped to create SOS, Service Organizations of Smith, where students volunteered at schools, hospitals, ghettos, or wherever there was a need. In 1971 he received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to establish a multidisciplinary course on the Holocaust at Hampshire College, which he initially taught.

Rabbi Lander was elected the first Jewish president of the National Association of College and University Chaplains, and he received a grant from the Lilly Endowment to establish the National Institute for Campus Ministries, which brought together clergy from diverse religious communities to conduct interfaith dialogue.

Even before he relinquished his Canadian citizenship to become a naturalized U.S. citizen, he felt called to speak out publicly against injustice. He was a vocal protester against the war in Vietnam, an outspoken advocate for Soviet Jewry, and, in 1973, joined the organization Breira: A Project of Concern in Diaspora-Israel Relations to convene dissenting voices within Jewish communal life that sought alternatives to the conventional Zionist stances of the time.

Later, in Amherst, Mass., he became an important presence within the local

Jewish community, helping to establish the Jewish Community of Amherst congregation. Among his most enduring contributions was his role in developing the Lander-Greenspoon Academy, a Jewish day school rooted in his conviction that education is fundamental to sustaining Jewish life. Alongside formal institutions, he helped cultivate smaller, participatory communities, including a family chavurah centered on celebrating Jewish life in the absence of local extended family.

Rabbi Lander is remembered by colleagues and generations of students as a thoughtful teacher and attentive listener whose intellectual passion was matched by his personal warmth. He is survived by his children, Shira (David Portnoy) and Jaime, grandchildren Zachary Lander-Portnoy (Elana) and Maury Courtland (Jamie), and three great-grandchildren. His wife Rose of 63 years predeceased him.

Tribute Wall



“ *To the Family: I worked with Rabbi Lander for many years at Smith. He always provided support for scholarly programs on the Middle East. Tom and I want to send condolences to the family and to tell them how deeply we feel your loss. Donna Robinson Divine, Morningstar Family Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Government, Emerita*

Donna Divine - February 17 at 12:36 PM

BC

“ *Baltimore Hebrew Congregation clergy, lay leaders and members offer their condolences to the family of Rabbi Yechiael Lander. We hope that you are comforted by warm memories and support of family, friends and community. May his memory be forever a blessing.*



Baltimore Hebrew Congregation - February 13 at 06:08 PM

MW

“ *1 file added to the tribute wall*



Matthew Weinstein - February 10 at 09:19 PM

MW

We will always be grateful to Rabbi Lander (and Rabbi Lander) for helping get our married life off to such a wonderful start.

Matthew Weinstein - February 10 at 09:19 PM

JB

“*We, Joyce and Lenny, deeply valued our friendship with Yechiael and Rose. Yechiael exemplified the values of egalitarian inclusivity, sensitivity to the needs and talents of students whom he mentored, an openness to new ideas, that included the spirituality of others, as when he stayed at monasteries. His literary and musical tastes were broad, and his support for his brilliant violinist wife unwavering. He modeled a tolerant and all embracing Judaism.*”

Joyce and Leonard Berkman - February 10 at 10:18 AM

SE

“ *The Elkins family met your dad early with my brother, Rabbi Reuvan Elkins in Southern, CA. They talked about being concerned with the Vietnam draft and if my brother would object to fighting in any war.*

We knew the whole family when you lived next to Smith college and followed your dad's services at Helen Hills Chapel and the Jewish Holidays.

Your dad performed my oldest sister , Susan Elkins wedding to Jack Winerock., well known international pianist in early 1970's.

I attended Northampton High with you guys and had respect for the whole family.

My son attended 2 years at your dad's name sake school and I am grateful for that.

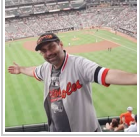
Thank you for sharing your dad with our local community all those years that must have taken him away from family time.-With love and respect. Sara Elkins, elkinssara26@gmail.com

Sara Elkins - February 09 at 04:44 PM

SE

I also wanted to mention how your dad would visit Jewish patients at Cooly Dickinson Hospital and I was in the room when he visited with my mom, Dorothy Elkins. He had this kindness to him and was filled with caring and interest in other people.

Sara Elkins - February 15 at 03:51 PM



“ *The Jewish History department of the Beth Tfiloh High School sends its deepest sympathies to our colleague and friend, Rabbi Dr. Shira Lander, on the passing of her father. May she and the entire extended family be comforted amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.*

Neil Rubin - February 09 at 09:07 AM