

Rabbi Joshua Stampfer 2017 Ageless Award Honoree



Rabbi Joshua Stampfer was born on Dec. 28th, 1921, in Palestine. While he was still a child, he moved with his family to the United States, where his father was rabbi of several congregations from Memphis to Los Angeles. As a young man, Rabbi Stampfer taught Hebrew while he earned a degree in chemistry from the University of Chicago. He met his wife of 66 years, Goldie Goncher of Atlanta, at a Jewish summer camp in northeastern Pennsylvania.

The story of Rabbi Stampfer's life is entwined with Israel. His great-grandfathers played critical roles in what was then Palestine, with his paternal great-grandfather, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Frank, helping found the city of Hadera. Rabbi Stampfer served in the Jewish Defense Army, as Israel struggled for its independence. When the Israeli/Palestinian peace initiatives leading to the Geneva Accords were signed in 1954 (later resulting in the Nobel Peace Prize), he was a forceful voice in favor of their efforts to bring peace to the region. After the initial negative reaction to Rabbi Stampfer's courageous and public stand, many embraced the commitment to the Accords and to the prospect of peace. His leadership as an advocate for peace through understanding and reconciliation both in the Middle East and throughout the world has been the hallmark of this remarkable man. In 1988, he attended a conference of the U.S. Interreligious Committee for Peace in the Middle East and became an early advocate of Israelis and Palestinians living side by side in peace.

Portland has been Rabbi Stampfer's home since 1953. His pioneering efforts helped create institutions that have served the city's growing Jewish community for generations. His legacy includes creating Camp Solomon Schechter, where almost 9,000 adults and children have enjoyed the outdoors and explored their Jewish identities; organizing the Oregon Holocaust Resource Center established in 1983; building the Oregon Jewish Historical Society in 1974; helping found the Oregon Jewish Museum in 1989; and establishing the Institute for Judaic Studies in 1982.

Rabbi Stampfer has been a teacher all of his adult life. He envisioned and helped forge much of Portland's Jewish infrastructure and continues to teach to this day. He currently teaches a Talmud class at Portland's Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, as well as a class every Tuesday morning at Neveh Shalom where he was the rabbi for 40 years and remains Rabbi Emeritus. He helped to inspire Portland State University to name a new, full-time tenured position in Judaic studies, and with the addition of a fourth professor, the 5-year-old program will soon be able to offer a major in Judaic studies.

Of his many venerable attributes, Rabbi Stampfer has been known throughout his life for being a proponent for peace and inclusion. During his time as Rabbi there, he helped make Neveh Shalom a more inclusive congregation by welcoming the full participation of women and gay members. In addition, he challenged many in Portland's Jewish community to rethink their positions on Israel and the Middle East.