

## RABBI JOHN LEVI'S SMICHA MILESTONE

# 'Distinguished, decent, honourable'

PETER KOHN

AT a celebration marking six decades since Rabbi Dr John Levi's smicha (ordination), federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg described the Temple Beth Israel (TBI) emeritus rabbi as "a wonderful educator ... who has enriched all of our lives but most importantly has stayed very much true to his Jewish faith, his rabbinic teachings, and has made Australia and the Jewish community stronger for it".

"Distinguished, decent, honourable – they're the words that come to mind when I think of Rabbi John Levi," he said.

“A wonderful educator who has enriched all of our lives.”

Josh Frydenberg  
Federal Treasurer

Celebrating a milestone delayed by the pandemic, a post-lockdown audience filled TBI on Sunday to laud Rabbi Levi and his wife Robyn, who last year marked 60 years since his smicha as the first Australian-born rabbi. They saw Frydenberg's launch of a biographical coffee-table book compiled by a committee headed by TBI past presidents Robert Sward and Judi Cohen.



Rabbi Dr John Levi (left) with federal Treasurer Josh Frydenberg.

Photo: Joe Lewitt

In her address, TBI past president Sam Sharman paid tribute to Robyn Levi as "a strong, caring, patient and resourceful woman".

Frydenberg traced Rabbi Levi's life, from his birth on a kitchen table in East St Kilda, his childhood in Malvern, his move, aged 10, to Western Australia after his father's death, education at Melbourne Grammar and University of Melbourne, rabbinical studies overseas, and time in Israel.

And then a rabbinical career at TBI from which he officially retired in 1997, but which continues to this day.

Along the way, Rabbi Levi

founded the Australian Council of Christians and Jews, drove the establishment of The King David School, and strongly influenced the growth of the Netzer youth movement. Frydenberg concluded, "This volume does him justice."

The rabbi took part in a Q&A with Sward and Cohen, examining some highlights of a storied career; twists and turns such as pioneering Jewish community radio in Melbourne, a seder in Israel with Menachem Begin, and his mateship with comedy icon Barry Humphries in their university days.

And there was the steady spade-work giving rise to new congregations in Australia and New Zealand, fostering Progressive Judaism globally, and emerging bonds between Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Along the way, a historian's abiding interest in Jewish Australia's early decades, a biographer's insights into Australian rabbinical colleagues, an archaeology buff's exploits in Israel, and an officer and chaplain's work in the Australian Army have been part of Rabbi Levi's journey.

The panel noted the rabbi was made a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC) in this year's Australia Day Honours, and a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 1981 for his services to Judaism, among numerous awards.