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Obituary: Martin London, revered local Orthodox leader

By Robert D. Dávila - Bee Staff Writer

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Martin London, founder of Keneset Israel Torah Center, became an outspoken supporter of organ transplants in his final years of life. Sacramento Bee file, 1998/Chris Crewell

Martin Robert London, a revered teacher and leader in the Jewish community who helped return Orthodox Judaism to Sacramento as the founder of Keneset Israel Torah Center, died Friday. He was 61.

The cause probably was related to lung problems, said his wife, Bonne Rae London. He endured many "medical maladies" in recent months but survived 10 years after a liver and kidney transplant reinvigorated him and led him to be an outspoken advocate for donor education, she said.

New beginnings were an important cause to Mr. London, a man of many passions and singular devotion to his faith and community.

In 1982, he founded Keneset Israel, the first place of worship in a half-century for Orthodox Jews in Sacramento. He organized community support and resources to open Keneset Israel, hired its first rabbi and served as president.

"It was the ultimate manifestation of his faith," said Andy Baron, a former Keneset Israel president and longtime member. "He strongly believed in the need for an Orthodox presence in Sacramento."

He taught the Torah to children preparing for bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies, served as cantor at the Morse Avenue synagogue and with his wife hosted religious dinners in his home. He also reached out to other believers,

consulting often with Conservative and Reform leaders and starting dialogues with Catholics.

"He felt it was very important not to isolate yourself," his wife said. "He was very accepting and embracing of other faiths."

Mr. London was an economics professor for almost 40 years at Butte Community College in Oroville. He started the school's business program and "was concerned about the well-being of everyone he worked with, particularly his students," Dean of Instructional Services Al Konuwa said. He also taught evening and summer classes for more than 20 years at Sacramento City College, Bonne London said.

In 1997, Mr. London was in UC Davis Medical Center after years of liver ailments when he nearly died of kidney failure. He gained a new lease on life and a new liver and kidney from Rhonda Pool, a 21-year-old Arizona woman killed in a car accident. The episode gave him a new purpose as an advocate for organ donation and a new perspective on life.

"What does this life have to offer? It offers the chance to do the right thing," he told The Bee in 1998.

Mr. London was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., in 1945 and moved to California as a boy. He earned bachelor's degrees in economics and Russian from California State University, Northridge, and a master's degree in economics from UCLA. He was 24 when he joined the first faculty at Butte Community College as full-time professor, his wife said.

He was a warm, cheerful man with a passion for life and learning, friends said. He loved music and languages -- he spoke Yiddish, Hebrew, Japanese and Russian; and he studied and toured Civil War battle sites. A fan of samurai culture, he visited Japan and started an exchange program for Japanese students at Butte Community College. He was a proud Republican and a devout Jew who served as cantor at Congregation Beth Israel in Chico and Mosaic Law Congregation, a conservative synagogue in Sacramento, before starting Keneset Israel.

"You could go to his house for dinner and meet a Japanese dignitary, a Hasidic rabbi, a Republican politician and a transplant surgeon," longtime friend Rivkah Isseroff said.

Most of all, friends said, Mr. London was dedicated to faith and family. His was deeply influenced by his grandparents, " 'Fiddler on the Roof' types" who lived in Eastern Europe, spoke Yiddish and taught him what it means to be Jewish, Bonne London said. He loved teaching and believed it was important to pass his faith to his children, grandchildren and community.

"Having a modern Orthodox community in Sacramento is ... an idea and a way of life, and that was him," said Michal Kohane, executive director of the Jewish Federation of the Sacramento Region. "Everything about him and everything he touched was connected to that way of life."

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