



## CLERGY CORNER: The Irish Rabbi

**By Rabbi Marc Mandel**

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Recently, on Nov. 4, The Museum of Newport Irish History, hosted a standing room only symposium at the Mainstay Hotel & Conference Center. The title was, "Ireland's Jewish Community and Newport's Irish Rabbi." The excellent panel consisted of Shai Afsai, Sean O'Callaghan, Ph.D., and John F. Quinn, Ph.D. As the current rabbi of Touro Synagogue, I have always been intrigued about Newport's Irish rabbi, Theodore Lewis.

Born in 1915, in Dublin, Ireland, Rabbi Lewis attended Dublin primary and secondary schools, graduated from Dublin University, and studied for the rabbinate in London, England, and Mir, Poland.

He barely escaped from Poland before the Nazis invaded it during WW II. He served as the rabbi of the Adelaide Road Synagogue, the largest congregation in Dublin, before immigrating to America.

He visited Touro Synagogue in 1949 and never left, serving the congregation for the next 36 years.

Rabbi Lewis was well known for his thick Irish brogue and sparkling eyes, quick wit, regal bearing and erudite sermons, which have been compiled and published in two volumes that I have in my office at the Levi Gale House.

He officiated at the lifecycle events for two generations of Newporters as well as others who came from far and wide to the Touro Synagogue.

He played host to many distinguished visitors including President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the poet Robert Frost.

In 1959, Rabbi Lewis appeared on the TV show, "To Tell the Truth," as the "only Irish-born rabbi in the US."

He was one of Newport's most beloved citizens, a familiar fixture in Newport, as he and his dear colleague and friend of over 50 years, Rabbi Ely Katz, strolled around the streets of downtown Newport, a very tall Rabbi Lewis with a very short Rabbi Katz.

He received many awards including an honorary doctorate in Sacred Theology from Salve Regina University. Rabbi Lewis retired in October 1985. He lived for a brief time in Israel, where he was able to visit his childhood friend, Chaim Herzog, President of Israel, who was also born in Ireland. Rabbi Lewis led Touro Synagogue through a period in which it was restored, received worldwide attention and was named a national historic site. For 25 years he led a campaign to persuade the US Government to issue a postage stamp honoring the synagogue, which was built in 1763 and remains the oldest synagogue building in the country. In 1982, a stamp was indeed issued. Touro Synagogue will soon host the former head of the Labor Party in Israel, Isaac Herzog. Herzog's grandfather, Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog, was the first chief rabbi of Ireland, and later a chief rabbi in Israel. There are some who speculate that it was Rabbi Yitzchak Herzog who suggested that Rabbi Lewis become the rabbi at Touro Synagogue. Thus, the Touro Synagogue - Irish connection, indeed, runs very deep.

*Rabbi Marc Mandel is the rabbi at the Touro Synagogue in Newport, the oldest synagogue building in the United States. For more information please visit [www.tourosynagogue.org](http://www.tourosynagogue.org). Clergy Corner appears each week in The Daily News and online at [newportri.com](http://newportri.com).*