

Rabbi Wolfe Kelman

Rabbi Wolfe Kelman (November 27, 1923 – June 26, 1990) was an [Austrian](#)-born [American Rabbi](#) and leader in the [Conservative Judaism](#) in the United States who never led a congregation, serving for decades as a mentor to hundreds of rabbis in his role as the executive vice president of the [Rabbinical Assembly](#), where he also prepared the initial steps for the [rabbinic ordination](#) of women in the Conservative movement.^[1]

Early life and education

Kelman was born in 1923 in [Vienna](#) to [Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kelman](#), the scion of a line of [Hasidic](#) rabbis originally from [Poland](#). He moved with his family to [Toronto](#), Ontario, Canada as a child. His mother took on the responsibilities of leading the Jewish community after the death of his father when Kelman was a 13-year old. His mother's assumption of the leadership role was one of the factors that led Kelman to "believe women could function as rabbis". He served with the [Royal Canadian Air Force](#) during [World War II](#).^[1]

Leadership in Conservative Judaism

Upon the completion of his military service, Kelman attended the [Jewish Theological Seminary of America](#), where he received his [rabbinic ordination](#). Eschewing a congregation and a pulpit, and at the prompting of Dr. [Louis Finkelstein](#) and Rabbi [Abraham Joshua Heschel](#), he accepted a post at the [Rabbinical Assembly](#) in 1951. There he helped professionalize the Conservative rabbinate, adding educational retreats and ensuring that rabbis received [compensation and benefits](#) commensurate with their role. In the nearly four decades before his retirement in 1989, the number of Conservative rabbis quadrupled from 300 to 1,200 during a period when the Conservative movement grew together with the rise of suburban Jewish communities.^[1]

Kelman joined his mentor Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel during the [Selma to Montgomery marches](#) in 1965 with Dr. [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) Throughout his career, Kelman sought to build better connections between the branches of Judaism in the United States and between its Christians and Jews, as well as improving ties to the Jews of [Israel](#).^[1] He did advance work with Rabbi Heschel preparing him for his 1964 meeting with [Pope Paul VI](#) in [Vatican City](#).^[1]

In addition to his duties with the Conservative Assembly, Kelman was the head of the U.S. division of the [World Jewish Congress](#) starting in 1986.^[1]

Death

A resident of [Manhattan](#) with an apartment on [West End Avenue](#), Kelman died of [melanoma](#) at age 66 at the [New York University Medical Center](#) on June 26, 1990. He was survived by his wife, the former [Jacqueline Levy](#), as well as two daughters, a son and six grandchildren (increased to ten since his death^[2]). His son is a rabbi, and his daughter [Naamah Kelman-Ezrachi](#) was the first woman in [Israel](#) to become a rabbi when she received rabbinic ordination from Rabbi [Alfred Gottschalk](#) of the [Hebrew Union College](#), affiliated with the [Reform Judaism](#) movement.^{[1][3]}