In Memory of Haim Levanon

It was a deep shock for me to hear that Haim Levanon passed away on March 5, 2014 at the age of 76. In recent years, when overseas travels became more difficult for him, we regularly talked on the phone several times a year. It is very sad to conceive that one cannot talk with him anymore.

Haim graduated at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and received his Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry in 1969. Immediately after his doctorate, he moved to St. Louis/USA where he worked for three years at the Washington University in the laboratory of Sam Weissman, one of the pioneers of electron paramagnetic resonance (EPR). In 1972, Haim returned to Israel and became Lecturer, Associate Professor and finally Full Professor in the Department of Physical Chemistry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. From 1990 to 1999, he was Director of the Farkas Center for Light-Induced Processes.

Haim and I met for the first time at Argonne National Laboratory/USA where he spent a Sabbatical Leave in the Photosynthesis Group of Marion Thurnauer and Jim Norris. Haim liked these extended research stays abroad which included a Sabbatical Leave in the Radiation Laboratory at the University of Notre Dame/USA, a Fellowship of the Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science at the Tohoku University in Sendai/Japan and a Humboldt Award at the Free University of Berlin/Germany and the University of Freiburg/Germany.

In the years 1997 – 2006, Haim and his coworkers and students were regular visitors of Freiburg, performing carefully designed EPR experiments on photo-generated triplet states and radical pairs using our time-resolved EPR spectrometers. On extended research stays, Haim was always accompanied by his wife Hedva. They lived either in a private apartment near the old city of Freiburg or in the guest-house of the University. It was a great pleasure for me and my wife Sigi to introduce our guests to the Black Forest and the Alsass visiting scenic and historic sites on both sides of the River Rhein.

Haim was a true patriot who sincerely loved his country. It was a matter of the heart for him to show his friends the beauty of the Holy Land. We remember with pleasure a trip to the Galilee which he offered to us in 2005. The first stop after a long drive through the West Bank was Bet She’an with its most impressive Roman Theatre. Then, we visited Christian Shrines at the Sea of Galilee. After a wonderful picnic in the Northern Galilee, we crossed the Jordan River to the Golan Heights. In the late afternoon, we stopped near Bet She’an, where one of Haim’s sons was running a fish farm. On the way back, Haim took again the West Bank route and we arrived in Jerusalem at 10 o’clock at night. What a fascinating trip! Three thousand years of the varied history of the Holy Land in just one day.

In Haim’s scientific activities, there are two major subjects: The study of the light-induced processes which lead to the formation of transient paramagnetic species and the characterization of these species by time-resolved multi-frequency EPR. Using liquid crystals as anisotropic solvents, Haim and his team gained deep insight into the formation of electron spin polarization in the triplet states of organic macrocycles and metal complexes. In addition, he was interested in the light-induced spin chemistry of photosynthetic systems. Applying high time and spectral resolution EPR, Haim and his co-operation partners were able to obtain novel information on the primary electron transfer steps of natural and artificial photosynthesis.

Apart from excellent research activities, the life´s work of Haim Levanon is distinguished by an exceptional commitment to the scientific community. For 20 years, he served as Editor-in-Chief of the Israel Journal of Chemistry. Moreover, he organized as Chairman or Co-chairperson various international conferences in Jerusalem such as the 50th Anniversary of the Israel Chemical Society, the Advanced Study Institute of the Hebrew University on the Primary Events of Photosynthesis, the International Conference on Magnetic Resonance of Biological Systems, the Joint U.S.-Israel Symposium on New Developments in Primary Photosynthesis, the International Symposium on Fullerene Chemistry and the International Meeting on Spin Chemistry.

During these conferences, Haim took great care of the comfort and safety of the participants. I shall never forget an incident that occurred in 2002 at the time of the second intifada. Together with Sigi, I attended an International Meeting organized by the Israel Chemical Society. The Meeting took place in a traditional Jewish Hotel in Jerusalem. For the safety of the participants, there were guards in front of the Hotel and probably also in the Hotel. Since Sigi had not been to the Old City before, we planned a visit in connection with the Meeting. First, Haim strictly opposed this visit, but finally he agreed. So, one morning, Sigi and I took a taxi to the Jaffa Gate and entered the largely “deserted” Old City. As a result of the second intifada, the number of tourists visiting Israel had drastically decreased. Without the “guiding” stream of tourists, it was difficult to find one´s way. Yet, at the end of the day, we succeeded to visit most of the highlights of the Old City.

However, departing from Haim’s advice, we did not leave the Old City for lunch, but stopped at the Roof Café in the Jewish Quarter. As far as I can remember, we were the only guests. Crossing through the Jaffa Gate in the afternoon, we noticed numerous police cars in front of the Gate. As suggested by Haim, we went over to the King David Hotel and took a taxi back to the conference venue. There, we met Haim and Hedva in deep concern. Around noon, a female suicide bomber had attacked visitors on Ben Jehuda.

Haim Levanon was a well-known international scientist of high reputation. He had numerous co-operations with leading groups from different countries all over the world including the United States (Argonne National Laboratory, Northwestern University, University of Notre Dame), Germany (Free University of Berlin, University of Freiburg, University of Cologne) and Japan (Tohoku University, Sendai). His innovative and topical work in the field of electron spin science was recognized by several national and international honors and awards. He was President of the Israel Chemical Society for the years 1984 to 1987. In 1992, Haim received the Max Planck Research Award together with Klaus Möbius. In 2002, Haim Levanon was the recipient of a Humboldt Award in recognition of his accomplishments in research and teaching. Since 2004, he was President of the Israeli Humboldt Club.

With Haim Levanon, the scientific community has lost an outstanding international scientist in the field of electron spin science. In addition, I have lost a sincere and warmhearted friend.

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