

The life story of a great American Reform rabbi

By Rabbi Ron Kronish

THERE ARE very few biographies of American rabbis. For some strange reason, they are not written very much. I don't know why. Therefore, this new biography of one of Reform Judaism's greatest rabbis of the 20th century, by one of the best historians of modern Jewish history, and especially of the Reform Jewish movement, Professor Michael Meyer, is an important contribution not only to the field of contemporary Jewish history in general, but to American Jewish history in particular.

Rabbi Alexander Schindler (1925-2000) was not only a leader of Reform Judaism for a long time by virtue of his long presidency (1973-1996) of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (now the Union for Reform Judaism), but also because of his very successful chairmanship of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations (from January 1976 through June 1978), which catapulted him to becoming a national leader of American Jewry as well as an international Jewish leader. He was also active in the World Jewish Congress, as a vice president and later as president. According to Professor Meyer, the fact that there has not been a biography of this major American Jewish leader until now is somewhat surprising, especially because "since his time there has been no one in Reform Judaism who reached his level of influence, and few in

American Jewish life more broadly."

Since this biography is written by a veteran historian, it relies mostly upon archival materials, especially upon the

Rabbi Alexander Moshe Schindler was born in Germany but he was a son of Eastern European Jews and a member of a family with deep Hasidic roots.

"Throughout his life, Alexander remained proud of his small-town East European ancestry. Even though he was born and spent his first years of his life in a major German metropolis [Munich], he never thought of himself as a German Jew, preferring to identify himself as a Galizianaer".

While Schindler was influenced by both of his parents, it was his father who apparently exercised the greater influence in his life. His father, Eliezer Schindler, who was a Yiddish poet, was drawn to spiritual matters and to Jewish tradition. According to Meyer, "in describing his

father, Alexander frequently used a characterization that he wanted to believe also described himself as a Jew: His father's essence, Alexander maintained, was being an ohev Yisrael, a lover of the people of Israel." From this comes the title of the book "Above all, we are Jews". Schindler clearly saw Reform Jews as part of the people of Israel, not as some separate sect. This was undoubtedly one of the qualities which endeared him to American and world Jewry, and enabled him to be one of the best chairpersons of the Conference of Presidents in its history.

For me, the most fascinating part of this biography was the long chapter en-



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Rabbi Alexander Schindler became one of the greatest supporters of the historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

extensive Schindler papers housed in the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati (Professor Meyer is a professor emeritus of HUC-JIR in Cincinnati). It also is based on many interviews and much correspondence with people who knew Schindler well. Indeed, the author makes clear that this biography is not a tribute. Throughout the book, he gave voice not only to Schindler's admirers, but also to his critics, and in a few places, he added his own critical remarks, which I very much appreciated. All of this accounts for a balanced biography, which is very much a work of solid scholarship.

titled “Spokesperson for American Jewry” which focused on Schindler’s role as chairman of the Conference of Presidents during a crucial time in the history of Israel, and especially American Jewry’s relationship to Israel, in which he played a major leadership role.

In January 1976, after he had been president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations for a little over two years, Rabbi Schindler was unanimously elected to be the chairman of the Presidents’ Conference. He was the first Reform rabbi to serve in that position. According to Meyer, “in accepting the office, Schindler noted that his election reflected the ever-growing commitment of Reform Judaism to the peoplehood of Israel and the well-being and security of the Israeli state.” Undoubtedly the most remarkable development during Schindler’s term as Chairman of the Conference of Presidents was the development of his very good relationship with Prime Minister Menachem Begin, after he was elected in the political upheaval that shook Israel and the Jewish world in 1977, when the Likud defeated the Labor block for the first time

I remember the days after the election of Menachem Begin in 1977 very well. I was still living in the USA at the time. The American Jewish establishment was shocked that a man with such extremist views could be elected Prime Minister of Israel. (Begin would be a moderate or a centrist today, compared to the current extremists in the government). American Jewish leaders were used to dealing with the leaders of the Labor party since the establishment of the state of Israel.

After Begin’s election, Rabbi Schindler sent him a telegram of congratulations and support, to which Begin responded cordially, calling Schindler “my dear friend Alexander” and he ended his response with “yours in friendship and respect.” Shortly after the Likud victory and even before Begin became Prime Minister, Schindler was on his way to Israel at the urging of Begin’s son and then of Begin himself. In an article in “Moment” magazine in December 1978, entitled “The Odd Couple: Begin and I”, Schindler referred to this visit with Begin as a “dramatic gesture”.

How did this unique relationship begin and develop?

According to Meyer, it was a matter of great chemistry between the two leaders:

“In Israel, Schindler was able to chat with Begin in the hospital where he was recovering from a heart attack, and the two continued their conversation a few days later in Begin’s impressively modest home. A mutual admiration quickly developed between the two men. One of Begin’s aides confirmed that Schindler had proven himself to be more European than American, ‘very smart and a good politician’. Schindler in turn, was impressed by Begin’s ‘sense of responsibility for the Jewish people as a whole’. He was more Jew than Israeli, more patriot and statesman than simply a politician seeking power.”

It turned out that Rabbi Schindler was helpful to Prime Minister Begin in some aspects of the negotiations that led to the Camp David Peace Agreement, signed in 1978 by President Carter, Prime Minister Begin and President Sadat. As their relationship grew and developed, Begin trusted Schindler more and more, and he drew him into his circle of confidantes. At one point, Begin wrote:

“I met with Alexander Schindler, chairman of the Presidents’ Conference. I... swore him to secrecy. He accepted that and I revealed to him the entire plan in both parts [regarding Egypt and the West Bank]. He responded with enthusiasm and afterwards announced publicly that when the plan would become known, 95 percent of the Jewish community would support it.”

Indeed, Rabbi Schindler became one of the greatest supporters of the historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt.

Acting on behalf of Israel was only one of Rabbi Schindler’s great accomplishments. He was mainly the central leader and spokesman for Reform Judaism in America for 23 years, during which the Reform movement experienced much growth and achieved great prominence in American Jewish life. As the leader of the movement, he was innovative and controversial, leading the movement to adopt positions on patrilineal descent and

outreach to interfaith couples and many other internal issues which have changed the face of Reform Judaism dramatically. He also strengthened Jewish education in Reform synagogues, and helped establish Reform Jewish day schools. And he always spoke eloquently and forthrightly on many of the social justice issues of the day.

To learn more about this great American Reform rabbi, Jews and non-Jews alike will want to read this well-researched and highly accessible biography, which will enrich your appreciation of both this particular leader and the movement which he served, as well as the Jewish world in which he was active. ■



Above All, We Are Jews: A Biography of Rabbi Alexander Schindler.

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