

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 132)

Rav Shimon Schwab, ZT”L (1908 – 1993) (Part V) The Man and His Views

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In previous columns we have dealt with the early life of Rav Shimon Schwab, ZT”L, his studies in Telshe and Mir, his serving as a rabbi in Bavaria, his need to leave Germany due to threats on his life by the Nazis, his escape to America, and his serving as Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in Baltimore from 1936 to 1958. In 1958 Rabbi Schwab was invited to join Rabbi Dr. Yoseph Breuer, ZT”L, as associate Rav of the German-Jewish community in Washington Heights, Khal Adath Jeshurun. This community is widely regarded as the spiritual “continuation” of the pre - War Frankfurt *kehilla*. With Rabbi Breuer's increasing age and infirmity Rav Schwab took on many leadership roles. After Rav Breuer was nifter in 1980, Rav Schwab led the community until his passing in 1995.

In this column we give some insights into Rav Schwab’s values and views.

Well Prepared for his Role as Rav

“Rav Schwab combined the ideals of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, architect of Torah Orthodoxy in the Western world and the intense commitment to *limud ha Torah* that is the legacy of the great Lithuanian *yeshivas*.

“Rav Schwab was not a bridge between two worlds, between East and West - bridges are not for living on. He was rather the embodiment of the *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elokim* Chaim ‘These and those are the words of the living G-d’ - of two sacred traditions. He embodied in one person two diverse Torah cultures: the glorious Frankfurt tradition of Rav Hirsch, with its emphasis on adherence to the emes and insistence on putting the stamp of Torah on every area of public and private endeavor ... combined with unwavering devotion to intense Torah study, which was the hallmark of the great *yeshivas* of Lithuania. On the one hand, he absorbed the Chafetz Chaim’s caress; on the other, he observed the admonishment of the *alter* Gerrer Rebbe who characterized Rav Hirsch as ‘*a lebedige mussar sefer*.’

“His mission was to make this heady blend the reality of authentic Torah life in America. He wished to set an example for the American *ben Torah*, whether engaged in full-time Torah study or as a working man. Rav Schwab was convinced that *Torah im Derech Eretz* offers a vision of Judaism ‘in a way that can be accepted ... by the five-and-a-half-million uncommitted Jews in the vast spiritual wasteland that is today’s America in a language they can understand.’¹

Note: The following is quoted from **Rav Schwab on Chumash** written by his son Rabbi Myer J. Schwab who has kindly given me permission to quote from his book.

Master Orator and Teacher

Rav Schwab was a master orator, and many looked forward to his talks at Agudah Conventions. He invariably spoke in English, although I recall being at one talk which he began in Yiddish. Many of the attendees were clearly disappointed and surprised that he was speaking in Yiddish. However, about 5 minutes into his talk he said, “*Un err haut gezuked az mir darf reddem in die Sparch vos mentschen farsteien*, [and he said that one must speak in the language that people understand] and therefore ladies and gentlemen.” There was thunderous applause, and he continued the rest of his address in English.

“Rav Schwab was at his best when he was lecturing or giving a *shiur*. As is well known, the Rav offered numerous unique interpretations of *Chumash* and Tanach, many of which have been recorded in his *Ma'ayan Beis Hasho'evah*. Posthumously, a series of books—*Rav Schwab on Prayer*, *Rav Schwab on Iyov*, *Rav on Yeshayahu*, *Rav Schwab Ezra and Nechemiah*—was published which contain many new insights which were previously unknown to the general public.

“These insights resulted from his *da'as Torah*, his instinctive feeling for the inner meaning of the words of Torah and Tanach. This sense grew from his thorough knowledge of the language of the Torah and its rules of *dikduk*, his thorough grounding in Talmud and Midrash, and most of all, from his deep piety, all of which were enhanced by his superb and clear mind.”

Living a Life of Kiddush Hashem

The purpose of all creation is to sanctify Hashem's Name, as *Chazal* say, “All that Hashem created is for His glory.” While this is true of all of creation, it is especially true of Klal Yisrael. Rav Schwab understood Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's entire weltanschauung of *Torah im Derech Eretz* in terms of *kiddush Hashem*: life on earth and man's involvement with worldly and material matters are all meant to lead the world to a greater awareness of G-d's presence on earth. It should also elevate the Jewish People as G-d's messengers to humanity and bring them to ever higher moral and ethical behavior.

Living in America, the *malchus shel chessed*, only strengthens one's obligation for *kiddush Hashem*. Every form of *chillul Hashem*, he taught, lowers the awareness of the Divine presence in this world. If the perpetrator is an observant Jew or, worse, a so-called Torah scholar, then the offense is far greater. How, he asked, can one who has cheated his neighbor or defrauded the government have the audacity to stand in front of the congregation and recite Kaddish, a prayer for sanctifying G-d's Name in the world? Rav Schwab taught that we are a kingdom of *kohanim*, priests. A *kohen* is one who spreads the word of the Alm-ghty, by his words and by example. One of the greatest opportunities for *kiddush Hashem* in *galus* occurs when a Jew is dealing with a non-Jew.

Chillul Hashem

More than anything, Rav Schwab feared the possibility of making a *chillul Hashem*. He never used the title Rabbi in his bank records or on his checks, out of concern, as he told me, that if, G-d forbid, a check would bounce, "Rabbi" would add to the *chillul Hashem*.

Many years ago, a shameful scandal erupted in the Jewish community, centering around a Jewish businessman who was put on trial for embezzlement. At that time, influential members of the embezzler's community approached the Rav with a plea that he do what he can to save the man from going to prison. Rav Schwab became extremely agitated, and he pointed out to the petitioners that the man's behavior, which was so widely publicized in the media, caused a tremendous *chillul Hashem*, and that the man had become a virtual *rodef*, a threat to the lives of Klal Yisrael.

He told the visitors outright that the embezzler deserved to sit in prison for a long time. He pleaded with them to give the embezzler a message - that the man should shave off his beard and take off his yarmulke when appearing in court, because by displaying these signs of his religious affiliation, he would be making a new *chillul Hashem* every day on the evening TV news, and would be a living disgrace for the Jewish People.

Rav Schwab wrote extensively on this topic of *chillul Hashem*.

If one steals from a non-Jew, swears falsely and dies, his death is no atonement 10).... Let us repeat. The profaners and the desecrators give us all a rotten name, aiding and abetting our many adversaries and antagonizing our few friends. Therefore, no whitewashing, no condoning, no apologizing on behalf of the desecrators. Let us make it clear that anyone who besmirches the Sacred Name ceases to be our friend. He has unwittingly defected from our ranks and has joined our antagonists, to make us all suffer in his wake. And - noblesse oblige - the more prominent a man has become in Orthodox Jewish circles, the more obligated he must feel to observe the most painstaking scrupulousness in his dealings with the outside world.

Rav Shimon Schwab, quoted in *Selected Writings* (CIS Publishers, 1988)

The State of Israel

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, with the support of the Agudas Yisrael, presented a great challenge to the Rav's strongly held views of *Austritt* which were at the core of his Hirschian upbringing. A Torah community must maintain total separation from any organized movements, such as Reform and Zionism, which deny the eternal truths of the Torah.

While Rav Schwab always appreciated the haven that the new state provided for the dispersed and suffering Jews, victims of the Holocaust, he worried that spiritually, the

new state would bring overwhelming challenges to Torah-observant Jews. The Rav was concerned from the very beginning that the State of Israel was founded by secularists with the intention of fundamentally redefining the essence of the Jewish People and weakening Torah observance. In the weeks and months following the establishment of the *Medinah*, while everyone was celebrating, Rav Schwab felt no pleasure. He found no sympathizers for his grave concerns.

Sometime later, he had the opportunity to visit Eretz Yisrael, and he went to see the Chazon Ish. He asked him, “What *heter* did Agudas Yisrael have for joining the government?” The Chazon Ish answered simply, “I don't know, they did not ask me.” While the Chazon Ish shared his concerns, he cautioned Rav Schwab that because there was such frenzy over the newly founded state, when he returned to America, he should keep his thoughts to himself. “Remain silent,” he said, “because people will consider you an *apikores*,” a heretic, for denying that the *Medinah* is the beginning of the *Geulah*. The Chazon Ish suggested that he express himself only “*b’akifin*,” in a roundabout way, only hinting at the challenges to a Torah life created by the newly established state.

¹ **The Jewish Observer, summer 1995**, “*The Ish Ha’emes*” by Rabbi Eliyahu Klugman