

Preface

RABBI ALEXANDER MOSHE SCHINDLER (1925–2000) was a central figure within American Judaism whose significance has yet to be fully understood. His successor as president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC, now called Union for Reform Judaism, or URJ), Rabbi Eric Yoffie, believes he was the “last great national leader of American Jewry.”¹ His good friend for many years but frequent political adversary, Henry Kissinger, called him “a preeminent figure of conscience and leadership, not only within the American Jewish community, but for all concerned with human issues around the globe.”²

It was Alexander Schindler who brought Reform Judaism to the height of its influence. Within a favorable American environment, his charisma and vision allowed it to grow to its maximum size and energy. Whereas other well-known Reform Jews of the twentieth century, such as Rabbis Stephen Wise and Abba Hillel Silver, gained their fame on account of their Zionist advocacy, Schindler’s reputation rests in large measure upon his activism within the congregational union of Reform Judaism.

With passion and effect, he brought into existence an institutional structure that reached out to Jews on the periphery of Jewish life and welcomed them into the religious community. Unafraid of lively debate—indeed nourishing it—he recognized that the unprecedented increase in interfaith marriages demanded acceptance of the intermarried rather than rejection if Jewish life within an enticing American society were to flourish. Although more traditional Jews objected vociferously, he advocated acceptance of patrilineal descent as a marker of Jewishness so that children whose fathers alone were Jewish would not be lost to the faith. Though with less success, he likewise sought to strengthen the Jewish community with an influx of non-Jews coming from outside its sphere, who would be drawn to its faith and customs.

Schindler was a highly controversial figure not only with regard to the institutional changes he advocated within Reform Judaism but also with

regard to his independent stand in relation to the policies of Israel. He was the first Reform leader to also be a principal leader of American Jewry as a whole. Elected as a Reform rabbi to chair the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in 1976, he was widely respected across the religious spectrum. When, during Schindler's term as chair, Menachem Begin was elected prime minister of Israel, Schindler was able—against all expectations—to bridge the gap between a liberal American Jewry and a prime minister whose views on the State of Israel lay far to the right. Schindler's own opinions on Israel combined a deeply felt Zionism with a willingness to discard a tradition that American Jews should always blindly accept current Israeli policies. He saw the Diaspora as having an ineluctable responsibility to share in shaping the Israeli future.

He was a talented and effective speaker, listened to by his rabbinical colleagues, by the Reform laity, and by government officials in the United States and Israel. By conviction and practice a Reform Jew and critical of Orthodox rigidity, he nonetheless regarded other forms of Judaism with due respect. He defined himself and wanted to be remembered as an *ohav Yisrael*, a lover of the Jewish people in its totality.

Unafraid of espousing causes unpopular among many American Jews and non-Jews, Schindler spoke out for LGBTQ rights, full racial equality, and a clear separation of church and state. He had close connections with a range of key civil rights leaders, including Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Roy Wilkins, and Bayard Rustin. Never cowed into suppressing his opinions, he dealt forcefully with American presidents and legislators.

In a Reform Movement that had drawn its inspiration largely from antecedents in Central Europe, Schindler—though born in Germany—introduced novelty by drawing religious inspiration largely from Eastern European Jewry, especially Hasidism. Despite his stress on inclusiveness, he saw the need to draw boundaries; for example, he held that a congregation that excluded belief in God had its role within the Jewish people, but it had placed itself outside the bounds of a Reform Judaism that was anchored in religious tradition.

Although English was not his native tongue, Schindler was able to present his views—often in a poetic or dramatic vein—with an effect that was judged to be almost without parallel. At UAHC biennial assemblies,

his speeches were consistently the highlight of the program. His listeners invariably felt that they had not come in vain. 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.

Yet, despite these markers of significance, to this day there is no published Schindler biography.³ I have been drawn to that task both to fill a significant gap in American Jewish history and also because, having had some personal contact with Alexander Schindler beginning with a summer camp in Wisconsin where he served as dean, I came to admire the man and his achievements. That is not to say, however, that I conceive of this biography as a tribute. I have given voice not only to Schindler's admirers but also to those who were critical of him or his policies. Here and there I have also included my own critical remarks. Like all significant figures, Schindler had professional and personal shortcomings. Despite my respect for him as a person and a leader, I have sought to achieve a balanced account.

This biography is based principally upon the extensive Schindler papers housed in the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati,⁴ supplemented by other archives, interviews, and correspondence with individuals who knew Schindler either as members of his family or as professional associates.⁵ In order to present this biography with greater coherence, I have gathered most of Schindler's personal life into a final chapter. It is my hope that these pages will enable future generations to better judge and appreciate Rabbi Schindler's place in Jewish history.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In contemplating the writing of this volume, I realized that, unlike most subjects that I have dealt with in the more distant past, this one required drawing upon the memories of key individuals who knew Rabbi Alexander Schindler either personally, professionally, or both. I am therefore grateful to all those who agreed to in-person or virtual interviews or who answered questions in writing. I began my research by driving into the Berkshires to interview the still very alert Rhea Schindler, who had shared so much of Alex's life, its joys and sorrows. While there,

I was able to speak with his oldest child, Elisa Schindler Frankel, who supplemented what her mother was able to tell me. My first interview of a professional associate was with Rabbi David Saperstein, who had enjoyed a close relationship with Alexander Schindler over many years while leading the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center. David not only enthusiastically agreed to an interview but also took time to meticulously read the manuscript, calling attention to problems of style and content. Not long thereafter, I traveled to Westfield, New Jersey, for a long interview with Rabbi Eric Yoffie, Alexander Schindler's successor as president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Eric likewise helpfully read the manuscript and made an important suggestion that strengthened my evaluation of his predecessor. Two other in-person interviews contributed to the manuscript. One was conducted with Rabbi Ira Youdovin, who had worked with Schindler as executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, and Evely Laser Shlensky, a former chair of the Union's Commission on Social Action; and the other was with Alan Goldman, who chaired the Union's Board of Governors during Schindler's later years.

A special word of thanks is due to Rabbi Judith Schindler. She not only granted me an extensive interview in her home in Charlotte, North Carolina, but also read a draft of the final chapter on her father's personal life and answered many questions by email. Judy devoted herself to the project and, while understandably a great admirer of her father, fully shared my view that a proper biography required balanced, scholarly treatment.

I also wish to thank those individuals whom I was not able to interview in person, but who kindly submitted to a virtual interview. They include Lydia Kukoff, the author of *Choosing Judaism* and the long-term director of the Union's Outreach Program, and Rabbi Lennard Thal, for a time director of the UAHC Pacific Regional Council. Much appreciated written recollections came to me from Lawrence Bush, who had assisted with Alexander Schindler's speeches; Rabbi Clifford Kulwin, who knew Schindler during his service as director of international development for the World Union for Progressive Judaism; and Rabbi Robert Orkand, who was the Schindler family's rabbi at Temple Israel in Westport, Connecticut. Among the other correspondents to whom I am grateful for

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In the summer of 2023, I was able to present a portion of chapter 4, dealing with the relationship between Rabbi Schindler and Menachem Begin, at a seminar held to mark the retirement of Professor Shmuel Feiner at Bar Ilan University. I am grateful for the invitation and the hospitality I enjoyed there.

I wish, as well, to express my thanks to the entire diligent and competent staff at the CCAR Press. Among those with whom I was fortunate to have concentrated personal contact during the publication process, I would single out its director Rafael Chaiken, who explained the procedures of the press during a visit of mine to New York. He has been committed to the volume from the start and sought to make it a central achievement of the press. It has been an immense pleasure to work with my editor, Rabbi Anne Villarreal-Belford. She not only commented perceptively on content and immeasurably improved the text's syntax; she also heightened my own devotion to the subject with her enthusiasm for it. Other members of the staff who in their various capacities had a share in publication of the volume include CCAR Chief Executive Rabbi Hara Person, Assistant

Editor Chiara Ricisak, copyeditor Michelle Kwitkin, designer Scott-Martin Kosofsky, proofreader Debra Hirsch Corman, Press Operations Manager Debbie Smilow, and Press Marketing and Sales Manager Raquel Fairweather-Gallie. I am appreciative of all their contributions.

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