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COVER STORY; The Rabbi for the Radical Middle; Harold Schulweis Takes a Swing at the Jewish Left, Right and Center in His Quest for Unity. Is He a Prophetic Voice for Our Contentious Times?; [Home Edition]

MARLENE ADLER MARKS. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 20, 1998. pg. 14

Abstract (Summary)

A crowd nearing 500 fills the wide, bright corridor outside the sanctuary at Valley Beth Shalom, the Encino synagogue Schulweis has led for 28 years. They come to hear this voice with the fire of Isaiah wrapped in the salami-and-egg compassion of your Uncle Benji, and to see this 73-year-old figure, trimmed by the religion of cardiac rehab at Tarzana Medical Center, jabbing from the pulpit at fraudulent ideas, arms punching upward. It brings to mind Rodin's statue of Balzac, the intellectual man of might. It also fits a rabbi whose sport of choice is boxing.

Take Moses, his subject tonight. By Schulweis' lights, Moses was more than just a commander who led former slaves across the Red Sea; he was a man much like Schulweis himself--a family man, a man of the people, filled with questions and doubt. Moses, as described by Schulweis, argues with God time and again, notably for a stay of execution after the Jews built the Golden Calf. If not for Moses' plea, God would have killed them all.

"God says to Moses: 'I look to you to pour cool water upon the fire of my anger,' " Schulweis tells his audience, quoting an ancient rabbinical source. God relied upon Moses to tell him the right thing to do. It's a thrilling oration, a reversal of the natural order--not man's search for God but God's search for man. Not coincidentally, that theme--carried from his teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel--sums up Schulweis' life work.

Full Text (3881 words)

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For a man who has not slept more than a few hours at a time in some 50 years, Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis appears incredibly wide awake. Here it is 8 p.m. on a Wednesday and this famous insomniac, fresh from the 15-minute catnap he allows himself most afternoons, can't wait to go on.

A crowd nearing 500 fills the wide, bright corridor outside the sanctuary at Valley Beth Shalom, the Encino synagogue Schulweis has led for 28 years. They come to hear this voice with the fire of Isaiah wrapped in the salami-and-egg compassion of your Uncle Benji, and to see this 73-year-old figure, trimmed by the religion of cardiac rehab at Tarzana Medical Center, jabbing from the pulpit at fraudulent ideas, arms punching upward. It brings to mind Rodin's statue of Balzac, the intellectual man of might. It also fits a rabbi whose sport of choice is boxing.

You never know which of the four Jewish movements he'll be swinging at--the falsely pious among the Jewish Religious Right; the hard-hearted legalists in his own Conservative movement; the mystical know-nothings among the former Jewish Left, who confuse God with David Copperfield, or the fervently Orthodox in Israel who are fomenting religious division in the name of "Who is a Jew?" But of this you can be sure: One or more of the movements will be his target, as will many conventions that his congregants hold comfortably abreast.

Take Moses, his subject tonight. By Schulweis' lights, Moses was more than just a commander who led former slaves across the Red Sea; he was a man much like Schulweis himself--a family man, a man of the people, filled with questions and doubt. Moses, as described by Schulweis, argues with God time and again, notably for a stay of execution after the Jews built the Golden Calf. If not for Moses' plea, God would have killed them all.

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Wrestle with God.

Question God.

Think for yourself.

Harold Schulweis sees almost nothing as everyone else sees it. He seeks a revitalized Judaism—compassionate, open, conscience-driven. He has become one of America's leading rabbis not by isolating himself within any of the four main Jewish movements but by challenging elements of each—and working, always working, to build bridges. Deep schisms beset Jewry today: Some Orthodox rabbis won't sit on panels with their liberal brethren, and some liberal rabbis, ridiculed and insulted by the fervently Orthodox in Israel who won't recognize their authority, have urged their congregants to boycott Israeli charities.

In this overheated climate, Schulweis battles to keep Judaism together, aided by his extraordinary credentials: He is a Conservative rabbi who was raised as an Orthodox Jew but who taught for years at the Reform Hebrew Union College. He also was an early advocate of the Reconstructionist movement, a small but influential offshoot of Conservatism, whose founder, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, argued that American Judaism will inevitably evolve in line with the principles of democracy and tolerance in the United States, adapting and updating traditional strictures.

"He represents the best part of American liberal Judaism," says Orthodox Rabbi Daniel Landes, now head of the Pardes Institute in Israel. "Decency, pragmatism and intellectuality, plus—and this is no small thing—he speaks from the ethnic authenticity of a traditional Jewish background."

"He is not an organizational man but a shaper of human life," says Rabbi David Hartman, who many regard as the conscience of Israeli Judaism. "He has a true impulse to change things and an awareness of the moral pathos of our times."

If Judaism is finally coming out of post-Holocaust despair; if it comes back from the meek, sentimentalized and enfeebled "Seinfeld-style" Jewish culture of pastrami-on-rye and becomes a vital, muscular player within the American religious mainstream, and if thousands more, including many non-Jews, come to have a better understanding of their relationship to God, then Schulweis deserves a measure of the credit.

Among his contributions:

--He created the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers 30 years before such heroism was popularized by the movie "Schindler's List." The organization honors Christians who, at great personal risk and for no perceived reward, saved Jews from Nazi death camps.

--He's put in place at Valley Beth Shalom innovations that have been duplicated nationwide, including the "pararabbinic" program that trains lay congregants to mentor others, and popularized the havurah program, which breaks large synagogues into small groups of like-minded members.

--He's written books and hundreds of articles that have helped update Jewish theology from its focus on a medieval God of vengeance and superstition to a God who values reason, debate and even a good wrestling match.

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You are reading this on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year that is the start of the ancient 10-day high-holiday cycle of self-reflection, prayer and commitment to personal change. Even in Los Angeles, where only 34% of Jews belong to a synagogue (compared with 44% nationally), about 60% of L.A.'s 591,000 Jews will flood back into synagogues. Valley Beth Shalom will host 5,000 this week.

So an interview with Rabbi Schulweis, who is readying his sermon, is particularly timely this evening.

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Q. Where was God in the Holocaust?

A. Wrong question. The question is: When was God there?

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We can understand Schulweis best through questions. His 1994 book, "For Those Who Can't Believe," is filled with revised inquiries on the nature of faith. Let's begin with the hard one: God and the Holocaust.

Where others see despair and the death of God, Schulweis, who holds a master's degree in philosophy from New York University and taught philosophy at City College of New York, has come to see hope and an even greater reason to believe. Not "Where was God in the Holocaust?" he says, but "When was God there?", because if you look hard enough, God is there in the actions of those who, at great risk to themselves, saved and hid Jews. The question leads naturally back into his past.

Schulweis was born in the Bronx, where Jews, Poles and Italians lived side by side in "close distance--like porcupines needing warmth." His parents had come to America as part of the great Jewish migration from Eastern Europe around World War I. His father, Maurice--a secular Jew, a Yiddishist and a Zionist--was born in Warsaw, Poland; his mother, Helen, came from the nearby town of Ciechanow, where Jews had spent centuries in limbo, sometimes as pariahs, sometimes as tolerated "foreign guests."

Maurice Schulweis sold advertising for the Jewish Daily Forward, the Yiddish newspaper, and Helen drove her husband on his rounds. They were of moderate means, the rabbi says. Harold, an only child, was sent by his father to a secular Yiddish school.

For comfort, he clung to his maternal grandfather, Reb Abraham Rezak, a devout man who literally spent all his days studying religious texts. Grandpa sent him to a religious school at age 12, and he loved it. At Schulweis' bar mitzvah a year later, there was a war of words between the generations. Reb Rezak wanted him to read in Hebrew, Maurice wanted him to read in Yiddish, and Helen wanted him to read in English. Harold performed at his bar mitzvah in all three.

So maybe it began right there in his Bronx apartment. The child who, in the words of Rabbi Chaim Seidler-Feller of UCLA Hillel, became the "great translator" of the four competing Jewish concepts of God, first became the peacemaker in his own family. It is a gift he has drawn upon again and again, especially in the early 1960s.

At the time, Schulweis was the rabbi of Temple Beth Abraham in Oakland, where he stayed 18 years. There he began meeting people who had saved Jews from the death camps, such as Herman Graebe, a civilian contractor to the Nazi army who saved Jews by hiring them for a fictional branch office. For Schulweis, here was proof that, yes, there was God, even in the Holocaust. So in 1962, he started the Jewish Foundation for Christian Rescuers.

It was an unpopular idea. The notion that rescuers existed during the Holocaust challenged core beliefs that Jews were eternally friendless and doomed. Urging Jews to honor acts of righteousness by individuals from the very nations that had engineered "the final solution" seemed treasonous to some. "My parents found it difficult to accept that Poles had saved Jews," recalls attorney Ben Reznik, who recently accompanied his parents back to Poland, which they'd fled before the war. "If it had not been for Schulweis, they never would have accepted it."

Despite the opposition, Schulweis began publicizing the Righteous Christians in the Jewish press. It was a hard sell. "He wrote the same article almost every month for many years," says Leonard Fein, Schulweis' friend and founding editor of Moment Magazine, an independent publication devoted to Jewish thought. "I was asked, 'How often are you going to let him say the same thing?' I always said, 'Until people get it.'"

Eventually they got it. Since coming to Valley Beth Shalom in 1970, Schulweis has continued each year to honor a different nation, a different hero. Last April, he brought to the synagogue rescuers from Denmark, a country in which 98% of the population would not cooperate with the Nazis. For many honorees, it was their first time in a synagogue. "Why were the Danes never invited before?" Schulweis asks. "Why didn't the Jews ever say thanks?"

Last spring, Schulweis stood virtually alone among Jewish leaders in appreciating Pope John Paul II's apology to the Jewish people for the Catholic Church's silence during the Holocaust. "This is a Polish pope, raised in a land with lots of anti-Semitism," Schulweis says. "And yet this is the first pope in 2,000 years to enter a synagogue. He's the first pope to recognize the state of Israel. This is the beginning of a relationship, not the end."

Schulweis frequently shares his pulpit with Catholic clergy during which the Holocaust is frankly discussed. "The task of reconciliation continues," says Monsignor Royal Vadakin, former head of the Los Angeles Archdiocese inter-religious office. "That Schulweis invited me shows that the work is not done."

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Q: Does God hear prayers?

A: Wrong question. Do you hear the prayers you are saying? Are you praying for good health but still smoking?

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Jokes are a big part of Schulweis' style, maybe because he spent years waiting tables at hotels in the Catskills. (He was a consultant on "The Simpsons" for Krusty the Clown.) But his jokes often conceal a knife.

"A woman came into my study the other day wearing a red string around her wrist," he begins. "She said a rabbi told her it protected her from the evil spirit. That reminds me of a joke. A guy goes to see a psychologist. He's snapping his fingers obsessively. Snap. Snap. Snap. 'Why are you doing that?' the psychologist asks. 'To keep away the elephants.' 'But there are no elephants here,' the psychologist says. 'Aha!' says the man. 'See, it works.'"

For a man whose intellectual style is manifestly tolerant, he has one strong prejudice--against supernaturalism. Computer-generated "proofs" that God literally "wrote" the Torah are beneath consideration. He is an intellectual, trained by the pragmatist Sidney Hook to believe only what can be verified. Mysticism offends Schulweis because it gets people off the hook. Say the secret words and the transom opens. But what if you can't find the secret words? Does that mean God has failed?

When I suggested one afternoon that he try Sleepytime tea for his insomnia, he leaped up in delight. But when I added that I am soothed by the bear in pajamas on the Sleepytime box, he despaired. "I'm not suggestible. I can't even be hypnotized. Even if I weren't a Jew I wouldn't believe in Santa Claus," he says. "Santa Claus is magic. It's pretense; I'm going to get a gift from an outside force without knowing it's my Momma and Poppa."

The issue is suspension of disbelief. The purpose of prayer, he has written, is not to receive a gift but to change human character.

"Congregants come to me. 'Pray for me, rabbi,' they say. I tell them I can't do that. 'I can pray with you, but I can't pray for you.'" To pray for a person would imply that the rabbi alone has access to God, that the congregant needs him as an intermediary. This kind of power is dangerous, since it puts him in control of another's life. Moreover, Schulweis believes that we have to accept the limits of power.

"There are some things that we cannot control," he says. "Nature takes its course. You cannot pray for an amputated leg to spring back to life. You can pray for courage. You can pray for the acquisition of prosthetics. You pray to understand what can be done."

Nor can he stand the word beshert, Yiddish for "meant to be." Beshert is applied to fate and romance ("Are you my beshert?" read the singles ads). "Beshert is not a Jewish concept even if it is a Yiddish word," Schulweis insists. "We don't have fate, we have choice."

Even the romance of beshert is dangerous, a violation of free will, the rabbi says. "A pregnant woman came to me years ago," he told me. "She had a kind of street Orthodoxy. The fetus she was carrying had a severe medical problem. She said she couldn't abort because she was taught 'es is beshert.'"

"I told her that choice is a religious issue. You have to choose how you are going to live with your husband, and will you have another child? That is your obligation, to choose."

Still, to see him whisper "As Time Goes By" in his wife Malkah's ear at their 50th wedding anniversary party at the Beverly Hilton last May, it seems that he believes in true love. They still hold hands; she calls him, adoringly, "Cookie."

The two met at a dance at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. She lived in a Bronx apartment two subway stops from Schulweis' home, in a Russian immigrant family that, while not wealthy, was remarkable: loving, warm, filled with art, culture.

Before she became a psychotherapist in family practice, Malkah Schulweis was a professor of English at Cal State Northridge. Her elegance and practical style breathe over every idea, program and sermon at the synagogue; husband and wife discuss it all at the table of the airy kitchen of their antique-filled Encino home. The couple's eldest son, Seth, and a daughter, Alisa, live in Los Angeles and are both therapists; another son, Ethan, lives on a kibbutz in Israel. There are nine grandchildren.

I had to ask him: did you pray differently when you were sick? Did you beg and plead and ask for divine assistance before your heart surgery?

No. "I don't pray 'to', I pray 'for,'" he says.

"The God he worships is not a God who dispenses personal prescriptions for good or ill," says longtime friend Leonard Fein. Which is not to say he doesn't get scared. He was terrified when Malkah was ill, terrified when Alisa

was a sickly child in Oakland, needing heart surgery. Scared enough to listen to his own prayers for a long life. The onetime smoker quit the pipe. The onetime meat-eater today is largely vegetarian.

"Does prayer work?" he is asked. He answers: "Only if you do."

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Q. Where is God?

A. No, the question is, "Where are you? Are you verifying God by your behavior?"

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Schulweis relishes the "complete freedom" he has at his synagogue to try whatever he likes to make it a true spiritual home. "We have everyone at this synagogue," he says, happily--"married, single, believers, nonbelievers, healthy, sick." Years ago, Jewish life was a closed circle. "When I was a child, I never knew anyone who was divorced. Anyone who was different was morally suspect; it was as if God disapproved. My mother had cancer. Do you think my father let anyone know?"

Today, Schulweis has transformed his synagogue into a "therapeutic community," helping anyone in need. Valley Beth Shalom also is an activist congregation, having wrestled with, over time, the whole gamut of political issues: busing, homelessness, race relations. Latino leaders addressed his congregation during the Prop. 187 debate. Schulweis is probably more politically liberal than his congregants, but no one seems to mind. What they do mind, what worries them intensely, is whether Schulweis thinks they're boring. Former members have told me they left the synagogue because they feared they could not measure up.

Schulweis froths at this. "I'm here," he says to the unseen complainer. "Where are you?" If he's demanding of others, he's worse on himself. While clicking the TV remote late at night, he thinks of congregants who endure injustices. By morning, he's got a new idea and, frequently, a new wrestling match.

Four years ago, Schulweis launched what seemed to some a brazen step for a Conservative rabbi: the inclusion of gays and lesbians as full members of his congregation. The roadblock to full acceptance lay in Jewish law, known as halacha. Schulweis argued at national rabbinical conventions that the traditional view of halacha was wrong. Rather than being a fixed document, Jewish law can respond with compassion to human needs and never allows any group to become a pariah. He gave sermons for a year on Jewish legal philosophy, then invited experts to testify.

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It all comes at a price, of course. Philosophically, Schulweis is often on a precipice by himself, in a Jewish movement often he alone seems to be able to define. "Judaism is a system of laws, but sometimes it seems as if Schulweis is saying Judaism is whatever the people decide it is," says Conservative Rabbi Brad Artson, a Schulweis fan who nevertheless worries what Judaism will look like in future generations. What are the fixed legal standards of inclusion in Judaism that will survive once Schulweis is gone?

Chancellor Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York has accused Schulweis' ilk of "marching to the wrong drummer," especially on the matter of a normal role for gays. "A self-respecting religion cannot enact change by coercion," Schorsch wrote years ago in the publication *Conservative Judaism*. "The ash heap of history is cluttered with proposals for reform rejected by our movement, despite the fact that they were bathed in the bathos of ethical imperatives."

Schulweis smiles: "I'm inviting him to address the congregation. I think he'll come." He thrives on such tumult.

"Imagine what it's like to have the prophet Jeremiah live next door," says Artson, now executive vice president of the Southern California Board of Rabbis.

Another Schulweis innovation is the Keruv outreach program, appealing to converts. The program brings rabbis from every movement to people who might be interested in Judaism. But it does so by seeking converts through such means as secular newspaper advertisements, a step some consider outrageous.

Judaism shouldn't be sold, says Rabbi Abner Weiss of Beth Jacob synagogue, titular head of Los Angeles Orthodoxy. "We wait for them to come to us." Yet Weiss, a trained psychoanalyst who has borrowed Schulweis' "parashbinic" and havurah programs for his own Beverly Hills synagogue, spoke last May before Schulweis' Keruv group, and he is supervising the Orthodox conversion of one of Schulweis' students. Says Weiss of his friend: "We can disagree on anything, but always with respect." In style and presentation, Schulweis is clearly of an older

generation that found its meaning in intellectual rigor. His sermons are clearly out of fashion with Jews who never read Kierkegaard or Spinoza or had a Yiddish-speaking grandfather. Truth is, many young Jews today no longer thrill to the spoken word delivered from a bimah on high; they want music, healing and passionate Hebrew prayer. Hundreds of young Jews with no particular religious training flock to New York's B'nai Jeshurun and Anshe Chesed synagogues or Los Angeles' Ohr HaTorah, led by Rabbi Mordecai Finley, because of the melodic chanting that defuses the pent-up soul.

At Valley Beth Shalom, the crowds are still large, but older, and the religious service is almost unchanged from Conservative practice in the 1950s. "Maybe I can't give them what they want," Schulweis concedes.

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Q. Does God exist?

A. Wrong question. The question is "Do you exist? What is your life for?"

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"Lonely" is a big word to Schulweis. He writes poetry about it. Sermonizes about it. The rabbi is lonely, he says, because of the enormity of the human dilemmas he sees. The rabbi "has only God to call upon, only God to wrestle with, and in the course of the wrestling he will be vulnerable to lameness that will remain for him forever," he once wrote.

And so I speak with Rabbi Ed Feinstein, Schulweis' young colleague and heir-apparent. Feinstein, 44, is short, bearded and frazzled-looking but dazzlingly clear-thinking. He was raised in Los Angeles and grew up listening to Schulweis' sermons. He quotes many by heart.

"What makes being his second so frightening is that Harold doesn't just schmooze," Feinstein says. "He's trained his congregants to listen, to argue and to think."

Schulweis and Feinstein speak a common language. When Feinstein arrived at Valley Beth Shalom some five years ago, Schulweis stopped worrying about his synagogue's future.

Then Feinstein got cancer, and Schulweis nearly fell apart. "I went to tell him the news," said Feinstein, who recently finished chemotherapy. "And I had to stop myself in mid-sentence. I could see what I was doing to him."

Schulweis has no plans for retirement; he's where he wants to be. At the anniversary dinner, Feinstein's speech was filled with fire and fight. He stood at the podium, a shorter, beefier version of Rodin's Balzac, jabbing the air. In the name of Schulweis, he criticized those who disengage from Jewish life, and those who dive in too deep, so entranced by ancient ritual and superstition that they tell time by "a clock that ticks backward."

"The Chassidic master once asked his students, 'What is the greatest moment in Jewish history?' " Feinstein said. "And the students had a big debate about whether it was Mount Sinai or the Red Sea.

" 'No,' say the rabbis. 'The greatest moment in Jewish history is right now.' "

Schulweis and Malkah stood on the dais, listening. And for once Harold Schulweis could not speak.

PHOTO: (COVER: Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis); PHOTO: (Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis); PHOTO: (Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis); PHOTOGRAPHER: Mark Hanuaer

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