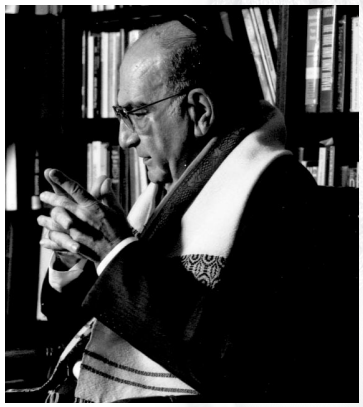
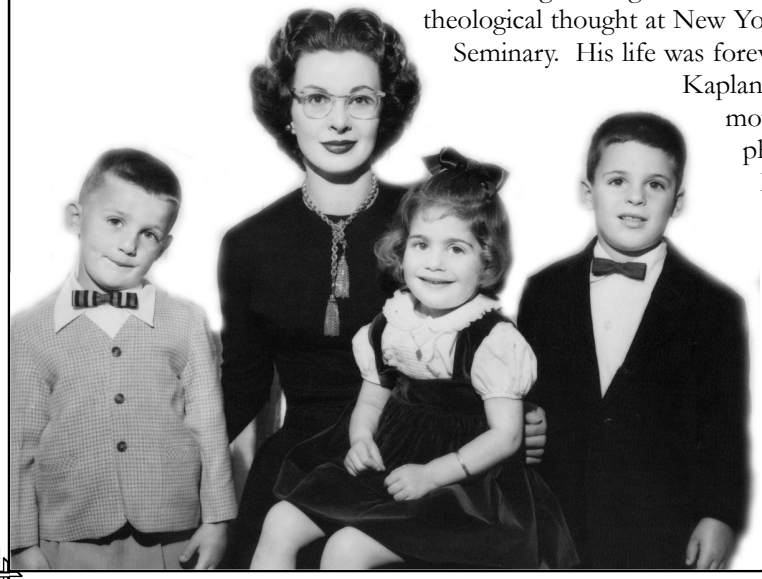
The Unique Legacy of
Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis



Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis is a passionate leader, bold innovator, vibrant teacher, thoughtful poet and persuasive orator. He has a deep connection to his inner voice which was formed by experience as much as by his studies and vision. An only child, Rabbi Schulweis was raised in a home with a father who was a fervent Yiddishist and a grandfather who was an equally fervent Orthodox Jew. Although his father did not want him to become a rabbi he was exposed very early to the power of the pulpit. He attended public school and *Yiddishe schul* in the Bronx. As a youngster his father often took him to Madison Square Garden to hear the great Zionist orators of the time, such as Abba Hillel Silver and Stephen S. Wise. There, he witnessed first-hand how people could be swayed by the power of the spoken word.

His studies at the Israel Salanter Yeshiva sparked a life-long devotion to Judaism's sacred texts, culture, and literature. He combined a Talmudic education at Yeshiva College with graduate studies in modern philosophical and theological thought at New York University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. His life was forever enriched by his studies with Mordechai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement; Abraham Joshua Heschel, writer, philosopher and human rights activist; Louis Finkelstein, the great Talmudic scholar; and the controversial philosopher, Sidney Hook. The latter offered him a teaching position at City College of New York where Rabbi Schulweis taught for four years.



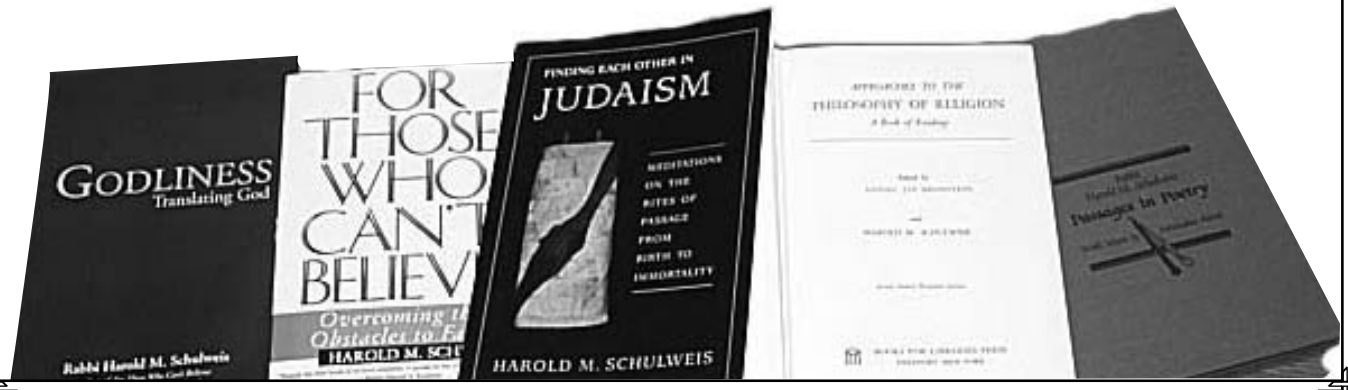
At a Jewish Theological Seminary *Purim* dance he met seventeen-year-old Malkah Savod. They were married in 1947, while he was still in the Seminary.

He was ordained in 1950. His first pulpit was at Temple Emanuel in the Bronx. Malkah was pregnant with their first child when they made the great trek across the continent to Oakland and Temple Beth Abraham. They spent eighteen years in the Bay Area, where their three children, Seth, Ethan and Alisa, were born.

During his tenure in the Bay Area, Rabbi Schulweis found himself in the midst of social ferment. He addressed the controversial topics of the time from his pulpit. He sermonized against slumlords and pawnbrokers and became involved in trying to ameliorate the social upheaval in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. He particularly reached out to the young people, even conducting a *Seder* in the basement of a church.

He has written books and articles, given sermons, lectures, but most importantly, he created programs empowering organizations and people to carry on his legacy. He detests indolence, can not understand apathy and is optimistic with a great sense of humor. While committed to the ancient texts, he remains thoroughly forward thinking and a strong proponent of modernity. Possessing the vision and conviction of the prophet he will not be silenced. He constantly challenges us to make the difficult choices and to be better human beings.

Rabbi Schulweis arrived at Valley Beth Shalom in 1970. His then three teen-age children joined him in bringing a new spirit of energy and empowerment to the young families of the congregation. Friday evening services immediately drew nearly a thousand people from all over Los Angeles to celebrate with Rabbi Schulweis, to sing and to dance during the *Oneg Shabbat*.



The congregation became active participants in *Torah* study as he introduced the Socratic Method during *Shabbat* morning services.

The first VBS program of what was to become part of "The Unique Legacy" was launched within his first *Rosh Hashanah* sermon at Valley Beth Shalom. He proposed the placement of synagogue members with similar interests and/or ages into groups of ten families each. Each of these *Havurot* would independently hold monthly meetings involving Jewish topics. A host of rabbis was frightened by the idea of the *Havurah*, fearing that it would dilute the need for synagogue life. Rabbi Schulweis felt just the opposite. He saw the *Havurah* as a vehicle to solidify the connection within the synagogue community.

Havurot became firmly planted at VBS and remains so today. The program subsequently manifested itself in other synagogues across the United States. There have been as many as 200 synagogues involved with *Havurot*. It is said that some churches have adopted the idea.

Rabbi Schulweis' next innovative project was the VBS Counseling Center. His concept was to identify and train a group of volunteer family counselors who would offer their services to the congregation and community at large. He consulted Dr. Arthur Sorosky (z"l) who took a year to put together a comprehensive screening and training program. When Rabbi Schulweis announced the program in 1973 at a High Holiday sermon, many volunteers stepped forward to begin the screening process. Since its inception the Center has trained four groups of volunteer counselors who have collectively logged approximately 60,000 counseling hours to date. The Center is still going strong and has been replicated by many institutions across the United States.

The adult *B'nai Mitzvah* program was initiated at VBS by Rabbi Schulweis in 1973. He habitually walked through the congregation to personally invite men and women to participate. The adult *b'nai mitzvah* concept has become a fixture in numerous synagogues. Over the past thirty-two years, more than three hundred men and women have become *b'nai mitzvah* at Valley Beth Shalom.

The Valley Beth Shalom Day School opened in 1978. Rabbi Schulweis firmly believed that a day school and a synagogue should share premises. In 1998 the Day School became known as the "VBS Harold M. Schulweis Day School."

Consistent with his belief in involving the laity, Rabbi Schulweis created a para-rabbinic program. Men and women studied with him for two years. These volunteers became proficient in conducting services for mourners and assisting families prepare for various life cycle events. This program continues to be active today working with pre-*b'nai mitzvah* families, conducting *kaddish minyans* and guiding new comers in Jewish ritual practice.

In 1986, revitalizing an idea based on research and a program begun while at Temple Beth Abraham, Rabbi Schulweis introduced the Foundation for Righteous Gentiles (now known as the Foundation for the Righteous) which was to celebrate the altruistic personality demonstrated by rescuers during the *Shoah*. The mission of this organization is to educate society about those remarkable people who risked their lives to save others. The Foundation continues its work and is now based in New York City.

Currently about 1700 rescuers have been identified most of whom are elderly and ill. Many are in dire financial straits. The Foundation provides each of them a stipend which requires approximately a million dollars each year. These funds are raised at an annual major event in New York City.

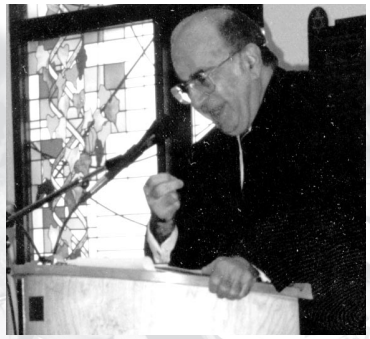
Arguably, the program that most exemplifies Rabbi Schulweis' dedication is the one that deals with encouraging Jews and non-Jews to learn about and embrace Judaism — the *Keruv* Center. Rabbi Schulweis invited rabbis from all the traditions to speak from their denominational perspective. Each of the lectures, begun in 1997, attracted hundreds of attendees from the greater Los Angeles area. Rabbi Schulweis had the *chutzpah* to admit that he was interested in proselytizing. Further, he was open to inviting the prospective Jews choose the branch of Judaism where they were most comfortable.

> **“A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.”**
> **— Henry Brooks Adams in “The Education of Henry Adams”**

He was not looking for members to join VBS but for Jews and Jews by Choice. This made him very unpopular amongst certain Jewish groups. Nonetheless the *Keruv* Center proved to be a spectacular success. The *Keruv* Center and the companion programs to welcome and integrate the Jew by Choice in our community have enriched our congregation. These programs continue to grow with the full support of the congregation.

Rosh Hashanah 2004 saw the founding by Rabbi Schulweis of Jewish World Watch as a vehicle to raise the collective Jewish voice against the genocide in Darfur, Sudan. Now, six months later, Jewish World Watch has become a city-wide inter-denominational social action and political advocacy project consisting of a growing list of Reform, Conservative and Orthodox synagogues and virtually all of the Jewish Day Schools in Los Angeles. To date more than $100,000 has been raised to pay for a medical clinic serving the refugees in Darfur, and the construction of life-saving water wells. Thousands of letters have been sent to government officials urging that stronger measures be taken by the U.S. and the U.N. to end the genocide and protect the people of Darfur. Jewish World Watch continues to press forward for the cessation of this genocide and will engage in other human rights issues which may require the attention of the Jewish community. Our commitment is “Never Again!”

Rabbi Schulweis’ fresh and imaginative thinking has been captured in his many books. His most popular book *For Those Who Can’t Believe* has had wide circulation and has recently been translated into Dutch. His other books include, *In God’s Mirror*, the classic *Evil and the Morality of God, Approaches to the Philosophy of Religion, Finding Each Other in Judaism* and three books of original religious poetry and meditation. Currently, he is completing a book entitled *Godliness (Translating God).*



Rabbi Schulweis has written the forwards, prefaces, or comments on dust covers for literally hundreds of books. He has been published in magazines across the United States, most prominently *Moment, Commentary, Reform Judaism,* and *Sh’ma.* His articles have no doubt reached millions, as many of these publications have circulations in the hundreds of thousands. His popularity as a “news maker” in the local papers is well known as he is sought after for comment as well as being featured for his groundbreaking programs.

His bold and original ventures find validation and substantiation in the teachings of classic ancient and modern Jewish thought. He is always seeking a place where roots can be sunk to strengthen Judaism. He motivates his people to study, to learn and to challenge.