

Glimpses Into American Jewish History Part 34

Forty Years as Rov of Baltimore's Congregation Shearith Israel

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Note: This article is based on Rev. Dr. Schepschel Schaffer, Twenty-Five Years of Activity in the Cause of Orthodox Judaism 1893 – 1918, by Israel Fine, published by Kohn and Pollock, Baltimore, 1918 and A History of Congregation Shearith Israel of Baltimore, On the Threshold of a Century, by Arnold Blumberg, 1970, published by the Congregation .

The article “**The First Rov of Baltimore's Congregation Shearith Israel**” (**The Jewish Press October _ 2007**) traced the intensive yeshiva education that Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer received in his youth, his studies while he attended the Rabbiner Seminar in Berlin that led to his receiving semicha from a number of outstanding *rabbonim*, and his being granted a doctorate by the University of Leipzig. Despite his remarkable qualifications, it became clear to Dr. Schaffer that he would not be able to obtain a rabbinical position in either Germany or Russia. Therefore, he decided he had no other choice than to immigrate to America, arriving in October of 1892.

Congregation Shearith Israel of Baltimore had not had a Rov since its inception. However, toward the end of 1892, the congregational board wrote to Rabbi Dr. Azriel Hildesheimer, Dean of the Rabbiner Seminar, and Rabbi Dr. Philip Hillel Klein, who in 1890 had become the Rov of Congregation Ohab Zedek on the Lower East Side, asking them to recommend someone to serve as rabbi of their congregation. Both rabbis nominated the same candidate – Rabbi Dr. Schepschel Schaffer.

Therefore, shortly after his arrival in New York, Rabbi Schaffer was contacted by the Board of Shearith Israel and invited to Baltimore to deliver “a trial sermon.” This led to his appointment as Rov of the shul in January 1893.

Serving as the Rov

In 1893 the Baltimore Jewish community consisted of between twelve to fifteen thousand Jews of German origin. There were only six synagogues of substantial size, and, of these, only Shearith Israel and Chizuk Emunah were orthodox. Shearith Israel consisted of about fifty members and a considerably larger number of “seat-holders.” The members of Shearith Israel were considered to be the most observant Jews in Baltimore.

Dr. Schaffer quickly became acclimated to his new surroundings, despite the fact that he had to learn a new language and adjust to the customs of a new country. He soon sent for

his *kallah*, Anna Lapidus, and, shortly after she arrived in March, they were married in the shul in the presence of almost the entire congregation.

Realizing that it was important for him to learn to speak English well, Rabbi Schaffer engaged a student from Johns Hopkins University to tutor him. He immediately began to deliver bi-weekly sermons and inaugurated the custom of delivering a short *dvar* Torah on the *sidra* before *Mincha* on Shabbos afternoon.

He also began giving a Gemara *Shiur* four times a week. By 1918 those who attended regularly had completed Shas! He also gave a *Mishnayos Shiur* once a week during the summer and between mincha and maariv during the winter.

Dr. Schaffer became the head of the congregation's Talmud Torah and taught the highest class. Under his leadership the school prospered to the extent that by 1918 it employed three teachers. Shortly after his arrival in Baltimore his interest in Jewish education led him to become the chairman of the Board of Education which directed the entire Baltimore Talmud Torah System. He served in this position for more than 25 years.

In 1913 Rabbi Schaffer attempted to establish an institution for advanced Talmudic studies modeled after the Hildesheimer Rabbiner Seminar he had attended in Germany. The goal of the Rabbinical Seminary of Baltimore, of which Dr. Schaffer became the dean, was to train rabbis who were strictly Orthodox and possessed an excellent secular education. Six young men attended Johns Hopkins University during the day and studied *Tanach*, Gemara and *Halacha* in the afternoon and evening in the *Bais Medrash* of Shearith Israel.

Alas, this institution lasted for only one year. One should keep in mind that Rabbi Schaffer's effort to found such a school preceded the 1915 merger of the Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Theological Seminary (RIETS) with Yeshiva Etz Chaim to form the short-lived Rabbinical College of America. The Rabbinical College of America led to the founding of Yeshiva College and its association with RIETS. Dr. Schaffer's concept of a rabbinical seminary that combined religious and secular studies was sound. However, in 1913 the Jewish community of Baltimore was simply not ready for such an institution.

An Early Zionist

The founding of the international organization *Chovovei Zion* (Lovers of Zion) in Odessa was an indirect outgrowth of the Russian pogroms of 1881-82. The organization soon spread throughout Russia, Germany and England. It was a predecessor to political Zionism and its goal was to foster the settlement of Jews in agricultural communities in the Holy Land.

Shortly after Rabbi Schaffer arrived in Baltimore a number of people expressed an interest in founding a Baltimore branch of *Chovovei Zion*. At a meeting held in his home Dr. Schaffer was elected president of this branch, the first to be founded in America.

Under his leadership the Baltimore branch grew rapidly, and its membership eventually exceeded 300. It regularly sent contributions to Eretz Yisroel, especially to the colony of *Mishmar Ha-Yarden*. A substantial sum of money was also raised for a Jewish school in Jaffa where Hebrew was used as the sole language of instruction. (This was not common in Israel in the late 1890s.)

When in 1896 Theodor Herzl issued a call for an International Jewish Congress, Dr. Schaffer was chosen to be the representative of the Zionists of America. Thus, in the summer of 1897, he traveled to Basel, Switzerland, where he was the sole American representative at this assembly. While there he took an active part in the deliberations of the Congress.

In 1901 he was one of fifteen American delegates to the Fifth Zionist Congress. For a number of years he served as president of the Southern Council of Zionist Societies. When the American branch of the International Mizrahi Association was formed in 1913, Rabbi Schaffer transferred his allegiance to this wing of the Zionist movement. He served as a member of its Governing Council as well as president of the Baltimore Mizrahi Society. He was deeply devoted to the Mizrahi slogan of “the people of Israel, in the land of Israel, with the Torah of Israel.”

Family

Rabbi Dr. and Mrs. Anna Schaffer had nine children – five of whom survived. Their oldest child, Aaron (1894 – 1957), was, for many years, a distinguished professor in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Texas. Their youngest child, Alexander (1902 – 1981), was a professor of Pediatrics at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Grace, their eldest daughter, married Rabbi Max Drob of Buffalo, NY. She apparently died young, leaving two children. I have been unable to find out anything about their other two daughters, Molly and Rose.

In 1928, after serving for thirty-five years as the Rabbi of Shearith Israel, Dr. Schaffer was retired to the position of Rabbi Emeritus. He was to remain responsible for the congregation’s kashrus supervision until the appointment of his successor. However, at the time of Dr. Schaffer’s passing in 1933, no successor had been appointed. It was not until four years later, in December 1936, that Rav Shimon Schwab, ZT”L, arrived from Europe to fill the vacancy left by Rabbi Dr. Schaffer’s death.