

Rabbi David Miller (1869 – 1939)

A Forgotten Fighter for Orthodoxy

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Readers are no doubt aware that during the first half of the twentieth century Jewish religious observance in America had declined. The prospects for Orthodoxy seemed bleak. “No one can overemphasize the hardships that faced Orthodox Jews who merely wished to avoid violating religious Sabbath laws in the era of the six-day week that included early Friday evenings and entire Saturdays. Orthodox Jews were effectively closed out of virtually any position in any business not owned by another Orthodox Jew. Out of sheer necessity and the instinct for survival in virtually any job that did not involve self-employment, many otherwise pious Jews inevitably succumbed.” (**The Maverick Rabbi**, by Aaron Reichel, The Donning Company/Publishers, 1986, page 192.)

Many rabbonim did their utmost to stem the tide of abandonment of Torah true Judaism. They were assisted by a few unusual “private persons,” who used their talents and wealth to promote the observance of mitzvos and provide children with decent religious education. One such individual was Rabbi David Miller, ז"ר of Oakland, California.

Sketch of the Life of Rabbi D. Miller

Little is known about R. Miller’s youth. He was born in Lithuania in about 1869. He came from a very poor home, because he wrote, “It was a common sight to see a poor, widowed woman, like my Mother, (God bless her memory) pawn her pillow to help pay for the education of her child.” Rabbi Miller attended yeshiva in Rozhinoi (known as Ruzhany in Russian). He was also a talmid for some time in the Slabodka Yeshiva, because he wrote that he studied mussar with the “*tzadikei olam HaRabbonim, ha gaonim*” Rav Yitzchok Blazer, Rav Naftali Amsterdam, and Rav Nota Hirsch Finkel, ZT”L.”

As a result of his yeshiva studies Rabbi David Miller acquired a profound and thorough knowledge of the Torah and Talmud. He himself wrote, “I am an authorized Rabbi, ordained by highly esteemed Jewish religious leaders, among them the great Rabbi Isaac Elchanan of Kovno.”

Rabbi Miller came to this country in about 1890 and served as a rabbi in congregations in New York and Providence, RI. However, he became disillusioned with serving in the rabbinate and gave up his rabbinical career,

moving to the West. He did this for what he called “conscientious reasons,” stating that he desired to make “no material profit from Jewish affairs.”

Rabbi Miller realized that the fundamental Torah institutions of *Shmiras Shabbos* (Sabbath observance) and *Taharas HaMishpacha* (Family Purity) were being neglected by large segments of the Jewish population in America. With this in mind, he dedicated his life, scholarship, and wealth to strengthening and advancing these institutions. He wrote and distributed, without charge, his book ‘The Secret of the Jew,’ spending large sums for its dissemination without thought of gain or profit. Shortly before his death (January 7, 1939-Tebeth 16, 5699) he wrote a book called ‘The Secret of Happiness.’ In it he explained the reasonableness and the value of Sabbath observance as a means of Jewish happiness.

However, Rabbi Miller’s books deal with more than Family Purity and Sabbath observance. They contain deep insights into all aspects of Jewish moral and religious life. He makes the case that our daily lives, hopes and ideals are dependent upon the observance of these institutions.

(Rabbi Miller’s books may be downloaded at no charge from <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/>.)

Oakland, CA

In about 1905 Rabbi Miller settled in Oakland, CA. Records show that by 1906 he was successfully involved in the real estate and construction businesses. Indeed, he soon became quite wealthy; residing in what was then considered the affluent area of Oakland.

Readers may wonder what sort of Jews lived in Oakland in the early part of the twentieth century. While many Jews unfortunately had embraced the Reform Movement, and they or their children were on their way to assimilation, there definitely was a viable Orthodox Jewish community in the city.

“Until the 1930s the signs of Jewish life were highly visible. A frequent sight on Castro, Chestnut or Myrtle Streets was bearded, black-coated peddlers, uncomfortable in the warm sun. Women, their hair in scarves, hurried from one kosher butcher to another comparing prices and gossiping in Yiddish.

“Spiritual life centered around the two largest orthodox shuls, Beth Abraham and Beth Jacob, but smaller groups of worshippers could be found as well. Yitzchak Rabinovitz, a descendent of a long line of Rumanian rabbis, was one of several Oaklanders who had a tiny shtiebel, complete with Torah, in his own home.” (**Free to Choose, the Making of**

Jewish Community in the American West, by Fred Rosenbaum, The Judah L. Magnes Memorial Museum, 1976, pages 58 – 60.

Jewish Education

(This section is based on Rabbi Miller's "**An Open Letter to the United Jewish Fund**," dated August 30, 1935 and his "**An Open Letter to the Jewish People of Oakland**," dated September 2, 1937. Courtesy of the Yeshiva University Archives, Rabbi David Miller Collection.

Rabbi Miller understood that a good religious Jewish education was the key to ensuring the future of Yiddishkeit. As obvious as this may seem to us today, in the first half of the twentieth century this was not so clear to many American Jewish parents, even Orthodox parents. Many felt that public school attendance supplemented with a few hours of "Jewish" education in the afternoon was enough. More often than not, even this "Jewish" education contained virtually no religious content.

Rabbi Miller started and supported at his own expense a Talmud Torah for the children of Oakland. (As far as I have been able to determine, Rabbi Miller did not have any children of his own.) Not only did he support this school financially, but he also devoted much of his time to running it. The school did not last, because some in the community were opposed to it. In 1935 Rabbi Miller wrote,

For lack of obtaining other room, I conducted my school at this congregation [Beth Jacob Congregation, one of the two large Orthodox shuls mentioned above] which I helped to found in 1907 and maintain thereafter. For having the privilege of educating Jewish children at my own expense in that Synagogue, I had to go through the humiliation of obtaining a permit from that President. I encountered much resistance in maintaining the school there. My permit was cancelled by the President [in 1921]. This was the greatest blow I ever received in my spiritual life, and the hardest struck on the innocent Jewish children.

These children have now grown to manhood and womanhood. Some of them have children of their own. Most of them still remember the lessons I taught them in an interesting, attractive, understandable way. I feel that I am completely rewarded. But just imagine my deep sorrow; the irreparable loss! Had they not broken me, my school, what accomplishment there would have been by this time - in all probability a Jewishly inspired generation would have been raised.

Rabbi Miller did not give up on Jewish education in Oakland. In the same open letter quoted from above he expressed his "intention to donate FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS (\$5,000.00) to the United Fund or/and the Jewish Federation of

Oakland” to be used to establish a new Talmud Torah. In addition, he offered to assist the school as an unpaid consultant.

However, there were two conditions attached to this generous offer. (According to <http://eh.net/hmit/compare/>, \$5,000.00 in 1935 was worth \$68,879.27 in 2004! This estimate is based on the Consumer Price Index.) First, these organizations had to match Rabbi Miller’s donation; second, the school had to be conducted in accordance with Orthodox Judaism.

Rabbi Miller’s open letter and financial offer fell on deaf ears, because, on September 2, 1937, a few days before Rosh Hashanah, he issued another “Open Letter to the Jewish People of Oakland.” (The capitalization and underlining are taken from the original.)

I refer particularly to the terrible neglect of the Oakland Jewish people in not having a real, daily school for the Jewish religious education of their children. SUCH NEGLIGENCE IS UNPARDONABLE. It is a spiritual crime. Tens of thousands of dollars are raised annually in Oakland for all kinds of philanthropy and fads but none for local real Jewish education.

Jewish religious education for children is the first, the basic, the outstanding precept in the Torah. It takes precedence over building a synagogue, obtaining the Holy Scrolls, and even the building of the Holy Temple. If there is no Jewish religious education for the children, the money put into synagogues and temples is wasted. Such neglect is suicide.

Now, therefore, in order to do justice to my own city and in order to clear myself before the Jewish world, I herewith offer my community another chance to establish an adequate school for Jewish children. I would be willing to contribute up to one-third of the running expense of such a school. Although I am not now in a position to give my time exclusively to this work, as I have done in the past, for the reason that there is now a great demand on my time from all over the Jewish world, nevertheless, I would give to such a school the benefit of my professional experience in systematizing and guiding it, that the aim of saving the Jewish children for Judaism might be accomplished. Such a school can not be a private affair, depending on me alone, as in the past. It must be a community institution. Therefore, I most earnestly urge the Oakland Community to take the matter in hand.

Sadly, this heartfelt plea also went unanswered. As a result, for many years there was no real Orthodox Jewish education in Oakland, CA to speak of. It was not until 1970 that the Hillel Academy of Oakland was formed. Classes were held in Congregation Beth Jacob. This school was supplanted by The Oakland Hebrew Day School in 1992.

The Oakland Lodge of B'nai B'rith

(Unless otherwise noted, the quotes in this section come from Rabbi Miller's August 1, 1938 letter "**To the Oakland Lodge of B'nai B'rith, Attention George J. Weiser, President.** Courtesy of the Yeshiva University Archives, Koenigsberg Collection.)

"The national organization of B'nai B'rith, meaning 'Sons of the Covenant,' was founded by German Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side of New York in 1843." The Oakland chapter was established in 1875. As we shall see below, by 1938, if not considerably earlier, the Oakland Lodge of B'nai B'rith had completely divorced itself from Torah Judaism.

On August 1, 1938 Rabbi Miller issued a letter to the Oakland Lodge. He wrote,

To my astonishment I received an invitation to attend the B'nai B'rith picnic on Sunday, August 7th, which is known to every Jew as being Tish'ah b'Ab. I presume you know that Tish'ah b'Ab, the day you have appointed for indulgence in a gay [festive] rally, has been for the Jews a sad day for over eighteen centuries, the day when the greatest catastrophes to the Jewish nation and people have occurred.

It is unthinkable that you should be rejoicing, eating, drinking, and dancing, while the rest of the Jews are fasting and sobbing and crying. For a Jew to do that is equivalent to his dancing at his own funeral.

Planning a picnic on Tisha B'Av was not the only activity that this Lodge engaged in that showed absolutely no sensitivity to Orthodox Judaism.

I have been a member of the B'nai B'rith Oakland Lodge for about twenty-five years. I have experienced many aggravations, such as the practice of the B'nai B'rith in persisting to eat contaminated Trefa food at their banquets and the awarding of a leg of ham with the inscription of "Kosher" as a gate prize, thus mocking and irritating the Jew who is loyal to his religion and to his sacred traditional inheritance.

I doubt that the lodge canceled its picnic on Tisha B'Av. To put it mildly, Rabbi Miller was not appreciated by a good portion of the Oakland Jewish community. "The Oakland Jewish leadership felt that Miller was a crank or, according to one reporter in 1929, 'detrimental to the best interests of East Bay Jewry.' A short-lived Jewish community newspaper, The Menorah, was instructed by the Federation to cease the publication of Miller's articles. The [administrators of the Jewish Federation] Fund, meanwhile, icily replied to his request for money on behalf of a Lithuanian Yeshivah with the statement, 'We do not recognize David Miller as the representative of anything.'" (**Free to Choose**, page 87.)

Fighting Against Insurmountable Odds

Clearly, Rabbi Miller's attempts to strengthen Orthodoxy in Oakland, CA during the first part of the twentieth century met with strong opposition. Still, he continued his efforts until his death. He was a fighter for Orthodoxy at a time when many had given up the battle.

Rabbi Miller's efforts enjoyed more success outside of Oakland. His books were read the world over and encouraged many to observe Shabbos and Taharas Hamishpachah. Over the years he contributed substantial sums to a wide variety of yeshivos and chesed organizations.

Rabbi Miller passed away on January 7, 1939. His last will and testament dated February 23, 1938 left money to nine prominent yeshivos in Europe and America. Rabbi Miller, Z"L, clearly understood the value of Torah education, and the crucial role it plays in perpetuating Judaism.

It is men like Rabbi Miller who laid the foundations of Yiddishkeit in America upon which today's vibrant Orthodoxy is built. The importance of what he and others like him did should not be underestimated. Every Orthodox Jew living today owes these pioneers a debt of gratitude.

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