



Home » InDepth » Front Page »

## A Forgotten Champion of American Orthodoxy

By: Dr. Yitzchok Levine

*Published: November 23rd, 2005*

*Note: Most of the information in this article is based upon Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman's autobiography **The Unfailing Light (UL)** published by the Rabbinical Council of America, New York, 1948.*

Today it is not uncommon to meet people from nonreligious homes who have become observant Jews. Some even attain distinction as well-known Jewish leaders. However, in the nineteenth century such an accomplishment was virtually unheard of. Yet, Bernard Drachman was such a person. Raised in a non-Shomer Shabbos home, he went to public school in Jersey City, NJ and then Columbia College. While in high school and college, Rabbi Drachman also attended the (Reform) Temple Emanuel Hebrew Preparatory School of New York City for six years. In 1882 he graduated Columbia with honors and decided to study for the rabbinate. Temple Emanuel granted him a scholarship to pursue rabbinical studies with the idea that he would prepare for the Reform rabbinate. He went to Germany, studied at the University of Breslau and the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau, and earned his rabbinical degree. In addition, he matriculated at the University of Heidelberg and obtained the degree of Ph.D. Magna Cum Laude in 1885.

### A Difficult Choice

As a result of his studies in Germany, Dr. Drachman became completely committed to Orthodox Judaism. Temple Emanuel had sponsored his studies with the understanding that when he returned he would become its assistant rabbi. Given his commitment to Orthodoxy, Rabbi Drachman was forced to make it clear to the congregants of Temple Emanuel that he would only serve an Orthodox congregation. Despite the fact that Reform rabbis usually earned considerably more than Orthodox rabbis, he chose the less lucrative career of being an Orthodox rabbi. The result was that, "he speedily became known as an enthusiastic and energetic champion of Orthodox Judaism, one of the then very few English-speaking representatives of the ancient faith in the America of that time." (**Memorial Journal** published by the Congregation Zichron Ephraim, 3/31/46 available at

<http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Village/2262/drachman/bernard.htm>)

Orthodoxy thus gained a well-educated, articulate spokesman, who devoted his life promoting what he termed "American Orthodoxy." This type of Orthodoxy remained faithful to the perpetuation of the age-old principles of the Torah, while at the same time incorporating those aspects of American culture compatible with it. Rather than transplant Eastern European

Orthodoxy as is, Rabbi Drachman sought to develop an Orthodoxy that was generic to the American milieu. In Dr. Drachman's view this development was not to take place at the expense of Halacha. In 1887, shortly after he began serving as rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel Bikkur Cholim of Manhattan, the synagogue membership voted to abolish the ladies' gallery and have mixed seating. Without hesitation Rabbi Drachman resigned his position and severed all connection with this congregation. "This incident created a great sensation in the city and, indeed, in Jewish circles throughout the country and, to a considerable extent, throughout the world" (UL page 203).

In 1890 Dr. Drachman became the rabbi of the newly formed Congregation Zichron Ephraim, founded through the largesse of Jonas Weil, Rabbi Drachman's father-in-law, in memory of Mr. Weil's father. Dr. Drachman served as rabbi of this congregation until his passing in 1945. The synagogue, located at 163 East 67th Street, N.Y., is known today as the Park East Synagogue (Congregation Zichron Ephraim), and is affiliated with the Orthodox Union. On August 18, 1983 it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places as "one of the few synagogues still owned by the same congregation which built it." (<http://www.nyc-architecture.com/UES/UES104.htm>)

### **Jewish Causes**

During his tenure as rabbi of Congregation Zichron Ephraim, Rabbi Drachman was actively involved in virtually every important Jewish cause. Indeed, he was ready to join and/or lead almost any endeavor that he felt would strengthen traditional Judaism. Below are listed what are only some of his activities.

### ***The Jewish Theological Seminary***

Readers may not be aware that the Jewish Theological Seminary was originally founded as an Orthodox institution. While it was true that a certain proportion of the organizing delegates and participating rabbis belonged to the Conservative wing of Judaism, the principles of the seminary, as declared in its charter of incorporation granted by the Legislature of the State of New York on May 9, 1886, uncompromisingly adhered to the tenets of Orthodox Judaism (UL page 181). In 1902 and later in 1926 there were efforts to merge the Seminary with Yeshiva Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon (RIETS). (See **Bernard Revel**, Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, Feldheim Publishers, second edition, 2000 pages 102-114.) Consideration of such a merger would have been impossible unless both institutions shared essentially the same (Orthodox) religious principles.

Rabbi Drachman assisted Dr. Sabato Morais, the Seminary's founder. In 1889 he was made Dean and held this position until 1909, when he severed his relationship with JTS. In his autobiography Rabbi Drachman gives no reason for leaving the Seminary. However, the editor of his autobiography attributes his leaving to conflicts with those who gained control of JTS. These people wanted to move the seminary out of the Orthodox camp. Dr. Drachman's insistence at faculty meetings that all policies of the seminary conform to Halacha caused friction. This led to the seminary leadership forcing him to resign (UL footnote page 261). Given that Rabbi Dr. Drachman consistently remained faithful to his Orthodox religious principles, this result was inevitable.

Dr. Drachman then began teaching at the Rabbi Yitzchok Elchonon Theological Seminary and remained associated with

RIETS until 1940. In his more than 30 years of his association with Yeshiva College as "professorial lecturer," he taught "most of the Hebrew subjects, with the exception of the Talmud and related branches" (UL page 368), as well as the German language.

### ***The Jewish Welfare Board***

Rabbi Drachman was one of the original organizers of the Jewish Welfare Board. This organization was formed during World War I to serve the needs of Jewish servicemen. It also raised funds to support the efforts of rabbis at military posts. The main efforts of the Board were focused on providing religious support to Jewish soldiers. Soldiers were provided with an abbreviated siddur which Dr. Drachman had taken a leading role in preparing.

### ***The OU and The Jewish Sabbath Alliance of America***

In 1913, upon the retirement of Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes due to ill health, Rabbi Drachman became the second president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America. He was the only logical candidate to succeed Dr. Mendes, given that he had been involved in the OU from its inception in 1898. Rabbi Drachman had for many years chaired the Jewish Sabbath Association, a special unit of the OU, which did its best to foster Shmiras Shabbos by encouraging businesses to remain closed on Shabbos. It also sought to place Shomer Shabbos Jews in jobs where they could remain faithful to this most important tenet of Judaism. In 1907 Dr. Drachman reported that "within the preceding years jobs had been obtained for 1,500 Sabbath observers."

(<http://www.ou.org/orthodoxunion/unionstory/chapter7.htm>) This group subsequently became an autonomous organization known as The Jewish Sabbath Alliance. Rabbi Drachman headed The Jewish Sabbath Alliance for many years. It continued to do its best to foster Shmiras Shabbos, and attempted to have legislation passed that would have allowed Jewish businesses that were closed on Shabbos to be open on Sundays. Unfortunately, these legislative efforts were not successful.

### **Candidate for Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of London**

"In the year 1912, The Post of Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of London had become vacant through the passing away of its then incumbent, the Very Reverend Doctor Hermann Adler" (UL page 290). During the early summer of 1912, Dr. Drachman received an official letter from the United Synagogue inviting him to become a candidate for this position. "This was a position unrivaled for dignity and power anywhere among the Jewries of the world" (UL page 290). Arriving in London in October 1912, Rabbi Drachman was subjected to a whirlwind of interviews and spoke at many synagogues in London and other cities in England. All in all, he made a highly favorable impression on almost everyone he met and/or heard him speak.

Two incidents recorded by Dr. Drachman about his visit to England shed light on his character and approach to Judaism. First, he describes a dinner he had to attend which may very well have had "an important influence upon the outcome of the campaign for the chief rabbinate" (UL page 303). This dinner was held in the home of Reverend A. A. Green, an official of

an Orthodox synagogue. However, Rabbi Drachman suspected that Green's kashrus was not reliable. Apparently there was no way for him to refuse the invitation. At the dinner he found himself seated at the head of the table with his host. It soon became obvious that he was not eating, and his host confronted him saying, "I presume that you are not eating because you think that my food is not kosher" (UL page 304). Rabbi Drachman writes, "I assured Mr. Green that I was not insinuating that the meal was not kosher, and no further reference was made to the subject. But the atmosphere had become distinctly chilly, and when I left I felt that the Reverend Mr. Green could hardly be numbered among my friends. That feeling did not disturb my equanimity, but I reproached myself for having permitted myself to be involved in a controversy, be it ever so slight, or brought into a position which could be considered compromising" (UL page 304).

Second, almost all of Dr. Drachman's speeches in England were delivered in English. However, on one occasion he was asked to address a group of immigrants from Eastern Europe in Yiddish. To the astonishment of those who had made this request, he replied, "I should not care to use the Yiddish as the language of my sermons." To the question, "Why not?" he replied, "I do not consider Yiddish a language, in the true sense of the term. It is, at best, a dialect of the German. It is an incorrect and ungrammatical German. Since I can speak a correct German, I see no reason why I should myself corrupt and spoil the language I speak" (UL pages 301-02). The result was that he addressed the group in a simple yet correct German and was perfectly understood by all present!

In the end Rabbi Drachman was not elected Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of London. Those opposed to him were able to use a procedural technicality to block his election.

### Scholarly Works

Rabbi Drachman also found time for scholarly endeavors. In 1899 he published the first English translation of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's **The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel**. His book **From the Heart of Israel or Jewish Tales and Types** first appeared in 1905. *Dibre Ha-Riboth* (Matters of Controversy, a rabbinical disputation between Zerahiah Ha-Levi and Abraham ben David) was published from a manuscript (Unicum) in 1907. (This sefer is available on the Internet at <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdf/divreharivot.pdf>.) In addition, he contributed countless articles to the English and Yiddish press that furthered the cause of Orthodox Judaism.

### Houdini

Dr. Drachman knew Harry Houdini (Ehrich Weiss) when Houdini was a pupil in the Talmud Torah of his synagogue, Congregation Zichron Ephraim. Houdini's father, Dr. Mayer S. Weiss, was a Hungarian born rabbi. Dr. Drachman points out that, "Despite the nature of his vocation, he (Houdini) had a profound reverence for the Jewish faith and deep-seated filial affection for his parents and reverence for their memory" (UL page 337). He then relates an incident to back up this assertion. In 1890 Rabbi Weiss, whose family was in dire financial straits, came to Dr. Drachman for aid. Rabbi Drachman volunteered either to give or lend money to Rabbi Weiss. Instead, Rabbi Weiss suggested that Dr. Drachman buy some of his seforim. Dr. Drachman recalled, "He had a large and excellent Hebrew library, and I selected a fine set of the *Codes of Maimonides*, for which I paid the price he asked" (UL page 338). Years later, after Houdini's father had passed away, and Houdini was a world-renowned and wealthy man, Rabbi Drachman approached him to ask for a donation to help pay off his

synagogue's mortgage. Houdini agreed to donate the then substantial sum of \$500 on one condition. He wanted the set of Rambam back to keep in memory of his father! Dr. Drachman agreed and within 24 hours of the return of the seforim he received Houdini's check for the \$500. At the end of this story Rabbi Drachman points out that he was sure that Houdini did not have the educational background to use these seforim. Nonetheless, he wanted them out of a sense of attachment to his father.

## Conclusion

Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman was a man who devoted his life to furthering the cause of Orthodox Judaism at a time when many were abandoning a Torah way of life. These people mistakenly felt that an Orthodox lifestyle was incompatible with American society. Dr. Drachman's life's work focused on showing that one could be an observant Jew and a full-fledged American. In this his was a pioneer who stood against the tide of religious abandonment that swept the Jewish world in America during the latter part of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. His efforts, and the efforts of others like him, laid the groundwork for the vibrant Orthodoxy that we see in America today. May he long be remembered for his good accomplishments!

*Dr. Yitzchok Levine, a frequent contributor to The Jewish Press, is a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at [llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu).*

**About the Author:** *Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at [llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu).*

© 2012 JewishPress. All rights reserved.

Printed from: <http://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/front-page/a-forgotten-champion-of-american-orthodoxy/2005/11/23/>

Scan this QR code to visit this page online:

