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RABBI DAVID MILLER: FORGOTTEN FIGHTER FOR ORTHODOXY

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Sep 13 2006

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Jewish religious observance suffered a propitious decline in early- and mid-20th century America. Orthodoxy's prospects in this country seemed bleak indeed:

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, Donning Publishers, 1986.)

Many rabbinical leaders 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 Judaism and provide children with a religious education. One such individual was Rabbi David Miller of Oakland, California.

Little is known about David Miller's youth. He was born in Lithuania in around 1869. He came from a very poor home: "It was a common sight," he wrote, "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."

Young Miller attended yeshiva in Rozhinai (known as Ruzhany in Russian). He was also a student for some time in the Slabodka Yeshiva - he noted that he studied mussar with the "tzadikrei olam HaRabbonim, hagaonim Rav Yitzchok Blazer, Rav Naftali Amsterdam, and Rav Nota Hirsch Finkel, zt"l."

Through his yeshiva studies David Miller acquired a profound and thorough knowledge of the Torah and Talmud. He 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 around 1890 and served as a rabbi in congregations in New York and Providence, Rhode Island. He became disillusioned with serving in the rabbinate, however, and gave up his rabbinical career, moving out West. He did this for what he called "conscientious reasons," stating that he desired to make "no material profit from Jewish affairs."

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Rabbi Miller realized that the fundamental Torah institutions of Sabbath observance and family purity were being neglected by large segments of the American Jewish population. With that 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, he wrote a book called *The Secret of Happiness* in which he explained the value of Sabbath observance as a means of Jewish satisfaction and

contentment.

(Rabbi Miller's books deal with more than the laws of family purity and Sabbath observance. They contain deep insights into all aspects of Jewish moral and religious life. They can be downloaded at no charge from <http://www.hebrewbooks.org>.)

In about 1905 Rabbi Miller settled in Oakland, California. 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.

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While many of Oakland's Jews had embraced the Reform movement and were generally on the fast track to assimilation, the city was home to a viable Orthodox Jewish community. Until the 1930's signs of authentic Jewish life were highly visible. A frequent sight on Castro, Chestnut or Myrtle Streets was that of 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. Yitzhak Rabinovitz, a descendent of a long line of Romanian 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.)

Jewish Education

(The following 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 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 seems to us today, this was not so clear in the first half of the twentieth century to many American Jewish parents - including those who were Orthodox. Many felt that public school attendance supplemented with a few hours of allegedly Jewish education in the afternoon was enough. (More often than not, this smattering of "Jewish" instruction 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; 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 above, he expressed his intention to donate five thousand dollars to the United Fund or/and the Jewish Federation of Oakland to be used to establish a new Talmud Torah. (According to the Consumer Price Index, five thousand dollars in 1935 would be the equivalent of more than seventy thousand dollars today.)

There were two conditions attached to this generous offer, however. 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; on September 2, 1937, a few days before Rosh Hashanah, he issued another "Open Letter to the Jewish People of Oakland" (capitalization and underlining all 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, Calif., 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 Tisha b'Av Picnic

(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 Yeshiva University Archives, Koenigsberg Collection.)

The national organization B'nai B'rith was founded in 1843 by German Jewish immigrants in New York. The Oakland chapter was established in 1875. As we shall see below, by 1938, if not considerably earlier, the Oakland Lodge 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 [Tisha b'Av]. I presume you know that [Tisha b'Av], 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 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 Insurmountable Odds

Clearly, Rabbi Miller's attempts to strengthen Orthodoxy in Oakland 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 hamishpacha. Over the years he contributed substantial sums to a wide variety of yeshivas and chesed organizations.

Rabbi Miller passed away on January 7, 1939 (Tevet 16, 5699). His last will and testament, dated February 23, 1938, left money to nine prominent yeshivas in Europe and America. Rabbi Miller clearly understood the value of Torah education, and the crucial role it plays in perpetuating Judaism.

It was men like Rabbi Miller who laid the foundations of Yiddishkeit in America - foundations on 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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