

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 131)

Rav Shimon Schwab, ZT”L (1908 – 1993) (Part IV)

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Note: *The following is quoted from the article **Memories of Shearith Israel** written in December 2000 by Rabbi Moshe Schwab, Rav Schwab’s eldest son. I have edited and modified it somewhat, and he has kindly given me permission to include it in this article.*

Sensitivity to Baalei Batim

One short memory before closing. On the first Shabbos after I got married, in May, 1956, I came to Shul with my brand new wife, Miriam. In the “Yeshivishe” style, I put my Tallis over my head - despite the fact that in those days, in Shearith Israel, in accordance with the German custom, the men wore hats instead of placing their Taleisim over their head. My father looked at me and said, look around you, do you see anyone here with his Tallis over his head? Why do you want to be different, and appear as if you think you are better than the “Baalei Battim?” Needless to say, I got the point, and put on my hat. Despite my father's Yeshiva education, and his great Torah knowledge, he was extremely sensitive to the feelings of his Baalei Batim and to their long held Minhagim. He recognized the circumstances in which innovations were - and were not - important to the special character of his Shul, and for the development of Yiddishkeit within it. His objectives were always “L’Shem Shomayim,” and that is why he succeeded.

My Recollections of Rav Schwab

Shortly after I settled in Elizabeth, NJ in 1968, I became friends with Reb Yosef Schwab, one of Rav Schwab’s sons. On occasion Rav Schwab would come to Elizabeth to visit with his son, his daughter-in-law, and his grandchildren. Once, when I happened to stop at Yosef’s home, Yosef introduced me to his father, and I was immediately impressed with the specialness of this man. He was friendly, warm and open, and at the same time dignified. I sensed that I was in the presence of greatness, and my instincts were, of course, not wrong.

From time to time I would call Rav Schwab with various halachic questions. He always listened patiently and seemed to know instinctively when to ask for more information. He would then clearly and carefully explain his answer. If I had questions about his reply, he would expand upon it, again with patience and clarity. In short, he knew how to deal with *Baalei Batim* and how to phrase things in a format that was both meaningful and to the point.

There were a few times when he did not have a ready answer for me. He would then say, "Please call me back tomorrow." When I did, there was always a ready and clear answer.

I once called him with a question about a particular brand of raw fish fillets and their kashrus on Pesach. A booklet put out by the supervising agency said that these fillets had to have a label indicating they had special Pesach supervision. However, the famous "Breuer's list" said that this brand of fillets could be used without any special label. I called the certifying agency and pointed out the discrepancy in the two listings. After some hemming and hawing, the person at the certifying agency finally told me to rely on the Breuer's list. I was dumbfounded, and replied, "But your agency gives the supervision on this product!"

I then called Rav Schwab and explained the situation. He said, "Please call back tomorrow." The next day I called back. As soon as I identified myself, Rav Schwab replied, "Same fish, different paper." This made it clear to me that the fish did not need special labeling for Pesach use. I have often recalled his incisive response when I have found out that there are a number of products that are packaged under various labels with different supervisions. The bottom line, more often than not, is, "Same fish, different paper."

Many years ago I agreed to speak at a Shabbaton that was to be held at a Conservative temple under the auspices of an Orthodox organization. Sometime after I had agreed, I realized that the majority of those who would attend would most probably drive on Shabbos to hear me speak. Feeling uneasy about the *Chillul* Shabbos that would result from my speaking at such an event, I called Rav Schwab. He immediately sensed my dilemma and replied with his characteristic wisdom and candor. He explained that according to his *sheetas* he would never step into a Conservative temple, not even during the week. He then went on to make it clear that he was not going to pasken that I should follow his approach. Instead he outlined the opinions of other poskim who did permit such events and left the decision to me. The end result was that I went and spoke, because it was too close to the time of the event to back out. However, based on what Rav Schwab told me, I never again accepted such a speaking engagement.

There was an active chapter of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists in Elizabeth, NJ. Once Rav Schwab agreed to address this group, and I had the privilege of picking him up in Washington Heights. When I went to his door, he greeted me with his friendly smile. He had this special way of making you feel that he was truly pleased to see you. In the car we chatted about all sorts of things, and I had a rare chance to discuss with a Godol a number of issues I was concerned about.

At one point I told him that a friend of mine, who was a yeshiva katana rebbe in Brooklyn, had told me of the difficulty he was having covering the required amount of material. The yeshiva insisted that Chumash be "teitched" into Yiddish as well as English. Since the vast majority of the boys in the class did not come from Yiddish speaking homes, teaching them Yiddish slowed the pace of learning. The rebbe wanted to

teach exclusively in English, but the yeshiva's principal would not allow this. I asked Rav Schwab what he thought of this. "It is unfortunate that in Brooklyn they are still going down this road," he responded.

I am sure that he knew that his reply would not be welcome in some circles. Nonetheless, Rav Schwab did not flinch from standing by his principles. He was committed to *emes* and did not deviate from what he considered to be the correct path.

So is the way of a true Godol. He is, of course, sorely missed. Where are the Rav Schwabs of today? I know of no rav alive today who is anywhere near the man he was.