

## Stevens Faculty Forum 10/25/06

### Laying the Foundations of Orthodox Judaism in the US: 1880 to 1945

At this date there remain of the families of Myers, Hays, and Mordecai, including the writer, only five persons professing the Jewish faith; and as within a few years these five will have passed away, and with them, all understanding of the family conditions in the four preceding generations, it is well that this chronicle should be preserved. (Records of the Myers, Hays, and Mordecai Families, from 1707 to 1913, by Caroline Cohen)

The isolation of Richmond's small Jewish population from the larger concentration of coreligionists was a factor inhibiting the celebration of the various festivals in the Jewish calendar. Ritual objects such as a Torah, religious books, or a tallith could only be obtained from either New York or Philadelphia. The pressure of conformity to the customs of the majority affected the Sabbath observance by Richmond Jews. The pressure of business and the attendance of Jews at private schools on Saturday were formidable obstacles to religious orthodoxy. Joseph Marx complained: "Nothing has so seriously caused us to reject our religion as the Christian policy of adopting a different Sabbath, the force of example at least, would carry Jews to the Synagogue, when Christians mass to the Churches, nay there would not be the same clashing of interests, nor a day of labour lost." (Richmond Jewry, by Myron Berman, pages 101 – 102.)

During the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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.)

We will discuss two men who did their best to fight these trends and were to some extent successful.

**Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman and Harry Fischel**

## **Harry Fischel (1865 – 1948)**

### **The Millionaire Who Remained True to Orthodoxy**

I. In 1924 Harry Fischel had occasion to visit the town of Eishishok in Lithuania. Eishishok is located a few miles from Radin, where Rabbi Yisroel Meyer Hakohen Kagan, ZT”L, known as the Chofetz Chaim, (1838 – 1933) lived. When the Chofetz Chaim learned that Mr. Fischel was nearby, he immediately sent an “automobile bus used for the purpose of conveying students from the station at Radin to the Yeshiva, to take Mr. Fischel to Radin. Accompanying the bus was a committee of students. Mr. Fischel was met at a considerable distance from the Yeshiva by the Rabbi, then 86 years of age, who personally escorted him to his home and then through the Talmudical college.”

Who was this man whom the Chofetz Chaim went to so much trouble to see, spent so much time with, and honored so? He was obviously a remarkable man whose deeds impressed even the great Chofetz Chaim.

#### **II. Born in small town in Russia, Meretz.**

A. Parents poor, but very religious

B. Showed interest in architecture – model of Mishkan (Tabernacle)  
@ 10

C. Left home at 20 to avoid having to serve in Russian army

D. “When you reach the golden land, do not exchange your religion for gold.” He never forgot these words as long as he lived.

#### **III. Arrived in US in 1865 – penniless \$.65 and clothes on his back**

A. Hard to find job where he did not have to work on Shabbos – carpenter. Employer went bankrupt

B. Found job in architectural firm.

The job turned out to be all that Harry had hoped for and more. The week flew by as he applied himself in his new position. The working conditions were excellent, and he found the work interesting and stimulating. However, when, on Friday afternoon, he approached his employer and asked if he could have Saturday off, he was told, “If you don’t come tomorrow, you need not come on Monday.”

He was now faced with a most difficult test of his religious principles. This job was precisely what he had been looking for, and it held the potential of him realizing his dream to become an architect. It appeared to be the road that would lead him from poverty to financial success. He spent a sleepless night agonizing over what to do. He finally decided that he would get up early *Shabbos* morning, *daven*, and then go to work. After *davening* he headed home to change from his *Shabbos* suit to weekday clothes and go to work.

Arriving at the corner of Hester and Essex Streets on the Lower East Side, he saw that not a single store was open. The streets were filled with people dressed in their *Shabbos* finery. The atmosphere of *Shabbos* was everywhere. Harry was truly torn by his predicament. He thought of how shocked and disappointed his parents would be if they knew what he was thinking of doing. Finally, with great difficulty, he made his decision. "He knew that neither then nor later would it ever be possible for him to desecrate the Sabbath."

On Monday he returned to his place of employment. He pleaded with his employers to let him work a five day week, saying he would accept half of the salary that had been agreed upon when he was hired. Not only was his plea rejected, but he was not even paid for the week that he had worked.

IV. Found job as foreman for a builder, married in 1887, vacation of 2 weeks, again unemployed. Sold everything to live.

A. Job of raising roof in 1888.

"The story of the next few years [of his life] reads like a fairy tale." (B page 31). His acumen as a businessman and his expertise in construction and architecture led him to financial success after financial success. By 1900 he was the owner of a number of tenements and, eventually, entire buildings on Park Avenue in the most affluent neighborhood in New York City that brought him a large annual income. In short, in a little more than thirteen years he went from a condition of dire poverty to one of affluence, becoming a multimillionaire at a time when even being a millionaire was nowhere near as common as today.

Harry Fischel's story is not the only rags to riches story that occurred in the *goldene medina* in those times. However, what makes his story unique is what he did with his success. "He regarded the prosperity which had come to him as a direct answer to

his prayers and considered that it imposed a definite obligation upon him to express his gratitude in good deeds. While he continued to strive to increase his holdings and to make more secure his fortune, it was mainly with the desire to place himself in a position where he might devote himself with greater zeal to his religion and might have more time to be of service to others.”

#### V. Involved in a myriad of educational and Chesed activities

A. *Etz Chaim*, director of *Machzikay* Talmud Torah, the oldest Talmud Torah in New York, Uptown Talmud Torah

B. Pioneered education for girls

C. HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) and Beth Israel Hospital

D. *Eretz Yisroel* and the Harry Fischel Institute for Research in Talmud

E. Traveled to Israel many times – kosher food, religious services

#### VI. Founding of YU and uptown campus - 1924

Those involved differed on how much money would be required to build the infrastructure needed to establish an institution that would combine a Talmudic and secular education in a single homogeneous environment. Some said \$1,000,000 would be sufficient; others \$2,000,000. When Harry Fischel suggested that \$5,000,000 would be needed, “some of the directors took the view that he had gone out of his mind. Mr. Fischel, however, insisted that five million dollars was none too large an amount to accomplish the purpose in view, and, in order to start the ball rolling, he subscribed at once \$10,000 with the pledge of an additional subscription of \$5,000 for each million dollars collected, making his total pledge \$30,000, if the full amount was secured.”

This substantial contribution (the reader should keep in mind that we are talking about 1924 dollars) was just the beginning of Harry Fischel’s support of the campaign to establish Yeshiva College. At a fundraising dinner held on December 18, 1924, he proposed the following to Nathan Lampport, president of the Yeshiva, and Lampport’s well-to-do family. Harry said he would match any amount the Lampport family would pledge. After some deliberation, the Lampport family replied that they were willing to give \$100,000. Without hesitation, Harry Fischel committed to matching this

amount. To understand the magnitude of that contribution, the value of \$100,000 in 1924 was \$1,107,470.89 in 2004.

## VII. The First Succah on Park Avenue

Harry Fischel, from the time that he first owned a home of his own, made sure that it had a *Succah*. One should keep in mind that most people were negligent in fulfilling the *Mitzvah* of *Succah* during the nineteenth and first part of the twentieth centuries. Very few had their own *Succah*. In 1925 Mr. Fischel demonstrated how far his commitment to this *Mitzvah* went when he built a 14 story apartment building on the southwest corner of Park Avenue and 80<sup>th</sup> Street. In order to be able to have a *Succah*, he “omitted one room on each floor of the twelve floors of the structure above his own apartment on the second floor, entailing a loss in rentals of about \$12,000 a year.” Clearly, for Mr. Fischel, Judaism took precedence over financial gain.

## **Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman (1861 – 1945)**

### **A Forgotten Champion of American Orthodoxy**

#### **I. Main source – The Unfailing Light – autobiography**

**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.**

#### **II. Difficult Choice – become completely observant – cannot serve reform congregation, less money**

**Orthodoxy thus gained a well-educated, articulate spokesman, who devoted his life promoting what he termed “American Orthodoxy.”**

#### **III. Pulpit – 1887 congregation votes for mixed seating – resigns**

**A. Father-in law – Jonas Weil, well to do**

**B. Congregation Zichron Ephraim – served as rabbi from 1890 Until his death in 1945 Now known as the Park East Synagogue**

#### **IV. Jewish Causes**

**A. JTS – originally Orthodox, dean 1889 to 1909**

**B. Then taught at RIETS – until 1940, taught “most of the Hebrew subjects, with the exception of the Talmud and related branches,” as well as the German language.**

**C. *The Jewish Welfare Board* - formed during World War I to serve the needs of Jewish servicemen. Siddur**

**D. *The OU and The Jewish Sabbath Alliance of America* – 1913** became second president of OU. Sabbath Alliance: In 1907 Dr. Drachman reported that “within the preceding years jobs had been obtained for 1,500 Sabbath observers.”

#### **V. Candidate for Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of London – 1912**

**A. Dinner**

**B. Yiddish**

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!

**C. Not selected for position**

#### **VI. Scholarly Works**

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. In addition, he contributed countless articles to the English and Yiddish press that furthered the cause of Orthodox Judaism.

#### **VII. Houdini - knew Harry Houdini (Ehrich Weiss) when Houdini was a pupil in the Talmud Torah of his synagogue**

**A. Father: Dr. Mayer S. Weiss, Hungarian born rabbi**

**B. Rambam - \$500**

**C. Spoke at Houdini’s funeral**

**VIII. 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.**