

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part _)

Rabbi Abraham Nachman Schwartz (1871 – 1937)

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Introduction

There are those who have the foresight to establish institutions that leave a lasting impression on Klal Yisroel. Such a man was Rabbi Abraham Nachman Schwartz, who founded Yeshiva Torah ve-Emunah Hebrew Parochial School in Baltimore, MD.

The school had been established in a room on the second floor of a residential building. It began with only four young children, but now [in 1925] consisted of three grades, with both Hebrew and secular studies. A new phenomenon in America, it was the first school of this type to be established outside of New York City. (It remained the only one for nearly three decades.)¹

In those days the parochial system of education was quite an innovation in Jewish life, and it was quite difficult to gain the sympathy of the average man in the street. But the founder [Rav Schwartz] who has built for himself a most glorious monument did not swerve from his conviction. With just a handful of men and women he founded and guided the institution through its early critical stages and was privileged to inspire the current movement for a new building for the school.²

The school was chartered in 1917 and in 1923 merged with the one-year old Talmudical Seminary of Baltimore. In 1937 the school's charter was officially amended and the school was renamed Talmudical Academy of Baltimore. Rabbi Schwartz served as dean from its inception until his passing in 1937. Today "TA" is a vibrant educational institution providing a Torah education for students from pre-school through Bais Medrash. It stands as a monument to Rav Schwartz's efforts in the fostering of Yiddishkeit in Baltimore.

The Life of Rav Schwartz

Rav Abraham Nachman Schwartz was born in 1871 in Lenz, a Lithuanian town located in Kovno Province. He studied for many years in a number of Lithuanian yeshivas, including Rassein, Krok, Telz, and eventually in the famous Kovno Kollel. He received semicha from the following eminent rabbonim – Rabbi Alexander Moshe Lapidus of Rassein, Rabbi Yosef Zechariah of Shavel, Rabbi Raphael Shapiro of Volozhin, and Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan Spector of Kovno. In 1890 he married Golda Miriam Preil, a sister of Rabbi Elazar Meir Preil (1881 – 1933), who served for many years as the Rov of

Elizabeth, NJ. Rabbi Preil was the father-in-law of Rabbi Pinchas Mordechai Teitz (1908 – 1995), who succeeded him as the Rov of Elizabeth.

In 1895 Schwartz was appointed Talmud instructor at the Krok yeshiva and from 1898 to 1905 served as communal rabbi of the Ukrainian town of Navoh Odem.

Immigrating to the United States in 1906, Schwartz became rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Chesed in New London, Connecticut. Two years later he became rabbi of Congregation Shomrei Mishmeret Kodesh in Baltimore, Maryland, where he remained for the next 29 years.

While Schwartz's Baltimore congregation consisted of mostly Russian and Ukrainian immigrants, his influence extended to all Jews. As one of the leading Talmud scholars of Baltimore, Schwartz offered personal counsel to numerous individuals and responded to all matters of religious concern. When an alarming increase in crime befell neighborhoods in East Baltimore, Schwartz worked closely with civic officials to quell the problem.³

What the life of Rabbi Abraham Nachman Schwartz meant to Baltimore Jewry cannot as yet be fully appreciated. He belonged to those Jewish leaders whose achievements are not to be viewed in terms of their own day. He worked with an eye toward the future. Having evaluated the Jewish scene in Baltimore rather keenly, he knew where to place the emphasis of Jewish values, and he stressed those values with constant persistency.

During the trying days of the World War [I], when the physical safety of our people was the chief concern of Jewish leaders, Rabbi Schwartz built the spiritual fortress of Baltimore Jewish life in the form of the Parochial School. It must have been a source of gratification for him during his last days to see with his own eyes the beginning of the realization of his fondest dream. Here again, it was the idea of Jewish learning that was the mainspring of his enthusiasm for the Parochial School.

Rabbi Schwartz was well known for the brevity of his remarks. His speeches were always marked by a sense of humor, by a certain directness, and by the quality of their contents. He always had something to say, and he said much in a few words. When many speakers addressed an audience from the same platform, the message of Rabbi Schwartz was usually outstanding. People quoted him and delighted in repeating his "words of wisdom." It was the teacher who spoke rather than the preacher.

To this day people are repeating the wise admonition which Rabbi Schwartz uttered at my installation ceremonies at the Shaarei Zion Synagogue. In a few words he depicted the position of the younger rabbi in American Jewish life, and he said: "Do not burden your rabbi with too many social duties; give him enough time for scholarship. A rabbi must never stop studying and learning." It was in

line with his theory that the rabbinate is primarily a position of scholarship. He believed that Jewish leadership can be effective only when it goes hand in hand with Jewish learning, and he applied this principle time and again during his creative life in Baltimore.

Despite the fact that he was steeped in the very heart of Jewish tradition, Rabbi Schwartz understood the modern world, and was in his way modern enough to keep abreast of the time. He was a tolerant person, too, and he was admired and respected by men of all shades of opinion, as the stalwart champion of unadulterated Jewishness.⁴

Rabbi Schwartz was indeed respected by all segments of the Baltimore Jewish community. Mr. Joseph Isadore Paper wrote

It is not necessary to be European born or to be educated in cheder or in the yeshiva in order to appreciate a human being, a Rabbi, who devotes his entire life to the Torah, to Judaism. And we, the Americans, are in dire need of Jews who truly preach and sincerely practice the Laws of Moses.

I mourn for thee, Rabbi Abraham Schwartz. My father, an Orthodox Jew and chassid, taught me to revere and respect you; and when God called my father away, I said Kaddish at your synagogue so that you, a true Jew, should say omen [sic].

In the winter evenings of two years past, seated in the Beth Amedrosh [sic] of the Shomrei Mishmereth Shule and listening attentively to your melodious interpretations of the Gemorah, you instilled within me the joy and not the sadness of Kaddish. Now that you too are gone, Jewish traditions flicker: give us this day others to keep the light of Israel burning. You speak no more, I see you always.⁵

Rabbi Schwartz passed away on February 4, 1937.

¹ **A Jubilee of Watching, The Story of HaRav Chayim Eliezer Samson** by Rachel Samson Rabinowitz, Feldheim Publishers, 1994, pages 76 – 77.

² **Rabbi Schwartz of Blessed Memory, A Word of Tribute—After the "Shloshim" Period** by Rabbi Israel Tabak, March 19, 1937. This paper clipping was obtained from The Jewish Museum of Maryland. Unfortunately, the source of the article is not given.

³ **Orthodox Judaism in America, a Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook**, by Moshe D. Sherman, Greenwood Press, 1966, page 192.

⁴ **Rabbi Schwartz of Blessed Memory**

⁵ From a partial paper clipping about Rav Schwartz obtained from The Jewish Museum of Maryland. Unfortunately, the source of this article is not given.