

Rabbi Harold Schulweis z”l Yahrzeit

by Stan Schroeder

Congregation Shir Ami paid tribute to the memory of Rabbi Schulweis at our Shabbat service December 16. **Rabbi Vorspan**, our special guest **Miriam Alperin**, and I spoke of our personal memories of one of the pre-eminent leaders of liberal Judaism in the 20th century on the weekend of his third yahrzeit. I also requested testimonials of **Rabbi David Wolpe**, **Rabbi Stewart Vogel**, **Rabbi Ed Feinstein**, and **Rebbetzin Malkah Schulweis** that I shared with the congregation.

The rest of this column contains excerpts from the program. The full program is featured on our website www.shirami.com. Select **Rabbi Schulweis Yahrzeit**.

Rabbi David Vorspan

Following my ordination I worked two years at Temple Beth Emet in Anaheim. When the position I had was being phased out in the mid-70s, I applied for two rabbinic positions in the San Fernando Valley. The first was at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino where I was interviewed by Rabbi Schulweis. He told me he had errands to run and would I mind if the interview was conducted in his car. I agreed and Rabbi Schulweis focused his questions on my theology and what philosopher/theologians I had read. I believe he felt my relationship with God was of primary importance to serving as a rabbi at VBS. As it turns out, I accepted the position at Temple Beth Ami in Reseda. However that time with Rabbi Schulweis has been with me ever since.

Rabbi Schulweis has had a profound influence on Conservative Judaism. His emphasis on human responsibility is evident in how he personally prayed. He would end his prayers of appeals to God with the two words: “through me.” I encourage us to end our prayers likewise and accept responsibility for the required actions.

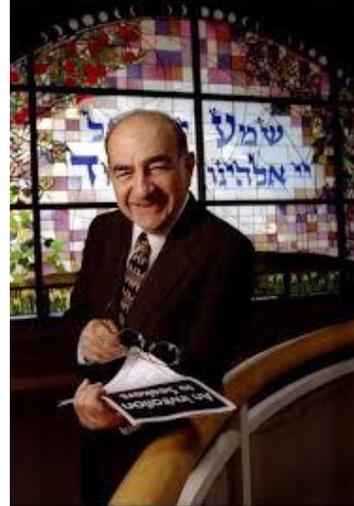
Rabbi David Wolpe, Sinai Temple

Harold Schulweis was unparalleled in his range of his gifts, the depth of his passion and the creativity he brought to the American Rabbinate. Capable of recognizing the good without being polyanish, of condemning the wrong without being narrow or scolding, his was a voice of hopeful conscience. Everyone in the rabbinate and indeed in the entire Jewish community is better because he made us better, and his memory continues to bless us with a vision and a model sorely needed in our fractured times.

Rabbi Stewart Vogel, Temple Aliyah

While many people revered his public persona and impact, for me as a new rabbi, I was inspired by his work ethic and his humility. Rabbi Schulweis never

Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis April 14, 1925 - December 18, 2014



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came to synagogue with the idea that his wisdom and oratory skills could allow him to get by with extemporaneous comments or sermons. When he came to services his comments were always prepared in outline form and his sermons always typed out in full. In the book of Numbers (12:3) we read, “Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth.” These words perfectly describe the character of Rabbi Schulweis. *Zichrono leev'rakha* - may his memory always be a blessing and his legacy an inspiration.

Rabbi Ed Feinstein, Valley Beth Shalom

In our history, there is a rare and special tradition of Jewish spiritual revolutionaries who were called upon to rescue Judaism at moments of profound disruption: **Yohanan ben Zakkai** after the destruction of the Temple, **Maimonides** when philosophy shook the foundations of Jewish faith, the **Baal Shem Tov** addressing a generation deeply disillusioned and despairing of faith. At these extraordinary moments, Jewish existence reached a crisis – when the sacred narratives of the past expired, and new narratives were yet to be born. These were the singular personalities who perceived that the survival of the community depended on its ability to transcend, to transform, to reinvent its ideas and institutions. They provided resilience, the courage and the inspiration to let go of the old, and to imagine the new. Rabbi Schulweis stands within that extraordinary tradition. As we sing at Hannuka: *Hen b'chal dor, yakum hagibor, goel ha-am*. In every generation, a hero arose to save our people.

See **Miriam Alperin's** excerpt at bottom of page 1.
See **Malkah Schulweis's** excerpt on page 2.

Editor's note: This page was originally published January 2015. Stan Schroeder

My Memory of Rabbi Schulweis

by Rabbi David Vorspan

The year that I was ordained, Valley Beth Shalom had an opening for an assistant Rabbi, and I was intrigued enough to interview for it. Which meant a sit-down with **Rabbi Harold Schulweis**.

Little did I know it would be a sit down in his car!



When I entered his office, he told me he had to run an errand, and would it be O.K. if we had a conversation on the way, to which I agreed.

And so on the way to wherever, I was interviewed by Rabbi Schulweis.

I remember him asking me questions about my concept of God, who my favorite theologians were ("You, Rabbi Schulweis!" I remember responding) and other issues a Rabbi had to respond to.

But my memories of that afternoon are of a person who had already developed a national reputation, but who was so approachable and casual. I think he would have asked questions about my beliefs and feelings even if it weren't for a job interview. He was interested in what others thought, on what others were doing, how others were changing the world for the better.

I took a position with a different congregation, but I was enthralled every time I heard Rabbi Schulweis speak, because it was always thoughtful and thought provoking. But my lasting memory will always be of that afternoon, of a man caught up in the task of maneuvering a car through the streets of Encino, but whose attention was also on a young Rabbi struggling to answer life's most intriguing questions while hoping to arrive at the destination in one piece!

Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* :

"**Harold Schulweis** was always my role model of what a rabbi could aspire to be and do, even as I realized I could never match his energy, his boundless compassion and his ability to see challenges where the rest of us only saw problems. He never let me forget whom we as individuals and as a Jewish community were obliged to care about, and he taught me what I needed to do for them. I am proud to think of him as my mentor, my inspiration, my friend."

My Experience with Rabbi Schulweis

by Stan Schroeder

Rabbi Vorspan wrote in his accompanying article about his interview with **Rabbi Schulweis** while a much younger Rabbi Schulweis was driving his car through the streets of Encino. I had a parallel experience in 2010 (almost 40 years later), but I was doing the driving. I went to a Simchat Torah program at Valley Beth Shalom. I attended many classes, programs, and services there as they have so many wonderful events open to the public.

The Simchat Torah program included a book auction of autographed books by the five VBS rabbis who were there. The book by Rabbi Schulweis was the last to be auctioned, I had made up my mind I was going to bid whatever I needed, regardless of which book they had selected. It turned out to be *Evil and the Morality of God*, one of his first books published in 1984. It is an academic dissertation of a single complex argument for a theology Schulweis calls "predicate theology". I was the only bidder.

After the auction I spoke to Rabbi Schulweis and told him I purchased the book hoping to be able to discuss it with him after I read it. He readily agreed. A few weeks later I called him and we arranged to meet. He no longer drove, but still maintained an office at VBS. We agreed that I would pick him up at his home in Mountain Gate, a beautiful community in the hills on the west side of the Sepulveda Pass. I had sent him something about myself and some of my writing at his request.

So I drove him to VBS and we talked in the car about my interests and involvement in Reconstructionism. He had been a student of **Mordecai Kaplan** at the Jewish Theological Seminary and adapted many of Kaplan's ideas into his theology. Then we talked for a while in his office. I don't really understand *Evil and the Morality of God*, but I understood the author - a brilliant man of principle who brought God's qualities to the world and brought out the best in those he touched.

Rabbi "Yitz" Greenberg, eminent Modern Orthodox rabbi who promotes Jewish - Christian relations:

"**Harold** was a prophet. By this I mean that he saw ahead of his time and of his generation and prescribed what the Jewish people needed to do in this moment of transformation. This was a crossroads where much could be gained or all could be lost. Harold showed us the way."

Editor's note: This page was originally published January 2015. Stan Schroeder

Biography of the Month: Rabbi Harold Schulweis

by Stan Schroeder

Harold Schulweis was born in the Bronx, NY April 14, 1925 to secular parents who respected Zionism and Jewish traditions. His father was



an editor of *The Jewish Daily Forward*. His early Jewish education was influenced by his grandfather, **Rabbi Avraham Rezak**, who introduced him to the Talmud. In 1945, Schulweis graduated Yeshiva University with a degree in philosophy. Later he enrolled in the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he studied under **Mordecai Kaplan** and **Abraham Joshua Heschel**.

Schulweis's first pulpit was Temple Beth Abraham, a Conservative congregation in Oakland in 1952. Among the innovations he introduced was the inclusion of women in *minyanim* and *bat mitzvah* ceremonies for girls. Instead of sermons, he used the allotted time for questions and answers. He became the senior Rabbi at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino in 1970. Under his leadership, VBS grew into one of the largest Conservative congregations in the western US. Responding to the loneliness and isolation of suburban life, Schulweis introduced synagogue-based "*Chavurot*" in 1971.

Schulweis is considered to be among the most influential rabbis of his generation in a career spanning his work not only as a religious leader, but also as a social activist and prolific author. When people would ask how they could believe in God after the horrors of the Holocaust, Schulweis would point to the moral courage shown by gentiles who saved thousands of Jews from the Nazis, such as **Oskar Schindler**. That attitude led him to establish what became the **Jewish Foundation for the Righteous** in 1986, providing financial support for 600 gentiles in 20 countries who had helped save Jews.

Not quite 20 years later, he founded **Jewish World Watch**, which raises about \$2 million a year to fight genocide in Africa and improve the lives of survivors.

On December 18, Rabbi Schulweis died in his home in Reseda following a long battle with heart disease. Since then there has been an outpouring of memories and laudatory statements from across the Jewish and civic communities.

The current senior rabbi at VBS, **Ed Feinstein**, said, "He gave us the capacity to be believing Jews because he offered a kind of theology that moved the center of responsibility from God in heaven to us. When humans take responsibility for one another, that's an expression of God's presence in the world."



Retired Los Angeles County Supervisor and longtime political heavyweight **Zev Yaroslavsky** remembered how, as a college student, he became the Los Angeles co-founder of the movement to pressure the Soviet Union into allowing refuseniks and other Jews to leave for Israel and other countries. At the time, most Jewish establishment organizations looked askance at the efforts and tactics of the young protesters, but Schulweis backed them from the beginning.

John Fishel, former president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles, sought out Schulweis for advice when he arrived in this city in 1992 and, in turn, Schulweis drafted Fishel to serve on the board of Jewish World Watch. "Harold always took on causes and projects others didn't want to wade into. His knack was to recruit people of stature and then keep them focused on the job."

Rabbi Uri Herscher, founding president and CEO of the Skirball Cultural Center, was a freshman at UC Berkeley when he first heard Schulweis speak at a Rosh Hashanah service, and became a friend and admirer for life. On a later occasion, Herscher introduced Schulweis to an audience, saying in part, "Harold Schulweis is a rabbi. This is a little like saying, a **Rembrandt** is a painting. Or a **Stradivarius** is a violin...He is a rabbi of rabbis...He has, as much as any rabbi in our time, given Judaism meaning, relevance and renewed purpose."

I consider Rabbi Schulweis to be the bridge between Reconstructionist Judaism as espoused by his teacher Mordecai Kaplan (and the source of my theology) and Conservative Judaism that Kaplan strove to influence (with limited success). Schulweis, through his book *For Those Who Can't Believe: Overcoming Obstacles to Faith*, and his teachings gave voice to a realistic and inspiring Judaism.

Excerpt from **Rebbetzin Malkah Schulweis** tribute to **Rabbi Harold Schulweis** (transcribed from her introduction to the **Harold M Schulweis Institute** website www.hmsi.info)

Harold was well aware that the Holocaust had shifted moral responsibility in the covenantal relationship. There is a greater role now for the human being. But he worried lest we forget the inviolable sense of the Greater in the process. Therefore he developed his conception of Sovereign. It resulted in a shift from vertical instruction in the congregation to a horizontal process of discussion, question and answer, were all present. Prayer, poetry, song; everything had to testify to its meaning. It was not merely his speaking that gave testimony to sanctity. It was his unconscious way of dissolving the empty space between himself and any other. When he spoke to you no one else existed in public or private expression. We have yet to catch up to him.



Excerpt from **Miriam Alperin's** tribute to **Rabbi Harold Schulweis**

There was a magnetism and inclusiveness about **Harold Schulweis** that few leaders ever achieve in their lifetime. It took a Jew, a committed Jew, a learned Jew, a rabbi, a mensch, a man who lived Mitzvot rather than preach them to start **Jewish World Watch** – a worldwide movement to actively help the oppressed and maltreated of Africa. While the world watched silently as thousands of men, women, and children died of