

Dr. Nima Adlerblum (1881-1974) was a noted philosopher, educator and writer, specializing in medieval Jewish philosophy. A sister-in-law of Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool, she wrote a study of Dr. Pool's life and thought. The unpublished manuscript, of which this article is excerpted, is in the possession of the Union of Sephardic Congregations.

REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE AND WORK OF RABBI DAVID DE SOLA POOL

Dr. Pool came to New York from England in 1907 with the zeal of youth and the anticipation of converting his dreams into concrete realities. His first sermon at Congregation Shearith Israel was a mirror of his deep-rooted longings, a blueprint of the years ahead, a perspective of the ideal rabbi. It was moving in its simplicity and straightforwardness, not in the flowery language likely to come from an enthusiastic young novice. It was a heart-to-heart talk of what he hoped to accomplish in joint efforts with that historic congregation.

The minister is one who ungrudgingly and unreservedly gives his life-services for the moral and spiritual well-being of his fellows. Only he who has the Godly character of loving peace and pursuing it, loving mankind, and bringing the truth and reality of his appeal to the conscience and heart of mankind, has authority to be styled Rabbi. The rabbi portrays the spiritual content of Judaism; he teaches the lessons of our glorious history and doctrines of our peerless faith so that they may be better carried into the affairs of secular life. . . . Not alone the synagogue, but every household may be a house of God, a sanctuary. . . . This all I would do also by the example of my own life. I would reflect my creed in my deed. Every true effort for the welfare of his fellows cannot remain fruitless when offered in devout humility.

He extended his view beyond the Congregation, surveyed the spiritual field and saw it poverty-stricken; yet a spark could still enliven the subconscious Jewish mind into consciousness and transform latent forces into dynamic ones. With self-awareness, Jewish observances would turn into cherished memories to live by. To erase or to prune

TRADITION

them would merely reinforce the divorce between Jew and Jewishness. As he saw it, the task was to reconstitute the old in the face of the new:

We may not turn a deaf ear to the loud and insistent claims of other doctrines and to the clamorous appeal of modern thought and culture. But let us remember that we are the humble religious heirs of Moses, the Prophets, the Psalmist, the Scribes and Rabbis, and have received their ideals in trust.

He saw the road clearly: intensify, beautify Jewishness through Jewishness itself. Knowledge of Judaism will give the Jew the capacity to maintain it. Educating the Jewish public was somewhat of a novelty then. Dr. Pool organized cultural meetings, study-clubs within the congregation and without. His lectures on Jewish history, literature, Zionism, philosophy, and religion attracted large audiences. He contributed towards lifting the standards of Jewish education for children, and towards introducing it among high school and college students. The *Menorah Journal* and its collegiate clubs were much assisted by him. Young Judaea drew its strength from him, and through his efforts it became the foremost Zionist Youth organization in America. In spite of his crowded days, he was its president 1915-1919 and again in 1923. He took an active part in Zionist affairs, spoke of Zionism in his sermons, lectures and private talks, at a time when Zionism was often not favorably received.

The first decade of the twentieth century was a relatively quiet one for American Jewry. Compared to the closing years of the nineteenth, it was like a zephyr after a storm: a period of absorption, of digesting, sifting and evaluating the tremendous efforts of the preceding years. Dr. Pool joined forces with modern American Orthodoxy. He was president of the New York Board of Jewish Ministers (1916-1917) and he devoted much effort to the Union of Orthodox Congregations organized by Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes.

The time was propitious for social improvements. The country underwent a healthy change with Theodore Roosevelt's "Big Stick" policy, hitting hard at gigantic trusts, with vociferous voices against child labor and sweatshops, and with Wilson's philosophy of democracy. Dr. Pool engaged in many activities that promoted moral progress. The Jewish Welfare Board offered opportunities for his volunteer services, both in peace and war times. He was a field organizer of its religious and welfare work during World War I. In 1917 he was one of the three Jewish representatives appointed to serve on the Herbert Hoover Food Conservation Commission.

His active concern and identification with the newly arrived

Sephardim from the Levant led to some constructive projects in which Congregation Shearith Israel took a leading role. His study of these newest immigrants, published in the *American Jewish Year Book* (1913), and his presentation of their problems at the annual convention of the Jewish Social Service Association (1914), led to national awareness of this important group.

From the time of his arrival in New York, he became deeply involved in the programs of the American Jewish Historical Society and the American Historical Society. He read numerous papers for their public meetings. He was president of the Jewish Society (1954-55).

His hopes for service and dedication were assuming full shape, encroaching more than a little but not altogether on his scholarly research. His long essay, "Hebrew Learning Among the Puritans of New England Prior to 1700," came from that decade. This is an important contribution on the Biblical atmosphere among the pilgrims of New England. It adds a refreshing page to American history. The illustrations are striking. To quote but a few: Governor Bradford (1590-1657), one of the Mayflower pilgrims, wanted to learn the Hebrew tongue most of all, he said, "because he would see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty." Some of the learned pilgrims, among them Cotton Mather, who had to leave England on account of his non-conforming views, was of the opinion that "the Hebrew punctuation was of divine origin." During the first years of Harvard College, more time was given to the Hebrew language than to any other subject.

His painstaking study of "Capital Punishment Among the Jews" bears on legal penalties, of moment in our times too, and goes into every aspect of the subject: the method of punishment, rabbinical modifications, legal restrictions, and post-talmudic developments.

These fertile ten years (1907-17) were the beginning of his successful career. His popularity was in continual ascendancy. He became a well-known figure in New York and gradually throughout the country. February 6, 1917, marks the supreme moment in his and Tamar's life—a marriage rich in happiness and achievement. Tamar was herself an outstanding personality and a Jewish leader.

There is no sharp division in his life between his literary and his practical activities. They merge into one, with the same spiritual motive underlying them.

Important as are his writings, each a contribution in itself, the urge behind them is more revealing. It gives a glimpse into the inner recesses of his being, searching for the expression of the soul, not only

TRADITION

in action, but in words breathing the ardent thirst for finding and achieving what is good.

Dr. Pool did not publish for the sake of social acclaim. His national and communal activities, and his devoted service to Congregation Shearith Israel, were sufficient unto themselves. He wrote because his longings, aspirations and concerns were overflowing. The thoughts had to run out on paper. He had to read them, as it were, to himself, to see what was going on in his mind, whether it could be shared, converted into action, inflame the youth, encourage the old, and maintain our tradition in a shaking world. He belonged to the group of idealists who seek neither fame nor wealth through their written words, but a spiritual or intellectual outlet for sharing their innermost thoughts with other human beings and nourishing them with its substance. Theirs is an outpouring of the inner self, the language of the soul.

We could trace Dr. Pool's philosophy in his personality, and his personality in his philosophy. They confirm one another. In him there was no demarcation between his thinking and living, and between his own philosophy and the Jewish one which he reflects imaginatively and creatively. In his book, *Why I Am A Jew*, he rejoices to find in Judaism the norm for himself, the fulfillment of a moral cosmos, of a world where heaven is not apart but in it, and God reigns supreme.

No Jewish thinker, qua Jewish, can break novel ground, but he can illuminate old truths with modern lights. Deep was Dr. Pool's concern to navigate the old faith through our turbulent seas. He was mindful of the gulf between past and present in our rapidly changing world. His has been no small contribution to help steady the shaky bridge over the chasm between them.

As can be seen in many of his writings, he grasped the dimension and perspective of Jewish thinking in its all-embracing fullness, elasticity, open-mindedness, and its large vistas into the far future. Our medieval philosophers, weighing and probing divergent views, bear witness that ours is not a closed, circumscribed system revolving upon its own self. The flexibility in emphasis has engendered individual and collective expansion. The stress laid on one point or another has unfolded a majestic panorama. The first Jewish philosopher, Saadia, accentuated the unity of God; Bahya, the duties of the heart; Yehuda haLevi, the historical consciousness; Ibn Gabirol, the ecstasy of the Divine spirit; Maimonides, the supremacy of reason; Gersonides, the identification of the Torah with science. Among the modern Talmudists, the Gaon of Vilna, with his original searching into the roots of Talmudic pronouncements, stands alone. The Ba'al Shem Tov foreshadowed Buber's

I and Thou in dwelling on the companionable intimacy in the communion with God. Rav Kook was an example of tolerance. Dr. Pool's father-in-law, Rabbi Hayyim Hirschenson, pointed the way towards the development and application of Talmudic laws to modern conditions. All these different approaches join in the Jewish being.

What did David Pool search for in our immensely rich mine? What has he brought to it? He re-echoed the voice of Judaism in a musical, colorful tone; he merged its ethical views with his own personality; he joined the duties of the mind with the duties of the heart. Ethics, the spiritual form of Judaism, is the premise out of which his thinking proceeds. Dr. Pool was characterized by his historical consciousness, piety, dedication to God and humanity, devotion to the rebuilding of Israel, and reverence for the synagogue as a center of Jewish continuity.

He did not align himself exclusively either with our rational or mystic philosophers. He could not envisage reason as supreme above religion. There is also little room in his philosophy for excessive mysticism. Religion is a living organism of spirit and body, of communion with God and concrete social expressions. It is not meant to seclude one from another, but to be a cohesive force through our faith in God. The joy of living, peaceful relations, collective worship—these he regarded as manifestations of a living religion. He did not feel a stranger in our large world, he shared the life of others, sought God not in isolation but in a pulsating humanity which aspires towards Him.

If he had been asked to whom among the philosophers he would have liked to come nearest, he would have unhesitatingly pointed to Yehudah haLevi. He often quoted him. Many years ago he wrote a penetrating essay on haLevi's "Defense of the Faith." Why would he have chosen Yehuda haLevi when others tower in metaphysical speculation? Because the emotional and poetical rendering of haLevi's profound thinking is drawn from the dynamic resources of the Jewish people, its history, and its self-awareness. This unique historical sense struck a deep note in Dr. Pool.

But his own views had evolved long before he read the *Kuzari* and the *Guide For the Perplexed*. What molded his mind was the indelible impression of the Bible which had been since childhood his inseparable companion on his walks, at home, and in his meditations. His writings sparkle with felicitous Scriptural quotations which in themselves could form an outline of the Jewish mind—a kind of I-Thou relationship between ourselves and the Bible. At the age of seventy-nine he edited a booklet, *Gems From The Bible*, meant to be a lantern in dark moments, a refreshing source at all times. Numerous Biblical passages he knew by

heart as a young boy, and not because he tried to memorize them. So moved was he by the poetry and the reflection of man's intimacy with God and His universe, that the verses became ingrained in his mind and heart.

In his student years there was philosophical commotion outside the Jewish world. His horizon extended beyond our island, but he was not dazed by the splashing of majestic or turbulent waves. He is among those who entered the modern *pardes* of heterogeneous doctrines and came out unharmed.

Dr. Pool may not have pondered the technicalities of various systems as do specialists in their respective fields. But he knew how to benefit by their truth and detect their fallacies.

Herbert Spencer, the sponsor of evolutionary theories, was no cause of confusion for Dr. Pool, who saw in evolution not a rejection of God, as some thought it to be, but the basis of His creation. Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), the predominant Neo-Kantian who attempted to reconcile Kantianism with Judaism, influenced him little with the concept of God as an Idea. Nor did he lend an ear to some theologians of our day who reduce God to an echo of the heart. His God is not a shadow, not an echo, but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

He did not speculate on Revelation. He accepted as an axiom that the Torah is divine, and that God manifested Himself in our history, which otherwise would be devoid of meaning. Without God's indwelling, it would have been but the story of a tribe which expanded, conquered, lived, and could have died like many other ancient peoples.

He centered his quest not on the mere interpretation of words, not on vague abstract theories, but on the meaning of our history, its underlying destiny, its purposeful march through the ages. In his book, *Why I Am A Jew*, he enters into the "First Two Thousand Years," then the "Next Two Thousand Years," and recounts them with the same sensitivity that a musician reads the notes of a symphony. They were to him like sense-data in a laboratory, from which he deduced optimism, faith, universalism. To be a Jew means to embrace in one's own life that which has constituted the spirituality of the people.

There is an amplification of his ethical view of life in his book, *Is There An Answer?* (1966), written jointly with his wife Tamar. It is an attempt to decipher the mystery underlying the perennial problems which have troubled the human mind in regard to justice, freedom, good and evil, suffering and happiness. The book seeks solutions in Judaism, in the variety of human cultures, in the promise of science, in the hope of universal peace, and not least, in a deep, genuine religious faith.

If we were to draw a pyramid of his philosophy, wholeness would be at the base, and holiness at the apex. His varied, colorful details could be deduced from these two fundamental categories. He does not use the term “wholeness,” but it is fully implied and is a fitting key to his personality and thinking. To him, morality and religion lie not in the spirit alone, nor in acts in themselves. The full personality is involved. Religion cannot be abstracted from observances; these in turn are incomplete unless they carry the inner meaning with them. Reciting the liturgy without penetrating into it is not praying. A Jew is not fully a Jew if detached from the collective Jewish being (*Kelal Yisrael*). History falls short of its calling if it does not engender historical self-consciousness. Tradition is not an automatic translation of the past, but a living, dynamic continuity. Justice torn from its spiritual essence would lead to a stiff, heartless society. In his conception of an ethical life, wholeness must permeate every corner and aspect. There can be no rift between intention and action, spirit and matter; they constitute an organic whole.

In his vocabulary, sanctity and goodness were interchangeable terms. That they are inherent in humans is a cardinal point in his philosophy. Justice, peace, love—all could emanate from a sanctified life if we are loyal to the genuine human nature blessed by God. “To thine own self be true” is the concluding chapter of *Why I Am A Jew*. Sanctity envelops us when our acts are pure and imbued with the spirit, the zeal, the enthusiasm generated by goodness itself, out of which morality proceeds. In consonance with Jewish thinking, he regards sanctity as constituting the fundamental tie between God and man and between fellow human beings.

His confidence in humanity was not a relic of the nineteenth century exuberance over man’s progress. It stemmed from his profound faith in Providence that even though progress is not predestined, humans were not created to suffer; happiness and achievement are within reach.

One could not refer to his philosophy without placing him in his proper perspective, the Orthodox soil. Prior to Emancipation, the term Orthodoxy had no place in the Jewish vocabulary. Jewishness was homogeneous. It was as natural to be pious as to breathe; non-observance was rare.

There was, however, throughout our history an underlying division between those who looked upon tradition as a mere photostatic copy of the past, and those to whom it was an *etz hayyim*, a living, growing tree. The Sadduces, the Karaites, the antagonists of Maimonides would have clogged the flow of Jewish life, had they not been over-ridden by genuine Jewish enlightenment and progress from within.

TRADITION

Dr. Pool was reared in an atmosphere of profound piety without bigotry. Orthodoxy was the norm of Jewish life in England. The religious dissensions of the continent did not extend significantly across the channel. Dr. Pool's Orthodoxy stemmed from his conception of Judaism no less than from heritage and sentiment. Observances to him are the arteries through which Jewish life circulates. In one of his last sermons, he taught:

Observance of the traditional Torah has been our life and the length of our days. The spirit of religion needs a protective body of law and discipline, direction and observances that unify body and spirit. . . . Where we have forgotten our Hebrew, where we have unbuckled the defensive armor of our Sabbath—neglected the dietary laws and the other distinctive ceremonies and rites which ensure the preservation of Jewish individuality, the giving up of these time-tested and time-hallowed defenses has meant our eventual surrender to the forces of obliteration. This is an unassailable historical fact. When a Jew seeks to make his Judaism easy, he embarks on a process to which no one has as yet found a logical stopping place. The cry is always for making it still easier by more excisions of its Jewish characteristics.

This sermon, after over a half a century in the rabbinate, was a recapitulation of his life-long convictions, reinforced by his student days in Germany, where he sensed so palpably the destruction of our ancient edifice by Geiger and his followers. The relative moderation of American Reform did not bring him nearer to it. To him, Judaism was a living organism in which observances, ceremonies and study of the Law were all fused into one. Tradition was not an inert mass from which slices could arbitrarily be cut off or sifted to meet the currents of the times. Dr. Pool stated: "No fact emerges more clearly from our history than this, that observance of the Law and this alone has preserved us as Jews, while disregard of the Law has rapidly induced the Jewish ruin of those who neglected it. Tampering with the Law is a process which once begun cannot be checked. It is the taking away of a brick here and a brick there, so that the weakening wall bulges under its weight more and more from the true until at last it crashes down. Of what avail for defense is a wall that is breached? Liberal Jewish congregations may have a seemingly prosperous present; but they have cut themselves off from the past and have cut themselves off from the future. The Orthodox congregant knows at all times where he stands and can be sure that the Judaism of today is the Judaism of yesterday and Judaism of tomorrow."

Services with decorum, a better education, awakening of historical consciousness, enlightened penetration into our teachings—these he felt could elevate Jewishness to its proper rank, and constituted the necessary reforms to meet the challenge of our time. He instilled in many the joy of the Torah and of Jewish living.

Orthodoxy was at a low ebb at the turn of the century. Many of the well-established Jews looked down upon the Yiddish-speaking immigrants, and associated Orthodoxy with them. The historic and dignified Shearith Israel became a shaping Jewish force, shedding lustre on Orthodoxy, giving it an esthetic form, and imbuing it with the American spirit without abandoning its own. It has demonstrated, as have later other congregations, the dignity and beauty of Jewish tradition and the possibility of maintaining it in a larger world.

In the dawn of the new era, Dr. David Pool was among those who carried the torch and lit the path. He joined with all his strength in the rebuilding of American Jewish life. The gap between rabbis and laymen narrowed little by little. The youth began to lend an ear to them; a common language developed not merely in speech, but in mutual understanding. They no longer looked upon the rabbis as relics of the past, but as guides in their perplexities.

With his youth and zest David Pool gathered young people around him. He lent to Jewish organizations a kind of spiritual aristocracy. His very presence at meetings increased attendance and heightened enthusiasm. He lectured at colleges on the beauty and depth of our faith in an era when students were lured by radical ideas. He also spoke before Christian groups on a proper interpretation of Jewish Orthodoxy. During the 1930's he addressed the faculty and student body of Wellesley College on the foundations of our faith. Like his philosophy, his Orthodoxy too was stamped with his concept of wholeness.

In an article called "The Centrality of Palestine," he gives a survey of its predominant place in the formation of Jewish life. This and others of his chapters in the Jewish Library series, edited by Rabbi Leo Jung, aim at stressing the organic unity of the various elements of the Jewish experience.

Wholeness is Orthodoxy's most potent argument against deviation. Divergences may be rational, pragmatic, utilitarian, modern, but they are like dim sounds versus onrushing waterfalls. In its fullness, the Jewish past overruns the present and carries it on into the future. When abstracted and divided, it loses the vital impetus which sustains it. David Pool is among those who have helped transplant the past into the present, and prepare the soil for the future.

TRADITION

His is not an Orthodoxy enclosed within four opaque walls. It is that of our ancient sages, which stretches into the wide horizon and carries its wholeness and holiness into an open world. It encompasses life in its entirety.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE WRITINGS OF RABBI DAVID DE SOLA POOL

- An Old Faith in the New World*, New York, 1955 (with Tamar de Sola Pool).
- Capital Punishment Among The Jews*, paper read before the New York Board of Jewish Ministers, New York, 1916.
- "The Centrality of Palestine in Jewish Life," *Jewish Library*, New York, 1930, Series 2, Vol. 12.
- "The Faith of a Jew: Jehuda Halevi's Defense of His Faith," *The Jewish Library*, New York, 1925, Series 1, Vol. 4.
- Gems From The Bible*, New York, 1964.
- "Genesis and Evolution," *Jewish Forum*, April, 1926, pp. 3-10.
- "Hebrew Learning Among the Puritans of New England Prior to 1700," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, Vol. 20, pp. 31-83.
- "The Immigration of Levantine Jews into the United States," *Jewish Charities*, June 1914, pp. 12-27.
- Is There An Answer?*, New York, 1966 (with Tamar de Sola Pool).
- "Judaism and the Synagogue," in *The American Jew, a Composite Portrait*, edited by Oscar Janowsky, New York and London, 1942, pp. 28-55.
- "The Levantine Jews in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book*, 1913-14, 5674, pp. 207-22.
- "The Place of God in Modern Life," *Columbia University Quarterly*, June 1932, Vol. 24, pp. 194-205.
- Portraits Etched in Stone*, New York, 1952.
- Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Selections from Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses and Writings*, Edited by Rabbi Marc D. Angel, New York, 1980.
- Why I Am A Jew*, New York, 1957.