

Why Rabbi Meyer Matters 25 Years After His Passing

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Abstract

Some of the most significant thinkers, artists, and particularly religious leaders of all periods have been nearly forgotten a generation after their deaths. The question that usually is asked is that their teachings or writings were no longer viewed as relevant in the subsequent generation and the real test of the significance of these figures is if their teachings are relevant a generation after their death and why. In this short article I point to several timeless elements in Rabbi Marshall Meyer's life and teachings that still matter 25 years after his passing.

Introduction

I wrote an article in *Conservative Judaism* on the occasion of the Seminario's 30th anniversary in 1992 and followed it up with a later 1994 article on the contributions of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, the Connecticut raised, JTS graduate who went down to Latin America in 1959 and transformed Latin American religion in general and Judaism in particular. In 2014 I wrote the article on the 50th anniversary of the Seminario and I have the perspective of having seen his work in the United States and Latin America continue to grow some 25 years after his passing. This article will chronicle why Rabbi Meyer matters over 25 years after his passing.¹ It is fitting that it figures in a volume of his beloved *Majshavot*.

The "Origin Story" of Rabbi Meyer and the Seminario

An origin story is a story that explains how a person became to be who he or she is. In anthropology we study the origin stories of peoples to see what values and ideas survive and what they teach later generations about, not only where they came from but where they are going. An origin story is much more than just a chronicle of events. An origin story is like the story of Superman, who was sent from the planet Krypton by his parents (largely to save his life) but also to help rescue the world. The origin story of Rabbi Meyer and the founding of the Seminario is to me like the origin stories of the Bible, the heroic accounts of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, Maimonides, Rabbi Isaac Luria, and the Vilna Gaon, because they reflect their struggles and their vision that helped to create institutions and ideas that figured long after their passing. I think that we should teach origin stories as part of our Modern Jewish History courses. I know I do. Thus when I think about why Rabbi Meyer matters it is because I cast him in the context of the long

¹This article will not cover the same issues that I wrote about in these two original articles. I suggest the reader consult them in order to cover some of the background not included in this article. *Conservative Judaism*, 44.2 in Fall, 1992, pp. 67-78, "The Rabbinical Seminary of Latin America: The First 30 Years" and *Conservative Judaism*, 47.1 Fall, 1994, pp. 27-38 "Somos Testigos:-We are Witnesses: The Liberation Theology of Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer." 2014. Kolot Magazine, "Why We Celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Seminario in Buenos Aires, Argentina," April, 2014. 2014. "Continuity and Change: The Fiftieth anniversary of the Seminario and the Conservative Movement in Latin America," *Conservative Judaism*, vol. 65.1, 2014.

history of the Jews, and his origin story –and the origin story— of the Seminario matters and it should be part of our teaching.

This origin story begins in the ashes of the European Holocaust. The post-Holocaust thinking was that it was going to be nearly impossible to recreate the great Jewish institutions of Europe, The next part of this was to see if these institutions could be reconstituted in the areas of the remaining world Jewry. Rabbi Meyer has a key role in this moment. Most people do not know that Rabbi Dr. Louis Finkelstein, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in the 1950s offered Marshall upon graduation the opportunity to go to Israel or Buenos Aires. He decided on Buenos Aires. The winds of change had started in the post-war era to attempt to take the large population base of Latin America and to create a new “Jerusalem” in Buenos Aires. In November of 1957, Rabbi Guillermo Schlesinger, the Rabbi of the Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina (CIRA) in Buenos Aires, one of the first Jewish congregations in Argentina (and perhaps the first one in the country), and one of the earliest of its kind in the region as well, was involved in a negotiation to create a rabbinical seminary in Buenos Aires. In August, 1958, an historic meeting called the "First Consultative Convention of Latin American Synagogues" was held in Buenos Aires. Professors Abraham Joshua Heschel and Ernst Simon as well as Mr. Charles Rosengarten and other representatives and observers from the U.S. were in attendance. At that convention attended Eastern and Western Europeans, as well as Sephardic lay leaders and rabbis of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, Panama, Ecuador, and Uruguay. There were two final recommendations for further discussion that were made. They were: 1) The importance of the problems of Latin American Jewish Youth; 2) a rabbinical seminary.

As a result of these discussions, a 29 year old recent graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, arrived in August, 1959 with his wife Naomi to be the assistant rabbi to Rabbi Schlesinger. By November of 1959, Rabbi Meyer realized that he had to create his own new, young, group of leadership for his initiatives. He turned his attention to Jewish camping and to youth movements, an area he felt he could more easily move forward on without making many innovations in a very established ritual. Post World War II Argentina and most of Latin America was filled with Jews who had either come in the 19th and early 20th century from Europe or were part of the displaced persons who sought refuge in Latin America following the Holocaust (and the creation of the State of Israel which displaced many “Mizrahi” and Sephardic Jews from their native lands). In short, the Jews of Latin America were divided up

into segmented Latin American secular Jewish groups filled with Yiddishists and Socialists, on the one hand, and Orthodox sectarian Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish groups from different parts of the Jewish world, on the other. Rabbi Meyer fought to create one modern Latin American Judaism that would be meaningful to Jews and intelligible to their non-Jewish neighbors. What Rabbi Meyer was doing in his first years in Argentina took nearly 100 years in the United States to evolve. The first Ramah camp that Rabbi Meyer founded in his first months in Argentina began on 6th of January, 1960 (summer season in southern hemisphere) and was an unqualified success with 49 campers, many of whom became the nucleus for the future “seminaristas” who would be in the Seminario education and rabbinical programs. While this small step for Latin America may not have seemed “earth-shattering” at the time, it was Marshall’s own camp experience in the United States that pushed him to create an informal Jewish education institution: the camp in Latin America. It remains as a pillar of the new “Jerusalem” that he was creating in those early years.

The Practical-Synagogue Laboratory: 1959-2019-Creating *La Comunidad*

Rabbi Meyer’s Seminario idea began at Libertad Synagogue but it was unique in that it was a combination of practical-synagogue laboratory with rabbinic training. It was not intended to be a *yeshiva* or a *bet midrash*. It was intended to be the modern equivalent of the “experiential” Jewish education that he had seen had worked so well in camp. In a meeting held at the house of Mr. Henry Schön, in November, 1962 a group of leaders of the CIRA drafted an idea for this type of synagogue, which they called Comunidad Bet El. Not really a “templo” or “sinagoga” but rather a community. The first service was led by Rabbi Meyer, in a large room rented in Buenos Aires in March, 1963. This *comunidad* would serve as a “practical-synagogue laboratory” to show that the rabbinic models given in the teachings of the Seminario could be infused in daily and Shabbat ritual. This model is what made the success of the affiliation with the Seminario so rapid. There was an educational institution, a practical lab and a vehicle for recruiting students for the youth movement; all this rolled into the activities that were centralized into the Seminario. The training ground for the *seminaristas* allowed them to re-create what was being taught at the Seminario in synagogues that had been created in the early part of the 20th century or in new synagogues that were built specifically for the new rabbinic model.

Following successful seasons of his version of “Ramah” and the development of a core group of young leaders in the Jewish community, a convention was convened at the CIRA in December, 1961 to create a “pre-rabbinical” seminary in Buenos Aires. The term “Pre-Rabbinical” was chosen so as not to place itself in competition with some of the other existing rabbinical programs in the United States and Europe, and in addition, the “pre-rabbinical” designation allowed graduates in the final years of formation to attend already existing programs elsewhere (with the proviso that they would return to Latin America). On July 1st, 1962, in front of a crowd that included international Jewish personalities and Argentine supporters and officials, the Seminario was inaugurated in downtown Buenos Aires at the synagogue of the Congregación Israelita de la República Argentina by Rabbis Israel Goldstein, Seymour Siegel, Guillermo Schlesinger, Fritz Winter and Marshall Meyer. The first four students of the SRL (Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano) participated in a creative *Minchah* service along with lay leaders of the community. By 1962, Rabbi Meyer realized he needed to create a new type of congregation and an independent Seminary. In 1963, with a small group of followers, a separate religious community was founded in an apartment in the suburban Belgrano neighborhood of Buenos Aires as a “laboratory-synagogue” for a new, independent pre-rabbinical Seminario. By 1964, Rabbi Meyer and a small cadre of Rabbis and Jewish scholars had created a new, dynamic translation of the *Siddur* (based upon the 1940s United Synagogue Rabbi Silverman (ed.) *Siddur*), founded and published a Spanish language journal of Jewish research, *Majshavot*, and entered into a major publishing agreement to translate some of the greatest modern Jewish writers of the 20th century into Spanish. By 1972 all subsequent ordinations took place in Argentina. Seminario students studied in Israel at the Schechter Institute with other rabbinical students but were ordained in Buenos Aires and accepted as members of the Rabbinical Assembly.

A Connecticut Yankee in Latin America

It would not be fitting to complete an assessment of Marshall’s early life and not include an insight into who formed his thinking. Rabbi Meyer’s developing human rights conscience was a result of his education both at Dartmouth and the Jewish Theological Seminary. First, it is important to note that many rabbis who claim to hold the mantle of Rabbi Meyer’s incredible personal example in the area of social action and human rights can be defined as rabbis on the

political right and the political left. Before Rabbi Meyer there was no model of a rabbi in Latin America of the sort that Rabbi Meyer created in the 1970s and early 1980s. In many Latin American countries today, rabbis who graduated from the Seminario (and those who did not graduate from the Seminario) find it important to work on behalf of human rights and social action. They do it consciously or unconsciously because of the example of Rabbi Meyer in Argentina. It is interesting to trace the origins of Rabbi Meyer's own development. His consciousness did not start in Argentina and one could say that he trained his whole life for the events that unfolded in the 1970s in Argentina.

A Life Lived in Connecticut-the Place Does Make the Man

I have always wondered what made Rabbi Meyer-Rabbi Meyer. I am a professor in Connecticut and have been to Norwich, Connecticut a few times over the past twenty years. Connecticut has its Puritan and early democratic roots that were embedded in the life of the state. Rabbi Meyer's early religious identity was formed in Norwich, Connecticut in a small New England Conservative congregation in the pre-World War II era. He went to Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire after high school and fell under the influence of a famed social philosopher and thinker at Dartmouth, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy (R-H) and then a visiting professor who he encountered and then followed to the Jewish Theological Seminary: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. This connection with RH provided Marshall with a perspective on the world and especially with a religious thinking that continued throughout his life. In his 1988 address at Dartmouth, Meyer acknowledged: "I am a rabbi primarily because of Professor Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy." Professor Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy's work spanned the disciplines of history, theology, sociology, linguistics and beyond. He was born in Berlin, Germany in 1888 into a non-practicing Jewish family, the son of a prosperous banker. He converted to Christianity in his teens, and then the interpretation and reinterpretation of Christianity was a recurring theme in his writings. He was also examining the way that education and language and how it was possible to change entire societies through educational institutions that were based upon ideological and societal concerns. R-H left Germany in 1933 with the rise of Hitler but if we look at the educational career of Meyer in relation to R-H, and especially at Meyer's social activism, it is one which took many of the ideas of R-H and transformed them into a practical form in Latin

American society. As I look for the thread of this influence in the writing of Rabbi Meyer (his sermons, letters, etc.) it is possible to see that basically he was transforming the religious thought of R-H into a system that would help him navigate governmental forces in Argentina which were similar to the forces that R-H faced in Germany in 1933. R-H went to the United States; Marshall Meyer stayed in Argentina and fought the injustice that he felt violated the civil rights of not only Jews but all Argentines. Also the religious ideology of R-H and MTM are amazingly similar. R-H was trying to reinterpret Christianity in light of the continued existence of Judaism, while Meyers was trying to interpret and reinterpret the significance of Judaism in light of the modern period (in the context of Conservative Judaism in Latin America). Marshall's studies with R-H, however, were also a preparation for his studies at the Jewish Theological Seminary in a way that no other teacher could have prepared him for-and for his work with Abraham Joshua Heschel. If we could remember every time a single teacher has created a rabbi in a classroom we would have many Marshall Meyer-s in the world. Sadly we do not. His teachers represented a generation of teaching that wanted to simultaneously educate and give data to the students and at the same time create character. The shaping of the character of an 18-22 year old in a New England undergraduate liberal arts college made it possible for Latin America to welcome a 29 year old rabbi to Latin America. It made a big difference in Rabbi Meyer's life, and his teachers continue to be read and understood today.

The Latin American Heschel: Teaching Latin American Students to Pray With Their Feet”²

When I was at the Seminario in May, 2017, I learned that Heschel is still an important part of the homonymous rabbinic curriculum, the Heschel rabbinic program, and Abarbanel educator's coursework. Rabbi Yattah has made it a major priority and as we discussed the reasons why he thinks that Heschel's thought continues to speak to the Latin American young and old, he

²“For Heschel, the march had spiritual significance. He wrote, "For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying." From an article by Susannah Heschel entitled: "Praying with their Feet: Remembering Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King" *Peaceworks*, Issue 371 - December 2006-January 2007, accessed May 23, 2013. The mothers who marched in the at the Plaza de Mayo in downtown Buenos Aires for their disappeared children starting in the late 1970s were supported by Rabbi Meyer and it was one of the elements that formed the basis for the ultimate downfall of the junta in Argentina and were Selma-like-marches-in-miniature. See: <http://www.peaceworksmagazine.org/praying-their-feet-remembering-abraham-joshua-heschel-and-martin-luther-king>.

immediately pointed a single passage in one of the SRL translated books that was published in 1984 when I was directing the Seminario. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* published in 1955 was a very powerful book for Rabbi Meyer's education. In many ways it is a book which many have not read thoroughly, but it represents the Philosophy of Judaism which the Seminario chose as its own in the 1960s and still has a profound meaning for students and the public 50 years later. During my talk on the Seminario I brought this point up and for the teenagers in the audience the words were still extremely meaningful. Heschel's quasi-mystic, poetic, post-Holocaust, Cold War pessimism still has meaning for adults and the youth. When I asked Rabbi Yattah for a particularly meaningful example of a teaching for modern Argentines in Heschel's writing he immediately cited a text from the Seminario publication *Dios en busca del hombre: una filosofía del judaísmo*.³ Rabbi Yattah pointed out the following line: "The minds are sick. The hearts are mad. Humanity is drunk with a sense of absolute sovereignty. Our pride is hurt by each other's arrogance. The dreadful predicament is not due to economic conflicts. It is due to a spiritual paralysis. This is an age of suspicion, when most of us seem to live by the rule: Suspect thy neighbor as thyself. Such radical suspicion leads to despair of man's capacity to be free and to eventual surrender to demonic forces, surrender to idols of power, to the monsters of self-righteous ideologies."

In Latin America, Rabbi Heschel is still constantly cited in new prayer book compilations and sermons. Heschel is simultaneously cited by rabbis and educators who are in agreement with right wing security concerns as well as left wing civil rights advocates. It is amazing how well both sides feel they capture the essence of the Jewish prophetic nature of Heschel's thought and it is for that reason he is still relevant in the context of the Seminario's teaching. It is for the same reason that often these same rabbis cite Rabbi Meyer. In a recent example of how both Heschel as well as Meyer's use of Heschel work together we have the case of Rabbi Mauricio Balter, a rabbi who was trained and ordained at the Seminario and now lives and works in Israel. Rabbi Balter, who is now the head of the Masorti Movement worldwide while based in Israel, was confronted with what he felt was a severe violation of human rights in Israel in September, 2012 when there was a desecration of the Latrun monastery, reacted in true Marshall Meyer form and rushed to condemn the desecration. Rabbi Balter responded with speeches in the media and he quoted (in

³Published in 1984 by the Seminario in Spanish. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* was originally published in 1955 (quote is from p. 495 in the Spanish translation).

the name of Rabbi Marshall Meyer) one of Rabbi Meyer's pronouncements from the 1970s. Usually, when rabbis are looking for citations to bolster their press statements (especially in Israel), they are expected to provide a quote from the Bible or the Talmud (or at least theologians from the Middle Ages). It is not self-evident that everyone in Israel and the world would have known who Rabbi Meyer was in 2012 but he still responded with a quote and in the name of Rabbi Meyer. He wrote: "Unfortunately, once again I find myself in need of a prayer, that my friend and teacher Rabbi Marshall Meyer wrote: "And people ask Hashem: What will be in the future? And Hashem said to them, how long are you to hate one another?" This is a quote which Marshall indeed wrote, based upon Heschel's reformulations of the Prophets. This is the full circle of the influences and inter-connections of Meyer-to Heschel to the rest of Latin American rabbis.⁴

The Legacy of Marshall T. Meyer

It is hard to quantify the significance of Rabbi Meyer's legacy in Latin America or in world Jewry for that matter. His students are everywhere in the Jewish world today from Israel, Europe, North America, and all over Latin America. Many of the Reform, Conservative, liberal Orthodox, Reconstructionists, Non-Denominationalists, and *havurah* groups owe a debt of gratitude to the creativity of Latin American Judaism and back to Marshall Meyer. It is said by Argentines (even today) that Rabbi Meyer rescued Latin American Judaism twice. I often tell my students that Marshall gets credit for rescuing world Jewry as I look at the model of Masorti Judaism in Israel and these other Jewish models that function in Jewish communities throughout the United States, Canada and even in Europe. First by creating the religious movement embodied by the Seminario in the 1960s and a second time in the early 1970s with an ideological/theological framework that allowed post World War II Latin American Jewish "Baby Boomers" to see why religious Judaism was still relevant to their lives. The second time he rescued Latin American Judaism was when he translated the values of this religious Judaism into a human rights movement that fought against the repressive government of the military. It is said by Argentines that Rabbi Meyer gave both Jews and non-Jews the courage to stand up against those right wing regimes that were violating

⁴ Read the full article: <http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial-opinion/opinion/attack-latron-monastery-was-antithetical-judaism> (accessed August 1, 2013). Rabbi Heschel's book, *The Earth is the Lord's* was already known in Buenos Aires. It was originally published in Buenos Aires in 1952 by Editorial Candelabro, before Meyer's arrival. In the 1970s the SRL re-issued the book with a new translation which better reflected the way that Heschel's theological message was then being understood by Conservative Jews.

their civil rights. The third act of his life is being done by his students and his students' students that use these values on the daily struggles of Jewish life worldwide.

For that reason, Marshall is credited with the type of courage of conviction that parallels Rabbi Meyer's mentor, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s. It is this type of rabbinic model that sees the rabbinate as a transformative agency in society in general and that makes each and every one of the over 100 rabbis (including two dozen women) ordained at the Seminario seminal figures in the countries' histories where they serve. 25 years after his passing his legacy means as much and perhaps even more than it did in 1993. May his name be for a blessing.