



KESHER ISRAEL
THE GEORGETOWN SYNAGOGUE

30 YEARS: RABBI PHILIP RABINOWITZ
A COMMEMORATION AND REMEMBRANCE
29 FEBRUARY 1984/26 ADAR 1 5744



SUNDAY EVENING
MARCH 2, 2014
7PM

KESHER ISRAEL

In the winter of 1910, six merchants living in Georgetown, met to discuss the “possibility of forming a Hebrew society for worship and other communal activities.” Joseph Bremmer, Joseph Scher, Max Whitkin, L. Brenner, Mr. Rakysen, and Mr. Gamzy, all Eastern European immigrants, founded the Georgetown Hebrew Benevolent Society, based out of the home of Harris Levy on 28th and M Streets, NW, with “about 25 persons.” On March 16, their registration application to the DC Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs as a domestic non-profit corporation was approved. Their first president was a man named Abe Mostow. We don’t know much about Mr. Mostow and the other founding families, but we do know that thanks to their efforts, we enjoy a wonderful Modern Orthodox shul and can celebrate the seeds of community that they planted over a century ago.

That autumn, for their first High Holidays together, they moved to 3062 M Street, NW, a larger space located above a storefront. They borrowed a *sefer Torah*, hired a cantor, sold tickets for \$3 each, and began holding religious services. Over time, their numbers increased, and “out of a small *kehve* grew a large *farein*”—from a small group of 25 people, they became united as one community. In 1915, the leaders of the community purchased a small house at 2801 N Street NW, converted it into a shul, and renamed themselves “Keshet Israel Congregation.” Over time, they outgrew the small house and the need to expand became apparent.

With a membership of 150 people, and a Ladies Auxiliary that raised \$10,000 (a lot of money in those days!) for the building, the cornerstone of the new building was laid on February 1, 1931, and a new chapter began to unfold. On September 6, just in time for *Rosh Hashanah*, the new **Keshet Israel Synagogue of Georgetown** formally opened its doors.

Keshet Israel hired its first Rabbi, Rabbi Jacob Dubrow, in 1925. He was quickly embraced by the community as their spiritual leader. He learned *daf yomi* with the congregation and at the Hebrew Home for the Aged every morning and established a Talmud Torah school.

After Rabbi Dubrow’s passing in 1945, two different rabbis served the congregation until 1950, when Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz arrived at Keshet Israel.

RABBI PHILIP RABINOWITZ

Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz was Keshet Israel's second rabbi, leading the shul for 34 years, from 1950 until his most untimely death and tragic murder in 1984. He had "brought the traditions of the disappearing world of the *shtetl*" to Keshet and was beloved by all who stepped foot in our shul. For many years, Rabbi Rabinowitz taught at the Hebrew Academy, until 1979, when he left to focus his efforts full-time on his growing congregation at Keshet.

Born in Lomza, Poland, in 1920, he studied in *yeshivot* in Lomza and Bialystok before immigrating to the United States in 1938. He received *smicha* (rabbinic ordination) from the Hebrew Theological College in Chicago, and received degrees from Catholic University and the Hebrew Theological College.

Rabbi Rabinowitz tended to the needs of his congregants—through the lean years of the 1950s and 1960s, when a morning *minyan* was not close to guaranteed, to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the community just started experiencing a rebirth. When he came to Keshet in 1950, Georgetown was a deteriorating neighborhood, but in his 34 years, he saw the congregation and neighborhood change before his eyes. His congregation had transformed into a mix of government officials, Israeli diplomats, young professionals, and students, not to mention the shul elders—many of whom were the children of some of Keshet's original founders.

A man of extraordinary loving-kindness, humility, and decency, Rabbi Rabinowitz spent his years at Keshet focused on three things: to study and teach Torah, to sustain the daily *minyanim*, and to watch over the welfare of his community. His home was always open to anyone in need, even strangers, and he helped assure that the community was immeasurably enriched in many ways.

Rabbi Rabinowitz was found in his home on the morning of February 29, 1984 - 26 Adar I 5744. Keshet Israel is commemorating the occasion of his 30th *yahrzeit* during the weekend of February 28-March 2.

MESSAGE FROM THE RABBI

We read about the construction of the *Mishkan* during the weeks before Purim and Passover. Often we talk about the power of that institution and how it has sustained us over time. It is after all the prototype of the Temple and of course of the synagogue. In one way or another it has helped the Jewish people survive throughout all the centuries all the places where we have lived.

But institutions are only creations of bricks and mortar. They are at best facilitators that bring forth the most creative and constructive elements of our personalities. They also allow the best individuals to emerge and serve the community.

Tonight we are commemorating the life and sadly the passing of our beloved Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz. We all know because Keshet Israel is a unique and remarkable synagogue. But a significant part of that uniqueness comes from the legacy that Rabbi Rabinowitz left to this community. His celebrated warmth, his welcoming of all who came through the doors, his concern for everyone associated with the Keshet community remain his beacons across the years. It is more than fitting therefore that we memorialize him and remember him tonight.

The *Mishkan* had many beautiful objects that were part of its structure and ambience. But at the center of the structure was the golden ark that held the Torah and the tablets of the Ten Commandments. All the rest, though it certainly was important, centered around the teachings that were revealed by God to the Jewish people. In much the same way everything that occurred at Keshet and everything that was wonderful about Rabbi Rabinowitz during his years as rabbi of the synagogue all revolved around his commitment to authentic Torah Judaism. It is his legacy that is one of the foundation stones on which our current beloved Keshet Israel stands.

We gather this evening to remember him and all that he was and all that he accomplished. It is fitting and proper that we do so. As an institution, Keshet has much to offer this community and much to be proud of. But at the same time we must remember and recognize that all that we are and all that we have stands on the shoulders of people like Rabbi Rabinowitz and will do so forever.

Rabbi Dr. Barry Freundel

MEMORIES

Judaism recognizes two forms of leadership: the *Navi* and the Kohen-Priest and Prophet. The figure of the Prophet always captured the imagination. A person of drama “speaking truth to power,” unafraid to challenge for the sake of God and Israel. The Priest, by contrast, was for the most part a quieter figure who served in the sanctuary rather than in the spotlight of political debate.

Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz, z”l, was one of those unique and rare individuals who served as a leader with the capacity to blend both forms of leadership. Outspoken and forthright, yet gentle and introspective. As a student of Torah in the halls of the Yeshiva in Lomza, Poland, he brought with him to the shores of America an appreciation and understanding of his mission as a Torah Jew. He was first and foremost a teacher whose objective was to teach and educate children to love, learn and live Torah. As a pulpit rabbi, he led his community and Congregation Keshet Israel for over three decades, from a time when finding a *minyan* was difficult and most of his congregants were not *Shomer Shabbat*, into the beginning of a magnificent renaissance of observant Torah *Yiddishkeit*. The continued vibrancy of Keshet Israel and the enthusiasm for prayer and Torah study over the past thirty years is in no small measure due to Rabbi Rabinowitz’s leadership, dedication, and perseverance.

May his memory be a blessing for his family, the Keshet Israel community, and *Klal Yisroel*.

Rabbi Tuvia Grauman (*Keshet* 1972-1988)

Rabbi Rabinowitz married us on January 1, 1981, and we remember the process that led up to this quite well. He was a pro. When Linda asked whether we would have a rehearsal, he replied, “Don’t worry, I’ve been doing this for years.” This put us both at ease. The ceremony itself was lovely and memorable for everyone. The sanctuary was gemlike, in its pre-renovation color scheme. Recall the inscription over the *Aron Kodesh* – no, not the current “*Etz Chaim Hee*,” but the former version – definitely *not* from *Tanach* – which read “*Zos Neder de Harry un Roza Levy*” or words to that effect?

From time to time there would be a small Shabbat lunch at his little row house a few doors down from M Street. It was a quiet place, truly peaceful. These were intimate experiences. Not rollicking, but a chance for him to get to know people and vice versa. It was an honor to be there.

Rabbi Rabinowitz was “our” rabbi. He was the first Orthodox rabbi either of us knew, and he was the real deal. Without him, Keshet would not have been *Keshet*.

Eugene Fidell and Linda Greenhouse (*Keshet* 1975-2009)

WITH THANKS

Kesher Israel would like to thank all those who helped sponsor this evening's program in memory of Rabbi Rabinowitz, including:

Steven and Shirlee Franco
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Neil and Fran Kritz
Sandy and Melanie Karlin
The Lebenberg Family
Gerard and Lisa Leval
Albert Rosenblatt

In addition, we especially thank all of those who contributed to this memorial by sharing their memories of Rabbi Rabinowitz, offering insight into what Kesher was like during his tenure, submitting old newspaper articles, and openly discussing how Rabbi Rabinowitz impacted their lives.

Thank you. It is through your input that we have been able to properly honor the memory of Rabbi Philip Rabinowitz, z'tl.

MEMORIES

Keshet Israel had fallen on evil days. To get a weekly *minyán* was a chore. A *minyán* could be roused for a *yahrzeit*, but some congregants didn't see each other from Shabbat to Shabbat. The shift in neighborhoods was driving the Orthodox to the suburbs and the kosher butcher on M Street was struggling to survive. Sarah and I arrived from a sojourn in the Virgin Islands with two schoolboys, and found, to our relief, the old Georgetown Synagogue with its doors open. That determined where in the Washington area we could settle, while I wrote my historical novels of World War II.

Rabbi Rabinowitz was the man who kept Keshet Israel going through that decline and past it to the start of its present strong renaissance. He was cut down by a still mysterious assailant, too soon to enjoy the full fruits of his persistence and strong faith. I loved this old-world teacher, who with his quaint ways and quiet indomitable personality, served, despite some abrasive *baal babatim*, to preserve a haven of true *Yiddishkeit* at the center of the finest neighborhood in Washington.

God bless his memory. *Zekher tzaddik l'vrakha.*

Herman Wouk

I started attending Keshet Israel in 1973 and met my husband there. Rabbi Rabinowitz co-officiated our wedding along with Rabbi Avrom Landesman. A year later, my husband and I with our infant daughter planned a weekend trip to NY. We needed to know whether Manhattan had an *eruv*. My husband inquired and found that authorities were divided, so we asked Rabbi Rabinowitz what to do. The rabbi's answer illustrated how humane he was. He first made clear that he had no personal knowledge of whether or not Manhattan had an *eruv*. But he said that if "respectable authorities" (and I clearly remember that he used that term) considered an *eruv* to exist, then we should feel free to accept their position. He then continued and explained that it was hard enough to be a Jew and there was no need to make observance more difficult than necessary.

On a personal level, the rabbi showed the same warmth and concern for making observance as easy as possible. While saying *kaddish* for my mother, I often attended weekday morning services and was the only woman present. The men were all regulars. The rabbi didn't know whether I could follow the davening, but when he noticed me there—the *mehitza* was low in those days—he began to announce pages. He never said a word about it, he just did it. A truly wonderful man and rabbi.

Marilyn Schiff (Keshet 1973-1985)

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

It's a little ironic that Rabbi Rabinowitz died just a few days before we read *Parshat Pekudei*, the Torah portion that describes the completion of the building of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. At the same time, the *Hafstora* for *Parshat Pekudei* describes King Solomon completing construction of the first Temple, the culmination of his life's work after succeeding his father, King David, to the throne.

While I never knew Rabbi Rabinowitz, in my 11 years at Keshet Israel, the legacy that all those who knew him continue to speak of is simple: Rabbi Rabinowitz lived and breathed Keshet Israel. He tended to his congregation the same way a shepherd tends to his flock. Rabbi Rabinowitz guided Keshet Israel through a tumultuous 34 years in Washington, DC, bearing witness to the changing times and its impact not only on the city but on his shul at the corner of 28th and N Streets. From a time when making a *minyan* was far from a guarantee to the beginnings of a rebirth, Keshet Israel was Rabbi Rabinowitz's life's work, his magnum opus, his Temple.

Remembering him 30 years after his tragic death is just a small token of appreciation for all that Rabbi Rabinowitz did to keep Keshet Israel alive, so that we can continue to benefit from its splendor.

Elanit Jakobovics, President

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