IN MEMORIAM

MEMORIAL TO RABBI ALEXANDER M. SCHINDLER

*Donald Day**

I will never forget November 17, 2000. I had flown from Florida to New York the night before (it was Thursday) to attend Rabbi Schindler's funeral in Westport, Connecticut on Friday morning. I drove from New York, arrived very early at the synagogue, and walked into the sanctuary – empty, except for rows of pews and hundreds and hundreds of empty chairs. There, in front of the bimah, stood a lone, simple, closed, unadorned pine casket. Two thoughts rushed through my head; first, the enormity of the realisation that this warm loving friend of over thirty years was in fact gone; and second, the symbolism and honesty of that plain pine box.

In this era of non-heroes, Rabbi Alexander Schindler was mine. I loved him because he loved the Jewish people, all of them, Reform, Reconstructionists, Conservative, Orthodox and Secular – he loved them all.

I loved him because he believed in the absolute equality of women in synagogue life and he fought for it; because he believed in social action and equal rights for all, including gays and lesbians, and he fought to achieve it; because he had the courage, against opposition within our own movement, to promote the concept of Outreach and to see it established within the Movement as a norm, reaching out to the convert, to the non-Jewish spouse of mixed marriages and welcoming them to our synagogue communities in the hope that their children (and perhaps they) will remain or become Jews.

And, yes, I loved him because, against opposition from both within and outside our Movement, he argued that maternal descent was not a requirement of Jewish authenticity, but that children born of a Jewish father, but not of a Jewish mother, so long as they were reared as Jews, should be considered and treated as Jews.

Yes, the imprint of Rabbi Schindler's leadership is permanently embedded in our Movement today. In the twenty-seven years of his presidency,

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Reform congregations in North America increased in number from slightly over 425 to 900. He led the way to the establishment of Reform day schools; he was among the leading Jewish spokesmen in America; his counsel was sought by presidents and prime ministers; he served two unprecedented terms as president of the Presidents' Conference of Major American Jewish Organizations, and during that period, became a close confidant and supporter of Prime Minister Menachim Begin.

All of this I honour and remember.

But what I shall never forget was Alex's warmth – he generated it – he oozed it – he exported it. He loved a good joke, especially one on himself. I miss his 'did you hear the one about. . .?' We miss his hugs (he was a hugger extraordinaire). He was a man of great compassion, always willing to listen, always willing to help a soul in distress.

Alex welcomed dissent – it only made him more determined to advance his own position – he never resented it.

And, oh, will we ever forget Alex the poet. He was a master of the English language. I never ceased to wonder how this twelve-year old German refugee learned to craft every line, every sentence of a sermon or a speech so flawlessly that it resonated like pure poetry. Like Steven Foster's 'Tree', his oratory reached towards the heavens.

Alex never retired. Upon leaving the presidency of the Union, until the day he died, he remained active, devoted to the improvement of the condition of World Jewry. He served as president of the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, and as an officer of the World Jewish Congress and the American Joint Distribution Committee, among other organisations.

One of my last memories of Alex was at a meeting I attended with him in Istanbul last summer. Around that table were representatives from all streams and movements in the Jewish World, from the extreme right to the extreme left, from the antireligionists, to the ultra orthodox. The respect and admiration for his even-handedness as chairman of the meeting was universal. Under his leadership, all defining adjectives – Reform Jew, Orthodox Jew, Secular Jew – disappeared. They were all simply Jews, dedicated to the betterment of the Jewish condition. Every issue under his leadership was discussed and voted upon with only one defining test – what was in the best interest of the Jewish people as a whole?

That was always Alex's test. I believe that is why, despite the fact that many disagreed with some of views, he was held in almost universal respect by the Jewish World. He was, and will always remain, in my heart at least, the consummate Jew, a particularist who transcended particularism for the universality of our people; my friend, my rabbi in the broadest and finest sense, my hero.

May his legacy and his memory forever remain a blessing to Reah, the love of his life, to his five wonderful children and their families, to the Jewish people whom he so lovingly embraced, and to all humanity. May I ask you all to rise and observe a moment of silence in memory of Rabbi Alexander Schindler. Thank you.