



HIS MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

The improbable life
of the late

R'Shlomo (Steven) Hill



By Rabbi Mayer Schiller



In an early role

PROLOGUE:

In 1957 my parents enrolled me in the Rego Park Jewish Center's Hebrew School on Queens Boulevard. Intended for first graders, classes were held only once a week. In the fall of 1958, the school upped the ante. There were now going to be classes every afternoon *and* on Sunday morning. That struck me, at age seven, as way over the top. Despite my mother's best efforts, even employing many packs of Topps 1958 football cards as bribes, I dug in my heels. Once a week for Judaic studies was my limit. Fortunately for all concerned, a Reform congregation had just opened a Sunday school above a small drugstore on Austin Street in Forest Hills.

That weekly hour and a half was to be the extent of my Jewish education for many years. My staunch reluctance to devote additional hours to Hebrew school was born, however, not of lack of interest in my Jewish identity; it was simply a refusal to sacrifice limited after-school playing hours.

Yet questions always lingered. Trips to Gluckstern's Restaurant on the Lower East Side necessitated, in those pre-Brooklyn-Queens Expressway days, a trip through Williamsburg. There I would see *chasidim* and always wondered what they were all about. I'd return home to Rego Park and curl up with the *World Book Encyclopedia* to read and reread the entry on "Judaism" and its presentation of the three "denominations," Reform, Conservative and Orthodox. We'd heard in Rego Park that there were Jews who didn't ride in cars on Shabbos. No one in our 90% Jewish public school, PS 206, had ever encountered such people. But it was certainly food for thought, at least in my case.

Moving to Pomona, Rockland County, in September of 1963, I frequently encountered the visibly Orthodox Jews of Monsey. My search was amplified by much reading and subsequent reflection. In the spring of 1964, shortly after my then political hero, Senator Barry Goldwater, was defeated by his nemesis, Nelson Rockefeller, in the Oregon primary, I resolved to become Orthodox for a month's time in order to experience religious practice firsthand. Cajoling two of my 12-year-old friends into joining me, we set out on a four-week experiment.

As part of our explorations, I resolved that we should visit some Orthodox communities. Accordingly, one Sunday afternoon we found ourselves walking down Washington Avenue, the main artery of New Square, then one of only three completely paved roads in the village. We failed to encounter a living soul. Arriving at the door of the *shul* we opened it hesitantly, only to hear the robust and slightly intimidating sound of chanting. My friend, who was getting increasingly nervous, said to me, "They're praying. Let's get out of here." And we did.

After a few steps, we met a friendly middle-aged *chasid* who asked why we had come. I later learned that this was the Rebbe's long-serving *gabbai*, Reb Shaya Ungar, *a"h*. When we told him about our month-long commitment to Orthodoxy he informed us that at that very moment there was a "Hollywood star" in the *shul*, who had himself become Orthodox

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only two years earlier. His name was Steven Hill.

Ushered into the *shul* by Reb Shaya, we were led over to a tall man, clad in *tallis* and *tefillin*, who was reciting *Tehillim*. After a slight pause, he began to take off and kiss his *tefillin*. That process in itself left an indelible impression. His obvious awe and love for the *tefillin* was a sight to behold. A conversation ensued with Hill, Reb Shaya and many of the *kollel yungeleit* (whose Torah study, incidentally, was the chanting of my friend's fears). In the middle of the discussion everyone became silent when the Rebbe, *zt"l*, emerged from his room. Hill turned to us and said in a voice drenched in reverence, "That's the Rebbe. He's a very holy man."



The mental efforts that most of us require to accord spiritual matters their due came to Steven Hill naturally. His voice was emotive and hence evocative. While his words were never many, they were full of pregnant pauses, gestures and facial expressions. He'd often stop in the middle of a conversation and then return, as if he'd gone elsewhere to acquire not only the right words but the right tone.

From that moment on, Steven Hill became the arbiter of many of my Jewish needs and problems. He tried to stop my bar mitzvah celebration from being held on Shabbos, and visited my parents many times to explain this or that Jewish practice.

His personality was gracious, but not talkative. The pleasantries were over quickly and serious matters were accorded solemnity. Eschewing the Socratic method, the force of his argument was *Tehillim*-esque. His powerful rhetoric focused on

the Divine.

He measured the *techum* [permitted walking distance] from my house to New Square and Monsey Orthodox *shuls* and, in general, provided me with the empathy I needed to ease my own transition into *shmiras hamitzvos*. (The fact that he'd guest-starred on one of my favorite shows probably didn't hurt things either!)

Our paths would cross throughout the years, sometimes frequently, at times less so. He was one of those individuals (and I'm sure we all know such people) who was so powerful to me that I often feared becoming too close to him. His genuine piety was almost palpable. It seemed almost inappropriate to invade that sacred space too often.

I did, however, uncover his playful side. When he told me that he'd once forgotten to say "*Yaaleh Veyavo*" twice, resulting in three consecutive *Shemoneh Esreis*, I asked him what that was like. "The third time," he deadpanned, "was a lot quicker."

In the summers of 1982 and '83 we worked together on his autobiography, which may yet see the light of day, with G-d's help. At the end of the day it was off to the pizza store for some soft vanilla ice cream, which, due to his desire not be recognized in public, we'd eat in the car.

But it was always his vibrant *emunah* and *bitachon* that I valued the most. Was he my mentor? Yes. My inspiration? Surely. Simply stated, he walked a walk that I sought to follow, with a faith that I will always envy.

While sitting *shivah* for my mother, I asked him in a private moment if he had any regrets. His reply was, "As the years pile on, I become increasingly aware that everything in our life is from the *Aibershter*. There can be no regrets. Everything that happens is exactly *b'seder*."

A few nights later he returned. There was a large crowd in the house. I'd just finished talking about how I'd gotten to Skver, whereupon a young man asked me how Steven Hill had done the same. I replied, "Well, why don't you ask him? He's sitting right next to you." The young man couldn't believe that the hat-wearing, bearded Jew seated next to him was the legendary Steven Hill. Of course, he didn't reply. The same humility that led him to

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forbid *hespedim* at his own *levayah* kept him silent when asked to talk about himself.

This, then, is his story.

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There was a popular song years ago that went, "Everybody's a dreamer and everybody's a star." We all have aspirations, hopes and dreams. Sadly, the years often dull and extinguish them. At times, though, the original dreams are radically altered, leaving new visions whose pull far exceeds the first beckoning of youth.

In the late 1920s, Solomon Krakovsky, a young Jewish boy born of immigrant parents who lived in Seattle, Washington, attended an amateur talent contest in which his sister was a contestant. Years later he recalled, "I saw her on stage and I thought, 'I wouldn't mind that, all those

people looking at me in the spotlight. That would be fun."

A high school vocational seminar in 1939 solidified his conviction that his life's calling was to be an actor. "Not for me," he mused, "was the bourgeois pursuit of security and stability. My soul was meant for the bright lights and acclaim, the creative fulfillment of Broadway and Hollywood."

Undeterred by the doubts of family and friends, he set out for Chicago to work odd jobs while obtaining minor acting roles and broadcast parts. The voracious wolf of poverty was always at the door. But the young man's vision was so clear—he was going to make it!—that he stoically endured the seedy, rodent-infested rooming houses of the Windy City and stints as a door-to-door salesman of home disinfectants. Success was surely just around

the corner.

As it was for many young Americans of that time, life would be put on hold by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. December 7, 1941, saw all able-bodied male citizens head off to fight in World War II. Solomon was no exception. The United States Navy claimed him for the duration. His dream would have to wait until the task at hand was complete.

Returning to New York City after the war, Solomon slowly began to ascend the ladder of his yearnings. One of his first professional stints was in a 1946 Broadway play that advocated for a Jewish state in what was then Mandate Palestine. The fledgling actor had just recently been renamed Steven Hill, both Solomon and Krakovsky having been deemed too unwieldy and ethnic for the popular taste.

Another Jewish actor, Martin Landau, who would perform alongside Hill in later decades, recalled, "When I first became an actor, Steven Hill was one of the two most promising young actors in New York City, the other being Marlon Brando. He was legendary, volatile, mad...and his work was exciting."

In 1948 Steven Hill was cast in a Broadway hit. Although his role was minor, the director, sensing Hill's theatric insight, allowed him to create a scene in the play. "This was my first show business endorsement," was his reflection in later years.

As they say in the trade, the young actor's career slowly and steadily took off, and he garnered feature roles in all of the major dramatic vehicles of early television. Film roles of increasing significance followed. He also married and began a family.

Chazal tell us in *Chagigah* 16a: "Every day a *bas kol* (Divine voice) emanates from Mount Horeb proclaiming, 'Return children, return.'" Asks Reb Nochum of Chernobyl in his foundational work *Meor Einayim*, "What use is a Divine Proclamation if it is limited to Mount Horeb and no one hears it?" His answer: "The voice is heard by all. It consists of the thoughts of repentance that every Jew experiences every day." Sadly, though, we often lack the sensitivity to respond.

In the summer of 1957 the young star was fresh from several leading roles,

including *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. He was on the set in San Francisco, starring in a pilot for a new detective show. The scene, to be filmed at night, called upon the actor to get into a car atop Nob Hill, drive down and turn right at the bottom, all the while being trailed by the camera on wheels. This was no easy shot in those days. While a certain amount of lighting was necessary, it was supposed to be nighttime, and too much light would defeat the purpose. Unfortunately, something went wrong with every single take. When day broke the director informed the star, "Sorry, Steve. We couldn't get it right. We're going to have to come back again tomorrow night and start all over."

At that moment, Hill was enveloped by sadness. "I was getting to the top of the industry—and this was all I could attain? Driving up and down a hill all night long? How had this become my life?"

But the director was unrelenting. "We have to get started on time. You understand that we're fighting against the light."

From a distant place those words seemed full of meaning, beyond Hill's ability to decipher. "Fighting against the light.... What light?"

Confused and despondent, he resolved to go back to Seattle to visit his parents and drop in on his childhood haunts. Perhaps he would find whatever it was he was seeking.

In Seattle he returned to the schools, playgrounds and candy stores of his youth, and his reaction was visceral. Everything had changed, from the buildings to the kids. "It was if my whole life had been wiped out. Nothing remained."

His father invited him to come to the Orthodox *shul* on Shabbos morning. [Note: Many immigrants of that time attended Orthodox services even as their personal practice waned.] He hadn't been inside a synagogue for years. "I thought I'd do him a favor so I went along. It all began with small things. The green carpet was the same as it had been at my bar mitzvah. Then I entered the sanctuary. There was the *aron hakodesh*, the old men saying their prayers. Could they be the same men I remembered? It certainly seemed so. *This*, I thought, *is forever*. *This stuff* is

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At an upsherin of a grandson

eternal. Above the ark were the words ‘Mah nora hamakom hazeh (How awesome is this place).’”

Years later, his insight into that moment would deepen. “The *pasuk* immediately before ‘mah nora’ is ‘And I did not know.’”

Indeed, even then he did not know it with clarity; not just yet. But the Divine call to our protagonist was getting louder.

In 1961, Steven Hill was cast in the roll of Sigmund Freud in a Broadway play. The script had undergone a slight alteration shortly before its opening night in New York that April. During a scene in which Hill was psychoanalyzing his female patient, the woman in the original script was to say a simple “No,” meaning that he should stop asking her probing questions. This was altered by Henry Denker, the play’s writer, to read as follows:

Elizabeth: No!

Freud: Elizabeth, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth (suddenly): You are a Jew!

Freud (surprised and hurt but controlled): Yes.

As Hill recalled years later, “During the out-of-town tryout I thought nothing of it. Yet later on Broadway, the phrase began to haunt me. ‘You are a Jew,’ she would shout contemptuously. The audience would utter an audible gasp. And each time I would reply softly, ‘Yes.’ In the silence between her outburst and my reply was an eternity of meaning. Yes, I was a Jew, on stage as Sigmund Freud, and in life as Steven Hill, as Sol Krakovsky. ‘You are a Jew’ would echo in my ears for hours after a performance. ‘Yes,’ I would say to myself. ‘Yes.’”

In Francis Thompson’s famous poem *The Hound of Heaven*, which depicts an individual who attempts to flee from the Almighty—a poem much beloved by our protagonist—the point is reached when G-d, *kevayachol*, says, “Rise, clasp My hand and come!”

That time was now at hand.

Hill was then living in Pomona, New York, a few miles north of the chasidic enclave of New Square. It had been only four

years since the Skverer Rebbe and his small but hearty band consisting mostly of Holocaust survivors had established America’s first Orthodox village on the outskirts of Spring Valley. Friends had told him about this strange place filled with wild-eyed and forever-dancing Jews, trapped in the primitive embrace of yesterday.

It sounded interesting and exotic. And maybe, just maybe, it had something to do with his embryonic quest.

For Sukkos of 1961, Hill drove down Route 45 to see what the *chasidim* were all about. His first visits were brief and halting. One of the people he met was a *chasid* who had been born and bred in the Bronx, whose accent and friendly demeanor shattered his notions of encountering other-worldly mystics. His next visit was the following morning, right before leaving for a Saturday matinee where he’d be portraying Freud in the Music Box Theater. He stood in the rear of the *shul* and looked out at the sea of *talleisim*, simply absorbing everything.

The next evening he returned for the Simchas Torah *hakafos* of the Rebbe, *zt”l*. This was to be his life’s pivotal moment. The Rebbe’s dancing with the Torah transfixed him. After he drove back home, his friends and family asked him to show them how the Rebbe had danced. He rose to do so, paused, and then sat down. “It was too holy. This is not something to be imitated.”

“I knew what false gestures were,” he later explained. “I was an actor. I could ‘be’ anyone at all. But I could not find any false gestures or facial expressions with this man. I simply could not be him. A few days later I was taken into his presence. His smile enveloped me; his love and focus were real. I would have to be careful when telling him my wishes!”

Hill’s wishes were simple: He wanted to find his way back to his people, to the beliefs and practices of his ancestors, to *der Aibershter*.

In Skver, he was no longer Steve; it was henceforth Reb Shlomo, and so it would remain. The *bas kol* had been heard. Now began the arduous and often painful job of putting everything into practice.

There was the inevitable difficulty of family and children. Hill’s wife tried, without enthusiasm, to accompany him on his journey. For several years his children were enrolled in the Yeshiva of Spring Valley, but his wife found it all rather excessive. A few years later, after Reb Shlomo had built his first-ever *sukkah*, he returned home on Yom Tov to find that his wife had left and taken the children. He was alone in his empty *sukkah* with only the *Aibershter*, the Rebbe and his newfound friends in Skver to console him.

Reb Shlomo loved his family deeply; their loss was devastating. The Rebbe had urged him to exert every possible effort to keep them together. When the inevitable end came, he urged his son Yonason, the only child of his first marriage who would later join his father on the same journey, to understand his mother and realize how hard it was for her to come along with him.

As far as his acting career went, the Rebbe urged him not to abandon it; whether because it was his source of *parnasah* or

due to larger *kiruv* considerations isn't clear. Rabbi Avigdor Miller also counseled Hill to remain in show business. "Maybe you can corrupt a few more of them," he once said, using "corrupt" in a humorous sense. "Let people see an *erlicher Yid!*"

As a *frum Jew*, Hill found Hollywood to be a great adjustment. But the sage counsel of the Rebbe, *zt"l*, and after 1968, that of the current Skverer Rebbe, served as his compass.

One time, after complaining to the late Rebbe about the difficulties of his career, he received this stunning reply: "*Oyb azoy, efshar kent ir shpilen Shakespeare?*" ("If that is so, maybe you could perform Shakespeare?") Hill was shocked that this Ukrainian Rebbe was familiar with the Bard of Avon. But it was incidents such as this that solidified his absolute trust in the Rebbes of Skver.

In truth, the *nisyonos* were just beginning. As Dovid Hamelech said in *Tehillim*, "You push man down until the crushing point and You say, 'Return, children of man'" (*Tehillim* 90:3).

In 1965 Reb Shlomo was offered the opportunity to costar in a war drama with a very famous actor, Steve McQueen. The pay was extraordinary, and the studio even agreed that he could have Saturdays off. The only proviso was that if there were ever several cloudy days when they couldn't film that he make an exception and give them a single Shabbos to make up the slack.

"This was the first big test," he jotted down years later. He was 43 years old. On the one hand, his dreams, nurtured over 35 years, were on the verge of fruition. The money would put him on easy street for years to come. He was torn.

But his reply was firm: "I'll work for you six days a week, every Sunday, around the clock, any time you want. But on Friday night and Saturday I just can't do it. My hands are tied."

And so the movie was made—without Reb Shlomo.

He continued to excel, just below the very top tier of the acting world. Reb Shlomo had guest appearances on all the major shows of that time.

Once again, a huge career breakthrough presented itself. A new weekly series was being formulated, to be called *Mission Impossible*. Hill, as government agent Dan Briggs, would perform those jobs which, for whatever legal or diplomatic reasons, America was unwilling to do publicly. Reb Shlomo basically created the role with his laconic acting style. The show was a huge hit. His ability to survive as a Hollywood star while being scrupulously loyal to Torah and devoting his spare time to its study inspired thousands of Jews to greater passion in their own mitzvah observance.

I remember my tenth-grade *rebbe* in Breuer's *yeshivah* in Washington Heights exhorting us to cut down on our television viewing, "with two exceptions. You can watch *Flipper*. What could be bad about a show starring a dolphin? And *Mission Impossible*, because of the *kiddush Hashem* of Steven Hill's life!"

But once again, this exceptional *neshamah* was being put to the test. The network tired of the difficulties imposed on the set by Hill's defiant refusal to work on Shabbos. When the first season was over the show survived—but Mr. Briggs did not.

Personally, though, things were looking up. Reb Shlomo was married again, and this time his devoted wife was an Orthodox

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definition. The essence of life was the *Aibershter*. Acting was a livelihood and something I simply enjoyed doing; not who I was. Surprisingly, I felt improved as an actor by this realization.”

Once again the offers came in, and Hill gave stellar performances in films and even a soap opera. This was followed by the crown of his career: the long-running hit, *Law & Order*. From 1990 to 2000 he played the part of the wise curmudgeon, Adam Schiff, DA of Manhattan. His fellow actors now turned to him for guidance; he was their teacher in the finer points of the trade. No longer were there battles over everything from Shabbos to *shatnez*. All his requests were granted. With his *Tehillim* firmly in hand he was transported daily by limo, back and forth between Monsey and Manhattan.

His career dreams had been fulfilled. So when the network decided in 2000 that his dashing off for weekday *minyán* to say *Kaddish* for his mother was too much, the parting wasn't bitter. Reb Shlomo was 77 years old. The time had come to rest.

His rest, though, was that of an *erlicher Yid* reaping the fruits of a lifetime of *mesiras nefesh*. Reb Shlomo was surrounded by children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and much of his leisure time was devoted to Torah study. One of his treasured *rebbe*s, Reb Moshe Green, head of the Yeshivah D'Monsey, would often learn with him. He cherished *davening* there, forever disdaining overly rushed *tefillot*.

After Reb Shlomo suffered a stroke some years back, speech became very difficult for him. But he still relished pointing smilingly to the Heavens and saying, as best he could, “*Ribbono Shel Olam*” and dancing to the tune of “*Zol Shoy'n Zain Der Geulah*.”

He passed away peacefully last Tuesday, the 19th of Av, as the family sang *Ani Maamin* around his bedside.

Years before, when his future wife's family was considering the *shidduch*, they asked the previous Skverer Rebbe about Reb Shlomo. “There aren't many *Yidden* who have his *emunah* and *mesiras nefesh*,” was his reply.

Indeed there weren't—and aren't. His love of Torah and *mitzvos* was as fresh and new at the end of his life as it was in the early 1960s. His willingness to sacrifice, not simply money and fame but his deepest creative yearnings for the *Aibershter*, is beyond the comprehension of most people.

He lived to see his children from his second marriage, as well as one from the first, raise their own children in the path of Torah.

I found him to be one of the most inspirational and enduring influences upon my life for the past 53 years. To quote the words of Hamlet, “I shall not look upon his like again.”

That, of course, is in this world. In the next world, however, I am sure that he is now sitting with his friends from Skver, the Rebbe, all of the late *rabbanim* who counseled him over the years, and his beloved *Aibershter*. And I can almost hear him say, “Mayer, this is greater than anything I could have imagined. Here is where all the dreams are really fulfilled!”

May his memory be a blessing and a *zechus*.

Rabbi Mayer Schiller has been a maggid shiur for over 40 years. He currently splits his time between MTA, where he gives a shiur, and Mesivta Beth Shraga, where he teaches English and history.

Jew, whose *temimus* and *emunah* rivaled his own. Reb Shlomo began to build the Torah home of his dreams: children in *yeshivah*, visits to the Skverer Rebbe, and a tender, loving observance of every *mitzvah*.

The Hollywood era of his life was apparently receding; he even told a reporter that he wouldn't mind at all if he never acted again. Reb Shlomo's mind turned to business and increased Torah study. Dabbling in real estate and writing scripts allowed him to forsake his original vocation.

In truth, there were several lean years. For an entire decade, from 1967 until 1977, his only acting credit was as the narrator of a documentary on Israel's history. Eventually, though, economic necessity and the desire to once again perform led him to call his old agent. His career was rekindled.

This time, though, it would be very different. “When I returned to acting it was much more enjoyable than before. My performances were no longer my self-



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