## Rabbi Mayer Schiller: A Decidedly Unconventional Chassid

By ELLIOT RESNICK Jewish Press Staff Reporter

Among leading *Torah Umadda* advocates, one personality in particular piques the curiosity of a visitor. For while Rabbi Mayer Schiller's words evince culture and sophistication, his garb belongs to the insulated chassidic world of Skver-Rachmis-

trivka.



Rabbi Mayer Schiller

Rabbi Schiller has taught in Modern Orthodox high schools for 31 years, the last 20 at Yeshiva University's Marsha Stern Talmudical Academy. He also coached the school's hockey team for eight years, retiring after winning six consecutive championships.

A ba'al teshuvah

(returnee to Judaism).

Rabbi Schiller's writings include The Road Back: A Discovery of Judaism Without Embellishments, The (Guilty) Conscience of a Conserva-

tive and many articles.

The Jewish Press recently spoke with him about the experiment that changed his life, why secular studies shouldn't scare Orthodox Jews, and his views on "so-called primitive peoples.

How did you become religious?

I was always haunted by questions of my religious identity. Most of us in those days in Brooklyn attended Hebrew school several times a week, but that left me basically cold.

In 1964 my parents moved to Rockland County and I came in close proximity with Orthodox Jews for the first time. This really brought my questions to the fore, so in the spring of 1964 I persuaded two of my classmates in public school – we were in seventh grade - to become practicing Orthodox Jews for a month in order to see what it was all about.

As part of that I suggested that we visit Orthodox communities, synagogues and yeshivas. We visited New Square and many other Orthodox places and a very favorable impression was made on me. When the month was over, I was in.

You have stated in the past that your growing interest in political conservativism contributed to your turn to Orthodox Juda-

Yes, I became very taken by the American conservative movement at that time. And as I began to read Russell Kirk and William Buckley and National Review, I realized that political questions in a larger sense are about one's general philosophy and religious worldview. So it just got me thinking even more about fundamental issues

It's interesting that you turned to the Right in the 1960's while so many others turned to

Well, I didn't reject the values I was being given willy nilly in the fifties from public schools and 1950's television – cowboy heroes and so forth. I felt that in that direction lay truth and meaning, and that if I could get at the core of what motivated those old TV characters Hopalong Cassidy and "The Rifleman" I'd be getting somewhere.

You believe in much of Torah im Derech Eretz or Torah Umadda ideology. Yet you dress in distinctly chassidic garb. Why?

Many years ago a Modern Orthodox educator said to me that he feels it's vitally important to use the names of Hebrew months when you cite a date. I realized at that point that the particular forms with which one incarnates his Jewish identity may vary. For a Modern Orthodox Jew, it might be a big knitted yarmulke or Hebrew names or saying  $Abba\,$ and *Ima* or something like that. But everybody needs certain forms or certain rituals that bring physical realities to his identity, and I think we all strive for that to varying degrees.

In a Jewish Action article, you wrote that "fun," not secular studies, is what causes young men to depart from traditional Judaism. Can you elaborate?

The danger we encounter today is that young people become enamored with a certain superficial giddiness that the popular culture holds forth and that's why they drift away. It's not because they're reading Wellhausen or Darwin or something like

Therefore, our response must be, I think, to create a Yiddishkeit that is going to engage the soul. Very often, the long yeshiva today is not necessarily what many people need.

One of my grandchildren, who happens to be a pretty bright boy, goes to a very fine yeshiva that has a ten-hour day with three sedarim of Bava Basra, two b'iyun and one bekius. And I was thinking to myself: My goodness, there's Chumash Ramban, there's Tanach there's hashkafa, there's Jewish history, there's Hebrew language, there's dikduk, there's *mussar*, there's *chassidus* – there is so much that could be done in a ten-hour day. Could we not find an hour or two or three for some of these other limmudim without sacrificing too much from Bava

What function do secular studies serve in a Torah education?

On a pragmatic level, more responsibility in

terms of preparation for *parnassah*.

On a deeper level, a sense that Creation in general is also from Hashem and if we approach secular studies the way the Chovos Halvovos or the Rambam did, our appreciation of it can bring us closer to the Ribbono shel Olom. It's actually a deepening and an enrichment of avodas Hashem if done properly – if there is a proper filter system that will filter out assorted forms of decadence and heresy that plague history today.

In 1999 you said that America was the cause of much evil in the world. You identified the "good guys" as the peoples in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Do (Continued on Page 69)



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## you still maintain this belief post-9/11?

Yes, well, the world is forever an ambiguous place and things never come quite as black and white as we'd like to have them.

America has come to represent in many parts of the world forces of secularism and hedonism. And when I spoke about Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, my sense was that these people are closer to the natural sacred rhythms of existence than Western Europe and North America.

On the other hand, obviously the danger of any firmly held belief system – be it secular liberalism, Islam, or Judaism – if held without mitigating moral and ethical considerations, can yield horrific results. So as [the British rock group] The Kinks sang, "It's a mixed up muddled up world."

# What do you mean by sacred rhythms of existence?

One of the deadening effects of what used to be called technocracy is that it shuts a person off from a sense that the world is a place of great holiness and that human existence is a place where there can be great sensitivity to that holiness if we just open our souls to it. Industrial liberal capitalist societies often deaden that apprehension which we can all have. People in the third world, I think, have much greater sensitivity to this than we do.

In other words, a pious Mexican farmer might be closer to God and closer to natural morality than a business executive on Wall Street.

#### Do you have plans to write any more books?

There are several books dancing around in my head that I hope to get out some day.

I think one of my main concerns is how to really implement Torah im Derech Eretz, Torah *Umadda* in a real yeshiva setting and in one's life. I also want to write a book about Orthodox Jewish relationships with the non-Jewish world, which I think is an area where we have much to improve. And of course the autobiography, which at some point I want to sit down and do.

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