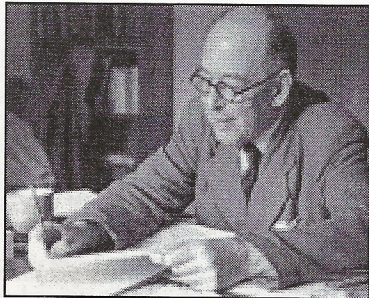


## C. S. Lewis and the Rabbi:

*an interview with Rabbi Mayer Schiller*

by Clara Sarrocco



*"You have not chosen one another but  
I have chosen you for one another."  
from *The Four Loves**

In August 1998, The New York C. S. Lewis Society celebrated Lewis' hundredth birthday with a weekend symposium. On that occasion the Society was fortunate enough to have as a speaker Rabbi Mayer Schiller who presented his essay, "Screwtape Proposes a New Toast" (Bulletin Issue No. 345-347). The Society wanted to extend an invitation to the Rabbi to attend one of our monthly meetings. But because Rabbi Schiller strictly observes the Sabbath and our meetings take place on Friday evenings, he cannot attend. In lieu of his physical presence, he has graciously consented to the following interview.

Rabbi Schiller belongs to the Hasidic branch of Orthodox Judaism. He has written two books, *The Road Back: The Discovery of Judaism Without Embellishments* (Foreword by Rabbi Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University) in which he urges Jews to return to their ancient religious heritage of Torah Judaism and *The (Guilty) Conscience of a Conservative* where he reminds those who believe in eternal values that they "must stop fighting today's wars with yesterday's weapons." He has written numerous articles, participated in many interviews, lectured widely and was featured in a PBS series. The Jewish Press has described him thus: "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-Rachmistrivka."

**Rabbi Schiller, please introduce yourself by telling us about yourself, your life, your family and how you came to be what could be described as a "truly renaissance man."**

I was born in Brooklyn in 1951. My family was very ethnically Jewish but had little religious identity. At age twelve I opted to become an Orthodox Jew and have been ever since. I am married with children and grandchildren and teach Torah and Talmud at Yeshiva University High School for Boys in Manhattan.

### Contents

|                                       |    |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| C. S. Lewis & the Rabbi               | 1  |
| Two Great Men Influenced by CSL       | 5  |
| Spiritual Mentoring in CSL's Letters  | 6  |
| Book Review: <i>Yours, Jack</i>       | 12 |
| Future Meetings                       | 11 |
| Contents of Bulletin 2008             | 13 |
| Report of the December Meeting        | 14 |
| Book Review: <i>CSL, My Godfather</i> | 16 |

Photo used by permission of  
The Marion E. Wade Center,  
Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL

Published bi-monthly for the subscribing  
members of the New York C.S. Lewis Society  
(Founded 1969)

Library of Congress ISSN 0883-9980

Subscription:  
\$10.00 for six consecutive issues;  
\$20.00 foreign

Editor: Robert Trexler  
366 S. Brooksvale Road, Cheshire CT 06410  
email: editor@nycslsociety.com  
web-site www.nycslsociety.com

Correspondence/subscriptions/renewals:  
Clara Sarrocco,  
84-23 77th Avenue, Glendale NY 11385

©2009 NEW YORK C.S. LEWIS SOCIETY



As far as being a "renaissance man," all I can say is I believe that existence and the knowledge and experience of it are great gifts of a Loving God. It also strikes me that all good men, of whatever religious creed, provided the creed be not evil, are beloved by the Almighty and will be rewarded by Him. Plus, different faith communities and cultures have much to offer each other while, obviously, not falling into a relativistic abandonment of truth and doctrine altogether.

It is a practice at our meetings to ask first-time attendees to tell us either/or their first Lewis book or their favorite Lewis book. Which was your first and your favorite CSL book?

My first C. S. Lewis book was *Mere Christianity*. My favorite book is *The Great Divorce*.

How did your first encounter with C. S. Lewis come about?

I was coming home from a New York Rangers hockey game in December of 1972 and stopped in the book store that was then in the Port Authority bus terminal. While browsing, I picked up *Mere Christianity* and was captivated by it. I bought it and read it all the way home on the bus.

In your book, *The Road Back - a Discovery of Judaism*, you quote Gilbert Keith Chesterton quite extensively. Did Lewis lead you to Chesterton or did Chesterton lead you to Lewis?

After that first night, I quickly made my way through the Lewis books. This led me to Chesterton and his sadder friend, Belloc, whom I also love dearly. GKC brings us to God on the days when life is bright and sunny. Belloc helps us on the days it seems dark and bleak. Lewis came first, though.

How do you explain the fact that Lewis, one of the foremost Christian apologists, has become so much a part of your Orthodox Jewish life?

Lewis' religious genius is relevant to all faiths. It deepens our understanding of God's service and provides us with spiritual strength. Take, for example, *The Problem of Pain*, combine it with *A Grief Observed* and you've got a primer on how people of faith should navigate the experience of suffering in God's world. Plus, I always felt that it was a good thing for Christians to be good Christians. So Lewis helps me be a better Jew and helps the world as a whole come closer to God.

In *Reflections on the Psalms*, Lewis wrote: "[God's] Judgment is apparently an occasion of universal rejoicing. People ask for it. . . . The ancient Jews, like ourselves [Christians], think of God's judgment in terms of an earthly court of justice. The difference is that the Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages. . . ." What is your reaction to Lewis' observations regarding what the Psalmists wrote about "judgment?"

I think that both faiths have both elements. A good Jew always puts himself in the dock and a good Christian also begs for (may we say even demands?) God's mercy and that His justice be administered to the truly wicked. The Book of Psalms also has both themes, of course

How do you answer your co-religionists when they hear you quote CSL so often. and are surprised at your interest in this decidedly Christian author?

I am forever defending non-Jews and their faiths to my fellow Jews. Defending my interest in Lewis is only relevant to the very tiny number of them who know who he is.



*Rabbi Mayer Schiller*

Your friend, Rabbi Mark Gottlieb, is also a reader of GKC and CSL - are there many Orthodox Jewish scholars who share these same interests?

I know of a small number. Professor Shalom Camry at YU and Rabbi Aaron Lichtenstein, head of Yeshivat Gush Etzion in Israel, come to mind. There are individuals I've



met over the years who've told me how much they've enjoyed Lewis. Dr. Yitzchak Schechter, also of YU, is a Lewis devotee. Usually it's *The Screwtape Letters* that is most popular. Over the years I've introduced a few of my students to Lewis. You have to remember that among the ultra-Orthodox there is little outside reading and very poor English language skills. As for the Modern Orthodox, most of them pursue their education, as most folks do today, as a functionalist means to get to a lucrative career. Anything other than popular fiction is very rare among them.

**As you know, Joy Davidman, Lewis' wife came from a liberal Jewish background not unlike your own. However, her path was towards atheism and Communism. Lewis helped her to find God. How did Lewis help you to find Orthodoxy or did Orthodoxy help you to find Lewis?**

I was Orthodox for many years before I read Lewis. I think that my Orthodoxy allowed me to grasp where he was coming from but I suspect that, since I was always taken by traditionalist themes, I'd have liked Narnia and the space trilogy anyway.

**You have spent many years teaching young people. How have you used CSL in the classroom?**

Not in a formal sense. I've recommended *Screwtape*, *The Great Divorce* and other works many times when I thought they might be appreciated.

**How do you answer negative responses from your students and/or their parents when you speak so highly of a Christian apologist?**

In my thirty-one years of teaching this has only happened once. And it was last week, actually! I'd recommended *Screwtape* to a boy and his father called me screaming hysterically and threatening me. You can't please all the people all the time.

Rabbi Gottlieb wanted to take a group of students to a theatrical presentation of *Screwtape* after they had read the book. He met with such opposition that he dropped the entire project.

**In your recommended readings, do you emphasize Lewis' fiction such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, his science fiction books, and/or his literary writings as opposed to his books specifically on Christian apologetics?**

All of the above, with *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* being my Narnia favorite and *That Hideous Strength* being my choice among the space novels.

**Would you regard books such as *Mere Christianity* to be a danger to Orthodox Jewish believers?**

Any work that offers an alternative world view to one's faith may be a danger. It depends on the maturity and knowledge of the reader.

**How do books such as *The Problem of Pain* and *Miracles* fit into Orthodox Jewish beliefs?**

Very well, I believe, almost perfectly. The fault I find in them is that they are a bit too systematic. Too Thomistic and High Church. What Lewis lacks is what we find in Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Mauriac, the early Graham Greene; the sense that salvation is not so tidy and the real world often seemingly hopeless and absurd. The Christian literary journal *Image* gets this very well. But, I guess *A Grief Observed* is a bit of an antidote to this trend.

**Many of the members of The New York C. S. Lewis Society discovered the Society through a letter written by Henry Noel and printed in *National Review* (1969) through the efforts of Linda Bridges. In your book, *The (Guilty) Conscience of a Conservative*, you reference *National Review* extensively. What part, if any, did the magazine play in your interest in C. S. Lewis?**

Ah, *National Review*! That died many years ago, now, didn't it? What a sad odyssey, from a robust, rigorous, courageous defender of our civilization, culture, and faith to a pathetic, pale and subservient imitation of *Commentary*. But I get carried away. *National Review* and the conservative movement of the late '50s and early 60s had a great influence on me, in general, and laid the foundation in many ways for my return to religion at age twelve. Lewis, in particular, though, came later, through the "chance" encounter I mentioned before. Incidentally, some may find it significant that the Ranger game, after which I discovered Lewis in the bookstore, was on Christmas eve. (The Rangers won 5 - 0, by the way, with Eddie Giacomini in goal.)

**In *The (Guilty) Conscience of a Conservative* (which you dedicated to L. Brent Bozell and the editors of *Triumph* magazine - a now defunct Orthodox Catholic magazine), you wrote: "The average Catholic,**



Protestant, or Jew does not care a fig about 'reforming' or 'updating' his faith. . . .the field is open for serious conservatives to seize the hour and capitalize on public dissatisfaction with liberal religion. Unfortunately, up to the present the layman has only known a liberal clergy without faith and a conservative clergy without compassion." How can C. S. Lewis provide an answer to all religions who are now trying to revitalize an interest in faith, hope and charity?

Lewis is orthodox. He is free of the liberalism and relativism that once dominated us and certainly free of the maniacal acceptance today of moral depravity, as manifested in infanticide and perversion. He is full of joy, zest and kindness. And throughout it all he is humble and accessible. I don't think the suicide of the west can be slowed down or averted anymore but Lewis can give many of us the happiness and conviction to survive as individuals, families and communities in the present and future catacombs.

What do you like best about C.S. Lewis and what do you like least?

The best thing about Lewis to me is his humility, both the teaching of it and, when we study his life, the way he put it into practice as well. *The Great Divorce* brings this home, until we are open to our faults and willing to abandon our self absorption and self pity we cannot approach God.

Like the least? Lewis' universe is a bit too simple. The bad guys are totally bad and the good guys are totally good. Life isn't that simple. Gosh, even Father Brown knew that!

Plus, I wonder often why he didn't go over to Rome. Of course, Vatican II could turn anyone off but Lewis lived most of his life when Rome was still healthy. However,

having been to Belfast on the 12th of July and seen the celebrations there, it is easy to understand how difficult it must have been for someone who heard flute bands playing "The Sash" throughout his youth to abandon the defense of ol' Derry's Walls.

You have written that one of your ambitions is to write a book to help improve the Orthodox Jewish relationship with the non-Jewish world. Do you feel that C. S. Lewis will provide a link to the realization of your very noble ambition?

Certainly, by giving me the courage to see the project through. Having read Lewis and Chesterton and studied their lives I know how truly beautiful good Christians can be. I wish that every Jew might realize this simple fact. I've spoken to and known pious Christians from Ulster and Afrikaner "Prods" to SSPX and sedavacapist Catholics. I've received warm welcomes ranging from Rev. Ian Paisley to Bishop Richard Williamson and I know that hatred of Jews simply does not exist in those circles. It's time that Orthodox Jews reciprocated the sentiments.

One of your stated goals is to write an autobiography. How is this progressing and when can we hope to see it in print?

Nothing yet. Maybe soon

On a lighter note - How is the hockey team doing? It was fascinating to see you gliding across the ice as their coach on the feature that PBS did on you several years ago.

In 1995, when we won our sixth straight championship, I retired from coaching, having realized my dreams. It was a delicious time in my life, thank God.

## CSL Quotation

"I might agree that the Allies are partly to blame, but nothing can fully excuse the iniquity of Hitler's persecution of the Jews, or the absurdity of his theatrical position. Did you see that he said 'The Jews have *made no contribution to human culture* and in crushing them I am doing the *will of the Lord.*' Now as the whole idea of the 'Will of the Lord' is precisely what the world owes to the Jews, the blaspheming tyrant has just fixed his absurdity for all to see in a single sentence, and has shown he is as contemptible for his stupidity as he is detestable for his cruelty."

Letter to Arthur Greeves, Nov. 5, 1933, *Collected Letters, Vol. II (1931-1949)*, p. 128.