



Text Study

in Commemoration of the Twenty-Fifth Yahrzeit of **RABBI ALEXANDER M. SCHINDLER**

President of the Union for Reform Judaism
from 1973 to 1996

“No monuments need to be put for the righteous;
their words are their monuments.”

—*B'reishit Rabbah* 82:10

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Reform Judaism Publishing, a division of CCAR Press
American Jewish Archives, a division of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion
Central Conference of American Rabbis • Union for Reform Judaism

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Introduction

IN HONOR of the twenty-fifth *yahrzeit* (anniversary of one's passing) of Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, who died on November 15, 2000, 17 Cheshvan 5761, we crafted this special text study guide. It is composed from primary sources at the [Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler Digital Collection housed at the American Jewish Archives](#), selected excerpts from *Above All, We Are Jews: A Biography of Rabbi Alexander Schindler* by Michael A. Meyer (CCAR Press, 2025), and selected excerpts from *The Jewish Condition: Essays on Contemporary Judaism Honoring Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler*, edited by Alexander M. Schindler and Aron Hirt-Manheimer (URJ Press, 1995). This guide has been designed to engage participants with the rich history and evolving legacy of Rabbi Schindler and his impact on Reform Judaism; inspire reflection on Rabbi Alexander Schindler's enduring contributions to Reform Judaism in the areas of the synagogue, youth and education, domestic and global social justice issues, Israel, and *k'lal Yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood); and engage URJ congregations in meaningful, historically grounded discussions that explore the past, present, and future of the Reform Movement. We invite members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) and congregations of the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) to incorporate this study guide into their Shabbat observance, on Rabbi Schindler's Hebrew or English *yahrzeit*, as a meaningful tribute to his memory. The Hebrew *yahrzeit* is on Saturday, November 8, 2025, and the English *yahrzeit* is on November 15, 2025.

When we originally set out to create this study guide, we thought it would just be a few pages long. However, the more research we did, the more treasures we uncovered—resulting in the much-longer document you see here. That being

said, our expectation is not that communities will study each and every text or topic included in this guide. Instead, **we encourage those leading these sessions to adapt the sources provided to best serve your unique communities.** Some may choose to devote two weeks of their congregation's weekly Torah study to the sources in this guide; others might select just a few for a Shabbat evening discussion during worship; still others may focus on just one or two topics that will pique the most interest in their communities.

Regardless of how you choose to engage with this study guide, we hope you and your community will travel a rich path down memory lane, gain insight into the revolutionary leadership of Rabbi Alexander Schindler, and engage in meaningful and visionary discussion in his honor.

Brief Timeline of Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler's Life

1925: Born in Munich, Germany.

1933: His father, Eliezer Schindler, an activist, published Yiddish poet, and well-known thought leader across Eastern Europe, fled Germany just prior to the Nazis' coming to his home to arrest him.

1938: Fled Germany. Arrived at Ellis Island on August 1, 1938. Lived briefly in Washington Heights prior to his family establishing a chicken farm and kosher bed-and-breakfast in Lakewood, New Jersey.

1944: Served in the US military with the Ski Troops of the Tenth Mountain Division in Italy, earning a Purple Heart for wounds and a Bronze Star for bravery. Schindler estimated that twenty to twenty-five members of his family perished in the Holocaust.

1949: Graduated from City College of New York.

1953: Ordained by the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

1954: Served as assistant rabbi at Temple Emanuel in Worcester, Massachusetts.

1956: Married Rhea Rosenblum, followed by the births of Elisa (1957), Debby (1959), Josh (1963), and Judy and Jonathan (1966).

1959: Served as executive director of the New England Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC, now known as the Union for Reform Judaism, or URJ).

1963: Served as director of education of the Commission of Jewish Education of the UAHC and the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

1967: Appointed as vice president of the UAHC.

1973: Inducted as president of the UAHC.



1976–78: Served as chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, the first Reform Jewish leader to be elected to this position.

1996: Retired from the UAHC.

2000: Died at the age of seventy-five of a heart attack in his family home in Westport, Connecticut.

Background Information

Some of the topics included in this study guide are evergreen, in that their importance and necessity continue. These include the role of the synagogue, the emphasis placed on youth and education, and the central role of outreach in the Reform Movement—though of course current events impact our understanding of these topics. The other topics—including the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel, immigration and welcoming the stranger, the relationship between the Black and Jewish communities, LGBTQ+ inclusion and the AIDS pandemic—have changed significantly over the past few decades or have recently had the spotlight shone on them in new and challenging ways. As you prepare to lead these study sessions, we encourage you to frame the era of Schindler’s leadership and lifetime. He led during a time when a woman’s right to abortion was newly guaranteed by the Supreme Court (*Roe v. Wade* was in 1973); when the fight for gay rights was just beginning (the first Pride March was held in 1970, on the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall Riots) and when AIDS was rampant, misunderstood, ignored by politicians, and vilified; when participation in NFTY was at its highest; and when the first generation of women rabbis were being ordained (Rabbi Sally Priesand became the first female rabbi ordained in America in 1972). There is no doubt that his lifetime was one of significant political and social change—and those changes and upheaval have continued. It is important to provide historical context to much of his language, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ inclusion, some of which now reads as outdated and possibly offensive. In all of these areas, Schindler was ahead of his time, very progressive, and fought significant headwinds within the Reform Movement and the larger American Jewish movement. Much of the historical background for all the topics included in this study guide can be found in Michael A. Meyer’s book *Above All, We Are Jews: A Biography of Rabbi Alexander Schindler* (CCAR Press, 2025), which we encourage you to read before leading a study session. We hope the additional background information below offers additional insight and support.

Youth and Education

During Schindler’s lifetime, the first Reform Jewish day schools started. Even in the early 1970s—when he was vice president of education at the UAHC—Schindler was advocating for such schools to be established. This idea was met with enormous resistance, and in fact the UAHC did not even move to endorse the establishment of Reform Jewish day schools until 1985. More information can be found here: [Day School Movement](#) | [Union for Reform Judaism](#).

On Outreach

Schindler promoted outreach both to intermarried couples and to non-Jews who did not belong to another faith community. While commonplace and even assumed today, Schindler promoted these ideas to a post-Holocaust Jewish community that was still grappling with the decimation of the Jewish community and with rising rates of marriages between people of different faith traditions. This was a time when rabbinic officiation at interfaith marriages was controversial, when finding a rabbi to officiate could be challenging, when families still “sat shivah” for children who married non-Jews, and when the American Jewish community was in a state of fear about the declining commitment of Jews to marry other Jews. Outreach was met with surprise and pushback, and Schindler spoke about its need for many years before it was made an official department of the UAHC.

Social Justice

The Relationship Between the Black and Jewish Communities

In 1987, when Schindler gave the speech quoted in this study guide, there was great tumult between the Black and Jewish communities. This era was the beginning of the fracturing of what had been believed to be a very close connection between the Jewish community and the Black community. It started with the “Andrew Young Affair.” Andrew Young was the first Black person to serve as the US ambassador to the United Nations, during President Carter’s administration. In this capacity, he had a clandestine meeting with representatives from the PLO; when newspapers published reports about this meeting, Young was fired (likely as a scapegoat to protect the Carter administration), and many in the Black community blamed Jews for that result. In addition, when Menachem Begin was elected prime minister of Israel, many leaders of the Black community, including Jesse Jackson, spoke out against him, and that caused a lot of upset in the Jewish community. There was also internal squabbling in the Jewish community about the relationship between Black and Jewish communities. Finally, in 1983 there was a big march for Black rights honoring the twentieth anniversary of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream Speech,” which was planned on Shabbat and included a number of anti-Israel groups. Schindler worked with Coretta Scott King and Walter Fauntroy to address those issues, and in the end, Schindler gave a speech at the conclusion of the march, which coincided with the end of Shabbat. A great deal of media attention was placed on the changing nature of the relationship between the two communities.

On Women’s Equality

Rabbi Schindler died in the year 2000, before widespread awareness of gender fluidity reached his consciousness. We’ve provided an opportunity for you to expand the discussion to include gender fluidity through the question “If Rabbi Schindler had lived into the twenty-first century, when awareness of and sensitivity to gender fluidity have become more widespread, what further changes might he have envisioned for inclusiveness in Jewish life?” You might also wish to discuss specific aspects of Jewish life that have tended to be understood in terms of gender, such as

your congregation's membership categories, the binary language that is often used on forms such as school registration forms, ritual questions such as how people are called up to the Torah, or the gender binary in Hebrew and in our prayer liturgy, for example.

On Israel

The 1977 Israeli elections shocked the world with their results. It was the first time in Israeli political history that the right wing, led by Likud, won the majority of votes in the Knesset. Menachem Begin, the newly appointed prime minister, was active in Likud politics but had previously led the Irgun—a Jewish paramilitary organization that opposed British presence and oversight in the region before the establishment of the State of Israel and was responsible for the 1946 bombing at the King David Hotel. Many Americans, Jewish and otherwise, opposed his leadership and called him a terrorist. It is widely believed that the swing toward the right wing in the 1977 election was a reaction to what was viewed as the failures of the left-wing Labor/Avodah Party in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The American Jewish community's leadership worried that the right-wing turn toward Israeli politics would alienate American Jews from their connection to Israel. One of the American Jewish organizations that spoke against Begin's and Likud's policies was Breira, which was established in the mid-1970s. It advocated for a change in Israeli policy toward the Palestinians, specifically calling for territorial compromise in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as a means to achieve a lasting peace. This appears to be the first time an organized group of Jews actively spoke out against Israeli governmental policy—though of course it was not the last. All of this background makes Rabbi Schindler's intimate relationship with Prime Minister Begin even more surprising.

TEXT STUDY

in Commemoration of the Twenty-Fifth Yartzheit of Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler

The Synagogue

NOW HOW does religion fare in all this? Does it have a place in the constellation of contemporary life and thought? Or has convulsive change rendered religion obsolete?

[Our] *need* for faith has certainly not lessened. If anything, change has deepened it. When a [hu]man stands on shifting ground, whirlwinds rage about, [one] requires this above all: bearings, direction, thrust. . . . Religion provides precisely such rootage, this needed sense of continuity—not just with its ideas and ideals but with its rituals as well. They give us added anchorage, another means to orient ourselves in space and time. (“Image of a Likely Tomorrow: Some Thoughts Concerning the Future of the UAHC and the Synagogue,” 1971; [AJArchives](#))

THE SYNAGOGUE quite simply is the heartland, the vital center of Judaism. All other Jewish institutions mobilize and utilize Jews in behalf of the community, only the synagogue creates Jews. It is in the synagogue where the individual soul and the community are joined. It is in the synagogue where modernity and eternity cross-fertilize, where the seeds of the Jewish future are sown. It is the synagogue where the covenant is recreated and renewed in every generation. (Congregation Ohabei Shalom’s 150th Anniversary, Brookline, Massachusetts, 1992; [AJArchives](#))

OUR LIVES are a wilderness, uncharted and unpredictable—untimely deaths, unexpected blows, unsuitable matches, unfulfilled dreams.

And yet, by gathering our heartaches into a house of worship, we find something transformative happening—our sorrows become windows of compassion.

Paths through the wilderness, hewed and marked by past generations, give us our bearings. Patterns of meaning and significance emerge. We are moved from self-pity to love. Our individual heartbeats merge with the pulse of all humankind. Suddenly we no longer tremble like an uprooted reed.

The synagogue is the regenerative soil of Jewish life. Just beneath its statuesque surface, our roots densely intertwine.

Like giant redwoods, standing shoulder to shoulder in ever shrinking forests, we Jews share a reality of interdependence, holding one another up.

Nowhere is this reality more strikingly revealed than in our congregations, our houses of gathering. Bialik called the synagogue “the mystic fount . . . the treasure of our soul.” The Talmud called it the place “where heaven and earth kiss,” the Zohar: “an earthly copy of the heavenly original.” I simply call it home. (URJ Biennial Address in Atlanta, 1996; [AJArchives](#))

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did Rabbi Alexander Schindler believe about the purpose of religion and the synagogue? Has his vision withstood the test of time?
2. Rabbi Schindler gave his speech “Image of a Likely Tomorrow” in January 1971. What do you think was going on in 1970 that led Rabbi Schindler to reflect on the “shifting ground” of this time? Do you see any echoes of that feeling today? How can Reform Judaism meet today’s challenges?
3. Rabbi Schindler said that for him the synagogue is “home.” What do you want your synagogue to be?

Youth and Education

MANY of our young people are religious. But their moral and spiritual aspirations are suffused with a universalism which challenges the particularism of our beliefs. They want to know not so much why they should be religious but why they should be Jewish and what they must do to live as Jews.

Such questions arise particularly in the realm of Judaism’s ethical commands. The call of secular radicalism is powerful and persuasive. Our young people hear that call and understand it fully. They understand why they should be just and merciful and humble in their ways, but they do not understand why they must be Jews to be so—not only as a matter of . . . loyalty to a tradition because it is a tradition, but in order to preserve for themselves and to preserve for others those values which we insist on designating characteristically Jewish. (“Image of a Likely Tomorrow: Some Thoughts Concerning the Future of the UAHC and the Synagogue,” 1971; [AJArchives](#))

OUR VITALITY [as a religious community] is assured by a massive stone in our institutional altar, the North American Federation of Temple Youth. NFTY was founded during the last week in December 1939 and quickly grew to become a most creative affiliate. Tens of thousands of our young people have participated in its activities, and their lives have been transformed by the experience.

Wherever I go on this continent of ours I find NFTY alumni. They are our rabbis and cantors and educators and administrators. They are the lay leaders of our congregations and their most devoted members. And whenever they speak of their NFTY years, a dreamlike, wistful gleam illuminates their faces.

NFTY has spawned many programs of great worth: junior youth groups and activities for its alumni on campus; the Eisendrath International Student Exchange program; Bible tours and archaeological digs in Israel; the NFTY Mitzvah Corps, bringing religious action to life in Puerto Rico and Mexico and to the ghettos of America. A group of NFTY song and dance leaders even toured Russia this past summer, to help rekindle the Jewish spark among Soviet Jews.

To this day, the Reform movement sends more teenagers on summer programs to Israel than does any other youth movement in the world. Indeed, without NFTY, there would be no Kibbutz Yahel and Lotan and no Mitzpe Har Halutz in

the Galilee; these very settlements lend primary credibility to Israel's Progressive Movement.

Most notable of all, NFTY brought the Union's camp program into being, and it remains the most effective vehicle for the transmission of Judaism at our command. By a magic all their own, our camps make Judaism come to life in the hearts of our children. (State of the Union Message, New Orleans, Louisiana, November 1989; [AJArchives](#))

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rabbi Schindler pointed out that many of our young people are drawn to fulfill Judaism's ethical mitzvot not because they are Jewish obligations, but because they recognize the universal goodness of fulfilling them. In what ways should it matter to us whether young Jews see their ethical obligations through Jewish lenses?
2. In 1989, Rabbi Schindler noted that many of the leaders of Reform Judaism whom he met were people who benefitted from the inspiring youth programs made available through the Reform Movement. In recent years, numbers of applicants to our rabbinic, cantorial, and Jewish education programs have declined. How can we adapt our youth programs at the local, regional, and national levels to regenerate passion for Jewish life and leadership?
3. "By a magic all their own, our camps make Judaism come to life in the hearts of our children." This is a powerful statement. What is it about our URJ camps that gives the campers so much enthusiasm for Jewish life? How can we harness that energy for our community's young people all year long?

Outreach

I BELIEVE that the time has come for the Reform movement—and others, if they are so disposed—to launch a carefully conceived Outreach program aimed at all Americans who are unchurched and who are seeking religious meaning.

It would be easy to tip-toe here, to use obfuscatory language and be satisfied to hint at my purpose. But I will not. Unabashedly and urgently, I propose that we resume our vocation as champions of Judaism, that we move from passive acceptance to affirmative action. . . .

Let us establish information centers in many places, well-publicized courses in our synagogues, and the development of suitable publications to service these facilities and purposes. In short, I propose that we respond openly and positively to those God-seekers whose search leads them to our door, who voluntarily ask for our knowledge. ("Outreach: A Case for a Missionary Judaism," address of Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler to the UAHC Board of Trustees, December 2, 1978; [AJArchives](#))

JUDAISM is a missionary religion in the full sense of the word. As long as the choice was ours, we have sought and still do seek and welcome converts to our faith. This affirmation may come as a surprise to many, for in recent years we have had no

organized missionary religion and as a result the average Jew supposes that [while] Judaism is not hostile, [it] is at least indifferent to the reception of converts. This is an erroneous impression. . . .

The record of history is unmistakable, and the mandate of our religion is crystal clear. Judaism enjoins us to carry the teachings of our faith like a light unto the nations, and at all times our message has found willing, eager ears. There is no reason why, living in a land of freedom, we should not shake off an adverse attitude toward proselytism foisted upon us by oppressive rulers in hostile lands. We do have a message which can win the hearts and minds of modern [people], and we ought not to be bashful in telling the world about it. (“Do We Seek Converts? Judaism: A Missionary Religion” (undated); Alexander M. Schindler Collection; [AJArchives](#))

PEOPLE credit me for conceiving and crystallizing the idea of “outreach.” In fact, Judaism had such a program eons before I came on the scene. *Lech-Lecha* states it quite clearly, as God reaches out to Abraham and bonds him to the covenant through the ritual of circumcision. “Walk in my way,” says God, “and be blameless.” *That* was Judaism’s original outreach program. It consisted of exemplary moral conduct that might provoke others to say: “If this is how they are, this is something I covet and want to be.” (State of the Union Message, Chicago, Illinois, November 1987; [AJArchives](#))

THE REFORM movement is addressing intermarriage through its “Outreach” program. . . . It is an effort to welcome intermarried families into the synagogue. We offer their children religious training and provide ways for non-Jewish spouses to take part in the life of the congregation and create a Jewish atmosphere in the home. . . .

Like it or not, intermarriage is a fact of life. Efforts to proscribe intermarriage . . . have not worked. As you observed, Jewish identity on the North American continent is no longer externally imposed by the larger society. Judaism today must be actively chosen, not only by converts—Jews by choice—but also by Jews by birth, who must discover and develop new ties that bind them to the faith of their ancestors. (“Jewish Converts Should Be Cherished,” letter to the editor, *Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 1991; [AJArchives](#))

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In his 1987 State of the Union message, Rabbi Schindler pointed out that Jews have always been in the business of outreach, by practicing exemplary moral conduct and striving to fulfill the mitzvah of being a “light unto the nations.” However, in his address to the UAHC Board of Trustees, he urged a much more active program of reaching out to the “unchurched” and seeking converts to Judaism. How do you feel today about the idea of outreach? Are there times when it is better not to reach out in the missionary sense?
2. What did Rabbi Schindler mean by his statement that “Judaism today must be actively chosen, not only by converts—Jews by choice—but also by Jews by birth”? Does this ring true for you? What might happen if Jews who are born Jewish do not actively make Jewishly informed choices?

Social Justice

The Relationship Between the Black Community and the Jewish Community

BLACKS AND JEWS are kindred in spirit. Our commonalities exceed our differences by far, especially when it comes to our aspirations.

We share a vision of a just, generous, and open society. We both recoil against the stench of bigotry. We both wish to see government help to solve social inequity. We vote more alike than do any other racial or religious groups. . . . Ours are the two American peoples who are committed to the idea of change in our country, who see the American dream not in the valley of the status quo but on Martin Luther King's mountaintop.

Only our common enemies, the enemies of freedom, rejoice when we square off against each other. Too much was lost during the era of our face-off! No longer do we stand on the ground of a socially progressive era. Indeed the ground on which we have stood in the past is crumbling beneath us.

. . . And we Jews and we blacks stand frozen in a wrestler's clench when we should be surging forward like two running backs on the same team. Aye, we Jews and we blacks sit like a couple of Jonahs in the belly of a whale when we should be doing God's work together, calling great cities—nay, a great nation—to repentance. (Centennial Address, Central State University, February 3, 1987; *The Jewish Condition*, 51)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rabbi Schindler wrote this address at a time when previously strong connections between the Jewish and Black communities were beginning to come apart. How has the relationship between these two communities changed since then? What do you think led to these changes? What can be done to strengthen our partnership?
2. A 2020 [article](#) published in *eJewishPhilanthropy* stated that Jews of color represent approximately 12 percent of the Jewish population in America. Yolanda Savage-Narva, the Religious Action Center's vice president of racial equity, diversity, and inclusion, refers to this more recent [study](#), and suggests that Jews of color represent approximately 15–20 percent of the Jewish population in America. We need to recognize that when we speak of Black and Jewish communities, there are many among us who identify as both. How does racial diversity enrich our Jewish community?

Immigration and Welcoming the Stranger

THERE IS ONE more debt which we must discharge because our [Reform Jewish] lot has fallen on such pleasant places, and that is the guardianship of American democracy, and especially of its readiness to be a sanctuary for all those who are still in bondage, the many who are still “tired and poor and yearning to breathe free. . . .”

Aye, we Jews have a special duty to hold open the American door of refuge—to remind America of the precious gem-in-the-rough lying within each immigrant,

of the aspiring spirit behind each dirtied face, of the payback, the yield that we as a nation have invariably reaped from the overflowing gratitude of rescued hearts.

The Harvard historian Oscar Handlin once wrote: “There was a time when I thought to write a history of immigrants of America. . . . Then I discovered that the immigrants *were* American history.” Aye, the immigrants *are* American history. The Puritan immigrants who landed at Plymouth Rock—they are the founding fathers and mothers of American history—but so are the Africans who landed in shackles in the Southern ports; and so are the Chinese who washed sweat from American collars on the West Coast; and so are the Norwegians who homesteaded in the face of Midwestern blizzards; and so are the Mexicans who wade across the Rio Grande even today to help gather the harvest in the steamy Southwest. They are *all* founding fathers and mothers of American history, for it is their labors, their suffering, their dreams, and their bodies that activate and accelerate the very process of America.

These then are our tasks of guardianship as American Jews: to secure the safety of all Jews, to internalize and nourish our faith, and to make certain that America will continue to be a haven for the world’s oppressed. (Speech at NFTY Convention in 1993 at Ellis Island, New York; [AJArchives](#))

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. These words were spoken on Ellis Island, where Rabbi Schindler had arrived, fifty-five years earlier, as a twelve-year-old refugee on August 1, 1938. If these words were spoken from your congregational bimah today, how would they be received? What has changed?
2. Why is “guardianship of American democracy” specifically a Jewish responsibility, in Rabbi Schindler’s opinion? Do you agree?
3. This speech was delivered at the NFTY Convention in 1993. The 2015 hit musical play *Hamilton* also sought to draw attention to the fact that America was built by immigrants by having all the characters played by a racially and culturally diverse cast of actors. This garnered very mixed reactions. Why does our country still struggle so deeply with xenophobia and multiculturalism?

Women’s Equality

IT IS NOT true that the ordination and investiture of women is a total rupture with the Jewish past, that women’s liberation has no roots whatsoever in the patriarchal, hierarchical system of the Jewish tradition. The reality of Judaism is rather more complex, period. It offers many contradictions.

Nevertheless, even at its best, tradition speaks of women largely in relation to men, rarely in relation to God, more rarely in relation to self or to other women. Even at its best, tradition speaks *about* women, only occasionally *to* women, and, until recently, never *bekol ishah*, in the voices of women.

“Now for the first time,” so Rachel Adler reminds us, “opportunities have arisen for women to join in the conversation.” Herein lies the transformative impact of our twenty-year-old revelation on Jewish life: The voices of women are heard in the synagogue; they have been included in the conversation.

What, more precisely, has this “joining in the conversation” meant for Judaism?

Exclusion has been terminated. Inclusiveness has been established as the new order of Jewish life. It permits the female experience of life-giving and motherhood to be part of synagogue life and thus allows the image of our God as nurturing Mother to find enthronement in our minds.

Perhaps most important of all, by “joining in the conversation,” our women rabbis, cantors and educators have also enlarged our understanding of Judaism. They bring insights unique to women in their approach to our classical texts, and, thereby, they enable us to grasp a more complete, a more fully authentic Judaism. (Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, “Celebrating Twenty Years of Women in the Rabbinates,” Los Angeles, California, June 8, 1993; *The Jewish Condition*, 229)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Celebrating twenty years of women in the rabbinate in 1993, Rabbi Schindler noted that the voices of women rabbis, cantors, and educators have led to “a more complete, a more fully authentic Judaism” for us all. How has Jewish life shifted, not just in its leadership, but in its home and family practice, in the post-feminist era? How do you foresee this changing balance continuing to evolve?
2. If Rabbi Schindler had lived into the twenty-first century, when awareness of and sensitivity to gender fluidity have become more widespread, what further changes might he have envisioned for inclusiveness in Jewish life?

LGBTQ+ Inclusion and the AIDS Pandemic

THE CHIEF ISSUE in the gay community had become the plague of AIDS. What was of particular concern to Schindler about this devastating disease, beyond the dreadful effect on its victims, was what he called the “secondary scourge,” a phenomenon “as deadly as the primary affliction: a wave of hysteria in a public which does not truly understand the disease and is therefore blinded by fear and prejudice.” Reflecting his own shift in attitude, Schindler believed that only showing compassion for AIDS victims was an insufficient reaction; beyond compassion lay the more adequate act of “identification.” Addressing a Jewish Community Service in Support of People with AIDS, Schindler brought the subject into the realm both of Jewish history and of his own biography: “We who were Marranos in Madrid, who clung to the closet of assimilation and conversion in order to live without molestation, we cannot deny the demand for gay and lesbian visibility.” He admitted that resolving the issue for himself had not been easy. He had had “to wrestle with demons in the depths of my own being, demons I never thought were there.” However, he explained that he now felt able to fully identify with AIDS victims, not least because he too had been stricken with the fear of death. In his youth, he noted, he had been a refugee from Hitler’s Germany and more recently a heart patient “looking on death’s face.” He was proud that the Union had acted in response to the AIDS crisis. It created a national committee to deal with the issue and distributed a packet of educational materials to combat misinformation for rabbis and laypersons in UAHC congregations. Schindler claimed that the Union was the only national Jewish organization that was addressing the issue. Speaking to his colleagues at the centennial celebration of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, he challenged them—and himself—to “once and for all declare

ourselves rabbis for *all* Jews, at every moment of life, not only the heterosexual Jews—or for gay Jews, only at their funerals when they die of AIDS.” (Michael A. Meyer, *Above All We Are Jews*, 127–28)

And all of this culminated just a few months ago when North America’s Reform rabbinate passed a resolution to give sanction and support to those of our colleagues who choose to officiate at same-gender ceremonies. But, unfortunately, much of this was achieved on a leadership level and has not permeated the grass-roots. If the truth be told, in too many of our mainstream congregations, we have not extended our embrace to include gays and lesbian Jews. We have not acknowledged their presence in the midst of our synagogues. We have not dispelled the myth of the “corrupting” homosexual—of the rabbi, teacher, or youth leader who would fashion children in his or her sexual image. And our *balabatim* who voted for this very resolution of which I just spoke a while ago nonetheless cannot overcome their own aversion to same-sex unions, refusing to accept the irrefutable reality that gay and lesbian couples are prepared to pledge their lives to one another and to establish stable and loving Jewish homes.

To be sure, many feel pity for gays and lesbians, and agree, intellectually, that it is a grievous wrong to stigmatize them, to ostracize them, to hold them in disdain. But something more than a grasp of the mind is required. There is a need for a grasp of the heart. Something different from pity is called for. We need, as a community, to cross those boundaries of otherness where compassion gives way to identification. Too many of us have not affirmed that we all are family. We speak of “them” and “us” as if gay men and women were descended from a distant planet. If those who have studied these matters are correct, one-half million of our American fellow Jews are gay. They are our fellow congregants, our friends and committee members—and yes, our leaders, both professional and lay. Whether we know it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, some of these are our sisters and brothers, our daughters and our sons. (Keynote address, World Congress of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Jewish Organizations, twentieth anniversary, 2000; personal files of Rabbi Judy Schindler)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rabbi Schindler’s approach to inclusion of Temple Beth Chayim Chadashim in the UAHC was based on his belief that “beyond compassion lay the more adequate act of ‘identification.’” What impact did this approach have on Jewish communities? In what ways is this impact still felt today?
2. In his Keynote Address to the World Congress of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Jewish Organizations in 2000, Rabbi Schindler bemoaned the fact that mainstream congregations had not yet embraced queer Jews or let go of the myth of the “corrupting homosexual.” How are we doing with this now, twenty-five years later?

Israel

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION QUESTION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE SECTION

- I. What does Rabbi Schindler teach us about balancing the tension between traditional doctrine and the demands of contemporary social justice issues? In what ways did Rabbi Schindler break from traditional Jewish doctrine? Where are those Reform innovations needed today? Which topics would Rabbi Schindler speak to today?

RABBI ALEXANDER SCHINDLER, chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, criticized Israel on Friday night for its concentration on the fund-raising function of American Jewry.

“Some American Jews,” said Schindler, “have the feeling that they are cows to be milked, walked around a bit for some exercise and then let off to pasture.”

Addressing delegates to a convention of the Zionist Organization of America here, Schindler said that “cows have their limitations.

“When I am in trouble, I do not want a cow. I want a man with the capacity for independent thought. Truth is the highest form of support for Israel.”

Given the strong basic support of American Jewry for Israel, it was a healthy, perhaps even required development that there was criticism of Israeli policy. (Malka Rabinowitz, “Israel Treating U.S. Jews like Milk Cows,” *Jerusalem Post*, September 12, 1976; [AJArchives](#))

DEAR MR. RABIN:

There is little one can say at a time like this. . . .

I do want you to know, though, that I am deeply saddened by the events of the past days. My heart goes out to you.

You have every reason to be proud of what you have accomplished. Your services to Israel, the nation and the people, were manifold and largely of inestimable worth. The judgment of history will bear this out. (Letter to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin following Israel’s 1977 elections, April 14, 1977; [AJArchives](#))

DEAR RABBI SCHINDLER,

It was most kind of you to write to me and I wish you to know that I greatly appreciate your expressions of encouragement and support. . . .

Again, my gratitude for your generous remarks and may I add that I have greatly valued our association. (Response from Prime Minister Rabin to Alexander Schindler, April 26, 1977; [AJArchives](#))



I FELT [Begin] to be a man of integrity, moved by the highest ideals of our people, in whose pattern of worths the quest for peace is a predominant design. I sensed his abiding love for the Jewish people, which makes everything else, even the machinery of the State, but an instrument of that people’s will and need. The mystic within me . . . responded to Begin’s mystical love for the Land. But I also felt his respect for the integrity of every Jewish community, not just those communities built on holy soil. (“A Journey to Jerusalem: Reminiscences and Reflections,” November 6, 1978; [AJArchives](#))

NOT EVERY American Jew agrees with every policy of the Israeli government, present or past. The pluralistic nature of our community precludes so homogeneous a reaction. We are not the servants of a particular party. We are not the instruments of any governmental coalition. But we are united by a sacred mission: to secure the safety of Israel. And we are impelled by a common love: an abounding love for the people of Israel. (Address at Mount Scopus, Bublick Prize, Hebrew University, July 1978; [AJArchives](#))

WE UPHOLD the hands of Israel's leadership not only by preserving our unity but also by giving voice—strong, unfettered voice—to our convictions.

There are those in our midst who urge us to keep a low profile, who enjoin us to be heard and seen as little as possible lest we incur the wrath of the mighty. We reject this counsel. . . . No longer will we allow ourselves to be beguiled by the blandishments of those who sit in places of power.

Nor will we be intimidated by them. We will not commit the sin of silence. . . . As Americans we have the right to speak. We have earned that right a thousand fold and more—by giving rich gifts of heart and mind and substance to this land. . . . And so we will speak the truth as we see it. (Remarks of Rabbi Alexander Schindler, Community Meeting with Prime Minister Begin, March 23, 1978; [AJArchives](#))

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did Rabbi Schindler understand the role of North American Jews in supporting Israel?
2. What is the significance of the exchange of letters between Rabbi Schindler and Yitzhak Rabin following the 1977 Israeli election? What does it indicate about the value of Reform Judaism as a movement to the Israeli leadership? What is the status of this relationship today? Would you wish to see this relationship evolve further?
3. Rabbi Schindler had great respect for Prime Minister Menachem Begin, despite their significant political differences and despite concerns voiced by American Jewry about Begin's highly conservative, right-wing new government. By developing a close relationship with Begin, Schindler modeled the value of overcoming political polarization for the sake of common goals. In what way is this lesson still relevant today?

CONCLUDING QUESTION

Imagine a conversation between Rabbi Alexander Schindler and Rabbi Rick Jacobs (the current president of the Union for Reform Judaism) in which they each discuss and compare the issues that have been their most pressing priorities during their time as president of the UAHC/URJ. What topics would they each highlight? Which areas of concern would they share/not share? How do you think that conversation would go?