

Congregation Agudath Israel
Caldwell, NJ.

As we mark the occasion of Rabbi Dr. Alan Silverstein's retirement after over four decades in the congregational pulpit, we have reason to celebrate one of the truly outstanding rabbis and communal leaders of late 20th and early 21st century Jewry and Judaism. A rabbi who built his congregation into one of the most vibrant within Conservative Judaism, a scholar who specialized in research of Reform Judaism in America, and a communal leader whose wise counsel was sought by leaders throughout the community, Rabbi Silverstein clearly has been our "Man for All Seasons". Let us dwell upon and celebrate these three Alan Silversteins.

Perhaps his greatest strength was in congregational programming. Rabbi Silverstein knew how to engage lay leadership in planning creative and memorable programs that enriched Jewish life for all ages. His carefully prepared sermons were models of clarity and organization validating the Judaic convictions of congregants while challenging them to grow and become more serious in Jewish observance and learning as both "head and heart" Jews. Linking up with other critical Jewish institutions-Solomon Schechter Day School, Camp Ramah, JTS, and local JCCs. Rabbi Silverstein encouraged congregants to deepen their Jewish experiences and communal involvements while building a stronger Jewish community in Essex County, NJ. In turn the congregation spawned key leaders who devoted their volunteer and professional talents to the enrichment of Jewish life.

From his earliest days Rabbi Silverstein pursued his interests in history, particularly American Jewish history. His senior thesis at Cornell focused on American Jewry and the 1956 Suez War. He persevered in these studies at JTS, Columbia, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and then again at JTS earning over a full decade's time both rabbinical ordination and a Ph.D in Jewish history. His doctoral thesis on the growth of Reform Judaism in America was most highly regarded and under the careful tutelage of Prof. Jonathan Sarna, dean of American Jewish historians was published by Brandeis University Press in its highly acclaimed series on the American Jewish experience. Decades later it remains a critical work in the field and essential reading for all interested in Reform Judaism's growth as well as challenges.

Last, Rabbi Silverstein has been an active player in Jewish communal life. His wise counsel is eagerly sought by Jewish organizations including Jewish federations, rabbinical organizations, JCCs and national defense agencies. He was elected to numerous leadership posts, including the Rabbinical Assembly and the Masorti Foundation and was a finalist for the position of Chancellor of JTS. During my decades with the American Jewish Committee, I often turned to Alan to address our regional and national meetings, serve on panels exploring critical challenges for the community, participate in our internal and external deliberations, and provide wise counsel at critical moments. Particularly challenging was the vexing issue of mixed marriage, which remains unresolved and controversial after the release of the recent Pew 2020 study of American Jewry.. On Public Television's acclaimed Macneil-Lehrer Report, Rabbi Silverstein expressed the courageous and controversial position that his experiences with outreach to mixed marrieds, while successful in strengthening connections to Jewish life, especially when

conversion to Judaism ensued, had persuaded him that encouraging endogamy and prevention must remain the core values of the community. In turn Rabbi Silverstein authored two volumes as handbooks on the subject encouraging singles to decide to marry within the faith and to retain their connections to Judaism if a mixed marriage had occurred. It was my personal privilege to review both these volumes within the Jewish media and to coauthor with Alan opened pieces on securing future Jewish continuity in the U.S., countering post-Zionist currents within modern Israel, and nurturing religious pluralism within both Israel and the American Jewish community.

All these achievements have defined Rabbi Silverstein as public man. But the private man, devoted son, spouse, father, and grandfather constitutes an even greater privilege to know, one my wife and I have enjoyed for nearly half a century since we were both newlyweds living in proximity on Manhattan's Upper West Side. A longtime friend of Alan's, now unfortunately no longer with us, once remarked to me, "I have known Alan for so many years yet never saw him even once become angered". A man of enormous patience, able to relate both to those with whom he agreed and with those he disagreed, able to give criticism when warranted and able to withhold it when not constructive, Alan has served as wise friend and counselor to so many in venues ranging from the comforts of his home, to the boardrooms of the community and its institutions, to the pleasures of the basketball court, even playing, albeit sparingly, for Cornell's team in the late 1960s. When the son of close friends was killed tragically in one of Israel's all too many wars some decades back, he spared no effort not only to fly immediately to Israel and officiate at the funeral and shiva but also brought his own family with him to provide whatever comfort one could at such an impossible time. For decades my wife and I would meet halfway between Caldwell and Riverdale with Alan and Rita on Saturday evenings to share good fellowship and food, commiserate when necessary, and seek counsel when appropriate.

Perhaps the term is overused, but Rabbi Silverstein is truly a "mentsch's mentsch". His gentle hand in the rabbinate, his brilliance as a scholar and public intellectual, his indefatigable readiness to go anywhere anytime he can be of assistance to others, and his level-headed counsel within Jewish leadership circles truly have made him a national treasure. His leadership will be sorely missed; his friendship even more. He and his beloved Rita have accomplished so much together in which they may take pride. And Congregation Agudath Israel can be justly proud of its rabbi for four decades whom they enabled to provide leadership on so many and diverse fronts.

Steven Bayme recently retired after four decades from the American Jewish Committee where he served as National Director of Contemporary Jewish Life.