Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool: Sephardic Visionary and Activist

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Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool (May 16, 1885-December 1, 1970) was the foremost Sephardic rabbi in the United States during the middle decades of the 20th century. Born and raised in London, he came to New York in 1907 to become assistant rabbi to his relative, Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, at the historic Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. Dr. Pool was associated with Shearith Israel for the duration of his life, except for three years that he spent in the land of Israel 1919-1922. In 1917 he married Tamar Hirshenson; they had two children, Ithiel and Naomi. [1]

His childhood spiritual home was the Mildmay Park Synagogue, a branch of the Bevis Marks Synagogue. The de Sola family traced itself back to Sephardim of medieval Spain, and included illustrious rabbis and spiritual leaders over the course of the generations. The Pool family had been active in the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue of London, David's father having been a leader in the Mildmay Park Synagogue and his grandfather having served as President of the Bevis Marks Synagogue.

David Pool graduated from University College of the University of London with first class honors in classics and humanities. He pursued rabbinic studies at Jews College. He later attended the Rabbinic Seminary in Berlin as well as earning a Ph.D. summa cum laude from Heidelberg University. His doctoral dissertation, The Kaddish, was published in 1908.

Upon his arrival in New York, he not only served his congregation but became active in the wider community. He was an outspoken activist on behalf of the newly arriving Sephardic immigrants from Turkey, the Balkans, Greece and Syria. He was elected President of the New York Board of Rabbis in 1916. He was field organizer and director of army camp work

for the Jewish Welfare Board (1917-18). In 1920-21, he was regional director for Palestine and Syria on behalf of the Joint Distribution Committee. During 1938-1940, he was President of the Synagogue Council of America; in 1955 he was elected President of the American Jewish Historical Society. He was a member of the National Youth Administration under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. During World War II, he worked with the Jewish Welfare Board in providing chaplaincy services to Jewish military personnel.

Aside from his communal involvements, Dr. Pool was a prolific author. He translated and edited the Sephardic Prayer Books for the Union of Sephardic Congregations (which he founded in 1928.) He translated and edited the Ashkenazic Prayer Book under the auspices of the Rabbinical Council of America. He published books and articles on various facets of Jewish history, philosophy and religious outlook. If ever the American Jewish community could boast of an extraordinary rabbi who combined the talents of a congregational rabbi, the social activism of a genuine idealist, the eloquent advocacy of a Zionist partisan and the calm, deep writings of a fine scholar—that rabbi was David de Sola Pool. That this rabbi was Orthodox made him more unique. That this rabbi was Sephardic made him absolutely unique for his time and place. When he died in 1970, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency published an obituary (December 3, 1970) appropriately captioned: “Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool, World Leader in Judaism, Dies at 85.”

During the course of his lifetime, Dr. Pool was highly respected—but often from a distance, as though he were on a pedestal. He was the epitome of dignity and gravitas, with the air of a nobleman. People looked up to him, admired him, even revered him. He was a master of the bon mot; he had a wry sense of humor; he spoke with a beautifully resonant voice and a distinctive English accent.

Although Dr. Pool was actively engaged in so many communal and scholarly endeavors, he was always something of an “outsider,” a person not fully understood or appreciated by the public. In some profound sense, he was “a lonely man of faith.” To Ashkenazim, he was Sephardic. To Sephardim—most of whom came from Muslim lands—Dr. Pool was a Western Sephardi, not really “one of us.” To the Orthodox, he seemed a bit too refined, acculturated and universal. To the non-Orthodox, he was too Orthodox! To rabbis, Dr. Pool was a scholar and gentleman. To scholars, Rabbi Pool was a rabbi, not an academic. To Zionists, Dr. Pool was surely an enthusiast, but was too genteel, too high-brow, too unwilling to get involved in political battles. To non-Zionists, Dr. Pool was an unapologetic Jewish nationalist. To Talmudists, Dr. Pool was a Bible scholar. To Bible scholars, Rabbi Pool was an Orthodox rabbi with an Orthodox agenda.

Dr. Pool, thus, has remained something of an enigma. While scholars can list his many accomplishments and publications, the distinctive religious worldview that animated Dr. Pool’s life has remained relatively unexplored. This article will examine basic themes in Dr. Pool’s thinking, so that his unique contributions—and failures—might be better understood.

The Western Sephardic Tradition:

In his spiritual autobiography, Dr. Pool recalled the serenity of his youth growing up in the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community of London. “The environment in which I lived was quiet and simple….No anti-Semitism, no migration, no undue struggle, no harsh change of fortune, no world war, marred the even tenor of the home in which I grew up.”[2] His synagogue experience was warm and meaningful. He participated actively in the services and learned the prayers and melodies with enthusiasm. “My own religious experience was happy, integrated, natural and fulfilling….Except on the New Year and the Day of Atonement, my religion did not stress that I was the victim of sin.” [3]

He was part of a family and a community that valued religious tradition as well as general education. Living in London among educated and prosperous Sephardim, David Pool had a privileged childhood that offered him opportunities not available to many young Jews growing up in Muslim lands or in Eastern Europe.

The Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community of London was a bastion of the Western Sephardic tradition. This culture had emerged among conversos, Jews who had been converted to Catholicism in medieval Iberia but who later returned to Judaism in such places as Amsterdam, London, Paris and other cities in Western Europe. Western Sephardic communities were characterized by a strong sense of personal and family pride, intellectualism, aesthetics, dignity, and social graces. Their synagogues were beautiful and well maintained. Synagogue services were highly decorous and orderly. Western Sephardim were quick to learn the languages, styles and mannerisms of the lands in which they lived.

David Pool imbued the values of the Western Sephardic tradition—a deep commitment to Jewish religious tradition; intellectual openness; involvement in the wellbeing of society. In summarizing Dr. Pool's worldview, Dr. Nima Adlerblum (Dr. Pool's sister-in-law) wrote: "His is not an Orthodoxy enclosed within four opaque walls. It is that of our ancient sages, which stretches into the wide horizon and carries its wholeness and holiness into an open world. It encompasses life in its entirety." [4]

The Bible:

The bedrock of Dr. Pool's religious worldview was the Hebrew Bible. From his youth, he studied its words, learned its grammar, and memorized many of its passages. As a young rabbi, he published a pamphlet, "How to Tell Bible Stories to Children." [5] He began with the principle: "All religious teaching must have an underlying spiritual basis…It should never be forgotten that the Bible is the basis of our Jewish religion and life; therefore for us, it is different from all other literatures, classical myths, old legends, or tales from Chaucer and Shakespeare. This difference should be made a fundamental and determining feature of the treatment of the Bible stories."[6] In telling Bible stories to children, the goal is to make them feel connected to the Biblical characters. Children should learn to take pride in their Biblical ancestors. "The purpose of the Bible story is to train up good Jews, not to train for examinations or to rear Bible experts. Not the ability to pass an examination, but 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.'" [7] When teaching older children the lessons of our Prophets, it must be made clear that the prophets' words are "inspired religious teaching on the immediate problems of the day. They must realize that the Prophets were real people, with a definite historical message and background. The prophets must be made to live for them, and not remain unattainable, saintly shadows. The burden of their social and religious teaching should be translated into modern terms." [8]

Throughout his life, Dr. Pool stressed the beauty, the righteousness and the spiritual power of the Bible. Writing late in his career, he noted: "For Moses, religion was the very opposite of an opiate for the masses. It was shot through with revolutionary and far-visioned practical measures looking toward emancipation from miseries born of indigence, crushing toil, slavery, and the eclipse of hope." He then cited biblical passages that taught morality and righteousness, and concluded that "this social definition of religion, first recorded by Moses, became the world's primary motive power working for mankind's life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[9] Dr. Pool noted that "the summons of the Bible is less a call to believe in dogmas than it is a command to know, understand, and act."[10]

In a sermon delivered on May 5, 1962, Dr. Pool reminded his congregation that "it is not easy, we know, to attain the high standards of righteous living which the Biblical law and the practices of Judaism aim to inculcate. But in the measure that we invest our conduct with the

idea of holiness, we raise life to a spiritual level."[11]

The theme of social justice, as derived from the Bible, pervaded Dr. Pool's teachings—and his actions. In 1918, he participated in Food Conservation Day, an event sponsored by the United States Food Administration to promote sensible use of food resources and to discourage wastefulness. Dr. Pool prepared sermonic materials to be utilized by rabbis throughout the country on the first day of Succoth. Characteristically, he began with a reference to the Bible: "The Psalmist proclaims that it is God who in His eternal love gives food to all living." He went on to stress human responsibility for equitable distribution of food so that all people have access to a proper diet. He lamented "the heartless extortion of exorbitant profits by food gambling, by monopolizing some part of the food supply, or by storing away needed foods until a time of scarcity and rising prices" and praised the government's U.S. Food Administration for doing "noble work of fine democracy, and one that furthers the purposes of God, who giveth food to all flesh, because His love endureth forever."[12]

In his address at the closing dinner of the Tercentenary Celebration of Congregation Shearith Israel, April 26, 1955, Dr. Pool reminded his audience: "Our religion, Judaism, seeks salvation for all mankind. The emphasis of our Bible is on social justice for all rather than on the mystic quest of salvation for the individual." [13]

The Bible, through its ethical teachings and its commandments, was the source of Jewish survival. In a sermon he delivered on September 30, 1916, he spoke of "the unchanging Law." While non-Jews are puzzled by Jewish continuity over the centuries, Jews themselves know that "our survival is the necessary outcome of our Law. The real miracle is this instrument of our persistence—the Law." As long as Jews are faithful to the Torah and its commandments, they have the blessing of endurance. But once Jews are lax in their commitment to Torah and its commandments, they invariably disappear from Jewish history. "No fact emerges more clearly from our history than this—that observance of the Torah, and this alone, has preserved us as Jews, while disregard of the Torah has rapidly induced the Jewish ruin of those who neglected it." [14]

Dr. Pool emphasized the importance of both the ethical and ritual teachings of Torah. In a sermon he delivered on December 1, 1962, he underscored the vital role of ritual observance. "Only loyalty to the Torah can preserve the Jew and his sorely needed message for the world. Where we have forgotten our Hebrew, where we have unbuckled the defensive armor of our Sabbath, where we have disregarded our own festivals and holy days, and neglected the dietary laws and the other distinctive ceremonies and rites which ensure the preservation of Jewish individuality, the giving up of these time-tested and time-hallowed defenses has meant our eventual surrender to the forces of obliteration. Observance of the traditional Jewish Torah has been our life and the length of our days." [15]

Dr. Pool's consistent and unflinching stress on ritual observance put him at odds with non-Orthodox Jewish movements. He believed that watering down or eliminating traditional religious practice was destructive of Judaism and the ongoing vitality of the Jewish people. Yet, although he was so clearly devoted to Orthodox religious practice, he maintained cordial and harmonious relationships with non-Orthodox Jews and non-Orthodox leaders. Indeed, he felt it was essential for Orthodox Jews to relate to all other Jews as members of one great family.

For Dr. Pool, the Bible provided a religious worldview as well as a practical guide to righteous living. In his Baccalaureate Address at Brandeis University, June 8, 1957, he called on students to maintain a vision "inspired primarily by faith in God and in man….Intellectual learning alone cannot be a sufficient guide through life. But in the measure that your

knowledge is linked with self-conscious moral and religious aspiration will it gain in meaning and helpful service to your fellow men. Your academic degree must be the symbol of an enlightened purpose in life." [16]

Dr. Pool spoke and wrote abundantly on Biblical themes and Bible-based religion and spirituality. Yet, he rarely spoke or wrote on Talmudic/halakhic themes, except in a very general way. While he drew on Talmudic stories and parables, he did not engage in serious Talmudic dialectics nor did he see himself as a halakhic luminary. Unlike most other Orthodox rabbis, he did not derive his spiritual worldview or vision from the Talmud.

Prayer and the Synagogue:

On the occasion of his 75th birthday, Dr. Pool addressed the annual dinner of Shearith Israel's Men's Club. His talk was entitled, "The Meaning of Prayer." He articulated ideas that had been with him since his early childhood and throughout his rabbinic career. "Our synagogue services express ecstatic praise of God as the infinite ideal that we should ever hold consciously before us…..Our prayer expresses the searching of our own soul….It inspires and strengthens resolve. It encourages the will and the power to do and achieve….Jewish prayer is not an exercise in self-castigation or apologetics. It is a joyous spiritual exercise. It is marked by an all-pervading and radiant optimism….It maintains an unyielding faith in the basic goodness of our soul. A somber note is seldom heard. This marks the ministry of a rabbi with sustained happiness. We are always looking for a tomorrow that shall be better than today." [17]

Prayer is a manifestation of intimacy between the worshiper and God and should reflect a spiritual serenity and dignity. "Man must feel that his praying brings him into God's presence….Devotional warmth, inspiration and ecstasy must not lead to irrationalism and to deviations into nebulous paths of excessive emotion or unrealistic mysticism." [18] The key to proper prayer is reverence, a sense of holiness.

Dr. Pool's experience of synagogue prayer, from childhood and through his old age, was primarily in the context of Spanish and Portuguese tradition. This tradition fostered decorum, orderliness, aesthetics and dignity. Spanish and Portuguese synagogue buildings were characterized by a fine aesthetic sense; they were kept neat and clean. Prayer services were intoned with reverence by the Hazan or the Rabbi, with ongoing participation of the congregation. In his sermon on October 25, 1910, the young Dr. Pool reminded congregants of his historic congregation that "the Jews of America look to us to learn how Orthodox Judaism, traditional Judaism, can and should be beautiful and attractive. The beauty of our synagogue building is inspirational. The spiritual beauty of our liturgy is of the loftiest. The devotional beauty of our music is soul stirring, and we must show the example to those around us of the religious beauty of congregational worship."[19] Dr. Pool believed that the synagogue is a haven from the strident pressures of civilization. It is the place "to which we come for quiet meditation and spiritual contemplation." [20]

Dr. Pool viewed the synagogue as the primary institution ensuring the continuity of Judaism and the Jewish people. While a relatively small number of Jews have found their spiritual homes in Yeshivot (Talmudic academies), the masses of Jews have turned to the synagogue as their religious domiciles. "The synagogue has been the symbol of the continuity of the Jewish people. It has been the traditional center of the distinctive Jewish culture and learning which are the abundant fruitage of the Bible. It has linked the Jew to his people by a bond stronger than that of blood and nobler than flight from anti-Semitism. The synagogue is the symbol of my Judaism and all that it means to me that I am a Jew."[21] In a lyric passage, Dr. Pool wrote: "When I enter a synagogue I am deeply moved by the memories enshrined within it. I sense the mystic echoing of four thousand years of prayer. It is to me a living organism,

the very body of the Jewish people." [22]

Dr. Pool's notion of synagogue prayer differed from widespread patterns within Orthodox congregations—whether Sephardic or Ashkenazic--where services often did not reflect the formality, high aesthetic taste, or quiet dignity that he advocated. In February 1943, he wrote to Dr. Samuel Nirenstein, President of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, asking that the Union establish a Commission on the Synagogue that would establish appropriate standards for Orthodox synagogues. Among its responsibilities, this commission "should also work out standards for the conduct of services with their specific recommendations, looking towards the elimination of those unaesthetic and irreverent popular practices in Synagogue which distract so sadly from the religious services of so many Orthodox Synagogues." [23]

In his commitment to traditionalism in prayer, Dr. Pool also differed sharply with non-traditional innovations within non-Orthodox synagogues. Writing late in his career, he took pride in the fact that his congregation "has achieved and exemplified an inspiring union between the free movement of the spirit in personal devotion, and the impressive stateliness which should mark congregational prayer." [24]

As the most frequented institution in the Jewish community, the synagogue was not only a home of prayer but also the springboard for righteous action. With the waning of attendance at American synagogues, the essential teachings of Judaism were not reaching an important segment of the Jewish community. In his Rosh Hashanah message of September 1924, he addressed the disaffection of a growing number of Jews from synagogue attendance. "The problem of the Synagogues is not one of theology or dogma, nor even of services, ritual and liturgy. While every aspect of Synagogue activity, both religious and administrative, presents its own subsidiary problems, the essential difficulty of the Synagogues of today is found in their aloofness from the world of life." [25] Synagogues were not to be viewed as isolated havens of religious worship but as catalysts for religiously-inspired action. Without the social justice component, synagogues become stagnant. "The synagogue has been among Jews the primary teacher of the high principles of social justice and human oneness….It has been from the synagogue that there have emanated organizations of loving human brotherhood which have brought help and strength into the lives of the needy and the faltering." [26]

Working with non-Orthodox Jews:

Dr. Pool was a leading Orthodox rabbi who sought Orthodox participation in all community-wide organizations. He himself served as President of the New York Board of Rabbis, an organization which prided itself on the involvement of rabbis of all the Jewish religious movements. Likewise, he served as President of the Synagogue Council of America, an organization that included Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jewish leaders who aspired to work together on behalf of the entire Jewish community.

His involvement in these "ecumenical" organizations was not the result of a compromise position, but of a principled commitment to the Jewish people as a whole. He believed that Orthodoxy needed to be heard where ever issues of concern to the community were taking place. In a letter (April 17, 1949) to Mr. William Weiss, executive director of the Orthodox Union, Dr. Pool wrote "that the Orthodox Union should not segregate itself and run away from cooperating with organizations and movements, so long as these movements are not anti-Jewish. The weakest and most futile thing we can do is to step out of movements. The strongest and most effective thing we can do is to remain in them and fight for our principles." [27] In a letter to Mr. William Herlands (April 28, 1949), President of the Orthodox Union, Dr. Pool reiterated his view that the Orthodox Union should be represented at general communal events such as the then forthcoming annual meeting of the American Association for Jewish Education. "Unfortunately there are among us some who feel that because the A.A.J.E. is

comprehensive in its Jewish interest and does not bear the Orthodox label, it should therefore be shunned by the Union. This policy is most harmful to Orthodoxy. It takes away from us the opportunity of expressing our legitimate influence." [28]

Dr. Pool's cooperative work with non-Orthodox individuals and organizations was a reflection of his broad communal outlook. In describing his outlook, he pointed to a hurdle that "has always stood between me and a common run of organizational activity. I have never been able to work effectively through the instrumentality of rigid sectarianism or party politics. A regimented partisan alignment, exclusively under group A or under group B or either for this party leader or for that one, has always alienated me by its strabismic falsifying of perspective values, and its frequent setting of secondary interests above the supreme cause." [29] Dr. Pool sought to rise above sectarian, partisan politics. While this was a grand vision that won him respect, it also was a strategy that distanced him from the sectarian, partisan political leaders who headed various Jewish organizations and causes.

Working with Newly-Arriving Sephardic Immigrants:

During the first decades of the 20th century, many thousands of Sephardic immigrants arrived in New York. They came to America from Turkey, the Balkan countries, Greece and Syria. Like many other immigrants of that period, they came with high hopes of establishing a better life for themselves and their families in this land of opportunity. Most of the immigrants arrived with little money, limited formal education, little or no knowledge of English.

The Sephardic newcomers faced the usual problems of immigrants striving to adapt to a new land and culture. But they also had additional hurdles to overcome. The existing Jewish agencies in New York and elsewhere were focused on assisting the huge number of mainly Yiddish-speaking Jews arriving from Russia and Eastern Europe. The Sephardic immigrants—most of whom spoke Judeo-Spanish, Greek or Arabic—were overlooked by the Jewish immigrant aid societies. Jewish social workers, almost all of whom were Ashkenazic, often did not even recognize Sephardim as fellow Jews; they assumed that these immigrants were non-Jewish Turks, Greeks or Arabs.

Shearith Israel, as the only Sephardic congregation in New York at that time, felt a special responsibility toward the Sephardic newcomers. Yet, there were immense sociological/cultural gaps between the well-established Shearith Israel community and the new Sephardic arrivals. At the beginning of the 20th century, few members of Shearith Israel were actually full-blooded Sephardim. Most were Ashkeanzim, with or without Sephardic ancestry. Few (if any) in Shearith Israel spoke Judeo-Spanish, Greek or Arabic. Whereas Shearith Israel followed a formal Western Sephardic ritual, the Sephardic newcomers were accustomed to their own less formal Middle-Eastern traditions.

Dr. Pool worked tirelessly to energize the Shearith Israel community on behalf of the Sephardic arrivals. The congregation's Sisterhood formed an "Oriental Committee," in which Dr. Pool played a vital role. The Sisterhood established a Settlement House on New York's Lower East Side to serve the Sephardic immigrants. In 1912, it was located at 86 Orchard Street. In 1918, the Sisterhood moved its Settlement House to a larger building at 133 Eldridge Street. The Settlement House included a synagogue, social services, Hebrew school for children, and various programs to help immigrants find employment and adapt to American life. [30]

In his sermon at Shearith Israel on March 9, 1912, Dr. Pool prodded his congregation to revive itself and its Sephardic character by working on behalf of the Sephardic immigrants. "It is the most urgent and imperative duty of our congregation today not to stand passively aloof awaiting their coming to us, but to go out to them offering a friendly, helping hand of welcome.

…It is a work that demands the tact born of sympathy, the self-sacrifice born of human love, and the truest feeling of brotherhood born of love of God."[31]

Dr. Pool was a leading figure in major Sephardic communal organizations that emerged through the mid-20th century, including the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America, the Union of Sephardic Congregations (which he founded in 1928) and the American Sephardi Federation. He was admired as a distinguished and articulate spokesman of the American Sephardic community. His eloquent voice not only helped shape the Sephardic internal agenda, but also served to represent Sephardim to the much larger Ashkenazic Jewish establishment.

In an article published in 1914, Dr. Pool urged the American Jewish social service agencies to be sensitive to the needs of the newly arrived Sephardim. "The Levantine Jew is marked by a strong historic consciousness, a pride and self-respect which express themselves in a dignity of deportment, dress and manners, an innate gentlemanliness, a refined sensitiveness, and a mettle which makes these settlers recoil from and reject any crude or patronizing offers of help."[32] He brought the concerns of the Sephardic immigrants to the attention of Jewish leaders in whatever forums were available to him—whether as a participant in organizational meetings and conferences, as a lecturer or as a writer.

During his tenure as rabbi of Shearith Israel, Dr. Pool succeeded in attracting Sephardic immigrants and their children to the congregation. Although there were bumps along the way, Dr. Pool's consistent warmth toward the newly arrived Sephardim helped Shearith Israel become a spiritual home for many in the growing Sephardic community.

Zionism:

Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes, Dr. Pool's senior rabbi at Shearith Israel, was deeply committed to what he called "Bible Zionism." Theodor Herzl called on Dr. Mendes to help organize the Zionist movement in the United States. Dr. Mendes was elected vice-president of the Federation of American Zionists and a member of the actions committee of the World Zionist Organization. Dr. Mendes wrote: "Peace for the world at last, and the realization of reverence for God by all men. These are the essentials for human happiness. Zionism stands for them." [33]

Dr. Pool was surely influenced by Dr. Mendes in his devotion to Jewish nationhood as manifested in the Zionist movement. But Dr. Pool's own Zionist convictions went beyond "Bible Zionism." For Dr. Pool, Zionism was the key to authentic Jewish expression. In the diaspora, Jews simply mimic the works of others; only in the land of Israel can Jews be themselves. Writing in 1913, Dr. Pool argued: "We in the Diaspora have had no national art: the Zionists in Palestine are developing one for us. We have had no national Jewish music; they are creating it for us. We have had no national Hebraic literature; they are producing it for us. We have had no living national language; they are reviving it for us. We have had no successful system of education for the young; they are forming one for us. We have had no standard of what constitutes a complete Jewish life; they are building one up for us. We have had little sense of the solidarity and oneness of Israel. They are instilling into us that consciousness of Jewish brotherhood and unity." [34]

In an article in 1914, Dr. Pool described Zionism as an expression of Jewish patriotism. "The Zionistic development of Palestine is giving to the Jewish people Jewish traditions, Jewish institutions and Jewish ideals, all rooted in the Jewish fatherland. In a word, Zionism is giving to the Jewish people not only territorialism of "landism," it is giving back to Judaism and the Jewish people the sentiment of patriotism of "fatherlandism" in the fullest and finest sense of the word."[35] Further in this article, Dr. Pool warned that patriotism can become parochial

and narrow. He thought that these tendencies in Zionism would gradually give way to a broad and inclusive worldview. Dr. Pool hoped for “a Jewish patriotism that is deeply founded, broad and unselfish, a patriotism without rancor or prejudice, a patriotism born of loyalty to our Jewish tradition…loyalty to our Jewish ideals and devotion to our Jewish patria, Palestine.” [36]

Dr. Pool’s Zionism was not merely theoretical. He was a hard working activist. He and his wife Tamar, were leaders in Hadassah’s Young Judaea youth movement. Tamar went on to become National President of Hadassah, in which capacity both she and her husband worked cooperatively to foster Zionist ideals and support for the Zionist cause. In 1919, Dr. Pool literally risked his position at Shearith Israel when he and his wife decided to leave for Palestine to do relief work under the auspices of the Joint Distribution Committee. They spent several years there, until returning to New York. Fortunately, Dr. Pool was re-engaged by Shearith Israel in 1922; but that was by no means something he could have counted upon.

With the rise of Nazism in Germany in the early 1930s, Dr. Pool increasingly spoke of the need for a Jewish homeland. He called on Jews to strengthen their own identities as Jews, to rally around Zionism. In his Hanukkah message of November 30, 1934, he cited the heroic example of the Maccabees who became “masters of their own soul. In every subsequent generation the Jew who has maintained his spiritual integrity has known the hero’s joy of spiritual freedom, though his body may have been oppressed and enslaved. He has been himself. He has refused to become that weak and pathetic creature, a copy of someone else.”[37]

As European Jewry faced its destruction at the hand of the Germans and their collaborators, Dr. Pool called on American Jews to rise to action on behalf of their endangered coreligionists. “It is our responsibility, and in the whole of Jewry primarily our responsibility, as American Jews to build up here and in the Land of Israel a refuge for the physical Jew and for the Jewish spirit. Once more the world will see a saving remnant of Israel that shall put forth shoots and grow into a mighty tree which will bring forth fruits of beauty and truth in the generations to come, and under which Jewish life shall be lived in peace with none to make us afraid.” [38]

With the horrific murder of millions of European Jews, the importance of a Jewish State was widely recognized as being vital for the future safety of the Jewish people. But for Dr. Pool, Israel was not merely to be a physical safe haven for Jews. It was to become a spiritual, religious and cultural center for world Jewry and all humankind. The Holy City of Jerusalem would symbolize religious idealism at its best. In his Rosh Hashanah message, August 1949, he wrote: “So long as there is a Holy City and there is religious aspiration in the soul of man, we have hope that the world need not be irretrievably gripped by overreaching violence and the cult of force. So long as there is a Holy City and all that it symbolizes, we have the hope, even though it be a slow and laborious hope, that one day man’s spiritual idealism will overcome his animal heritage of struggle.”[39]

In their book, An Old Faith in the New World, David and Tamar de Sola Pool included a chapter entitled “For the Sake of Zion.” They proudly pointed to the many members of Shearith Israel who, throughout the generations demonstrated their love and support of the Holy Land. They noted the philanthropic work of the congregation to the newly established Jewish State, as well as those members who settled in Israel to share directly in the rebirth of Israel.

Not all congregants, especially in the early decades of Dr. Pool’s service to Shearith Israel, were pleased with his Zionistic views. Some important members of Shearith Israel are said to have resigned their synagogue membership because of Dr. Pool’s impassioned support of

Zionism. Yet, he continued his Zionistic teaching, preaching and communal work with unflinching fervor. Over the course of his career, he won many hearts and minds to the vital significance of the State of Israel to the Jewish people and to the world.

Universalism:

Dr. Pool's religious worldview was imbued with a sense of unity: the unity of humanity based on the unity of the One God. The religious insights of Judaism were a treasure of the Jewish people to be shared with the entire world. "While the message of the prophets was directed primarily to their own people, they had the vision of humanity as a whole, and many of their words were addressed to other nations….They were the first true internationalists. They summoned Gentile and Jew alike to infuse both individual and social life with true moral and religious motivation, and so build on earth the Kingdom of God when all mankind shall live at peace." [40]

The goal of the Jewish religious vision is the messianic era, when all human beings will live in peace and recognize the sovereignty of God. "Oppression, injustice, and warfare must yet give way to Messianic universal peace, universal brotherhood, universal justice, and universal love." [41]

Dr. Pool envisioned all religions working together for the advancement of the human spirit. "The relationship between the great world religions should be one of mutual respect. Each seeks an approach to the Almighty….It is not a weakening but a strengthening of the loyalty we owe and give to our own faith if we understand, value and respect the faith of our neighbors." [42]

The Universal God:

Even when Jews offer their particularistic prayers and blessings, they invoke the universal Deity: "our God, King of the universe." For Dr. Pool, the "fervent and boundless hope running through the whole prayer book is not an expression of an assertive self-righteous nationalism. It is the yearning for mankind's spiritual healing by divine light." [43]

In his sermon of November 15, 1930, Dr. Pool spoke of Albert Einstein's views on religion. For Einstein, there were three levels of religious development among human beings. Primitive religion was dictated by fear and ignorance, akin to superstition. Another stage was social/moral religion, where the emphasis was on trying to create a harmonious society based on ethical conduct. At this level, religion was essentially the guardian of human behavior. The third and highest level was the cosmic religious sense, in which humans are filled with humility as they search for the unity of God in the phenomena of nature. Dr. Pool argued that Judaism, while strongly connected to the social/moral aspects of religion, calls on its adherents to reach for the cosmic religious sense. This is evidenced in the names we ascribe to God: HaMakom, the omnipresent; Yotser/Borei Olam, Creator of the universe; Ribbono shel Olam, Master of the universe; Melekh HaOlam, King of the universe. "For the Jew, the lofty religious outlook which Albert Einstein puts into words is not the religion of individual religious geniuses; it is the religion of the people with a genius for religion….We Jews must still continue to be the Servant of the Lord, bearing through the ages until all mankind shall have learned to attain to it, the supreme conception of a cosmic religious outlook, God a unity in all existence, and order and law throughout His universe." [44]

A Grand Religious Worldview in an Imperfect World:

Dr. Pool's religious worldview was essentially optimistic. In spite of the many shortcomings of humanity, he believed that good people working together would ultimately succeed in creating a righteous society. The Jews have a particular mission in the unfolding human adventure;

they must serve as a “light unto the nations” and help usher in a Messianic age. Yet, the Jews’ mission is infused with a universalism; it aspires to serve the universal God and to all humankind. In closing his book, Why I am a Jew, he articulates the religious vision that animated his life’s work: “Armed with faith we can fight soulless knowledge and self-destroying technology; fascist aggression and military violence; racial hatreds, class bitterness and annihilating international strife. We know no better way. We know no other way if we are to build a world in which ‘none shall hurt, none destroy….for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’ (Isaiah 11:9).” [45]

A Lasting Legacy:

Dr. Pool embodied the ideas and ideals of his Western Sephardic tradition and of an enlightened Orthodox Judaism. He deeply appreciated the particularistic teachings and observances of Judaism while constantly maintaining a universalistic outlook. His type of Sephardic/Orthodox rabbi was unusual in his lifetime and is even more of a rarity today. Indeed, the Sephardic and Orthodox communities have been moving further away from Dr. Pool’s vision of religious life.

Dr. Pool devoted many years of labor to edit and translate the Sephardic prayer books. His goal was to create a unified framework for the Sephardic congregations of North America. If all congregations utilized the same prayer book, an American Sephardic minhag would replace the multitude of ethnic variations among Sephardim. He took pride in the fact that one could pray in Sephardic synagogues throughout the continent and almost always pray from the siddurim that he had prepared.

Yet, his dream of a unified Sephardic minhag has largely been repudiated in recent years. There has been a proliferation of Sephardic prayer books, many catering to the specific rites of particular communities e.g. Syrian, Moroccan, Turkish/Rhodes. Israeli prayer books according to the customs of Eidot haMizrah (Middle-Eastern Jews) have become increasingly popular. Whereas Dr. Pool’s prayer books were widely used through the 1970s, they have become less utilized in more recent years. Dr. Pool had hoped for a harmonization of Sephardic synagogue practice; in fact, though, the prevailing tendency has been for each group to insist on its own customs and its own prayer book.

When Dr. Pool edited and translated the Ashkenazic prayer book (1960), his hope was that the many Ashkenazic congregations of America would have a dignified book from which to worship. As in his work on the Sephardic prayer books, he saw to it that the Ashkenazic prayer book was presented in an aesthetic style, without cumbersome notes to distract worshippers. Yet, his Ashkenazic prayer book is hardly used any longer, with most Ashkenazic congregations having switched to other editions that contain many notes and halakhic instructions.

Dr. Pool’s principled commitment to work on a community-wide basis, together with non-Orthodox Jews, has not been embraced by many of the ensuing generations of Orthodox rabbis. The Orthodox shift to the right has resulted in a far more parochial and sectarian Orthodoxy than Dr. Pool would have liked. The Synagogue Council of America that symbolized cooperation among the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements—and of which Dr. Pool had served as President 1938-1940—closed its doors in 1994. While “Hareidi” Orthodoxy is generally hostile toward official cooperation with entities that grant equal status to the non-Orthodox, even Modern Orthodoxy has become less engaged in formal work with non-Orthodox leadership.

Dr. Pool’s ideal of large synagogues with decorous services has also lost adherents among the next generations of Orthodox Jews. For Dr. Pool, Orthodox congregations could and

should include traditional-minded Jews of various levels of religious observance. But Orthodoxy in recent years has witnessed a proliferation of smaller “yeshivish” minyanim and “shtiebels,” where the worshipers are almost all of the same level of religious observance. Decorum in the larger Orthodox synagogues is not always to the standard that Dr. Pool would have liked.

Dr. Pool eloquently advocated social justice, universal humanitarian concern, and inter-faith cooperation. These themes today are often seen as being in the province of non-Orthodox Judaism. While there still are some Orthodox rabbis who share Dr. Pool’s commitments, the general tendency seems to be toward a more particularistic conception of Judaism.

Perhaps, somewhat like Don Quixote, Dr. Pool dreamed the impossible dream. He maintained a grand religious worldview that was rooted in tradition but that transcended parochial boundaries. He sought unities where most others were mired in multiplicities.

Although many of his ideas and ideals have not yet prevailed—and may never prevail--Dr. Pool can yet serve as a source of religious light for a world that very much needs spiritual illumination. For those who aspire to a profound, dignified and intelligent spirituality; to a resurgence of righteousness in the spirit of the Hebrew prophets; to an Orthodoxy respectful of tradition and with a universal vision; to a unity among Jews and a harmony among human kind—to all such seekers Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool will ever be a steady and wise guide.

Epilogue:

I began my service to Shearith Israel in September 1969, while I was still a 24 year old rabbinical student. That first Rosh Hashana, I sat next to Dr. Pool on the synagogue’s Tebah, reader’s desk, where the congregation’s clergy are seated. Dr. Pool was 83 years old, frail, and in declining health. After services on the first night of Rosh Hashana, Dr. Pool placed his hand on my head and gave me his blessing, wishing me a happy and meaningful ministry.

I well remember my feelings on that sacred moment. When I shook his hand, I was shaking the hand of a great spiritual leader who had begun his service to Shearith Israel in 1907; he had taken over from Dr. Mendes who had begun service to Shearith Israel in 1877. I was one handshake away from 1877! And just a few more handshakes separated me from Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas who had begun serving Shearith Israel in 1768. I felt the weight of centuries, the incredible continuity of a magnificent tradition.

Even in his elderly years, Dr. Pool maintained a remarkable aura of dignity and serenity. He was venerated by the congregation not only for what he had accomplished in his lifetime, but for who he was—a genuinely pious, humble soul who served God and His people with selfless devotion.

I quickly learned traditions of the Shearith Israel spiritual leadership, traditions going back centuries, traditions upheld and enhanced by Dr. Pool and transmitted to his immediate successor Rabbi Dr. Louis C. Gerstein and then to me. Rabbis of Shearith Israel, as well as the Hazanim, conducted the synagogue prayer services and read the Torah with precision. The synagogue’s pulpit was reserved only for the synagogue’s rabbis. (On rare occasions, guest Orthodox rabbis were invited to preach from the pulpit.) Sermons were to be instructive and inspirational; frivolity was never allowed from the pulpit, nor was the pulpit to be used to advance a political candidate or to criticize anyone by name. The rabbi was to set an example to the congregation of proper devotion in prayer—no engaging in idle chatter or silly gestures, no reading books other than the prayer book during worship. The rabbi was to be at services punctually, not missing unless prevented by illness or a serious scheduling conflict, or unless away from town. The rabbi was to set the tone for orderliness and decorum, for neatness and respectfulness.

Along with the traditions relating to synagogue and prayer, Dr. Pool embodied the congregation's tradition of communal involvement and social justice activism. The congregation was proud of its history of service to America (Shearith Israel's members fought in the American Revolution!), and its commitment to the wellbeing of the Jewish community and society at large. Dr. Pool's universalism was very much in keeping with the Spanish and Portuguese traditions of his forebears.

Dr. Pool died in December 1970, a bit over a year after I began my service to Shearith Israel. Yet, I seemed to feel his guiding hand throughout my rabbinic career. I read all his publications; I went through his sermons; I edited a collection of his sermons, addresses and writings. Throughout my many years of rabbinic service, Dr. Pool has surely been an important influence. Even now, as rabbi emeritus of Shearith Israel, I still seem to feel Dr. Pool's hand on my head and I still seem to hear his words of blessing and encouragement. They mean as much to me now as when I first heard them at age twenty four. Perhaps even more.

Notes:

[1] For biographical information about David de Sola Pool, see David and Tamar de Sola Pool, An Old Faith in the New World, Columbia University Press, New York, 1955, pp. 202-208; Nima Adlerblum, "Reflections on the Life and Work of Rabbi David de Sola Pool," Tradition, 30:1, fall 1995, pp. 7-16; and Dr. Pool's article, "My Spiritual Autobiography," in Thirteen Americans, Louis Finkelstein ed., Institute for Religious and Social Studies, New York, 1953, pp. 201-217. See also Ben Elton, "New York Orthodoxy Between the Wars," Conversations, no. 20, autumn 2014, pp. 40-44.
[2] "My Spiritual Autobiography," p. 202.
[3] Ibid., p. 205.c
[4] Nima Adlerblum, p 16.
[5] "How to Tell Bible Stories to Children," Bloch Publishing Company, New York, 1913 (reprinted 1920).
[6] Ibid., p. 3.
[7] Ibid., p. 5.
[8] Ibid., p.19.
[9] David de Sola Pool, Why I am a Jew, Beacon Press, Boston, 1957, p. 26.
[10] Ibid., p. 67.
[11] Marc D. Angel, ed., Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Selections from Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses and Writings, Union of Sephardic Congregations, New York, 1980, p. 147.
[12] "Food Conservation Day," a pamphlet issued in 1918, pp. 8, 10
[13] Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Selections from Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses and Writings, p. 129.
[14] Ibid., pp. 38-9.
[15] Ibid., p. 154.
[16] Ibid., p. 133.
[17] Ibid., pp. 138-139.
[18] Why I am a Jew, p. 98.
[19] Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Selections from Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses and Writings, p. 26.
[20] Ibid., p. 139.
[21] Why I am a Jew, p. 91.
[22] Ibid., p. 81.
[23] This letter, among other of Dr. Pool's letters in the Shearith Israel archives, was published in Tradition 30:1, fall 1995, p.19-20.
[24] Why I am a Jew, p. 86.

[25] Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Selections from Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses and Writings, p. 182.
[26] Why I am a Jew, p. 146.
[27] Tradition, 30:1, p. 21.
[28] Ibid., p. 22.
[29] Thirteen Americans, p. 212-213.
[30] For a discussion of the relationship between Shearith Israel and the Sephardic immigrants, see Marc D. Angel, La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, chapter 6.
[31] Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses and Writings, pp. 31-32.
[32] David de Sola Pool, “The Immigration of Levantine Jews into the United States,” Jewish Charities, June 1914, p. 15. See also his article “The Levantine Jews in the United States,” American Jewish Yearbook, vol. 15, 1913-14, pp. 207-20.
[33] See my article, “The Religious Vision of Rev. Dr.Henry Pereira Mendes,” in M. D. Angel, ed., From Strength to Strength, Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1998, pp. 21-28; and Dr. Pool’s booklet, H. Pereira Mendes: A Biography, New York, 1938; and David and Tamar Pool, An Old Faith in the New World, pp. 192-201.
[34] David de Sola Pool, “Palestine and the Diaspora,” pamphlet published by the Federation of American Zionists, New York, May 1913, p. 13.
[35] David de Sola Pool, “Zionism as an Expression of Jewish Patriotism,” a reprint from The Maccabaean, November-December 1914, p. 5.
[36] Ibid., p. 12.
[37] Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses, and Writings, p. 75.
[38] Ibid., p. 99.
[39] Ibid., p. 192.
[40 Why I am a Jew, p. 33.
[41] Ibid., p. 174
[42] David and Tamar de Sola Pool, Is There an Answer?, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1966, p. 205.
[43] Why I am a Jew., p. 96.
[44] Rabbi David de Sola Pool: Six Decades of Sermons, Addresses, and Writings, p. 62.
[45] Why I am a Jew,p. 198.. 198.