Remembering Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel shares some thoughts on the life and spiritual legacy of one of America's foremost rabbinic figures of the 20th century.

Rabbi Dr. David de Sola Pool was the pre-eminent Sephardic rabbi in America during the mid-twentieth century. Born in England in 1885, he died on December 1, 1970, the first week of Kislev 5731, after having served Congregation Shearith Israel in New York for a period spanning 63 years.

Dr. Pool was the quintessential Sephardic rabbi of the Western Sephardic tradition. He was eloquent and dignified, and yet friendly and approachable. He was a fine scholar and author, and was also an admirable and respected communal leader. During his impressive career, he was an ardent spokesman for Zionism; a devoted spiritual guide to American Sephardim; a foremost voice in interfaith dialogue; a historian of American Jewry; editor and translator of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic prayer books.

When I began my service to Shearith Israel in September 1969, 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.

That was a special and sacred moment for me. When I shook Dr. Pool’s 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.

I remember Dr. Pool's aura of dignity and serenity, even in his elderly years when he was increasingly frail. He was a genuinely pious and humble man who served his community with selfless devotion.

Dr. Pool had maintained Shearith Israel's traditions during his many years of service to the congregation. He not only followed in the footsteps of his venerable predecessors, but set the standard for his successors. Dr. Pool taught by example. He instructed his immediate successor, Dr. Louis C. Gerstein, who passed on the traditions to me. I learned that the 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.

The rabbi was to set an example for social justice, communal activism, righteous behavior. The rabbi was to be a scholar, teacher, and pastor. The rabbi was to speak with his congregants, not at them. Dr. Pool insisted that each Jew take responsibility for his and her religious lives. In September 1922, Dr. Pool wrote to his congregation: "We do not, we cannot, all think alike, and there is no one of us that dares dogmatize for others in the realm of religion. If you expect your Rabbi vicariously to think through the problem of living for you, you will weaken and paralyze your own spiritual nature, just as surely as you will destroy your Judaism if you leave it to your Rabbi to live a Jewish life for you."

In a sermon delivered at his grandson's Bar Mitzvah in May 1962, Dr. Pool spoke of the need for the generations of Jews to live their Judaism actively. "We must not allow ourselves to become decrepit veterans dreaming of past victories in the struggle for holiness. We have to be something more than feeble survivors of once glorious days…Our life as Jews must be the result of something more than inertia based on the physical fact that we were born into the Jewish people….Within every one of us who is worthy of bearing the Jewish name there must be a conscious sense of a divine call to serve our fellow men for today and

tomorrow…. Weaklings among us may fall away as they have done in every generation. But the true spiritual descendants of Abraham, of Moses, and of all our heroic sages and saints keep the Jewish light kindled, and hand it down from generation to generation.”

In 1966, he and his wife Tamar published a book, “Is There an Answer?” They made the following observation: “It is we ourselves who can and who must make life worth living. In the face of the harshest realities, we must cling to life and exalt it by giving to its positive values a commanding place in our consciousness. …To look constantly on the seamy side of life is false to the totality of existence. We must gratefully remember life’s goodness and blessings. We must discern what is transient in experience and what is abiding in our consciousness” (p. 23).

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.