

“ Atem Edai – You are my witnesses”  
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Last year I made a presentation on the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano “Marshall T. Meyer”. This year in commemoration of the 50th, Anniversary of the foundation of this Seminario, I want you to know who Marshall Meyer was, and what he did for the Latin American Jewry and why he was called “The Rabbi of the Century”, “the Rabbi of the Human Rights” , the “Rabbi who made the revolution”.

The Jerusalem Post wrote: “Meyer saved the Jews of Argentine twice. First, he created a community where there was none before. Then he rescued endangered Jews and non-Jews alike”.

Rabbi Meyer, who risked his life again and again to help people of all faiths who were victims of the “dirty war” in Argentina, was a mesmerizing speaker, teacher, and a beloved rabbi to thousands and thousands. He revolutionized Judaism, both in Latin America and in the United States.

Rabbi Meyer was relatively unknown in America, but in Argentina he was a hero. When he and his wife Naomi arrived in 1959, they planned to spend a couple of years abroad and then come back home. But the Latin American Jewry was in need of a spiritual leader and Rabbi Meyer did not shy away. He founded a conservative synagogue (Bet El), the first and only Rabbinical Seminary in Latin America, and began a Jewish publishing company, editing and translating into Spanish prayer books and the great works of Jewish culture.

But let’s start from the beginning.

Rabbi Marshall Meyer was born in Brooklyn on March 25, 1930. He studied in Darmouth college where he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1952. Then, he graduated in Hebrew Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

He was a devoted student of Professor Abraham Joshua Heschell, whom he had met when Heschel was a visiting professor at Darmouth in the earlies 50’s. He was at Heschel’s side for almost eight years, first as a rabbinical student and then as his private secretary.

His post graduates studies were completed at the Hebrew University , where he studied with Martin Buber, followed by studies at Columbia University and the Union Theological Seminary of New York.

Upon his ordination as rabbi in 1958 at the Jewish Theological Seminary, he was offered a number of rabbinic positions, including one in Israel. But, he chose to go

to Argentina for a two year period as assistant rabbi to Guillermo Schlessinger at Congregacion Israelita de Buenos Aires.

**Let me tell you that He didnt leave Argentine until 1984.**

He was a humanitarian and charismatic leader and consummate pulpit rabbi with an excellent administrative and fund raising skills who had managed to transform Latin American Jewry.

His thoughts are known primarily in his Spanish writings. He was a prolific writer, speaker, and a Spanish translator with publications numbering in the hundreds, but most of his writings were not translated into English.

During his 25 years in Latin America, as the rector of Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano - **which he founded** -, head of Camp Ramah in Argentina - **which he founded** -, director of the World Council of Synagogues Latin American office - **which he founded** -, pulpit rabbi at Congregación Israelita de Buenos Aires, and then Rabbi at Bet El Synagogue of Buenos Aires - **which he also founded** -, he shaped an entire theological literature and vocabulary which has influenced rabbis and Jewish thinkers in Latin America.

The 1970s were extremely turbulent times in Argentina, a reflection of the instability of the government and the military and non democratic forces which had governed the country off and on since the mid 1940s.

Between 1970 and 1972 the kidnapping and killing of major Argentine figures, illegal demonstrations, and “revolutionary” cells in the north and west of the country led to military government intervention in major cities around Argentina.

During this period Rabbi Meyer’s writings constantly drew upon Heschel’s concepts of “Divine Pathos” and the “Leap of action”.

From the beginning, human rights in Argentina were at the top of his agenda, but Rabbi Meyer heard the call when the military took over the country and began the “dirty war”.

He was a lonely voice against the government, preaching against the dictatorship, welcoming the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo into his synagogue at great risk, and visiting the prisons weekly.

He ran a virtual underground railroad, helping people escape the country, hiding others until they could get out, working tirelessly to locate the disappeared.

I am sure that you may have read about the “mad mothers”, the women who have the names of their missing sons and daughters embroidered on their white handkerchiefs and who walked in silence every Thursday at 3.30 PM around the obelisk in the Plaza de Mayo. This is why they received the name of Madres de Plaza de Mayo (The mothers of Plaza de Mayo).

Marshall invited these women to attend services at the Bet El Synagogue. By that time very few people were walking with them. They were afraid.

During a meeting of the Board of Directors, someone said that he was frightened for the entire congregation *“We cannot allow the mothers to come here all the time”*. To the everlasting dignity and nobility of the Board of Directors, their answer was : *“This synagogue will always be open to those who want to enter, and our rabbi will always have the freedom of the pulpit, to say what he feels must be said”*

Marshall helped these people who were waiting for years to find the bodies of their sons and daughters, to say kaddish at the synagogue. One day a man rolled up his sleeve and showed the rabbi the numbers *“For this I was saved from Auschwitz ?*

As a U.S. citizen Rabbi Meyer perhaps had a privileged but still precarious position in Argentina during this period of the military juntas. Between 1976 and 1983, while perhaps as many as 30.000 Argentines “disappeared”, including about 1.500 Jews, Rabbi Meyer fought for disclosures, releases and justice for Jewish and non Jewish prisoners.

In *“Thoughts on Latin America”*, published by the Rabbinical Assembly, Marshall explains:

*“As a rabbi, I felt obligated to visit prisons, and to try to comfort parents of the disappeared people, be they christian, Jewish or agnostic... I have tried to respond to life in this jungle as I believe a rabbi should respond...*

*Unless we are capable of feeling Rahmanut and Hesed for everybody who is being persecuted, what right do we have to think that the world will take notice when we scream out only on anti semitic issues?*

*My response, with every ounce of strength I possess as a Jew emanates from my understanding of Judaism.*

*We were slaves in Egypt and we taught the world to strike out for freedom”*

He was the Rabbi of Jacobo Timmerman , the brutally tortured writer and newspaper editor, incarcerated for his human rights position, a Jew who experienced a part of the horror of this period.

Timmerman dedicated his famous work *“Prisoner without a name, cell without a number”*, to Rabbi Marshall Meyer. *“a rabbi who brought comfort to Jewish, Christian and Atheist prisoners in Argentine Jails”*.

This book was first published in the United States because it was prohibited in Argentina. Marshall brought one to the Seminario , which was kept under the custody of Dr. Harff, the director of the Library by that time, - who lent it to very

few people, but only to be read within the Institution. It was very risky to take out this book.

One of his students said: *“Marshall was extremely brave, but not foolish. He had courage, but was not irrational. He knew that because he was an American citizen he was allowed to do certain things that were dangerous for the Argentine people. He never induced us to do what he was doing. He risked a lot, but never put us under risk. This was one of his talents, to recognize the difference”*. He used to say *“don’t you dare to do what I do, I have an American passport, while you don’t*.

This same student spoke about the Thursdays classes.

Every Thursday before starting classes, Marshall went to the Police Station, but before going there, his secretary had the instructions that *“if by 4 PM I am not back, please call the Embassy”*. This is how he lived.

*These were the best classes we had, continued the student, The acceptance was relatively restricted.*

*It was not only attended by the seminarists, but also, from time to time, by special guests like politicians or activists.*

*We didn’t have to prepare the classes in advance.*

*Marshall spoke and our classes became discussion seminars. He spoke about the news that appeared in the newspapers, or the news he obtained either from the American or Israeli Embassy.*

*Of course nobody would repeat outside the room what was said inside. Everything was strictly confidential.”*

This student, who never finished his rabbinical studies because he decided to become a doctor, will never forget these classes

Marshall sharply criticized the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) the organization which officially represents Argentine Jewry to the government, for having cordial relationships with the Military Junta.

He found very few allies among the Jewish leadership. The DAIA felt it was advantageous to maintain unity and cordiality in its relationship with the military dictatorship in order to minimize anti semitic activity.

The DAIA accused Marshall of making waves and arousing the world media against Argentina.

**But thanks to Marshall the world was aware of what was happening in Argentina.**

Some people felt very threatened by Marshall’s words and actions, and needless to say, he was not universally loved.

Several articles were written against him with numerous allegations, and some of the writings were outright vicious.

The orthodox wing too, was especially enraged about Marshall's liberal agenda.

More or less ten years ago, while moving some very old books from one of the stacks of our Library, something fell from one book. We picked it up thinking that it could be a loosen page, but no, it was a letter sent by one of the prisoners and that Marshall had hidden, for security reasons, in those books that were rarely used.

Of course, immediately we proceeded to look into many of them, and our surprise was unlimited. We found lots of letters, written by different prisoners, who were asking Marshall to intercede or to inform their families that they were alive.

Imagine how we felt when we read all this material. We started looking all over, not only in the Library, but also in Marshall's office, and we found lots and lots of pamphlets, letters, magazines on Human Rights, etc. carefully hidden in different places. We also found the letters that Marshall and Jacobo Timmerman wrote during and after his liberation, as well as the letters sent to the main representatives of the US government and officials. If this material would have been found by the militaries, it would have endangered not only Marshall's life, but also the lives of those people he was trying to save.

We collected all that material, we photocopied everything and we sent the original materials to his widow. **Why???**

Because by that time nobody could decide to whom that material belonged.

On one side the widow said that this was Marshall's personal correspondence, therefore it belongs to her.

On the other hand if they were found in the Seminario, and being Marshall a representative of this Institution, that material should have remained in Argentina.

But, the fact is, that Naomi Meyer received all those letters and many years later she sent them to Duke University, where the archives of Marshall Meyer can be found.

At the same time, and with her permission, all the photocopies we kept, were digitalized by an Institution called Memoria Abierta (Open Memory), which collects everything related to those years of the dirty war. All this material is available for researchers, and of course in the internet. This is a joint project between Seminario and Memoria Abierta.

Marshall spoke out at every opportunity, his life was constantly threatened and his wife was advised to take the children home to America.

But, **they stayed**, and Marshall's legacy of humans rights activity remains alive in Argentine.

When Mr. Ricardo Alfonsin was elected as the first democratic President of Argentina after the military government, Rabbi Meyer was the only non Argentine appointed to the Committee for the Disappeared. He received the country's highest medal bestowed on a non Argentinian.

After the 25 years he spent in Argentina, Marshall, his wife Naomi and his three kids born in Argentina – Anita, Dodi and Gaby, decided to return to the United States.

In an interview he explained: *My decision to leave Argentina was prompted by emotional, physical and spiritual exhaustion, the result of living under the tremendous pressures of a military dictatorship, followed by more than a year of intensive work on the National Commission on Disappeared persons.*

*During that time I traveled and took testimony throughout the world, trying to trace the disappeared and find the guilty parties.*

*It was one of the most grueling and horrifying experiences in my life, but not my first contact with these mothers and grandmothers.*

*I had been working with them since the military takeover in March 1976.*

*But by last June (**this was 1984**) I felt that I had to get away for a while. I could no longer bear to look in the pained, anxiety-ridden faces of parents whose children had long disappeared and were probably no longer alive.*

Marshall's personal identification with Latin America was so complete that even after leaving Argentina he continued to use "us" when speaking of the Seminario and Latin American positions.

Despite being brought up and spending most of his adult life in the United States, he seemed more Latin American than North American.

His pulpit and his personal language were peppered with neologism or English versions of Spanish quotes, and he admitted that he still dreamed in Spanish.

In his writings, the influences came from Heschel, Buber, Barth, Tillich and Nietzsche, even when he does not directly cite them.

This has been the briefest summary of Marshall Meyer's life in Argentina. I could speak for hours, but unfortunately I have only 45 minutes. So I will continue with his major legacy in Argentina and in Latin America: The Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano.

## **THE RABBINICAL SEMINARY**

As I told you at the beginning in my very brief summary, when Marshall came to Argentina, he started as the assistant Rabbi of the Congregación Israelita, but in 1961 as he completed his second year of assisting Rabbi Schlesinger, he returned to the United States.

He spoke to Heschel about his doubts of returning to Argentina or not. He was very concerned about the importance of the establishment of the Seminario and other projects. But he couldn't decide himself. During his interview with Heschel, the

rabbi asked Marshall: *"do you want to study and write about Jewish History, or do you want to make History?"*

*You are now, my dear Marshall in the exact place and in the right moment to do so, and you are the only capable person to carry out this project."*

*Do you want to write another thesis just to prove what you know? You dont have to write another one, prove what you know.*

***Go back and do your work"***

So during 1961, and with the support of the World Council of Synagogues, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Rabbinical Assembly and the United Synagogue, Rabbi Meyer organized the necessary support and potential faculty commitments to begin the pre rabbinical school

On July 1, 1962, in the presence of an assemblage that included international Jewish personalities and Argentine officials, the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano was inaugurated in downtown Buenos Aires, at the synagogue of the Congregación Israelita the Buenos Aires.

**On that historic day, the intellectual foundations of Latin American Conservative Judaism were laid.**

Before that glorious day, Marshall met a unique Sephardic rabbi of his own age in whom he saw a man with great promise. The rabbi, a native Spanish Speaker from Morrocco was Rabbi Mordechai Edery z"L, who, unfortunately, passed away two years ago.

Rabbi Meyer saw in him the needed link with orthodoxy and the necessary communication skills for creating the literature for a modern seminary.

Rabbi Edery helped shape Latin American Conservative Judaism during his more than 20 years association with Rabbi Meyer.

In August 1964 the present location of the Seminario in Belgrano, was opened. The dedication ceremony held in the presence of the Vice President of Argentina, Dr. Carlos Perette, officials from the Catholic and non Catholic church hierarchies, representatives of political parties, of the World Council of Synagogues, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and many Latin American Rabbis, inaugurated the "formative era" of the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano

On that day Marshall's speech was unique. His theology of liberation sounded alarm for Jews and Christians alike. His words were not exclusively about Jewish education and the needs of the Jewish community. His speech was about the needs of the Argentine Community and how the Jews fit in this larger scheme.

Since its foundation, the Seminario has been transformed from a parochial pre rabbinical seminary into a Jewish Institution serving the entire community.

In the beginnings the Seminario's academic preparation was based on two realities.

First, the Seminario, and Rabbi Meyer in particular, always hoped that the JTS and the conservative movement worldwide would contribute significantly to the faculty of the Seminario.

Except for the first 3 years no systematic faculty interchange was ever set up between the Seminario and the JTS. The sporadic visits of scholars such as Jacob Agus, Simon Greenberg, Theodore Friedman, Wolfe Kelman, Isacc Klein, Chaim Avni , did not help build a systematic basic foundation for a scholarly faculty. Therefore, Rabbi Meyer went to the JTS to recruit recent graduates to work in Latin America.

Rabbis Gerald Zelizer, Jerome Epstein, Jeffrey Wohlberg and Allan Letofsky did come for varying periods to teach at the Seminario.

But the problems of language and cultural integration made this arrangement increasingly difficult.

Only in the 80's we had the opportunity to receive Rabbis Pinchas Peli , Shmuel Havidor Hakohen, Moshe Tutnauer and Salom Paul.

In the past years, and due to the economic crisis we hardly receive visiting professors. Sometimes during a trip to Argentina, they offer themselves to give some classes during their short stay in Buenos Aires.

Today, **50 years later**, the Seminario stands, in an impressive five story complex which houses the various educational, cultural and religious programs that attract more than 300 students weekly

The core of the Institution is, and has always been, its library, which is the only Scientific Jewish Library in the Spanish Speaking continent, with 65.000 books and 610 titles of journals and periodicals.

This library is not only used by its students, but researchers from all over the world visit us daily in search of information, as well as students and professors of the non Jewish Universities.

Marshall Meyer and Rabbi Edery carried out two major projects: the publication of the Siddur and the Mahzor with a moder Spanish translation , as well as a Jewish journal very similar to the Conservative Judaism, called MajShavot.

Rabbi Edery also translated the five books of the Torah.

Rabbi Meyer also supervised the translation of significant religious thinkers, into Spanish , both Jewish and non Jewish, a project undertaken with the support of a very well know publishing house called Paidos.

These works, the basis for the theological and ideological orientation of the Seminario, included Leo Schwarz collection called: Great Ages and Ideas of the jewish people, Salo Baron's: Social and Religious History of the Jews, Leo Baecks' "Essence of Judaism", mostly all the books written by Abraham Joshua Heschell, Martin Buber's "Tales of Hasidim" and Jacob Agus "The Evolution of Jewish People, as well as works from Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmand and William James.



Nowadays, unfortunately this agreement does not longer exist and we are only reproducing or re publishing some of these books.

The first edition of our Academic Journal MajShavot (Thoughts) appeared in 1961. This journal has represented a vehicle for the formation of Jewish thought in Latin America. MajShavot is a combination of 10-20 Jewish journals, like Judaism, Conservative Judaism, Commentary, the Jewish Spectator, etc. One of the goals of MajShavot was to encourage Latin Americans to produce original articles on Jewish thought and theology, including as well, articles of some of the world's greatest Jewish thinkers, such as Rabbi Heschel and Rabbi Seymour Siegel's works.

First MajShavot was published 4 times a year, then 3, then 2, then 1, and for the past four years we could not publish any number. But the good news is that we could start again with its publication. We have recently published a four year issue, and we hope to have a regular edition of at least 2 issues a year.

Most of our graduates, 86 up to date, who now serve throughout Latin America, North America and Israel, speak a variation of Marshall Meyer's rabbinic language. It is peppered with citations from the Bible, Pirkei Avot, Maimonides, Mendelssohn, Herman Cohen, Heschel, Buber, Nietzsche, Barth Tillic and Bonhoeffer.

Although the graduates of the Seminario are native Spanish speakers, Rabbi Meyer's terminology was their standard. A new generation of rabbinical and theological terminology had begun in Latin America.

**Rabbi Meyer chose for the logo of the Seminario the words from Prophet Isaiah (43.10 and 12) : Atem Edai –  
“ You are My witnesses” because he hoped the students would become living witnesses to the tradition of Judaism**

Rabbi Marshall Meyer died on December 29<sup>th</sup>. 1993 in the city of New York after a long illness. During his funeral the Argentine Rabbi Roly Matalon, chief Rabbi of B'Nai Yeshurum in NY, declared:

*“Marshall, your life was a torch of fire in a world too often lonely, cold and dark, both inside and about us. Your fire is no more but we have the memory of the fire and the sparks. Those of us who had the privilege of your teaching, of your dedication and love, bless and will bless God for your life and we pray that we may be worthy of making fire with the sparks you have left in our souls. We will treasure those sparks for ever”*

**A year after his death, the authorities of the Seminario Rabinico decided unanimously to give the name of Marshall Meyer to the institution, during an international conference held in Buenos Aires, in 1994 called “Inventory of a heritage: The legacy of Marshall T. Meyer”, with the presence of his wife,**

**Naomi, international authorities, most of the rabbis graduated in the Seminario, community leaders and many many people whose life changed after meeting him.**

**Elie Wiesel Said: *A Jew's purpose should not be to make the world more Jewish, but rather to make it more human*"**  
**(Elie Wiesel)**

**This was Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer's purpose. This is the lesson he taught to his disciples, and to the whole world, during the 25 years he lived in Argentina.**

**THANK YOU MARSHALL I AM ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHOSE LIFE CHANGED AFTER MEETING YOU!!**

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