

In memoriam: George N. Schlesinger
By David Shatz (Yeshiva University)

Last summer saw the passing of George Schlesinger, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, at the age of 87. The word "unique" is overused in our culture, and philosophers like to argue that it applies trivially to anything-- because everything is unique in *some* respect. And yet, in defiance of philosophical scruples, I can't help affirming that George Schlesinger was *truly* unique. It is a pretty safe bet that no other analytic philosopher enjoyed telling stories about the saintliness of the Hafetz Hayyim, went swimming as a teenager with the Hazon Ish (Rav Abraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, 1878-1953), and spoke with love and awe of Rav Isser Zalman Meltzer (1870-1953), author of the *Even Ha-ezel* commentary on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and a rabbinic figure whom Schlesinger also knew. Yes, no other analytic philosopher did such things--let alone a professor of Schlesinger's stature and achievement in the philosophical world.

A descendant of the sixteenth century luminary Rav Mordekhai Jaffe ("The Levush"), George (Natan) was born in Budapest in 1925, and came to his college education relatively late in life. Just before World War II, he, his parents and his brother managed to escape the Nazis approaching Hungary by bribing someone in the British embassy to issue a visa. All they could get was a tourist visa, and the trip to the land of Israel was horrendous because the family was terrified of being sent back. Nonetheless, they managed to settle in Bnei Brak. There they lived next door to Rav Karelitz zt"l, who had at the time only a small circle of followers and only later became widely known as the Hazon Ish. When George was a young teen, his mother arranged to have him ride to the beach on Fridays with the Hazon Ish and a few of his students. After moving to Jerusalem, George studied at Yeshiva Kol Torah and the Chevron Yeshiva, where he became known as somewhat of an *illui* (prodigy) with an open secret: the desire to study English and secular studies. He was sent to the Hazon Ish a few times so that the latter could persuade him to remain in Chevron Yeshiva. At age 23, he was hired by Rav Moshe Zvi Neriyah to be a RaM (Rosh Mesivta) at Yeshivat Bnei Akiva in Kfar ha-Roeh. He accepted despite not yet having

received semikhah from Rav Meltzer's son. There he met his wife Shulamit. They married in 1950.

George did not attend high school, but he wanted to pursue a secular education, and chose London as the venue. He had an equivalency degree, but it wasn't recognized in England. While teaching at a Jewish institution in Manchester, he was studying physics and applied math in order to be admitted to the University of London. Because of his years in yeshivot, it was not until age 30 that George received a BSc from the university, followed by a master's degree, but he earned a PhD quickly, in 1959, from The University of Melbourne. In Melbourne he headed the network of Orthodox Sunday schools and published the periodical *Ittoneinu* for children and parents. He began his philosophy career teaching at Australian National University, where he again contributed to the life of the Jewish community, performing many rabbinic functions on a volunteer basis. He came to Chapel Hill in 1967 and was regularly a visiting professor at Bar-Ilan from 1972 through 1987.

George wrote many things, and *on* many things—philosophy of science, probability theory, metaphysics, epistemic logic, philosophy of language, ethics, and, last but very far from least, philosophy of religion. He argued for theism with vigor and flair, and against an array of efforts to refute it. Apart from ten books and a mountain of papers in philosophy journals, he published several articles in *Tradition*, the journal of Orthodox thought, bringing to its readers treatments of the anthropic principle, suffering, and the paradox of humility. In addition, he contributed to books such as *Challenge: Torah Views on Science and Its Problems* and *Science in the Light of Torah*.

A true "harif" – a sharp, incisive mind--he loved, besides the big philosophical issues, puzzles and brain teasers. How, for instance, could he resist Newcomb's Paradox? His wonderful books *Aspects of Time* and *Timely Topics* are signature examples; they even include conundra for the reader and penetrating solutions in the back of the book. Cleverness, originality, imagination, and piercing analysis were his hallmarks. Reading his work, one also gets the feeling that the author was having an enviably good time writing. All the while he gave many Torah lectures and created innumerable *divrei Torah*, so that his son always managed to find a "vort" from his

father relevant to his weekly *shiur*. George also had an artistic side, creating oil paintings and drawing cartoons, some of them philosophical.

We first met in 1980 or so, and spoke or met from time to time. He was straight out of central casting. With a thick Hungarian accent, deep voice, sprightly dress, jovial disposition, self-effacing manner, and abundant wit and humor (his wife says there wasn't a quip or joke he didn't know and remember), he was wonderfully engaging in his frequent visits to my classes as a guest lecturer (*gratis*). What struck me no less, however, is that in conversations, he showed an arresting and rare quality: piety. For all his high powered philosophical machinery, Natan (as he preferred I address him) was ultimately a man of simplicity and faith. He was also humble, kind and concerned. After I had a cardiac problem twenty years ago, he chided me each time thereafter when I --a generation younger-- told him about some project or other. "But this is too much for you!" he would exclaim. (My wife and I loved how he would identify himself when he'd call: "Schlesinger here," came the unmistakable voice.)

In 1994, George penned an article for a volume of autobiographical essays by theistic philosophers, edited by Thomas V. Morris, then of Notre Dame (whose life path is itself most interesting). It is a remarkable, revealing piece about "the transition from an intensely religious community to a radically differently motivated community consisting of mainly secular philosophers." Rather than compare the talmudic and academic methodologies, he expands on a difference in "intellectual attitudes." He inquires, "What single human characteristic is a necessary ground without which no piety can prevail?" and his answer is: humility.

He relates a story about Rav Meltzer. A critic published an essay arguing that Rav Meltzer's work on Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* contained many errors and inconsistencies and was based on inadequate scholarship. A student of Rav Meltzer thought he could refute all the allegations in print, and was about to send a rebuttal to the journal's editor. Rabbi Meltzer was content, instead, to let the critic have the last word in print because the man had undergone misfortunes and was in depression. "Surely," said Rav Meltzer, "I cannot allow you to deprive [this man] . . . of whatever joy and satisfaction he may have derived" from publishing the refutation. In another instance that Schlesinger relates, a brilliant *rosh yeshiva* discovered that the solution he had propounded to a certain textual difficulty was anticipated by a great rabbi one hundred years earlier. He responded how happy he was to discover this! While the majority of

religious people fall short of this ideal, Schlesinger maintains, the attitude of “*barukh she-kivvanti!*” marks a distinctive ethos (or at least that’s how I would put it) of the Torah world. Few secular academics would have the *rosh yeshiva*’s reaction, but instead most would be disappointed to learn that they were not first on the scene. And were a philosopher to display such humility, Schlesinger maintains, it wouldn’t be *because of* philosophy. Schlesinger concludes by saying that he personally feels incapable of living up to the Torah ideal, so that his journey from the Torah world to philosophy “may in an important sense be said to have been downhill.” “Yet,” he continued, “the effort of my earlier vocation can’t be said to have vanished without leaving a trace.” As someone remarked, he was a person who contributed a great deal to the world of philosophy while being able to maintain a critical distance.

Whether or not you concur with George’s contrast between Torah study and academic philosophy, his reverence for Torah and rabbinic luminaries emerges with luminous clarity. His combination of academic prowess, intellectual might, piety, reverence, incisiveness, joviality, faith, wit, and wide erudition in matters both large and small made George Schlesinger one of the most colorful and endearing personalities I have met in any walk of life. His conglomeration of traits and achievements inspire fascination and awe. He was unique -- under many a description.

Yehi zikhro barukh—may his memory be blessed.