

## Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, z"l—"Obama's Rabbi"—A Remembrance

by Doni Remba, President and Executive Director, the Jewish Alliance for Change

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, one of the great religious leaders of our time and a champion of peace and social justice, has left us. I had the privilege of working with Arnie during the 1980's as a teacher of children and adults for the first six years of his tenure at KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation in Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood. He remained a friend and ally ever since. This is a time to remember him, and the enormous contribution he has made to Jewish and American life.

By the time I had met him in 1980, Arnie had already served as a Navy chaplain during the Korean war, marched with King in Selma during the sixties, founded and led an innovative synagogue, and had been one the primary moving forces behind the creation in 1973 of the first national Jewish organization advocating for Palestinian-Israeli peace based on a two-state solution, at a time when calling for mutual Israeli and Palestinian recognition and rights was seen as high treason within the Jewish community.

In his essay, "A Theology of Activism," Arnie writes: "I believe that Judaism mandates a quite specific political ethic which is binding upon all Jews. I include among our political obligations the amelioration of inequality, offering sanctuary to those fleeing oppression and tyranny, and a perpetual struggle for peace, even at some risk to our own security and safety...[T]he positive commandment of Judaism is to begin to act again and again, in the face of all doubt and with due consideration of all that negative experience can teach...God will complete our imperfections. She will not forgive our self-defensive cowardice or our fear of failure."

He thought a rabbi ought to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable"—as one rabbi and close friend put it at his funeral, as his friend Martha Nussbaum, the renowned political philosopher at the University of Chicago Law School, reports in what is perhaps the most evocative remembrance of him. (<http://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/faculty/2008/12/arnold-wolf-19242008.html>) Throughout his life and work, Arnie exemplified "a passion for challenge and argument, a love of the search for truth whatever its inconveniences, a profound respect for dissenting opinions," in Martha's apt words.

Contrary to what some hawkish Orthodox critics say, the commitment to the pursuit of peace and social justice of many Jews like Arnie did not flow from some attachment to universalism that was somehow opposed to their Jewishness and their Judaism. For Arnie, it was integral to his understanding of what Jewish tradition demanded of us. Though he was an iconoclast and progressive in his politics, he was among the leaders of the return to tradition in Reform Judaism.

Arnie saw Judaism as defined by the belief that "it is better to do something under command than by choice....*Mitzvah* [commandment] is in a privileged position....To all of us North Americans," he noted, "autonomy and choice—freedom and the ability to decide for ourselves—are crucial. But to Judaism, as I understand it, the opposite is the case...All Judaism is *mitzvah*. There is nothing else." He maintained, as one of his provocatively titled articles put it, that "There is No Judaism but Orthodoxy—But All Jews are Really Reform."

He taught that

Jews are required, so far as they are able, to help other Jews. We have an obligation to support Israel, which by no means is identical to support for any given government policy there or, for that matter, a policy of the United States. We are not allowed to be bland universalists, just as we are not allowed to consider our own family the moral equivalent of all other families. Our ethical tasks begin close to home and then move in ever-widening circles until, in principle, if never in reality, we embrace the whole world. To be a Jew means to love 'the near one' (neighbor) as ourselves, hoping to bring near as many as we can.

To a young man who in 1980, having recently lost his 47-year old father, wondered how a just God could have created a universe in which life could be so torn asunder, Arnie responded in the traditional Jewish idiom as God had to Job that we cannot understand the ways of the Creator—a response that left me distinctly unsatisfied. My grappling with God, good and evil inevitably spilled over into my classroom at KAM. After a free-wheeling exchange in which my young students and I alternately challenged and defended the conventional explanations of God and radical evil, I asked them to put their thoughts to paper. Arnie loved the product, even with its dissenting and sometimes slightly heretical notions. In 1981 and again in 1984, he published their ruminations for the whole congregation, presenting their “profound and poignant theological reflections with pride and deep respect.” “When do we lose these youthful insights,” he wondered aloud. “How do we get them back again?”

### **The Loving Critic: Israel and the American Jewish Community**

Arnie was, in so many ways, an exemplar of the rabbinic teaching that “Love unaccompanied by criticism is not love . . . Peace unaccompanied by reproof is not peace.” (*Genesis Rabbah* 54:3) He lived a life guided by the prophetic ideal of criticism from love. As founding chair of *Breira*—which means “alternative”—he helped spearhead a Jewish organization which proposed “an alternative to the intransigence of both the PLO and the several governments of Israel,” speaking out for the then-heterodox idea of a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Though *Breira* had the participation of over a hundred Reform and Conservative rabbis and noted American Jewish writers and intellectuals, the group was subjected to a vicious McCarthyite campaign of calumny in the organized Jewish community. Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, was perhaps the only major leader of a Jewish organization to defend *Breira*, calling the attacks on the group, and firing by major Jewish organizations of some of its rabbinic supporters, a “witch hunt,” all of which led to *Breira*’s dissolution by 1977.

While Arnie continued to be a passionate advocate for Israeli-Palestinian peace, I believe he was deeply heartened to see that from the 1980’s on there were so many other American Jews—and mainstream pro-Israel Jewish organizations—who had followed in his footsteps in calling, and working, for a serious and sustained American initiative to help bring about Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement and a comprehensive Arab-Israeli settlement. But Arnie was no uncritical peacenik. He wrote of the obligations of Palestinians to end violence against Israel, and of Israel to work with Palestinians to end the occupation and bring about a secure two-state solution:

The Palestinians are right to demand their liberation; the Jewish people need look no further than their own history to understand the wrong of the occupation. But it must not be forgotten that Israel is also right to demand the end of violence coming from some segments of the Palestinian community. Liberation is not enough -- we have also the obligation to live ethical lives.

Both sides, then, must recognize the humanity of the other, and work together toward their mutual freedom, their mutual obligations. We learn in Exodus 12 that the Israelites went up from Egypt with a mixed multitude -- they were not alone as they shook off their oppression, and, we can presume, they were not alone at Sinai.

God does not speak only to the Jews. The Creator speaks to all Creation, calls on each of us, individually and in our communities, to live in freedom and responsibility. Israel and the Palestinians must talk with each other, in honesty and mutual respect, and achieve a durable peace agreement, if either people is to know real liberation.

When, as president of Chicago Peace Now, the progressive Zionist group I had co-founded in 2001 after the failure of the Oslo peace process, I returned to KAM in 2004 to host a public dialogue with the Senior Legal Advisor to the Palestinian Negotiating Team from the Camp David and Taba talks, and a prominent American Jewish peace advocate, it was at the invitation of KAM’s Cantor Deborah Bard. Arnie was

there, but I was remiss in not having publicly recognized that we were in the presence of one of the rabbinic giants who had courageously pioneered American Jewish support for Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation.

It had been a few years since I had been back at KAM, though I had continued to visit with Arnie in other places. His eyes twinkled as he asked: “So, does it look the same?” I went up to my old classroom, whose windows gaze out on Barack Obama’s home, and confessed: “It’s as if time has frozen. Nothing has changed!” But so much had, and we both knew it.

Though now the synagogue’s emeritus rabbi, Arnie continued to teach classes, educate Bar and Bat Mitzvah students, deliver the occasional sermon, and engage, as always, in political activism. Last year, Arnie delivered a blistering Yom Kippur sermon titled “Our Sin.” KAM had all at once lost its serving rabbi, its cantor, and its director of education, all extraordinarily talented people each in their own fields. Arnie went on to reprove the congregation, and himself, for their and his own very real failings, which he believed had caused the departure of so many of the synagogue’s senior staff.

### **“Obama’s Rabbi”**

Arnie had been one of Obama’s earliest supporters when Obama first ran for the Illinois State Senate in a district that encompassed Hyde Park and other parts of Chicago. When, over a decade later, late in the presidential race, McCain and Palin sought to discredit Obama through guilt by association with one Professor Bill Ayers, a Hyde Park neighbor, Arnie let it be known that for a host of reasons it was a bum rap. Attempting to tar Obama as “paling around with terrorists,” McCain and Palin claimed that Ayers had “launched Obama’s political career in his living room.” But Arnie pointed out that many people in Hyde Park had hosted coffees for Obama—“there were several every week”—to introduce the candidate to the community and help him build political support. He noted that his wife Grace insisted that their own coffee for Obama had actually been the first—so if anything, Obama’s political career had actually been “launched” in Arnie and Grace’s living room.

In March of this year, Arnie sprang to Obama’s defense when he was under attack for the remarks of his minister, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. He made clear that he supported Obama’s candidacy not out of “neighborly instinct,” but “because he stands for what I believe, what our tradition demands.” And as a rabbi who had long prized his freedom to take controversial political and religious stands before his congregation, he reminded the American Jewish community that “We sometimes forget, but an integral part of that tradition is dialogue and a willingness to disagree. Certainly many who call me their rabbi have taken political positions far from mine - just as Barack Obama’s opinions have differed from those of his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.”

Then he reminded us of what was really at stake in this election for Jews and for all Americans, adding his and his family’s testimony to vouch for his friend Barack:

Obama’s strong positions on poverty and the climate, his early and consistent opposition to the Iraq War, his commitment to ending the Darfur genocide - all these speak directly to Jewish concerns. If we’re sidetracked by Wright’s words, we’ll be working against these interests. After all, a preacher speaks to a congregation, not for the congregation.

I’ve worked with Obama for more than a decade, as has my son, a lawyer who represents children and people with disabilities. He has admired Obama’s dedication and skill as he worked on issues affecting our most vulnerable citizens....Barack Obama is brilliant and open-hearted; he is wiser and more thoughtful than his former minister. He offers what America, Israel, and the Jewish community need: a US President willing to ask hard questions, and grapple with difficult answers. I am very proud to be his neighbor. I hope someday to visit him in the White House.

Soon thereafter, Arnie joined our Board of Advisors, with the encouragement of his (other) political activist and Orthodox son, Jonathan. Arnie was proud to join a Jewish organization which was then sponsoring Jews for Obama, and which, as the Jewish Alliance for Change, continued to advocate for Obama in the Jewish community through Election Day, while espousing a progressive domestic and foreign policy agenda.

President-elect Obama issued the following statement upon learning of Arnie's passing, which was read at his funeral at KAM:

I am deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, who was not just our neighbor, but a dear friend to Michelle and me. We are joined in this time of grief by the entire Hyde Park community, the American Jewish Community, and all those who shared Rabbi Wolf's passion for learning and profound commitment to serving others.

Throughout Chicago and in Jewish homes and classrooms across our country, Rabbi Wolf's name is synonymous with service, social action, and the possibility of change. He will be remembered as a loving husband and father, an engaging teacher, a kindhearted shepherd for the KAM Isaiah community, and a tireless advocate of peace for the United States, Israel and the world.

But Arnie's long-time vociferous support for Obama did not prevent him from criticizing his friend when he believed he had erred. A few weeks ago, at a public talk at KAM delivered by Abner Mikva, the former federal judge and White House Counsel to President Clinton who is one of Obama's mentors and advisors, Arnie chastised Obama over some of his cabinet appointments and for his reversal this summer on a civil rights issue: Obama's decision to support legislation granting legal immunity to telecommunications companies that had cooperated with the Bush administration's program of wiretapping without warrants. This "pragmatic move to the center" was a reversal of Obama's prior opposition to President Bush's effort to expand the government's domestic spying powers.

Even as he defended Obama in March, Arnie wrote that "I've sometimes found Obama too cautious on Israel. He, like all our politicians, knows he mustn't stray too far from the conventional line, and that can be disappointing. But unlike anyone else on the stump, Obama has also made it clear that he'll broaden the dialogue. He knows what peace entails."

Had Arnie lived to see the great suffering of Israelis and Palestinians in the current crisis, he would have been among those reminding us that it stems above all else from the woeful absence of real diplomatic leadership on the part of the United States and its allies. He would have been privately urging his friend, the President-elect, to upon taking office launch an unprecedented drive to negotiate a more durable cease-fire, coupled with a bold regional approach to comprehensive Israeli-Arab peace, one which "breaks fundamentally with past efforts."

### ***Baruch Dayan Emet***

Arnie was, as he himself had said of his great teacher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "a prophet who knew that prophecy was now impossible. But, as he taught us, the prophets and sages are dead. It is only the living who now constitute Israel and will together make its future." What a hole in the universe has been left, cried Rabbi Arthur Waskow. Arnie will be sorely missed by so many; we need him now more than ever.

To read President-elect Obama's letter in remembrance of Rabbi Wolf, please visit <http://my.barackobama.com/page/community/post/president/gGxK9X>