

Judah Nadich

By Shira Nadich Levin and James L. Levin

Delivered at B'nai Jeshurun—Yom Kippur 2014

Today, Jimmy and I have the privilege of talking about the role that my father, Judah Nadich, *zichrono livracha*—or rather our father, since Jimmy's relationship with my parents was that of a son—played during and after World War II and, particularly, in his role as the first advisor on Jewish Affairs to General Eisenhower, directly after World War II and the Holocaust.

To understand what my father brought to that role, and how it affected him, it is helpful to get some understanding of who he was.



Judah Nadich - Senior US Army Chaplain during World War II (in Europe) and, after the War, Advisor on Jewish Affairs to General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Adolph Judah Nadich was born in 1912 in Baltimore, the child of East European Jewish immigrants. His father, Isaac, barely earned a living as a grocer. The family lived above the store, and included his mother, Leah, who died when he was 10 and then his father's second wife, Nessa, (who became his "second mother"), and his sisters Fannie, Gertie and Esther. My father-in-law initially rebelled against the Jewish education he received at the hands of unappealing and even incompetent teachers, and his mother was in despair: "What will happen to this boy? He'll become a truck driver." Happily, a fine teacher inspired him, and his mother made sure he had the opportunity to go to New York to attend Yeshiva High School and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (today, Yeshiva University). He also attended The

City College of New York at night, receiving a Bachelor's Degree. After graduating from both institutions, he matriculated in the Jewish Theological Seminary, which appealed to him as being more modern. He happened to be a student at JTS during what many would call its "golden age."

Following the rise of Hitler, he understandably dropped the name Adolph and became Judah.

At 24, Judah was ordained and became a pulpit rabbi, serving in Buffalo and Chicago. He later served in Brookline, Massachusetts and for 30 years was the rabbi of the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York.

Pearl Harbor transformed his life. He enlisted in January 1942 as a chaplain in the army, and soon became the first Jewish chaplain in the European theater, initially sent to the United Kingdom, where he was stationed until a few days after D Day. My father-in-law did not remain the only American Jewish chaplain in Europe for long, but he was the highest ranking among them. His experiences during the war are a topic for another occasion.

My father-in-law described in his book "Eisenhower and the Jews" the first service held at the Rothschild Synagogue in Paris after the liberation of Paris—in the presence of American soldiers and thousands of French Jews: "All of the pent up feelings—fear, grief, despair under the Nazis, mixed now with elation, relief, hope because of the liberation, burst forth at the sight of an American rabbi—he could have been any American Jewish chaplain—speaking in a service of liberation from German rule." In a book by Debra Darvick, she described the experiences of an American soldier who was present that day in the synagogue: "Despite the fact that the announcement of this service for Jewish soldiers had been hush-hush, it seemed as if every Jew in Paris caught wind of it. When I approached the synagogue, police officers were still removing the boards that had covered the ornate doors and windows of the Rothschild synagogue during the four years of Nazi occupation. The courtyard outside the synagogue was mobbed—men, women, children, mothers pushing their babies in perambulators all wanting to enter. When I finally made my way into the synagogue, I immediately heard Shalom Aleichem echoing from every corner of that magnificent building. Tears of joy streamed down the cheeks of all who were gathered." The soldier goes on to describe the reaction of the French Jews to hearing Major Judah Nadich preach in English, Hebrew—and then in French—and how my father-in-law handed him a Torah scroll to carry around the synagogue, which forever transformed the soldier's life.

In the months following the liberation of the concentration camps, the American army came under criticism in the United States for its treatment of the Jewish survivors, some of whom were forced to share their camps with Nazi prisoners of war, and almost all of whom were confined behind barbed wire. The report stated: "As matters now stand, the military appears to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them, except that we do not exterminate them." President Truman was shocked and angry. Many changes were put into place as a result of this report. Jewish Displaced Persons were recognized as a separate national category.

In August of 1945, my father-in-law was ordered to Frankfurt, Germany to assume the new role of "Advisor to the Commanding General, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, on Jewish Affairs." In that position, Judah visited the DP camps in the American zone and reported directly to

Eisenhower on those visits, advising the general as to how conditions could be improved. He helped sensitize the military to the conditions of the Jewish DPs and to what they had suffered during the war. My father-in-law wrote a series of reports that are considered invaluable historical documents concerning the conditions of the DPs. He quickly had former Nazis removed from being held together with the DPs, had the rations available to Jewish refugees increased and also persuaded General Eisenhower to have the barbed wire removed from around DP camps. In his memoirs, Judah revealed that he used his position to help free Jewish children who had been hidden in French convents during the war and now were in danger of being kept there. Like many Jewish chaplains, he also secretly assisted the “Breichah” - the so-called illegal immigration to Palestine. He helped relay information, assisted in procuring food and supplies and was otherwise useful in helping refugees fulfill their desire to immigrate to Israel. Years later, he received a decoration from the State of Israel for his services.

We believe that my father’s role as advisor on Jewish Affairs had a profound impact on his life. We know from his diary and book about this period, when he left this position and the army he felt that he could not go back to his former life as a pulpit rabbi. He described addressing a large meeting in New York after the war with emotion and even anger. He could not reconcile what he saw as the normal life of the Jews in the United States with the murder of so many Jews and the destruction of Jewish life in Europe. As a result, for over a year, he spoke throughout the United States, and later in South Africa, to raise money for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and then for UJA, to be used to aid the displaced persons. This speaking tour helped bring first-hand accounts of the Shoah and the condition of the survivors to American and South African Jews. Long before the Shoah was known as “the Holocaust,” my father spoke and wrote about it, hoping that Jews and non-Jews would come to understand its significance.

It is hard for us, his family, to picture my father turning away from the pulpit and away from G-d. I have never known a more religious person. The rabbinate was not a job for him—it was a calling, it was who he was. I grew up in a home that was steeped in the joyous observance of Judaism, in a beautiful environment created and nurtured by my father and my mother, Martha Hadassah Ribalow Nadich. My mother was the daughter of Hebraists (her father was the editor of the Hadoar, the Hebrew weekly published in the United States), and she had gained an impressive secular and Judaic studies education, later working with, among others, Louis Finkelstein, the chancellor of JTS. She was a true partner to my father—but to talk about her is another presentation, for another day.

Friday night and holiday dinners in my parents’ home were continuing threads of joy, made up of my mother’s fabulous meals and pastries, z’mirot, and great conversations, together with the most wonderful mix of the Jewish community—from Mordecai Kaplan and Arthur Hertzberg to

Isaac Bashevis Singer, to student rabbis and cantors and to many members of the synagogue where my father served as rabbi. Judaism and Zionism were key ingredients in the life of my family, and defined us. I viewed my father as having a personal relationship with G-d. When my sisters, Leah and Nommi, and I surrounded his bed in the emergency room when he was not well, although I thought he was sleeping I noticed his lips moving. When his eyes opened, I asked him what he was trying to say. He told me he was thanking the ribbono shel olam, the master of the universe, for giving him such daughters. This was the man I knew, who saw the good in every situation and who thanked G-d for the good in the world (even while he was ill and in the hospital).

The answer to this puzzle was provided to us in interviews of my father conducted and taped by the Shoah Foundation, the Museum of Jewish Heritage and the Holocaust Museum, which we viewed after his death. He described to the interviewers what he witnessed in Europe and his resulting difficulties with his faith in G-d. But he explained that with the passage of time, while he questioned Judaism, G-d, and this world as a result of what he had seen, he realized he would have many more questions if he did not believe in G-d. He talked about the indescribable joy he found with my mother and from his family, as well as the incredible beauty of a flower and other wonders of nature, and he realized that pondering how these beautiful things came to be would present even greater questions for him without his belief in G-d.

Some of his experiences in his role as Eisenhower's advisor hold a key to how he found his way back to G-d and to his life as a rabbi. We would like to share some of those with you, in the words of my father-in-law:

"On my very first trip to Feldafing, I visited the hospital nearby at St. Ottilien. When the American army was approaching Dachau, the concentration camp's officials herded many of the Jewish inmates aboard a train's cattle cars, thinking they would take their Jewish prisoners south to be exterminated at their convenience. But the American army moved faster than expected and the train was abandoned not far from Dachau, close to a large monastery. One of the inmates was a young Jewish doctor from Lithuania, Zalman Grinberg. When the German guards fled, he led the Jews into the monastery, took over its hospital buildings, seized medicines and hospital supplies and opened a hospital for the sick and exhausted Jews, suddenly freed. By the time I visited the hospital, some 1200 patients had already been discharged and 785 were still occupying beds. Some of the patients had been brought from Dachau and others from DP camps.

Dr. Grinberg took me on a tour from ward to ward. He saved the children's ward for last. As we entered the ward, I saw about fifty or sixty boys and girls with all kinds of wounds and injuries. Here there was a child without a leg, there, a child without an arm. In one bed a child's skull was completely bandaged, in another, a child's eyes were covered with bandages. Dr. Grinberg

looked at me and, seeing the emotion on my face, said, "I can see that you are moved by the sight of the injured children. But worse than their visible scars and injuries, are the scars that these children carry within themselves. Remember that each of these children came to Dachau with a family. Each of them has seen the members of their family go, one by one. Perhaps an older brother was shot down by a machine gun, an older sister dragged away screaming before being killed, their mother pulled from their clutches, their father shot in the head by the bullet of a guard's revolver. The survival of each of these children is itself a miracle."

Then Dr. Grinberg turned to the children and said, "Boys and girls, you see we have a guest, an American army officer. But he is also a rabbi. Children, sing a song for our guest." The older ones started, the younger joined in, and they sang the song, "Am Yisrael Chai! (The Jewish People Lives!)" The tears rushed to my eyes as I thought, after what these children have experienced—they can still sing "The Jewish People Lives!" Then, certainly, the Jewish people will live."

"I was called to the office of a member of General Eisenhower's staff, shown a telegram from Paris requesting permission for a prominent Jewish leader to enter the American zone of Germany and asked whether I recognized the name of the person referred to in the wire. The name was David Ben Gurion, then the head of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. When I assured the officer that I knew who the person was, he asked whether I thought it would be advisable to admit him into our zone of Germany. My answer was that his visits to the DP camps would certainly raise the morale of the Jews in the camps. The officer told me that he would at once send back approval of the request.

That night I was in Paris and I visited Ben Gurion at his hotel, where we talked for a while, and then arranged to meet later in the evening on the platform of the army train to Frankfurt. His concern, voiced to me in our conversation, was about the stamina of the survivors. Are they altogether broken people? He wanted to know. Are they crushed in spirit? Will they, when brought to Palestine, need institutionalization or could they adjust to living and working in the Jewish homeland? Quickly, I assured him that these Jewish survivors were strong. They had to be to survive. I had no hesitation in saying that they would make excellent citizens of any country where they would live. But he was anxious to see for himself.

That evening, Ben Gurion and I were to travel to Frankfurt by overnight train. I arrived early to the train station. My accommodation on the train was a bedroom which I was to share with another officer. I put down my bag and went back to the platform. After a short while, Ben Gurion arrived and I learned that he was given a seat in coach. It did not bother him but I could not let him sit up all night. I looked for the train captain. When I met him, I thought it was good luck that, by chance, he was a young Jewish officer. "Do you know who Ben Gurion is?" I asked him hopefully. "No," he answered flatly. "He is the head of all of the Jews of Palestine," I told

him, trying to make it simple. I continued, "He is coming to Frankfurt as General Eisenhower's guest, and you cannot permit him to sit up all night in coach." "What do you expect me to do about it?" he asked. That was my opening. "Tell the major sharing my bedroom - that you are very sorry, but a guest of General Eisenhower has to be taken care of, and have the major take a seat in coach, since no other bedroom is available." In that way, I was able to arrange for Ben Gurion to share my bedroom. We spoke for hours as I tried to answer his many questions about the displaced persons, the camps in which they were temporarily living, about Eisenhower and the American army. We finally got to sleep until we arrived in Frankfurt.

I took him to the general's office and, upon entering, I said, "General, if there were a Jewish state in Palestine, I should be introducing you now to its prime minister, Mr. David Ben Gurion." The two men chatted for a while. General Eisenhower told Ben Gurion that he was anxious to satisfy his curiosity about the DPs. He would provide him with an army car and driver to take him to any DP camps that he wished to inspect. He concluded by asking Ben Gurion to see him again after his visits to give him a report of what he had seen, together with his recommendations.

In the afternoon I took Ben Gurion to Zeilsheim, the DP camp nearest Frankfurt. We pulled into the camp and stopped. Several of the Jewish survivors saw me and came over to chat. I had been there many times before. One of the men followed the others but looked into the army car. Suddenly he let loose an unearthly scream. "Ben Gurion!" he shouted, "Ben Gurion!"

The others, who had been talking with me, left me and gazed into the rear of my vehicle. They too took up the scream. Other men nearby came running. Ben Gurion in Zeilsheim? How could that be? I feared a riot and, quieting the men, I said to them, "Yes, it is Ben Gurion. I want you to show him the discipline of which you are capable. He has come to speak to you. Spread the word that Ben Gurion will speak in the auditorium." They at once took off, running.

Zeilsheim had a camp population at the time of about 3,500 people. In a little more than half an hour, the large auditorium was full, all the seats taken, all the aisles and the wide space in the rear filled with standing men and women. Looking through all the open windows and doors, were the people who could not get in, all of them quiet, trying to see and hear.

Finally, Ben Gurion and I walked out on the stage. Those seated rose to their feet and, without any signal, began singing Hatikvah, the Jewish national anthem, voicing the hope that some day Jews will return to the land of Israel, "the land of Zion and Jerusalem, Eretz Tzion Ve'Yerushalayim" As they sang, tears rolled down their cheeks. On the stage, Ben Gurion and I were also singing, with tears rolling down our cheeks. The survivors could not believe their eyes. Through the dark years of hell under the Nazis, in concentration camps and in flight from their tormentors, they cherished one hope. If they miraculously would survive to see freedom

again, they would leave the lands of the anti-Semites, the countries of the killers, and go to the land of Israel. Now, here in this DP camp, on the cursed soil of Germany, the land of Israel had come to them in the person of Ben Gurion! For the first time they believed that the nightmare was over, they were really free!”

We are so very grateful to the rabbis and to Myriam Abramowicz, for providing us with the extraordinary privilege of talking about our father and his experiences, particularly on this day, which was a source of great spiritual inspiration for him throughout his life. G'mar Hatimah Tovah.

Shira Nadich Levin and James Loren Levin have been members of BJ since 1997. They have three sons, Alexander, Gideon and Benjamin, and were thrilled when Sara and Benjamin were married in 2013. Shira worked on community building initiatives at BJ, co-chairs the Minyan committee, regularly attends and hosts BJ classes and is currently co-chairing the Israel Dialogue Initiatives. She was the Kallat Torah in 2014.

Jim is the Chief Operating Officer at the Columbia/Barnard Hillel and Shira is a real estate partner at Cooley LLP, co-chair of its leasing committee and the founder and chair of its Women's Initiatives. She is a member of the east coast board of WILEF (Women in Law Empowerment Forum) and served as president of The Abraham Joshua Heschel School, where she remains an honorary trustee and a member of its executive committee. She has served on the boards of other organizations, provides pro-bono work to numerous Jewish organizations and is a trustee of the Alan B. Slifka Foundation.