

Orthodox sister, like Reform brother, still pushes the envelope

by Helen Tettelbaum
NJ/N Bureau Chief/Middlesex

Orthodox rebbetzin Eva Oles, 76, says that if she had another few decades, she might consider pursuing the rabbinic. Such a choice would no doubt put her at odds with her fellow congregants at her Orthodox Highland Park shul. But one suspects that she would survive, even enjoy, the controversy.

Within the microcosm of Oles' own family, pluralism is the catch word. Her brother, Rabbi Alexander Schindler — who died a few weeks ago — was a Reform leader; cousin Pesach Schindler is a leader of the Israeli Masorti (Conservative) movement. Even Hasidism — she claims the Belzer rebbe as an ancestor — was in the family mix.

Oles maintained her Orthodoxy even as her brother instituted in Reform Judaism what many see as the ultimate split in the Jewish people: patrilineal descent. While Oles disagreed with her younger brother's position, she says she never raised the topic with him, feeling that he was motivated by love of the Jewish people and what he regarded as a way to strengthen it.

They simply coexisted peacefully with their differences. "I knew he didn't follow Halacha. We couldn't eat at his house — but all that is irrelevant," she said. "I was a Jew my way and he was in his way." On the other hand, if one of her children had married a non-Jew, she would have insisted "on a halachic, Orthodox conversion" for her daughter- or son-in-law.

In their father, she says, they had a strong example of outreach. Eliezer Schindler, a well-known, Polish-born Yiddish poet, was exiled to Siberia to live among a community of Russian peasants during World War I. The peasants were so impressed with the elder Schindler that under his aegis, they converted to Judaism. Eva and Alexander spent their childhoods in Munich, after their Polish parents emigrated from Poland; the family fled to the United States when the Nazis rose to power.

From an early age, Oles was more religiously observant than her brother — who, she said, wasn't much of a synagogue-goer as a child — and her mother, who attended a Reform synagogue. "We didn't have a kosher house," she said, "yet [my mother] was very intensely Jewish and sent us to a Jewish day school. I had a first-grade teacher, a lovely man, and I began to love Yiddishkeit right then and there, and became very strictly Orthodox.

"I went to my mother and said, 'I want a kosher house, or I won't eat here anymore.' I was six years old! She said, fine. She threw out all the dishes, and taught the maids how to make a kosher house."

Their mother was also a proud Jew who was unhesitant in speaking her mind. In the early '70s, she was taken hostage on a Swiss Air

flight and calmly informed one of the terrorists that she was a Jew and was proud of it. "She said later, 'Maybe I shouldn't have said that,'" said Eva with a smile. Also, she added, her mother had tranquilizers with her and passed them out to her terrified fellow passengers.

When she was a student, Eva



Eva Oles with her brother, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, at a memorial service for their parents less than two weeks before his death

met her future husband, Rabbi M. Arthur Oles, at an annual melave malka, a meal at the close of Shabbat, held for emigres from Munich. Coincidentally, they had lived around the corner from each other in Munich but had never met. To this day she keeps the trigonometry lesson he helped her with at their first meeting.

The couple lived in California for many years, her longtime job as a social worker at the Jewish Home for the Aged in San Francisco and his as a community chaplain often overlapping. Rabbi Oles died in 1998, a few years after he fell ill with Alzheimer's disease and they moved to Highland Park to live near their daughter Miriam, a clinician at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey in Piscataway, and her husband and four children. Their other daughter, Deborah, a doctor, lives in Los Angeles with her two sons.

Oles and her husband followed the teachings of Orthodox leader and scholar Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who headed the Talmud faculty at Yeshiva University in New York and from whom Rabbi Oles received his ordination. His wife displays the *smilita* document with pride in her hallway.

Beyond, her library is neatly kept but nearly overflowing, with precisely half of her wide desk crowded with old family photographs and a coffee table covered by yesterday's Talmud lesson.

Oles pursues Jewish knowledge with as much diligence as a rabbinical student, lamenting that she "started so much of my learning at 76." She is enrolled in several weekly *shiurim* (lessons): two at Ahavas Achim, one at the Highland Park Conservative Temple and Center and a *hevruta* lesson — one-on-one with a part-

ner. An accomplished pianist, Oles also teaches piano to her youngest grandchild, Noam Weinberger, 11, who is a student at Rabbi Pesach Raymon Yeshiva in Edison. He in turn teaches her Gemara.

For many years, every Shabbat afternoon she learned with her husband. After his death, she rented an apartment in New York City so she could study at Drisha, a women's institute for Jewish studies.

Oles also belongs to the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance and ascribes to the view that if there's a halachic will, there's a halachic way for Orthodox women to become rabbis. "Women can find the sources themselves to say, 'Look, there are ways of solving these issues within Halacha for Orthodox women to be as active as men in learning,'" she said. "Start girls young with Gemara; give them the opportunity — not the message, 'You're not good enough for that.'"

Given that she doesn't even like the *mehitza*, what makes Oles stay Orthodox as opposed to embracing Conservative Judaism? She acknowledges that one reason is the lack of observance among the vast majority of Conservative Jews. Also, she said, she feels comfortable with traditional *davening* and Ahavas Achim's Rabbi Ronald Schwartzberg.

Oles' high level of activity is not centered on Jewish life alone. The extent of her involvement in municipal life in Highland Park belies her short time in the borough. Early on, she backed political newcomer Meryl Frank in her successful 1999 bid for mayor against incumbent James Polos, a Democrat. Oles, who felt that provide a more open government than had the Democratic establishment, hosted a tea at her apartment for her candidate. She describes how Polos, now a Middlesex County freeholder, and then Democratic machine leader Dominic Cerminaro came to see her while she was planning the event.

"They actually sat down right here and pleaded with me to invite them," recalled Oles. She refused. "This was a private event for people to get to know Meryl. Polos said, 'But I've done such great things for this town — why can't I come?' They just begged and begged. I couldn't believe it," she said.

"Then there were local rabbis calling me and asking me not to get involved with helping Frank — it wasn't that they were against Frank," recalled Oles, "but they didn't want to go against Polos, who had done things for the Orthodox community."

Oles, who has a PhD in social work, says she would like to use her professional skills in some sort of volunteer project for the municipality. And there is no doubt that Oles is determined to fulfill that goal as well.

Eva S. Oles

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Der Rabbi Silber & my Drisha Friends,

I am reading you the enclosed article which will be of interest to you, as I mention Drisha and our the Benefiting of the Learning of Drisha. You might show the article in the Propagat Drisha, especially Niss Bruder.

It was always so helpful to me. I'm continuing to study on my own, as you can see. I hope all is well with you and with Drisha.

Sincerely,
Eva S. Oles