

Memories Of Rabbi Adler

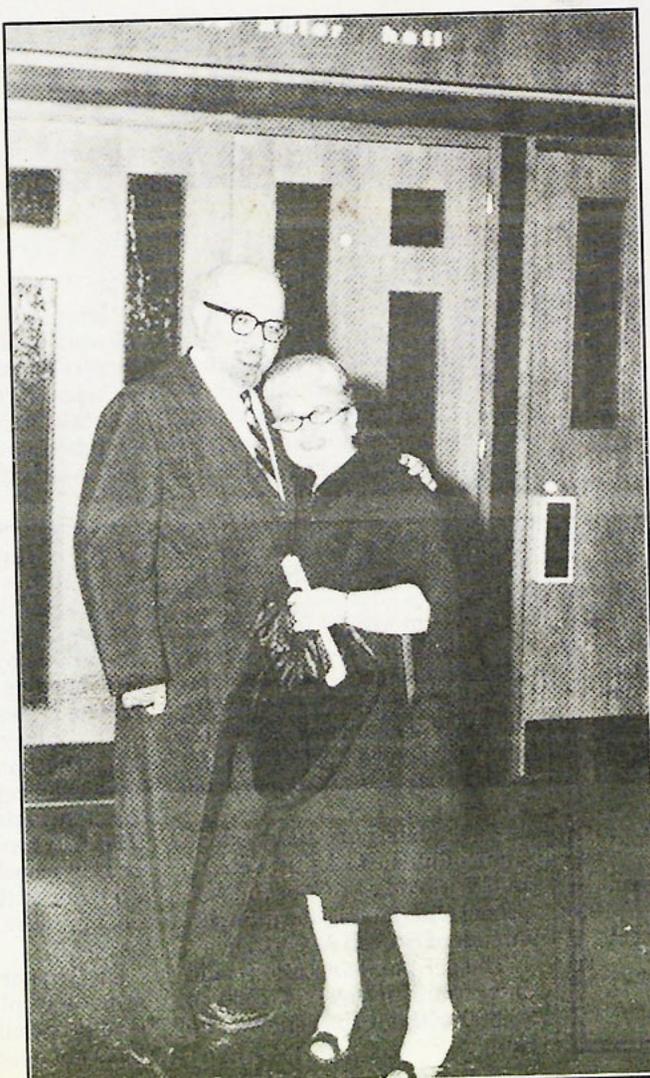
The assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin recalls a tragedy that happened closer to home.

DAVID ZEMAN STAFF WRITER



Above: Rabbi Irwin Groner succeeded Rabbi Adler.

Right: Rabbi Morris Adler and his wife Goldie at Shaarey Zedek.



The recent assassination of Yitzhak Rabin at a peace rally brought back painful memories for some area Jews: the slaying of a beloved rabbi a generation earlier.

Feb. 12 will mark 30 years since Rabbi Morris Adler of Congregation Shaarey Zedek was shot by a mentally ill college student at a Sabbath service. So revered was Rabbi Adler that his funeral, believed to be the largest in Detroit history, drew nearly 15,000 people.

"What nerve the sun has to shine today," sighed one mourner.

That feeling of personal loss and of a shared disgrace that one Jew would kill another was rekindled with Mr. Rabin's death, apparently at the hands of a Jewish extremist. Though the motives and mindset of the two gunmen were worlds apart, both events cast a profound pall over the Jewish community, bringing strangers together in the peculiar way tragedy unites family.

"After Rabbi Adler's death, I spoke to the congregation about the need for unity and said that we would derive our unity from our commitment to the values Rabbi Adler spoke of," said Rabbi Irwin Groner, Rabbi Adler's successor.

Rabbi Groner preached a similar message after Mr. Rabin's death.

"At this time, the people of Israel have different political views," he said. "Their unity should derive from their sense of loyalty to the nation, from their commitment to preserving the strength of the Jewish people, from their shared hope in the future of peace."

Indeed, a haunting irony surrounds both slayings.

Mr. Rabin had just delivered a message at a rally on the necessity for peace, but had confided to advisers that he might not survive the process.

Rabbi Adler, meanwhile, had been troubled shortly before his death by the tide of alienation he sensed in younger Americans.

"We are inducing them into a life in which insecurity and apprehension are dominant, so that the future holds out for them no promising possibilities of peace, safety and security," he wrote.

For those who knew Rabbi Adler, a man of gentle brilliance, the murder was unthinkable. His life had been marked by acts of compassion. He had served as a chaplain during World War II, and had spoken

firmly for civil rights, the rights of workers, and against discrimination.

Friends also recall his humility and humor.

In 1935, when he was asked one day to become the rabbi of a synagogue in Buffalo after giving a sermon, Rabbi Adler remarked, "I suppose you think I'm flattered. Why, you take more time in selecting a hat than you took in selecting a rabbi."

Two years later, he came to Shaarey Zedek, where he enlarged the educational program and helped build other Conservative synagogues in Michigan.

"His legacy, I think, was one of giving," said Shulamith Benstein, the rabbi's daughter. "Shaarey Zedek is a very giving congregation, not only financially, but with its time. I think a lot of that was spurred by my father. He gave of himself 110 percent and was always the first to pledge."

His assailant, Richard Wishnetsky, was a 23-year-old honor student with a history of mental illness. He had once been counseled by the rabbi. But in the weeks before the shooting, Mr. Wishnetsky had grown increasingly bitter and paranoid, and had cut off visits to a psychiatrist.

"Since I feel that I am no longer able to make any significant creative contributions I shall make a destructive one," he wrote in a journal. "Listen to my voice, you deaf ones. Listen to how sick, sad, lonely and forlorn it is."

On Saturday morning, Feb. 12, 1966 — Lincoln's birthday — Rabbi Adler delivered a sermon on the slain president. "May the love which he had even for his enemies ... be ours," he told the congregation.

He then turned to his right and walked over to congratulate 13-year-old Steven Frank, who had celebrated his bar mitzvah that morning.