



### Rabbi Jacob B. Agus Z 1911-1986

Jacob Agus was born in Poland in November 1911. He was educated in the local heder and in the yeshiva. In 1925, his family went to Palestine. Two years later they moved to New York. Upon receiving his rabbinical ordination in 1935, Rabbi Agus took his first pulpit in Norfolk, Virginia. He left Norfolk in 1936 to study philosophy at Harvard University. While at Harvard, Rabbi Agus met his future wife, Miriam Shor. After receiving a doctorate from Harvard, Rabbi Agus served two Orthodox congregations in Chicago, Illinois and Dayton, Ohio. In 1946, Rabbi Agus broke with the Orthodox movement and aligned with Conservatism.

In 1950, Rabbi Jacob B. Agus accepted a position at Beth El, a new, Conservative congregation. The very presence of Rabbi Agus vaulted Beth El into national prominence. He was a noted scholar with a growing international reputation for his theological and philosophical thought. Rabbi Agus authored 11 books, wrote 78 articles for the most prestigious journals in the world, and published 54 book reviews. He spoke at symposia and maintained correspondence with the major thinkers of his generation.

Despite a busy and exceptionally productive life, Rabbi Agus never neglected Beth El or Baltimore.

He attended and spoke at the daily morning minyan and evening services. Rabbi Agus spoke regularly at the Men's Club and Sisterhood meetings, giving lectures and book reviews. He faithfully visited the sick and paid shiva calls, attended committee meetings and was available to accept calls from congregants. Over the years, thousands of students enrolled in Beth El's adult education program, which Rabbi Agus initiated. He introduced Bat Mitzvah, making Beth El the first conservative Congregation in Baltimore to make Bat Mitzvah the equal of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony. In addition, he taught post-Bar Mitzvah classes and wrote a daily prayer book.

Rabbi Agus' teaching extended far beyond Beth El. He was called the "rabbi of the rabbis" because he held bi-monthly seminars for rabbis for all denominations in the Baltimore-Washington region. Rabbi Agus taught in Christian seminars and was the first non-priest officially authorized by the Vatican to teach Catholic seminarians.

Steven T. Katz, a biographer of Rabbi Agus, said that "Rabbi Agus, more than any other Conservative rabbi of the generation, clearly and thoroughly articulated a philosophy of law appropriate for the Conservation movement. One cannot help but admire the honesty and erudition of his approach.

On social and political issues, Rabbi Agus was often outspoken. In the early 1950s, he raised his voice against Sen. Joseph McCarthy. He joined with religious leaders to end racial segregation. In addition, Rabbi Agus refused to obey a federal mandate to build a nuclear fallout shelter in Beth El, fearing that the construction would legitimize the concept of nuclear war. He was an early and vigorous opponent of the Vietnam War.

Rabbi Agus served the congregation for thirty years until 1980. For the next six years, until his death in September 1986, Rabbi Agus was rabbi emeritus of the congregation.

Rabbi Mark Loeb would say that his colleague, Rabbi Agus, was "Considerably more than an intellectual...he was also a spiritual standard-bearer...it is fairly clear that he had few peers and no real successors."