

# “A SOCIETY OF LISTENING AND DIALOGUE BRINGS US CLOSER TO THE DEFENSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS”

**Rabbi Michel Schlesinger**

• *By Renato Barreto* •

Michel Schlesinger, born in Sao Paulo, has been involved in projects addressed to the Jewish community since he was very young. After graduating in Law from the University of Sao Paulo (USP), he chose to devote himself to rabbinic studies, pursuing his rabbinic studies and a master's degree at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. In 2005, he completed his training in Israel, receiving the rabbinical ordination and earning a master's degree in Talmud and Jewish Law.

At the age of 28, he returned to Brazil and became a rabbi of the Israelite Paulista Congregation (CIP), where he later occupied the position of Rabbi Henry Sobel.<sup>1</sup> CIP is a community that, at challenging times in the country's history, especially during the period of military dictatorship, raised its voice against torture and the curtailment of individual freedoms. With the same intent, Schlesinger follows this legacy of advocating for human rights, especially as a representative of the Jewish Confederation of Brazil (Conib) for interreligious dialogue, a function that he has been performing intensively.

In his practice, one of the most frequent themes is peace, which, according to him, results from an education that sees the contact with the other as a privilege, an opportunity for learning. “When we meet each other, we have two possibilities: one is to be afraid of the unknown, of what is different from me, and this fear often ends in violence. Another possibility is reverence, recognition of the beauty that exists in this diversity,” he says. Even in the face of disagreement, the practice of listening and dialogue should direct people to the defense of human rights and the consolidation of a peaceful society.

It is in this context of valuing otherness that the Jewish principle of *tzedaká* (social justice) intends to articulate faith with social practice. Thus, it is notorious how Rabbi Schlesinger has advocated in favor of inclusion and on issues such as the challenge of sustainability, care for the environment, religious freedom and equalitarian treatment for everyone, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, for example.

At every stage of the development of Judaism, Jewish sources address the importance of Jewish people becoming responsible for society, liberty, and human rights. Thus, CIP is a congregation that in its early years began the task of welcoming immigrants, people who came to Brazil without speaking Portuguese, without housing or work, neither knowledge of Brazilian culture.

As an extension of this historic mission, currently, the Troca Urbana project of CIP Youth, in partnership with Missão Paz of Nossa Senhora da Paz Parish, promotes activities to integrate refugees with the city of Sao Paulo, aiming to develop the autonomy of the participants and offering them greater contact with the culture of the new land.

Beyond mere empathy, in a practical sense, the Torah itself, the holy book of Judaism, expresses the responsibility of caring for and loving the foreigner, a position historically occupied by the Jews themselves. "We must take care of the foreigner because we ourselves were foreigners in the land of Egypt," he recalls.

In this perspective, even the construction model of the synagogues carries within it an element of communion. According to these precepts, although there are architectural variations, all synagogues must have a common element: a window that represents the connection between rituals celebrated inside it and the outside world. From this point of view, Jews, according to the rabbi, have an obligation to truly commit themselves to what happens on the streets and in society at large. For this reason, the history of CIP has in its genesis a very close relationship with the defense of individual freedoms.

Founded by Jews who fled the persecution of a Nazifascist Europe, the congregation was made up of people who found security in Brazil so that they could live and freely exercise their right to religious cult. And it is precisely the appreciation of this freedom, whether for Jews, Muslims, Christians or followers of Afro-Brazilian traditions, that ensures that each one can be authentically what he or she is and live in a society where human rights are safeguarded, defended and guaranteed.

Specifically on the subject of human rights, the rabbi speaks of the relationship between the Jewish history and the fight against all forms of discrimination and persecution of minorities. In the 2018 electoral context, he warned about the link between religious values and the defense of the agenda of human rights, secular state and democracy. This demonstrates, to some extent, his efforts to build bridges with people who disagree with these and other topics that have been polarizing the Brazilian people.



The secular state, according to the rabbi, does not mean a state that prohibits religion, but one that guarantees all religions equal possibilities to develop freely. This implies that none of them can be prohibited or privileged by the Brazilian state and all of them have the right to participate politically and to express their opinion about what happens in the country. According to Schlesinger, it is up to each one of us to continue working to ensure that the Brazilian state remains loyal to these principles. “The secular state is an achievement, but its accomplishment, the practice, is complex. We have not reached the fullness of a secular state yet, but we are on this path.”

Thus, Rabbi Schlesinger assiduously emphasizes the value of dialogue. For him, there are two fundamental conditions for establishing it: on the one hand, believing in oneself; on the other hand, pluralism. That is, one must accept that his or her truth must not necessarily be the truth for the other, thus respecting the diversity of beliefs.

*Translated by Claudia Sander*

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1 • Besides being Rabbi Michel Schlesinger’s mentor, Sobel was an important human rights defender in Brazil, and he worked on the secret project that, with the participation of Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns and the Presbyterian pastor Jaime Wright and his team, exposed the torture and abuses perpetrated by the Brazilian military dictatorship. One of the results of this project was the book “Brasil: Nunca Mais” (Sao Paulo: Editora Vozes, 1985).



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