

KENNETH BIALKIN

a born leader

by Aliza Davidovit

Perhaps the blue-and-white *pushke* (charity box) Kenneth Bialkin remembers seeing in his grandparents' house has had more influence over him than he might have imagined. Through a slit that measured as narrow as the hope of Europe's Jews during WWII, dimes and dollars, prayers and dreams were pushed into that tin box. As the coins dropped to the bottom, they clanked in solidarity in a common struggle: Jews giving to help other Jews, giving to help themselves, perpetual partners in the struggles of their Jewish homeland, the State of Israel. Indeed, as with all collection boxes, what you put in is ultimately what you get out. Could Bialkin's grandparents ever have known that with each drop of a coin into the *pushke* they simultaneously filled and fired the soul of their little "Kalman," Kenneth Bialkin, who would one day advance to the front in the fight and support of Jewish causes and *Eretz Israel* (the land of Israel).

Bialkin has not only reached the summit in the Jewish world, he has hit the apex over and over again in his professional life as an attorney and in all his endeavors. His lengthy, active résumé is a cornucopian delight to any writer paid by the word. Bialkin is currently a partner at Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom law firm. His practice encompasses a broad range of corporate and securities law matters, including U.S. and international mergers and acquisitions, corporate finance transactions, in addition to SEC enforcement matters. He has been involved in some of the largest insurance company mergers and acquisitions. He represented Travelers Group in its merger with Citicorp to form Citigroup Inc., which was the largest financial institution merger in history. He represents the Nasdaq Stock Market in its restructuring and its conversion into a privately capitalized and owned institution. He represented Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in its merger with New England Mutual Life Insurance Company. He represented Travelers Group in its \$4 billion Aetna's property-casualty operation, to name a few.

In a recent article in *American Lawyer*, Bialkin is defined as a headquarters general who is able to keep it all together. Quoted in that same article Bialkin says that "each one of his business transactions is like a military campaign." With his winning strategies, he brought in two multibillion-dollar deals to his law firm in spite of corporate America's abysmal year in 2003.

This very busy man is a director of several corporations, including the Municipal Assistance Corporation for the City of New York, Tecnomatix Technologies, Ltd. and Travelers Property Casualty Corp. He sits as Chairman of the Ad Hoc



Photo by Gideon Lewin

Committee on Insider Trading Legislation of the American Bar Association. Bialkin is also former chairman of the Business Law section and of the Committee on Federal Regulation of Securities of the ABA. He is past president of the New York County's Lawyer's Association and former Director of Citigroup, Inc. Bialkin also served as an adviser to the Federal Securities Code Project and Corporate Governance Project of the American Law Institute, as well as serving on advisory committees of the Securities and Exchange Commission, The New York Stock Exchange and the American Stock exchange. As Bialkin tirelessly assumes more positions, the above list is hardly exhaustive.

Bialkin's law firm, one of the country's most powerful, employs 1750 attorneys. Its New York headquarters occupies 26 floors in a building whose other main tenant is the Condé Nast empire. Skadden Arps also has offices in Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Newark, Palo Alto, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and Wilmington, as well as in Beijing, Brussels, Frankfurt, Hong Kong, London, Moscow, Paris, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto and Vienna.

He becomes increasingly animated as he speaks about his family, the Jewish people and State of Israel.

Bialkin was born in 1929, in the Bronx, New York. As a descendant of Polish and Russian parents, he feels that the opportunities of his own life were purely geographic luck. He says that he, too, could have been born in Eastern Europe and shared the fate of

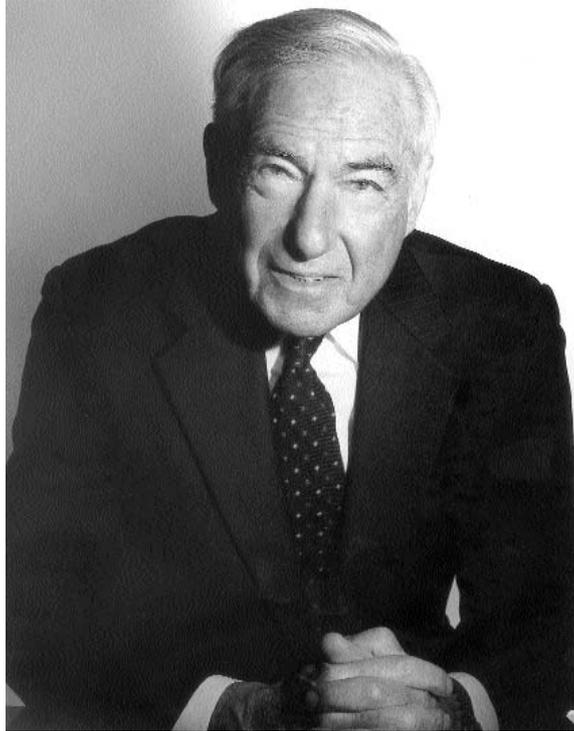


Photo by Gideon Lewin

Bronx, lived Bialkin's own family and his mother's parents. Although his own family was kosher but not strictly observant, his maternal grandparents were. As a result, young Bialkin and his siblings and cousins would go to synagogue every Sabbath and then to his grandparents for lunch. In their home, too, he witnessed a spirit of charity, kindness and love for the

Jewish people as they were forever trying to raise money for rabbis and yeshivas. But as kids will be kids, after their routine *Shabbos* lunch of chicken, each of the children would take his weekly allowance of 25 cents and be off to the Pelham Parkway movie theaters.

As Bialkin got older he began to frown upon attending *shul* on the Sabbath, preferring to play baseball with the other young boys in the neighborhood. He also began to find Hebrew school a burden and stopped attending soon after his bar mitzvah. His interests took off down another runway. In his little workshop in the basement of his parents' home, he loved making model airplanes. "I

always tried to fly them," he jokes, "but they hardly ever flew." He tells how during WWII he and classmates would carve airplanes for air spotting ID and to this day he can still identify all the American and German airplanes of the war. When he was still in his early teens, he and a friend won a New York City-wide science competition. (It was an early start for the man who'd continuously find himself in first place.) The boys designed a model which illustrated the Doppler Effect, a phenomenon which gives lift to an airplane wing. Growing up, Bialkin always wanted to be an aviator, but fate would have it that he would soar much higher than that.

millions of other Jews. But as fate would have it, both sets of grandparents immigrated to the United States to make a new life.

Bialkin remembers with pride how actively involved his grandparents were in raising money for Jewish causes. "My paternal grandfather was a secular man," Bialkin recounts, "but he was deeply immersed in charity and always soliciting for what we then called Palestine."

Bialkin reflects on the times he spent with his grandfather, who lived in Union City, New Jersey, and refers to them as "wonderful days." And as the images of the past recreate themselves in his mind's eye, Bialkin remembers that ever-present blue Jewish National Fund *pushke*.

Across the Hudson River, in the

Although he was distracted by his aviation interests and then later by his interest in science, chemistry and

Over a catered breakfast at its state-of-the-art Times Square headquarters, Kenneth Bialkin speaks to *Lifestyles* about the turns and twists of his life. His voice is soft-spoken and he is mild-mannered, endearing traits that one wouldn't expect from a lawyer. He is also a *mensch*, a gentleman and a very patient person. Despite his success, his ego is MIA. Despite his financial expertise, money is not the end all for him. Alluding to the plush, finely appointed offices, Bialkin says, "All this is just trappings." At age 74, Bialkin says that what truly drives his life is his past. "It lives with me every day," Bialkin shares.

“I was lucky enough that whatever I did was good enough to get me to the next rung. It wasn’t until later in life that I became conscious of having risen.”

cytology, Bialkin’s heart was never too far from his Jewish identity. As a very young teenager, he would read several newspapers daily and read about the hardships Jews were suffering in Europe. His interest in history and social studies grew and it was not long before this remarkable high school student was made a delegate to the *New York Herald Tribune* High School Forum, which included kids from all over the country. He remembers after giving a speech at one such event that a teacher called him aside and told him that he mispronounced a word. He was always grateful to those who tried to help him and improve him. On another occasion he remembers that two of his teachers at Christopher Columbus High School called him into a room and tried to help him correct his Bronx accent. Perhaps they saw potential in the young man who says he was always in a rush and took extra courses every summer. It is perhaps because Bialkin is such a successful candidate of the New York Public School system that Governor Pataki has recently appointed him to the New York State Commission on Education, which was set up after a court of law ruled New York State was depriving city students of their constitutional right to a sound education.

It was not merely the New York public schools that transformed Bialkin into an outstanding achiever. Bialkin learned a lot from his parents by way of example. He reflects how hard his father used to work from early in the morning until late at night. Bialkin says that he, too, worked very hard. “Nothing came easy for me,” he tells. His mother,

the eldest of four sisters, was determined that he would obtain the education which her own early circumstances did not permit her to enjoy.

Bialkin graduated from the University of Michigan with a degree in economics, where he specialized in



Lisa, Kenneth, Ann and Johanna.

fiscal and monetary policy. Certain that he had no interest in joining the workforce or getting a job in economics, he followed the path of many of his friends and went to law school. In 1953 he graduated with a J.D. from Harvard. During the summer of his first year at law school, he attended the London School of Economics where he studied problems of British Economic Recovery on a scholarship he received from the Institute of International Education. Prior to law school, Bialkin says that he had never even known a lawyer nor what they do. But he learned fast and he learned well and he himself went on to teach securities law as an adjunct professor at New York University School of Law for 18 years.

“I always wanted to excel and focused on becoming an excellent lawyer,” Bialkin tells *Lifestyles*. He also says he had a strong commitment to

be the very best at whatever he would undertake. “I was lucky enough that whatever I did was good enough to get me to the next rung,” he recounts. “It wasn’t until later in life that I became conscious of having risen.”

In every organization Bialkin got involved with throughout the years he became a leader: National Chairman of the Anti-Defamation League; President/Chairman of the American Jewish Historical Society; President of the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York; Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations; President of the New York County Lawyer’s Association, and Chairman of the American Israel Friendship League. He has also served as

Vice Chairman of the Jerusalem Foundation for almost 30 years.

Recently, in recognition of Bialkin’s 16 years as a member of its Board of Directors, Citigroup established the Kenneth J. Bialkin/Citigroup Public Service Award at the American Jewish Historical Society. The award is presented annually to either a person or organization whose achievements have made a difference in an area of concern that reflects Bialkin’s lifetime of accomplishments and achievements. The first award was presented posthumously to Eric Breindel, the late editor of the *New York Post*, a defender of minorities and the Jewish State.

Ann, Kenneth Bialkin’s wife, says that what makes her hardworking husband so special is that he does not have a big ego. “He always does things for other people, or for a cause he believes in, especially when it’s about

Photo courtesy of Kenneth Bialkin

“I was touched by their isolation in Israel and at the enormity of the challenge they were facing and their valiance in building a state. I identified with their need to make a Jewish home for the Jewish people and their fight was my fight. They were on the front line for Jewish survival.”

Israel or the Jewish people,” she says. “He never does it for himself or for the *koved* (honor).” She tells *Lifestyles* that when her husband first started as Chairman of the Conference of Presidents he received a phone call from the Conference saying that he had to fly to Washington, D.C., to meet then-President Ronald Reagan. Bialkin inquired as to the purpose of the meeting. But when he was told that it was primarily a photo op, he refused to go, saying he had no time for that.

Bialkin met his lovely wife just a few years after he graduated from Harvard in 1953. Ann, who graduated from Columbia University with a master’s degree in social work, was originally from Nashville, Tennessee. Her family, too, was very active in Jewish charitable causes and synagogue life. Ann was completing her undergraduate degree at Sarah Lawrence when the couple met on a tennis court. The scorecard now shows it went from “love” to 46 years of marriage.

Today the couple has two beautiful daughters, Lisa and Johanna. Lisa started off in her father’s footsteps and practiced as a lawyer in a leading law firm for many years. But after several years in law, she decided to “do as mother did” and pursue a graduate degree in social work. She is currently completing intensive training to become a psychoanalyst. Johanna is more artistically inclined. She’s an ambitious entrepreneur who designs and prepares computer websites for both businesses and nonprofit organizations. She is also an entrepreneurial



(l-r) Mort Zuckerman, Kenneth Bialkin and Ariel Sharon.

interior designer. First she fixes up homes and then puts them on the market for sale. Needless to say, Bialkin is extremely proud of his two girls.



Some years before his girls were born, in 1959, Bialkin and his wife took a trip to Israel that forever changed their lives. It was there Bialkin realized that as Jew whose roots were in Eastern Europe, his good luck was but an accident of place and time. “I was touched by their isolation in Israel and at the enormity of the challenge they were facing and their valiance in building a state,” he says. “I identified with their need to make a Jewish home for the Jewish people and their fight was my fight. They were on the front line for Jewish survival.”

Ann Bialkin was also very moved by that trip. As a social worker she felt she had a lot to offer. Upon returning to the U.S., she wrote several letters to the UJA and other groups volunteering for social projects that would help Israelis. She got no response. Eventually she established ELEM [a Hebrew acronym for

youth in distress]. It is a tremendous foundation which assists troubled Israeli teens who commit crimes or use drugs and who are completely overlooked by the judicial system. ELEM provides them social services, helps them rehabilitate and helps them join society again in a productive manner. The Bialkins have dedicated their hearts, their souls, their talents and their money to further the cause.

That trip to Israel also turned Bialkin, who was already an avid reader, into a ferocious reader on Jewish history. His identification with his Jewish heritage and the Jewish homeland was impassioned. He has read many books over the past 45 years and is today an authority on matters pertaining to the Middle East dynamic. He armed himself with knowledge and he too became a fighter for Jewish survival. As leader of the most powerful Jewish organizations in the world, Bialkin has fought and presented Israel’s case to American presidents, world leaders, to the media, to American Jewry and to Muslims. He was one of the first Jewish leaders to go to Crown Heights after Yankel Rosenbaum was killed and make the media hear both sides of the story. He is friends with Israeli and American politicians and with Israeli prime ministers who often ask for his advice. Bialkin spoke with Prime Minister Ehud Barak while he was at Camp David. “I told him that the concession he was proposing broke my heart,” Bialkin says. “But I said if we can get in writing that it will be the end of the Palestinian

conflict then we should do it." Barak was in concert with Bialkin's thinking. "It didn't work because Arafat didn't have the will or the power to make it work."

Bialkin says that he has signed on to pursue his Jewish identity because he believes in it, he is proud of it and because he is forced to. "If there were no anti-semitism and no attacks against us and Israel, if we were not singled out maybe I'd be an assimilationist," he says. "But forces have made me conscious of my responsibilities. We are an honorable people with honorable traditions. We have a right to seek our betterment. Anyone who gets in my way is depriving me of something to which I'm entitled to...If I'm a laborer in the vineyard of Jewish liberation, it is because the enemy has forced me to do that."

Bialkin feels that the mindset of militant Arabs simply doesn't accept the existence of Israel. "The Palestinian leadership simply doesn't want Israel to be there," Bialkin explains. "Many Israelis didn't understand that and thought that if they were fair to the Arabs, they could reach accommodations with the Palestinians and live in the same region, cooperate and prosper." Only today, Bialkin feels that Israelis realize that the driving motive of Arab leadership is to terminate the Jewish state.

"So what remains for the Palestinians?" Bialkin questions in an op-ed piece in the *New York Sun*. "Further introversion and deprivation, caused entirely by their own failure to produce a leadership bold enough and wise enough, smart enough and humane enough to seek a better life for their people." He goes on to say in that article: "The Palestinian Arabs must wake up to the realities of their existence; they must realize that they are living without hope of freedom,

democratic institutions, educational progress, social enlightenment, or a promise of economic advancement. Since they exist in a repressive, despotic regime, there are virtually no voices of protest, no demonstrations seeking democracy, no speeches or articles



(l-r) Abba Eban and Kenneth Bialkin.

advocating peace with Israel in a negotiated compromise conducted in the absence of terror and violence. One can only wonder why that society has not developed a Martin Luther King, Jr., or a Lech Walesa, or an Elie Wiesel who has the courage to speak truth to power."

This adamant Jewish leader also feels that it is a calumny to say that there are extremists on both sides and that that is what is barring peace. "The settlers may want to keep the land, but even the most rabid settler will abide by the rule of law," Bialkin explains. "Arab suicide bombers say no matter what they will never give up their struggle to liberate Israel, killing themselves in the process and blowing up buses." He adds that as long as these terrorists refuse to accommodate themselves to the political will of their people, the struggle will go on.

After one such suicide bombing, Bialkin and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani rode a bus in Israel to show solidarity with the Israeli people, albeit a well-guarded bus. When asked if he would otherwise ride a bus in

Israel, Bialkin answers, "I guess I would, but not without concern," he adds. "However, we can't be ruled by fear."

Who could have fathomed that just two weeks after Bialkin's interview with *Lifestyles* magazine that a suicide bomber would explode a

bomb just outside of his hotel in Israel. The blast occurred near the Inbal Hotel, where a conference of Jewish leaders, including Bialkin, was listening to a speech by Army Chief of Staff Moshe Yaalon. The blast killed nine and maimed dozens. Bialkin and the group walked over to the police barrier from where they could see the bloody horror that had unfolded. It was probably because Bialkin had witnessed the murderous scene with his own eyes that he was even more incensed

than usual with news coverage of the event. In a compelling op-ed, he took on *The New York Times* cool coverage of the murder of Israelis and its sympathetic slant for the perpetrator of the crime. He compared it to the *New York Sun's* coverage which graphically described the horrific scene, gave a "face" to the victims and honest context to the conflict.

If Bialkin leads by example it is because he was led by good examples. He says that he has learned in life that what you say to your children is far less important than what you show them. "I started out by trying to tell my two daughters to be good Jews and love Israel, but realized that the only thing that makes a difference is the example you set and the example you show them. Indeed, he has a lifetime of achievements which amply show that as with all *pushkes* what you put in is ultimately what you get out...and sometimes a lot more!

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