

reating a
*Synagogue-Based
Keruv Initiative*

Staff and Holiday Issues of Conflict

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Our synagogue staffs and professionals live in the Jewish quarter and as such leave the knowledge and social skills they have acquired and utilized in the outside world at the proverbial “door.” The analogy of a “door” is once again useful. We need to keep it open, and learn to meet, greet, and explain who we are and why what we do is important, using a language that is warm and embracing and which reflects an understanding of those who might wish to enter. In order for this to become possible, we need to learn who our current and future membership will be and then how we can best address and engage them.

Hello Mat, this is Rabbi Ploni

I called to thank you for your letter and to apologize for the manner Tommy’s teacher mishandled what should have been a straightforward situation. Our principal is developing a training program for all our teachers to avoid future situations like the one you experienced from happening in the future.”

Mat, I would like to ask you a favor. Could you and Lisa invite me to your home sometime in the near future so we can discuss this in greater depth? I have a feeling that I could be missing something very important, and I would like to learn more about how your family teaches religious values. After all, you represent an important part of our community.

has a tree,” we need to be prepared with a more effective rhetoric, one that engages rather than dismisses, one that involves people in discussion and serious thought, rather than encourages them to be embarrassed and feel isolated.

Our message needs to change from one that advocates that “Christmas trees should not be in permitted in Jewish homes,” to one that acknowledges our intermarried families or our members’ non-Jewish families in a different light. While the tree’s presence might evoke a visceral reaction for many of us if we were to enter a home where a tree was present during the “Christmas season,” it needn’t be understood an act of defiance or of “slipping backward” or a betrayal of a sacred trust.

How then should the rabbi or teacher respond when he or she learns that a family ostensibly is celebrating two festivals at the same time? By viewing this as a matter of culture (border clashing) rather than as part of the greater battle, he/she may open up an opportunity for proactive engagement devoted to the meaning of Hanukkah and the competing cultures in which we live. A cultural interaction is an invitation for a cultural intervention.

There are many ways one can intervene in a situation; however, it strikes me that once again a possible intervention would be to view this as an opportunity to introduce the power of ritual into the dialogue. Consider the analogy of a door. The interaction takes places on one side of the door and if successful, leads to an intervention that opens the door and lets the people view what is inside. Could it be that if we could successfully explain the power of ritual to a family, it would sufficiently resonate to cause them reconsider their current practice? Would that it only be so successful we could juxtapose this situation to endogamous couples!

Abstract: This paper addresses two of the essential components that need to be a considered if a synagogue-based Keruv effort is to be initiated. Prior to this, a language of inclusion needs to be created and all staff and board members need to be instructed in its usage. The first component of this paper focuses on educating synagogue staff about the nature of their current and potential members’ religious backgrounds. The second component challenges the rabbi to revisit potential points of religious and cultural conflict, i.e. Christmas, Easter and Halloween, and to reinterpret their current language and strategies in order to be more effective. This paper is a response to the questions raised in the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, lay and rabbinic think tanks that took place during 2001–2007.

Rabbi Charles Simon

Christmas and the manner it is celebrated in North America are viewed as a major skirmish in the battle for Jewish survival. Yet the response of the Jewish community in the United Kingdom has been infinitely more positive and suggests that new responses can yet be formulated. Nearly twenty years ago the Jewish community in the United Kingdom created a new way to observe Christmas. It is called “Limmud.” Limmud successfully brings together several thousand Jewish people of every denomination on the days before and immediately after Christmas for study. This is clearly a much more positive response to our concerns than the one we have posited for a number of decades.

Our traditional response to Christmas needs to be replaced by one that reflects an understanding and openness that some of our members, and indeed many endogamous families, celebrate non-Jewish holidays in one form or another, and at the same time does not communicate the message that we endorse or encourage Jews to adopt non-Jewish practices. The response should not be confused with a new version of “don’t ask and don’t tell,” but rather convey a message that recognizes the family composition of our members and acknowledges that the form of an individual or a family’s observance isn’t always a reflection of the content of that religion.

The teaching of Christmas or the acceptance of non-Jewish forms of observance does not belong in our curriculum; however, our teachers and our clergy need to learn the emerging new reality of our member families. Rather than “judge” them and find them “wanting,” we need to understand who they are and be prepared to accept or at least to respond to their variations in practice. Rather than rely on the past rhetoric of “Christmas trees should not be in Jewish homes,” which only opens the door for the child of an intermarriage to say, “well my father is Jewish and he always

the “trick or treat” practice, result in a reconsideration of how our members address this festival without delivering a message that the Conservative rabbinate condones this cultural behavior? Could a message that appeals to parents and empowers them to attempt to modify existing cultural trends succeed if we suggest a practice that teaches “giving to others and rewards active giving” as a substitute for “trick or treat”? Could a different perspective create a greater resonance with the values inherent in Jewish life?

While one would sincerely doubt that a rabbi could change the practices of an entire community, though it is theoretically possible, an initial step of providing an explanation or a response that resonates with our members would be a vast improvement over the current status quo.

It is surprising that I have never heard of a rabbi complaining because his congregants were going to church on Easter. Is it because the absence of a symbol as powerful as the Christmas tree has allowed Easter, which is infinitely more of a religious festival, to slip under our radar? Yet, Easter and Passover are too close to one another in most calendar years for us not to learn to use their congruence as an opportunity to draw our non-Jewish family members, and our Jewish family members with non-Jewish relatives, closer to us. The relationship between the *matzoth* and the wafer, between wine and blood, the egg on the Seder plate and the (yes) Easter bunny, offer untold opportunities for discussion of renewal and rebirth of a people, in contrast to resurrection and rebirth of a soul. The opportunity to begin to engage in theological discussion and yes, in some cases, textual study about the soul, rebirth, resurrection and the differences that exist in our respective traditions, can only result in a deeper appreciation of Jewish ritual life and experience by all parties.

Creating a Synagogue-Based Keruv Initiative

The Situation

Hello Rabbi,

As you know, my wife Jeri is not Jewish. Although she has been gracious in encouraging the Jewish education of our children and is fond of Judaism, she herself does not intend to change her religion. Recently, she had occasion to call the synagogue and received what I can only describe as an offensive response (from the staff, the cantor, the educational director, the executive director, yourself).

I expect to be picking up the pieces of this response for the next several years. In that regard, I think we need to sit down together and have a serious discussion concerning the impact this has had on our family and on the sensibilities of my parents, who, as you know, have given much of themselves to this synagogue.

Yours truly,

Benjamin Rothschild (Tisch, Schwartz, Berger, Weiler, Blaustein, etc.)

Hello Rabbi

We've only met on occasion, but you might remember my wife, Lisa Pinkerton, and our son Tommy. I've attended some of your lectures and the family is in shul about once a month. Tommy is in fourth grade. He returned from Hebrew school last evening and was extremely upset. Apparently he was told our family was not authentically Jewish because we had a Christmas tree. Tommy was born a Jew, we have a kosher home, and we look forward to sending him to Ramah this summer. I was born a Methodist and even though I rarely go to church, I have always had a tree during the holiday season. When Tommy's teacher told the class that in order to be a Jewish household one couldn't have a tree, Tom was extremely hurt. I would appreciate your guidance.

Sincerely,

Mat Pinkerton

The National Jewish Population Survey of 2000 documents that over a third, and possibly almost half, of children of the members of Conservative synagogues have intermarried or are in the process of intermarrying. Demographers argue over the exact percentage. What matters is that all employees in a synagogue — support staff, youth workers, Jewish educators, Hazzanim and Rabbis — understand that an increasing number of our members are intermarried or have themselves undergone a conversion, and most of them have extended non-Jewish family members. If we wish to integrate these families into Conservative Jewish life we need to raise the level of our sensitivity and understanding of who these

Modifying the Accepted Rhetoric

Christmas, Easter, and Halloween are the most obvious areas of conflict within an intermarriage or family with non-Jewish family members. With such families, a carefully crafted language needs to be prepared based on an understanding of the nature of the population to whom it is to be delivered. This language needs to reflect an awareness of our families' multiple origins and an appreciation of the distance and different perceptions that often exist between our views (the clergy's) and theirs. This language shouldn't be apologetic, but does need to communicate an understanding of, and a respect for, the significant percentage of our families who have non-Jewish family members, and who celebrate non-Jewish holidays and life-cycle events.

Halloween is clearly the most secular and therefore easiest of these three celebrations to discuss. The traditional Jewish response to Halloween has been to respond to it from the religious dimension, and thus to deliver a message that is practically incomprehensible to the typical Conservative Jew who understands the festival as a piece of evolving North American culture. The failure to reconcile these two conflicting perceptions results in the perpetuation of a scenario that has been in existence for decades, where our congregants expect the rabbi to tell them Halloween is a pagan festival. As we do so, we perpetuate the existing cultural attitude that conveys, in a de facto way, that the rabbi is ineffective and out of touch with the contemporary world.

What would happen if the rabbi altered his/her perspective and explained the meaning of the festival in relation to the evolving North American culture? Would this change of emphasis resonate with our members and force them to rethink their current practices? Would a reformulation, (a midrashic spin) coupled with new suggestions for reforming

example, our members who live in the non-Jewish world need to learn about the story of the Passion, the story of Easter and Good Friday, including all of its anti-Semitic touches. Our members need to hear this from the priest and the minister and in a number of venues. It could foster interfaith understanding in a new way that promoted mutual tolerance and build communities. Clergy from other religions could be encouraged to use synagogue bulletin, the pulpit and adult education courses to describe their views on Christmas and Hanukkah, Easter and Passover, or possibly even Halloween. Classes could be team taught by clergy members and professors of Anthropology or other related fields.

The ignorance of Catholic, Protestant and Jew about their own religion, as well as the religion of their neighbors, is highlighted in a recent book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know . . . and Doesn't*, by Professor Stephen Prothero of Boston University. In it Dr. Prothero comments that:

When I finished graduate school and became a professor myself, I told students that I didn't care about facts. I cared about having challenging conversations, and I offered my quiz-free classroom as a place to do just that. I soon found, however, that the challenging conversations I coveted were not possible without some common knowledge — common knowledge my students plainly lacked. And so, quite against my prior inclinations, I began testing them on simple terms. In my World Religion classes, I told my students that before we could discuss in any detail the great religious traditions of the world, we would need to have some shared vocabulary in each, some basic religious literacy. Today religious illiteracy is at least as pervasive as cultural illiteracy and more dangerous.

families are, and we need to learn how to more effectively respond to the concerns that will arise in their religious lives. Too often a well-intentioned family will seek to join a Conservative synagogue, only to be discouraged at the outset; or should they be accepted into the community, they may be confronted later on with situations that foster anger, confusion, or embarrassment. Our synagogues might advertise themselves as “welcoming” but often fail to understand that a “welcoming” community must include teachers, staff members and lay leadership. If we are sincere and wish to practice what we preach, we need to learn how to more effectively respond to this changing population.

In the post-World War II period, rabbis at the various Seminaries were offered courses in comparative religion so that they would be able to represent the Jewish community to the non-Jewish world. Today, an understanding of the various forms of Christianity, Islam and other Eastern religions is needed in order to create a language and an attitude that will resonate with non-Jewish spouses or parents and encourage them to make Jewish choices.

We must begin by recognizing that many of our synagogue employees, including non-Jews, are ignorant of the rudimentary beliefs and practices of other religions. Our office workers, teachers and even clergy have a tendency to lump together all Christians as either Catholics or “other.” This “lumping together” adversely positions synagogue staff and opens the door to offensive remarks and defensive responses. In order to work effectively with our mixed families, these attitudes of ignorance and defensiveness need to be abandoned and be replaced by attitudes of tolerance and understanding.

The classroom, the synagogue support staff, the bulletin and the bima need to be acknowledged as the vehicles of

transmission. Acknowledging life cycle events within the families of our members, who have non-Jewish relatives, whether they are births, weddings, or deaths, demonstrates that community values and actions can be transmitted. The synagogue that provides its members with guidance on how to show proper respect when a non-Jewish parent or sibling has died teaches compassion and community values to both communities. The synagogue that internalizes this response, and teaches it to its staff, projects the message that the Jewish community cares about all of creation. This in turn makes people proud to be a member of such a community.

I recently prepared a brief questionnaire and asked both Reform and Conservative colleagues to distribute it to their teachers. The questionnaire was a simple form that asked teachers how many children in their classrooms had intermarried parents and what percentage of their families celebrated non-Jewish holidays in any form. It also asked if the teachers thought they might have inadvertently said something in their classrooms about non-Jewish religious practice that might have caused conflict in their students' homes. I realize that three schools and thirty teachers are not a sufficient number for a serious study. However the results obtained clearly demonstrated that in almost every case, the teachers lacked any specific information about their parent families, let alone knowledge of their religious composition and the nature and form of their practices.

Assuming a staff has been provided with a basic understanding of non-Jewish religious beliefs and practices, and with the knowledge of the religious backgrounds of their students' families, they can begin to understand how to frame appropriate questions when life cycle events occur in those families or when a conflict with Jewish practice comes to light.

Repositioning the Clergy

What perspective or perspectives would provide a rabbi or an educator with the needed tools that would transform situations of potential conflict with an intermarried or potentially intermarried family into acts that would foster more serious Jewish connections? It could be helpful to interpret intermarriage through the lenses posited by cultural historians who suggest that Jewish life can be understood as an interaction between border cultures. By adopting such a perspective, we could reposition the playing field from one of “us and them” to one of total engagement, where people strive to define both their borders and the fringes and where each member of the couple's paths intersect. A mutually agreed-upon language of engagement can reveal areas of religious conflict from the viewpoint of interacting cultures — certainly a less volatile approach — and suggest ways of engaging people in daily and holiday life in a manner that challenges them to consider that “values” can be transmitted as a result of the choices they make. A language of engagement that stems from points of commonality creates an environment that encourages discussion of ways to develop lives of meaning.

It is within this dialogue, and as a result of this dialogue about the value of ritual and the importance of Jewish practice, that the Jewish professional can create a resonance with a couple that reinforces their relationship. The interactions that utilize ritual as a tool to strengthen relationships demonstrate to an intermarried couple that Jewish practice can help them resolve their tensions or unconscious behaviors.

At the same time and within this context, congregations need to understand that a community that is religiously literate gains an understanding of our respective differences. Programs need to be initiated that educate our membership and teach them about the basic tenets of other faith traditions. For