

## Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, the practical ethics column will focus on personal and social ethics. Each month a guest columnist wrestles on paper with situations where ethical considerations tug on the heart and demand deeply thoughtful consideration. The column is co-sponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).

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THE PRINCIPLE ETHIC of building community is forged out of my early experience as a young person seeking Torah. That ethic requires that we must be unafraid of the commitment to, in the words of our tradition, raise disciples.

I was nineteen years old and "in search of myself" when I decided it was time to start studying with a rabbi. The first rabbi I called took an appointment, talked about himself for a while, and then gave me a list of four books to read before coming back to see him — in a year!

The second rabbi I called invited me into a class he was teaching. Before the class began, he sat with me to learn about who I was, what I was looking for, and in what ways the class might answer my desire to learn Torah. And where the class wouldn't speak to my search, he would personally supplement that learning with individualized study in weekly meetings.

That experience ruled the day, and I eventually became a rabbi. Only when the albatross of my own occasional disorganization (an ethical dilemma in its own right) prevails do I miss the chance to follow in my teacher's example of building community.

I teach a weekly class in my neighborhood of Brooklyn. The students are all non-synagogue members under the age of 40. As a guiding ethical principle of the class, there are no requirements, and there's no tuition. One doesn't even have to come every week. By some measures, the bar is set pathetically low.

But by another set of standards, we raise the bar of expectation each week. For example, I know that without tuition or requirements, I have to create an environment and teach in

such a way that these students return each week. In this regard, I am teacher as social organizer. I take it upon myself to know how and why each and every person attended; if they didn't, I reach out to find out why not.

As I look around the room while teaching, I silently take note of how each person came to this class. She went on birthright and found our organization on the web; the one sitting next to her is her roommate; to her right is a journalist who comes to Brooklyn from Manhattan, is in a gay relationship, and is yearning for a Jewish connection; the couple across the way is by demographic standards an "interfaith" couple, a designation that does more harm than good to their shared quest for meaning and community (they're also designing their own wedding ceremony, and I meet with them privately to help think through what they may want to do). Next to the couple is a married interfaith couple who randomly found their way into our High Holy Days services and realized they needed to do more structured Jewish learning before they ventured into parenthood. Next to them is the son of a cantor, a writer, an artist, a young man who loves Brooklyn in all its expression to his core and revealed a kippah on his head, worn for the occasion because, as he put it, "I realized I should cover my head, given where we are." And finally, to his left, a young neighborhood *au pair*, 24 years old, from Amsterdam. She is the granddaughter of a Dutch Holocaust survivor whose mother wants nothing less than her daughter's embrace of Judaism, and so far from home, in her mythic New Amsterdam, she studies Torah with a rabbi.

As they make their way into community for the first time, they must tell their stories


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AFTER TWO DECADES in the pulpit, I decided to move outside of the walls of the synagogue and center my rabbinic work in homes and around tables. After years of inviting friends and congregants to my home, I noticed that the fellowship of Shabbat hospitality, the informal learning and conversation around the table, and the impact of ritual moments created a very powerful context for teaching and experiencing Judaism. In addition, many Jews are largely unfamiliar with home traditions or are hesitant about offering a Shabbat or festival experience in their homes. During my time in the pulpit I witnessed the growing impact of Orthodox outreach organizations that emphasize Shabbat hospitality and whose rabbis graciously and joyfully opened their homes week after week to all sorts of Jews.

The homes of Jews around Seattle became the venue for my rabbinic and outreach work. Rather than bring the Jews to the rabbi, I hoped to bring the rabbi to the Jews. I began to recruit hosts who would commit to inviting large numbers of guests for Friday nights, Shabbat afternoons, and even full Shabbat events. I literally became a “rabbi in residence.” I could no longer wait for people to come to

my place, but had to work with people to come into their space. I shifted from giving sermons to animating conversations around a table. I moved from a more formal educational setting of a synagogue to the informal and intimate context of people’s homes. Rather than focusing on the spoken and written word, I learned to create multi-sensory seder experiences. Instead of being a rabbi pastor, I became an outreach partner. It was like shifting from being a classical musician to becoming a jazz artist.

This is the role of a Shabbat animator: a Shabbat animator instills in people a love for Shabbat and encourages Jews to embrace the practice of *hachmasat orchim*, welcoming guests. Into homes, an animator brings passion for Torah, love of Shabbat, caring concern for others. At a recent Shabbat dinner, a minister who was attending as a friend of the host said to me, “This is a wonderful ministry you have chosen.” Ministry, while not a Jewish term, is a helpful way to conceive of myriad ways to provide rabbinic or Jewish service to the community. This new model helps our people rediscover and renew the Shabbat table and home as a foundation for an engaged Jewish life. 

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and validate their individuality. In doing so, we understand that each journey in is sacred, treading a unique path — music, art, writing, social justice, the law, business, education. The community is home to men and women and children whose identities are shaped by their sexuality, ethnic configuration, and varying degrees of insecurity over what they know and don’t know. It’s all part of the mix. And as teachers of Torah and community builders and social organizers, like it or not, it’s our obligation to embrace these people “where they’re at” if we’re truly going to meet them where they’re at.

That’s what raises rhetoric to the ethical dimension.

I recently dedicated a class to the memory of a beloved teacher. We studied the famous passages from the rabbinic literature about Hillel and Shammai’s different approaches

to accepting new students who were interested in exploring Judaism’s meaning. They laughed when one heathen teased Hillel for his bald head; they got the slapstick humor of Shammai chasing out an inquiring student with a builder’s cubit; they sat in rapt attention and awe as they watched Hillel’s patience grow with each test (like a Zen master, one observed) and, staying several steps ahead of the proselytes, bring each of them under the wings of God’s presence.

My goal: to teach them about my teacher by encouraging them to wrestle with an ancient text, to see themselves in that text, and to be validated not only by me as their teacher but by my teacher and his teachers, all the way back to Hillel and Shammai. This link, blessed and individual, joins them to a chain of tradition. And who wouldn’t want a work ethic that brings such reward? 