



CLAL

26/501  
November 10, 1995  
17 Heshvan 5756

# Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

## In this issue

**On finding one's place within Judaism: with celebration and expectations.**

## Pride and shame Marla Brettschneider

I recently spent a Shabbat in Philadelphia. It was Shabbat HaGadol before Pesach and Rivkah Walton was giving the *drash* at Minyan Dorshei Derech. As we began a discussion period, Rivkah asked the *havurah* to focus on the places we felt shame connected with being Jewish, framing the discussion with her wonderful *drash* on the shame that Jews in ancient Egypt felt for being shepherds. What ensued was an interesting exchange highlighting the different experiences of Jews from places where comparatively we are many (Mount Airy, New York City) and those from places where Jews are few (rural areas, the Midwest). It seemed that Jews from urban areas claimed to be shame-free, whereas the Jews from the Midwest admitted to harboring much shame.

### Diaspora Within Diaspora

I have been thinking a lot about these issues of shame and the urban-rural difference because, as a New York Jew now living in rural Pennsylvania, I often feel like a fish out of water, in exile. Other times I am aware that rural Judaism is simply another Jewish way of life with an integrity unto itself. What I am slowly discovering is that, beyond a simple definition, the contours of meaning for these concepts shift with context. For me, how to be in Bloomsburg—meaning in large part how to be a Jew here, navigating in new spaces for shame and celebration—has been a perplexing task and requires new definitions of identity.

The region in which I live is witnessing a clash of cultures which further complicates my experience of being a Jew here. Eastern PA is a traditional Klan stronghold. Recent studies indicate that this area has the largest number of white/Christian supremacist hate groups in the country and the fastest rising membership in these groups.

### Proud To Be Loud And Jewish

We have active KKK subsidiary groups in town, on the college campus where I teach, and a chapter of the USA Nationalist Party in the local high school. As scary as all that is, I would still imagine that "card carrying" white/Christian supremacists remain in the minority, while many others are extremely conservative and religious Christians, with many fundamentalists among them. There are many poor and the minority population is almost non-existent.

In the midst of this, we have Bloomsburg University. In many ways the university has catered to the needs of the children of these local rural families. It does

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not have a pretty history during the McCarthy years nor the Vietnam era, and has maintained its conservative stance for many years since. As a state school, however, and the best one in the system, there has been a lot of pressure to diversify—faculty, students, curriculum, programming—and generally to raise its standards by breaking with its local and conservative roots (which is how I came to be here).

Daily life for me as a Jew here consists of an endless series of negotiations (some more subtle than others) between the traditionally extreme conservatism in this rural context and the flirtation with cutting edge diversity politics. The issues of shame and pride are, therefore, rather complex. In direct opposition to the Dorshei Derech discussion, I feel proud to be a loud pushy Jew in the rural conservative and Christian aspects of life here. In a place where Jews are hated and have little power, I am often plagued with fear, but do not feel shame. The reasons for this are twofold.

### Power And Shame

On the one hand, people have so little experience with Jews and know so little about Jewish culture, that most times I can rely on an assumption of American good will. I have no need for any embarrassment and I sport my New York Jewish self in an effort to educate and to expose to some diversity many with whom I come into contact. On the other hand, in response to all the Jew hating, both conscious and subconscious, I figure that lack of shame is actually the best response. To be a knowledgeable Jew who takes delight in my heritage blows a lot of minds out here.

Perhaps ironically, it is in the midst of the multi-cultural politics that I am more hesitant, and bring with me much of the baggage of Jewish life in urban diversity politics (unaddressed that morning at *minyán!*). In cities such as New York and Los Angeles, Jews swell the ranks of politicians, landlords, merchants, artistic trendsetters and civic organizations. Jews occupy many of the conspicuous positions of power and yet so many of us are also involved in work to challenge the inequities of the current power systems. And thus, in contrast to the way that urban Jews at Dorshei Derech spoke, I find the diversity settings problematic because there my people have comparatively more power.

There are also issues of pride and shame within the small Jewish community here. We have a one-room

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synagogue which is considered one of the historical landmarks of the town. It is situated unassumingly amongst some houses on a residential street and I continue to find its simplicity overwhelmingly beautiful. The community sponsors holiday celebrations and last year revived a custom of once a month Erev Shabbat services.

### Where Everyone Counts

What I have found is that rural Judaism is like *havurah* Judaism in practice but without the ideological grounding. These communities cannot sustain a rabbi and thus function through communal participation; they are too small to be able to afford denominational rivalry and thus exist through inclusion; they are often egalitarian, because they cannot afford to alienate or exclude half of their ranks. Although the men seem to run the synagogue, the only communal organization is a chapter of Hadassah, which serves less as a Zionist support group

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*Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility* welcomes articles from diverse points of view. Hence, the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the editors. Donations to *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility* are tax-deductible. *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility* is available in microform from University Microfilms Internat'l., Ann Arbor, MI.

Book reviews are by Eugene B. Borowitz.

Address all correspondence, subscriptions and change of address notices to *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility*, c/o CLAL, 99 Park Avenue, Suite S-300, New York, NY 10016. Telephone: 212-867-8888; FAX: 212-867-8853.

*Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility* (ISSN 0049-0385) is published bi-weekly except June, July and August, by CLAL, 99 Park Avenue, Suite C-300, New York, NY 10016. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY. Subscriptions: \$29 for two years in U.S.; \$18 for one year; \$21 a year overseas; \$35 for two years overseas; bulk subscriptions of 10 or more to one address, \$9 per subscription; retired or handicapped persons of restricted means may subscribe for one year at half price. **POSTMASTER:** Send address changes to *Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility*, c/o CLAL, 99 Park Avenue, S-300, New York, NY 10016-1599.

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November 10, 1995

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than as a basic American Jewish civic organization. It is the women who ensure that the educational, social and service needs of the local Jewish community are met.

I love this Jewish community and respect it enormously. Even as a radical and outspoken Jew I have been warmly welcomed into its ranks. I am now seeing for myself many characteristics that make for a new understanding of a proud Jewish community (which Sarah Feldstein, a friend and activist Jew who grew up in rural New Hampshire, described to me before I left New York). The Jews here in Bloomsburg are less parochial in certain ways than many Jews whom I have known in New York. They are more self-reliant, and do not take Jewish life or community for granted. My feeling is that families out here have to be more conscious and creative if they want their children to develop a sense of themselves as Jews.

Yet, along with many of the urban Jews that Shabbat at Dorshei Derech, I struggle with what I perceive to be the rather quietist approach rural Jews take to intercommunal affairs. I also realize that as a Jew raised in New York I have a lot to learn about the coping strategies of rural Jews. As much as I want to speak out against what I see as internalized antisemitism, to speak about the way some here seem to carry shame, I have already learned from them to take it slow and not be so quick to judge. I am learning that lessons of moving from shame and internalized antisemitism to a solid celebratory Jewish grounding in places like New York do not neatly translate to the needs of rural Jews. And so, finally, I am also learning to confront my own timidity about being a politically agitating Jew in their midst (challenging a different sort of shame increasingly related to being Jewish as conservatives in this country gain ground!). □

## What I need from institutional Judaism

Meredith G. Warshaw

Although I've seen many articles in the past few months in the Jewish press about what is needed to ensure Jewish continuity and to keep Jews involved with Judaism, they have all been written from the perspective of the Jewish professionals/institutions, or polls that various organizations have sponsored. I have yet to see an article written from the point of view of the people these organizations serve. This, then, is my view of which services would

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help me become more involved with Judaism, as well as helping me raise my child with a strong Jewish identity.

### Provide A Welcoming Community

I am a woman in my late thirties, a single parent of a four-year-old son. I grew up in New York City, where being Jewish was "normal", so it wasn't until college that I felt the impact of being a minority. Our synagogue was extremely Reform and non-religious (the rabbi did not want us to learn any Hebrew beyond basic "prayerbook" Hebrew, and would state in sermons that there is no God, just a spirit of good among people). Having a child has led me to ask why being Jewish is so important to me, to want to learn more about Judaism and become more observant. So, what do I need from the Jewish "infrastructure"?

First, I want a synagogue that will help me in providing my child with enjoyable associations with the communal practice of Judaism (as opposed to the home-based, family traditions). This means occasional classes about the Jewish holidays aimed at preschoolers (such as a once per month holiday school), and occasional Friday night or Saturday morning Shabbat events geared especially towards teaching the child that synagogue and Judaism are enjoyable.

### Adult Education For All Levels

Second, I want adult education to help those of us with inadequate Jewish educations. Because the synagogue I grew up in felt devoid of religion, I have chosen to affiliate with synagogues that are more observant. However, since my background is very scanty for someone who spent 8 years attending weekend religious school, I want a synagogue that will help me fill in the gaps in my background so that I can fully participate in services.

My ideal synagogue would offer continuing education for adults that ran at the same time as the children's classes, at least on weekends; after all, if I'm going to be *schlepping* my child to Hebrew school, I might as well use the hours he's there to improve my own Jewish education without needing a babysitter that I may not be able to find or afford.

In addition to adult education that addresses my needs as an adult, I want my synagogue's regular adult education series to address my needs as a parent by holding workshops on such topics as bringing up a Jewish child, discussing God with your children (especially for those of us who do not have well-formulated beliefs of our own!), and making children fully part of holiday celebrations. At this point in my family's life, I choose our synagogue