

The pace of the trend setters

Bernard Reisman

I first discovered *Sh'ma* twenty years ago. I was involved in a study undertaken by the National Council of Churches of "Trend Setting Religious Organizations." The goal of the research was to uncover those special innovative religious institutions or communities in America which were having a vital impact on the lives of their congregants or members. A group of social scientists were assembled, each of whom was assigned to study one of the major religious communities in America. Their task was first to locate the trend setting organizations in their religious community and then to seek to define the dynamics of these organizations--what it is about them that explains their unique capacity to capture the imagination of their people, and to have a significant impact on their lives.

My assignment was studying the trend setting religious organizations in the American Jewish community. The selection strategy was to utilize a cohort of some two dozen individuals, from various parts of the country--scholars and community leaders, concerned and knowledgeable about the contemporary Jewish community, and to ask them to identify those Jewish organizations which, in their judgement, met the criteria for being trend setting. When the views of the expert cohort were compiled, those organizations which were identified by several people were further reviewed to assess their appropriateness for the study. Finally, six organizations were selected to serve as the study population of Jewish trend setting organizations. They were: Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York; Brandeis Camp Institute in California; Congregation Solel in Highland Park, Illinois; Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Massachusetts; the Jewish Parents Institute in Detroit; and *Sh'ma*.

I knew about the first five of these organizations, each of which was a Jewish religious or educational organization. The one group which I had never previously heard about was *Sh'ma*. I initially was skeptical that a journal could properly be thought of as an organization or community. My skepticism lasted until I spent a day in New York City interviewing Gene Borowitz and several of his colleagues who were part of the early group of contributing editors. I soon came to understand why this innovative newsletter warranted the designation of trend setting organization. First, in the exchange

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with the *Sh'ma* core leadership I achieved a clearer understanding about the culture and style of this community. To put it mildly the interaction among us, both the nature of the contemporary American Jewish community and why a journal like *Sh'ma* was important, was spirited, at times even angry. However, when the smoke had cleared, it was evident that we learned a lot from each other and I certainly better understood what Gene meant when he said "Through *Sh'ma* I want to teach Jews how to argue with each other."

What is refreshingly different and appealing about *Sh'ma* is its simple structure. It precludes intellectual "showing off" with extended treatises, footnotes, et al. Here the point is straightforward: present the essence of your position and then permit others with different ideas to offer their essence. I venture to say that because of the mercifully concise 7½ pages of copy, the proportion of subscribers reading the *Sh'ma* exchanges may be the highest of any journal.

Finally, as with most meaningful communities, the key to impact is people. Gene Borowitz's editorial genius was not so much in his skill in coming up with interesting and controversial subjects, as it is in finding thoughtful and articulate people, many first time writers, who represent a range of views on the subject. The willingness of these people with opposing opinions to join in dialogue is in itself a welcome and important message for the Jewish community. It is also an expression of trust and respect for the person who invited them to be part of the exchange--Gene Borowitz. □

On meeting eugene borowitz

Mindy Portnoy

I met Dr. Borowitz in a book ("Gene" I met much later). It was 1970; I was a sophomore in college; and I decided to read *Choosing a Sex Ethic*. I can tell I finished the book because it is underlined throughout until the end. And it is also full of my hostile comments in the margins. Who was this man who thought he knew so much about sex, love, and marriage?! And didn't I know better--19 years old, already a liberated woman (on page 58, I noted that he needed to add the words "and women" to the sentence "our most important ethical task today is to learn to think of human duty in terms of all the men in the world"). This Borowitz

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