

# Sh'ma

a journal of Jewish responsibility

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## On being a new rabbi in manhattan

Saul J. Berman

What has it been like for the past four and one half years, being the rabbi of a very large Centrist Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan? The challenges in my own move from Jewish academician to congregational rabbi were clearly enormous: to expand the concept of spiritual achievement so as to more include the ethical as well as the ritual; to provide the stimulus and the opportunity for learned Jews to continue their Jewish intellectual growth; to foster greater religious intensity while keeping the community open to alienated and unaffiliated Jews; to provide as many doorways as possible through which any Jew might enter and taste the goodness of Torah; to help shatter the sense of isolation and aloneness of singles, of single parents, of newcomers in a city which fosters anonymity; to intensify opportunities for religious expression by women within the structure of *halacha*; to lead the congregation to a greater awareness of our responsibilities to both Jewish and non-Jewish needy and homeless; and more.

It's very difficult to say how distinctively my goals are correlated to the size and setting of the congregation, but it is perfectly clear to me that both size and setting impact enormously on the character of my own work and experience. First, as to size, Lincoln Square Synagogue has a membership of approximately 700 families and 500 single persons of all ages. Beyond the membership, approximately half of the 850 people registered in weekly classes are non-members; over one-third of the 1200 people who crowd five separate services every *Shabbat* morning, are not members; our outreach and community action programs reach deeply into the Jewish community, far beyond our own membership. For me, it has been very difficult to relate to the

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congregation as a community—it feels more like a town or even a small city. And if I feel that way, how must lay people feel about it? On the other hand, the exhilaration of being in the midst of an overcrowded sanctuary, of the street being blocked every *Shabbat* after *Tefillah* by 1000 people socializing, lends a special intensity and vitality to the sense of being Jewish.

## Pleasing Some but not All

Size makes for another tension. Even with the total devotion of an extraordinary staff of two additional rabbis, a cantor, and outreach and community action professionals—serving a community this large and this diverse is a constantly frustrating undertaking for two reasons. Firstly, programs and services implemented at great pains and with enormous effort to serve one segment of the community or one dimension of its ideology, are often perceived by other segments of the community as, at best, wasteful, and, at worst, ideologically offensive. Some of my proudest achievements in the four years I have been at the synagogue are: the creation of the L.S.S. *Lehrhaus* providing an opportunity for advanced Jewish study with some of the finest Jewish scholars of America and Israel; the expansion of the Women's Service from an occasional to a regularly and frequently scheduled service; the development of our Youth Program as a vibrant force for Jewish informal education and experience; the implementation of Turn Friday Night Into *Shabbos* as a national program in which over 4000 Jews participated at 23 synagogues across the U. S. and Canada; the creation of a Community Action program encompassing political action on behalf of Israel and Soviet Jewry as well as food drives, clothing drives, toy drives, programs and conferences on the environment and on world hunger; the development of a non-professional *shadchen* service and the dialogue program between members of L. S. S. and members of Stephen Wise Free Synagogue.

These projects and programs, without exception, have been subject to both acclaim and condemnation within the congregation. Helping people stretch their ideological tolerance seems to be a constant but thankless task at all ends of the spectrum. Size and diversity seem to assure that there will always be a vocal minority who think that the particular effort is either too extreme, too expensive, not appropriate for a synagogue, not sufficiently responsive to the problem, too much of a compromise, too fragmenting of the community or too concerned with keeping everybody happy. I have grown increasingly intolerant of and impatient with this particular phenomenon.

## Time and Energy are Sapped

The second area of impact of size and diversity has been the effect on my own intellectual growth and on my relationship to my family. On one hand, the range of halachic questions with which I am compelled to deal both as individual *she'elot* and as communal policy, is enormous. How should our *Chevra Kaddisha* relate to a deceased who had AIDS? May an unmarried woman plan to have a child by artificial insemination by donor? Is a proper *Eruv* really halachically possible in a Manhattan neighborhood? These, and a plethora of questions related to business ethics, medical ethics and ritual matters, occupy a significant portion of my intellectual energies, and have broadened my knowledge of and insight into the operation of Jewish law in the real world enormously. But by the same token I no longer have any time during the year for the sort of systematic research and analysis of problems and sharpening of ideas through sharing with colleagues—which, at one time, was such an essential element of my intellectual identity.

As for the impact on my relationship to my family—suffice it to say that being in the rabbinate while attempting to be an involved, responsive and responsible husband, and father of four young children, has been for me, a losing battle. I find increasing discrepancy between my own beliefs, sermons and teachings on the quality of family life and the reality of my own availability to those I so deeply love. I find it increasingly unacceptable to remember that I used to have friends for whom I had time and emotional energy and have that no more. The issue is not even the unrealistic demands created by the few embittered souls who could never be satisfied with my efforts on their behalf—indeed, for them, even messianic intervention would probably not suffice. It is rather the reality of the undertaking, precisely the size and diversity of the congregation which generates the need for constant availability, or as one congregant put it, "We need a rabbi on call all the time." Perhaps this is the Achilles heel of my rabbinate, but I am not willing to assign unequivocal priority to the needs of the congregation over those of my children, my wife or myself.

How have these four and a half years been? There have been moments of utter frustration at the intractability of certain problems, moments of despair in my inability to relieve pain and sorrow, moments of anger at people's stubborn unwilling-

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ness to see the obviously good and right, moments of feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of shaping souls and forming a community. On the other hand, there have been moments of utter joy in seeing the spiritual transformation of people I have come to cherish, moments of enormous gratification in feeling that I have helped someone through a personal or religious crisis, moments of great pleasure in seeing a Bar or Bat Mitzvah child for whom the synagogue, its ideology and its essence, have shaped the soul into the next generation. Most of all, there are moments when I am overwhelmed with a feeling of gratitude to God for making possible for me a sense of achievement in my undertakings unparalleled in my prior experience.

So, how has it been? It depends on when you ask me. □

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