ONE JEWISH PEOPLE?

How One Community Addresses the Issues That Divide Us

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The Synagogue Council of Massachusetts has established a framework of dialogue that fosters pluralism while respecting individual differences and ideologies. It brings together the leadership of local synagogues and denominational movements in study and dialogue. Its paradigmatic program initiative is an annual Young Leadership Unity Mission to New York, now in its eleventh year and with more than 300 alumni.

A bomb explodes in a Jerusalem marketplace. Amid the chaos, the terror, the horror, angels of mercy begin to move. Lovingly and reverently, the men collect the shattered body parts, ensuring that the dead will receive the dignified burial due every Jewish man, woman, and child. Reading the accounts of this horrible tragedy, one could only hope and pray that those filtering through the rubble for pieces of limbs, skin, and marrow would not concern themselves with how Jewishly the victim lived his or her life.

But, sadly, in our routinized, day-to-day Jewish lives, many want to reduce us to precisely this kind of we-they mentality. The future seems grim for the causes of pluralism and *Klal Yisrael.* We face growing divisiveness over such topics as patrilineal descent, the ordination of gay and lesbian rabbis, and the status of non-Orthodox conversions—all variations on the recurring themes of Who is a Jew? and Who is a rabbi? We witness the increasingly isolationist practices of the fervently Orthodox bumping up against the vocal and highly visible rituals of Jewish feminists and their supporters. Too often, these clashes of culture and ideology lead to shocking acts of violence. Public statements and proclamations by segments of American Orthodoxy delegitimate the authenticity of Jews from the other streams of Judaism. Counterattacks from the religious left condemn the Orthodox, often failing to distinguish between those who have made discrediting statements and those who have repudiated them. American Jewish leaders attack Israel's Orthodox establishment with threats of pulling their organization's support from UJA/federation. And the recent demise of the Synagogue Council of America is just one more indicator of both the importance and difficulty of achieving—and sustaining—dialogue and cooperation across denominational lines.

Are we rapidly approaching a time of complete separation between segments of Orthodoxy and the rest of the Jewish world? Is there cause for hope in a society both numbed by terror and fanaticism and skeptical about any "good news" in communal or political life?

Although I do not presume to have all the answers to such weighty questions, I do believe that my experiences of the past 15 years as executive director of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts may shed some light on the dynamics of pluralism and diversity, of power and authority, which are so critically involved in these issues.

The Synagogue Council of Massachusetts was originally incorporated in 1941 as the Associated Synagogues of Greater Boston to "give expression to the ideal of religious solidarity." Its primary purpose, which continues to guide the organization to this day, was to "overcome the parochialism, divisiveness, and sectionalism which have been the bane of Jewish life in this country."

In 1982, the Associated Synagogues was reconstituted as the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts (not to be confused with the

now-defunct Synagogue Council of America), receiving a three-year demonstration grant from the local Jewish federation—the Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston (CJP).

During the early years of its existence, the Synagogue Council's leadership was understandably intent on addressing those areas of concern about which there could easily be common agreement. Seminars on outreach to the unaffiliated or synagogue security, for example, were acceptable, whereas interdenominational study programs were not. Buying consortia for congregations were wholly appropriate; dialogues on the issues that were dividing our people were not.

It took much internal discussion before the descriptive line—"The Synagogue Council of Massachusetts is a joint venture of UAHC, United Synagogue and Orthodox congregations in Massachusetts"—became the defining symbol of our organizational culture and structure. Read between the lines, and you will immediately see a few of the key issues with which we were grappling 15 years ago and which continue to be addressed to this day. Maintaining an atmosphere of civility and mutual respect that nonetheless acknowledges real differences is a basic requisite for achieving the interdenominational collaboration the Synagogue Council enjoys and is the prime determinant of this organization's current, and potentially sustainable, level of success.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate that, despite the ideological divisions within our Jewish community, it is possible and, in my opinion, essential to establish a framework that fosters pluralism while respecting individual differences and ideologies. Pluralism is not caving in to other denominational groups for the sake of unity, it is not the acceptance of other positions without serious struggle and dialogue, and it is certainly not compromising widely held fundamental beliefs and practices. As pluralists, we accept *ab initio* the existence and communal validity of our coalition partners, although we may and often do disagree on many religious issues. A uniformly accepted theological pluralism? No! Dialogue and collaboration across denominational lines? Absolutely!

The oft-quoted verse from the tractate *Eruvin,* used by many to justify a pluralistic approach in Jewish life despite obvious theological differences, seems most appropriate to this discussion.

> R. Abba b. Samuel said: For years the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel disputed, these saying "the law is like us" and these saying "the law is like us." A heavenly voice emerged and said "[Both] these and these are the words of the living G-d."

Given the many different threads that make up our trans-denominational tapestry, what, then, are the formulas that enable those with whom we interact, with disparate ideologies and institutional priorities, to come together in unity?

PRINCIPLES OF TRANS-DENOMINATIONAL WORK

Our approach at the Synagogue Council is to concentrate on what *can* be accomplished, rather than on what divides us. One of our operating principles is that serious obstacles to Jewish unity and organizational integrity must be addressed head on, enabling each of the coalition partners to be heard. We try to set our sights on achievable goals, with full recognition that (1) not every disagreement can be resolved quickly, or over time, or perhaps at all and that (2) conflict resolution invariably requires some degree of compromise, but never at the expense of any group's basic ideological or theological underpinnings. Bridge-building and bridge-maintaining are tough jobs. We take this work seriously, erecting and refining the bridge brick-by-brick, span-by-span.

How do we translate this philosophy into practical interdenominational relations strategies? We offer a hand in friendship and unity, with the hope that it will be accepted in the spirit in which it was extended. We embrace each individual, congregation, or

denominational group at whatever level it finds most comfortable, remembering that *the goal is unity, not uniformity.* We deal with human beings, not institutions, and attempt to develop a level of trust and mutual concern that must be sustained over time through consistency in thought and action. We have learned that disagreements are best resolved slowly, without fanfare, and with no public announcements or proclamations. We have fun together, study together, bring humor into our deliberations. We try to lower the decibel level of rhetoric by assuring each individual that he or she is definitely being heard. We always begin board meetings with a d'var Torah, preferably delivered by volunteer leadership, and alternating denominations from one meeting to the next. We recognize that political posturing is not only predictable, but a necessary condition for anyone coming to the table as a representative of a rabbinic or denominational group. Yet, through sensitive diplomacy, each group can be heard and issues can be aired in an atmosphere of inclusion, mutual interdependence, and *derech eretz.*

The Synagogue Council's Self-Description

Let's examine, for the purposes of illustrating how the Council works, its self-description, as "a joint venture of UAHC, United Synagogue, and Orthodox congregations in Massachusetts." What is missing? What is the role of the national denominational movements? Reconstructionism? The status of non-movement congregations? The definition (or lack thereof) of a congregation? And what does it mean to be partners in a joint venture of extremely different religious groupings?

The Synagogue Council resolved the issue of inclusion of the national movements by only listing those that were ready to be listed. Independent congregations became eligible for membership in the organization, but were not included in the governing structure; however, the definition of a congregation still eludes us. As the number and strength of Reconstructionist congregations and havurot increased in Massachusetts, the word "Reconstructionist" was gradually included in the Council's listing of its affiliates. And as movement leadership became increasingly involved in the daily operations of the organization, the Synagogue Council evolved from a loosely knit group of congregations and denominations to a movement-oriented organization that coordinates activities and initiatives for and with area synagogues, across movement and agency lines.

Pluralism in Action

Most deliberations at the Synagogue Council board room table do *not* break down into religious factions. The integrity of each coalition partner is highly valued, regardless of his or her denominational leanings, and it is assumed that our discussion is *L'shem Shamayim,* for the sake of heaven. In fact, though there is no formal veto power in the Synagogue Council's governing by-laws, there is a tacit understanding that any issue that is exceedingly uncomfortable or too highly charged for any group will be tabled by *one of the other* denominational movements! Pluralism in action!

Though there is no absolute formula for building bridges across denominational lines, it is strategically easier to remain within the "safe zone"—the window of programming opportunities within which everyone can come to common agreement. Working across denominational lines and collaborating with CJP and its family of agencies, the Synagogue Council chose such "safe zone" initiatives as synagogue management, support for Jewish education, outreach to the unaffiliated, combating Messianic Jewish groups, rescue of Ethiopian and Soviet Jews, support for Israel, and finding a solution to the problems of abandoned and neglected cemeteries. Were these efforts the sum and substance of our communal accomplishments, many would be content to say *dayenu.* But we realized that we had to do more—and were able to do so *because* we had already established a track record of accomplishments in these apolitical areas.

Despite a solid working relationship behind closed doors, our leadership recognized that we could no longer ignore the denominational strife that was increasingly making its way into the headlines at the local, national, and international levels. Our next challenge was to determine what should be the role of a local interdenominational organization on issues of international scope, such as repeal of the Law of Return. One alternative would be to position ourselves in the public policy arena. Another approach is to bring people together in study and dialogue, giving them a better grasp of the issues and a healthier understanding of why Jews from the other denominations feel and act in certain ways.

The Synagogue Council's conclusion was to stay out of the public policy arena and to develop programs, courses, dialogues, and other initiatives to bring together the leadership of our congregations and the denominational movements. To that end, a Committee on Religious Unity was established in the mid-1980s with the mandate of reaching a wide range of community leaders to foster and enhance relations among individuals of varying backgrounds and religious philosophies.

YOUNG LEADERSHIP UNITY MISSION

Although many interdenominational seminars and courses resulted from the initial work of the Committee on Religious Unity, the paradigmatic program initiative is a Young Leadership Unity Mission to New York, now in its eleventh year and boasting more than 300 alumni.

After a full year of planning, proposals, and counter-proposals, the concept of a two-day Unity Mission for young leaders—people in their thirties and forties from across the denominational spectrum—to the venerable Jewish institutions of higher learning in New York surfaced as the primary vehicle to begin this process of education and dialogue. In 1987, the first Unity Mission became reality, with 32 eager participants representing a very broad and diverse group of men and women.

Our original concept of a major public Conference on Jewish Unity, modeled on CLAL's Critical Issues Conferences of the mid-1980s, evolved into a much smaller, more intimate, and manageable educational mission. Why New York? Certainly to gain access to such luminaries as Rabbis Yitz Greenberg, Ismar Schorsch, Joel Roth, Norman Lamm, Norman Cohen, and Eugene Borowitz (to mention but a few of our gracious hosts and teachers)[1], but also, quite frankly, so as to move the dialogue out of the public arena and out of our own back yard. Public forums—replete with high visibility, media coverage, and heated debates—often bring the organizing group into the public eye, but at what cost? Consistent with the Synagogue Council's commitment to being part of the solution, not the problem, our leadership decided to create a small mission program that would allow for *real* contact between individuals of differing backgrounds and provide opportunities for them to learn at the feet of some of the world's great Jewish scholars and policymakers. Perhaps of greatest significance was the opportunity the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts offered for mission alumni to continue to meet, study, and dialogue in Boston after the excitement of the two days began to wane.

The Unity Mission includes two full days of travel, study, dialogue, prayer, spiritual renewal, and introspection for young leaders of Boston-area congregations. Two meetings are held prior to it to enable participants to meet one another and learn from local rabbis about the background and philosophy of the four major movements. At the first of these meetings the dialogue begins in full force, with attendees sharing in small groups how they came to their current religious philosophy and level of practice. At the second meeting participants are grouped by denomination and asked to articulate what perceptions they believe others have of them and

[1]By visiting only the seminaries in New York, we were excluding the Reconstructionist Rabbinic College, which is housed in Philadelphia. This too, over time, has been examined, re-assessed, and resolved.

what aspects of their particular philosophy make them most proud.

What do the hundreds of alumni have to say about the Mission and its impact on them and the community? Here are some representative views:

> When Mission participants met before the trip, I was struck by the diversity. One participant, brought up in an Orthodox home, now considers himself Conservative. Another, once an atheist, is now Reform, and so on. Barriers are fluid, not rigid, and people change. Individuals are always more complex than categories, and more interesting than ideological platforms.

> We were a very disparate bunch. The journeys that had brought us to this place in our lives were varied, as were our conceptions of Judaism, and of our own Jewish identities. Nonetheless, we all believed that the work of the laity is essential to any rapprochement between our various movements.

> This was an empowering and transforming experience which proved that dialogue is possible. The Mission gave us an opportunity to shed our denominational skins and to relate to each other as fellow Jews. The two days in New York City demonstrated that it is our fundamental Jewishness that counts and not arbitrary labels. We saw that Jews of diverse persuasions can sit together, study together, daven together, share thoughts and aspirations without the expected awkwardness and sense of separateness. As we linked arms in a wide circle—Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Orthodox Jews—singing "Hinei ma tovu mana'im," I felt at that moment that the walls which divide us can be brought down.

Upon returning to Boston, the group continues to meet for the expressed purposes of continuing the dialogue, spreading the message in the community, and enhancing participants' level of Jewish knowledge. They meet face-to-face with their rabbis, speak before groups of congregational and community leaders, and attempt to bring trans-denominational programming to their own communities. Many have committed themselves to intense personal growth and increased levels of observance—keeping kosher, wearing a *kippah* at all times, enrolling in graduate-level Judaic studies, registering for a Synagogue Council-sponsored women's dialogue group or *hevruta* course, or changing careers in order to work professionally within the Jewish community. Our first alumni rabbi has recently graduated from Hebrew Union College (HUC), having experienced the beauty and scholarship of HUC for the very first time when she traveled with us to New York in 1992. Another alumna secured CJP funding for a combined leadership development program for four congregations in her community, which included representation from the four denominations in all aspects of the initiative. A Reform woman returned to New York on her own for a full-day visit to Yeshiva University, just to continue talking with and learning from one of the rabbis she had met there. This resulted in an evening of study, hosted by her congregation, at which this Orthodox rabbi was the featured speaker.

Observers of the Mission's impact wonder whether such dramatic change can come about directly as the result of a two-day program, no matter how powerful or intense the experience. Many who attend these Missions have a predilection toward inter-group dialogue, are open to change and experimentation, and are involved in their own spiritual journey. The people they meet and the intellectual/religious stimuli they encounter may be life altering, but within the context of philosophical questions and ideas with which they have already been struggling.

There has also been a powerful transformation in Synagogue Council leadership over the years, directly attributable to these Unity Missions. When people come together for intense Jewish study and an encounter with the transcendent, they inevitably approach the "business" of the organization and issues critical to the Jewish people in palpably dif-

ferent ways. In much of the Synagogue Council's work, text study across denominational lines helps enhance and strengthen the bond that transcends institutional boundaries.

Mitvah goreret Mitzvah—One good deed leads to another. Institutionally, one success leads to another. Fledgling study groups have emerged into a formalized course of *hevruta* trans-denominational learning. Annual alumni gatherings culminated in a tenth anniversary *Vatikim* (Veterans) Mission to New York, which is about to evolve into an annual summer Shabbaton for Mission alumni, spouses, and friends. A bi-monthly program of late Friday evening services for singles has evolved into NASHIRA—a weekly, early-evening Shabbat service for young adults that alternates between a Reform and a Conservative congregation, followed once a month by dinner, singing, and an educational program.

Have individuals been significantly changed, in their Jewish attitudes and behaviors, as a result of their participation on a Unity Mission? Every indicator, including studies in the early years comparing attitudes before and after the Mission, suggests that the experience does affect participants' views and practices in significant ways. Has the Mission experience changed our community? Admittedly far more difficult to measure, it is my belief that communities are changed by individuals. The data show, without question, that those who have attended a Unity Mission are increasingly taking on the highest levels of leadership of their congregations, denominational movements, and community agencies. An unexpected byproduct of these Missions has been a huge pool of young and dynamic leaders, from across the denominational spectrum, for the Synagogue Council, CJP, and other community groups. These individuals approach the enterprise of institutional administration with a *Klal Yisrael* mentality, often begun on the Mission and nurtured through an array of post-Mission study programs.

Have we solved such thorny problems as patrilineal descent or *gittin?* No. But as the dialogue is enhanced, so too is the desire to grow together, as individuals and as a community, committed to the ideals of pluralism, *derech eretz,* and self-pride. *"Im tirtzu, ein zo aggada,"* loosely translated, means to me, "Just Do It!"