



27/516
September 6, 1996
22 Elul 5756

Inside...

School's in session.

The shofar is sound-

ing. And we are back

with a full agenda.

We begin with

strategies for

recasting the Ameri-

can Jewish land-

scape.

Three bold ideas;

three passionate

voices.

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Sh'ma

A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

The promise of community high schools ■ Daniel Lehmann

There is a growing chorus of voices in American Jewish life calling for the transformation of American Judaism. Sociologists, theologians and historians are claiming that the institutions created nearly a century ago as the cornerstones of American Judaism may be inadequate to sustain a vibrant Jewish community in the 21st century. As American Jews reimagine the structure of the Jewish community in which they live, old institutions may lose their power and new institutions may emerge to address contemporary needs. One new institution that seems to be developing with great rapidity and energy as we come to the end of the millennium is the community Jewish day high school.

New Creations For New Needs

Community Jewish day high schools have existed for some time in communities like Washington DC, Philadelphia and more recently in Denver and Los Angeles. But within the past year a flurry of activity has led to the establishment of new Jewish community high schools in Boston and Atlanta with discussions underway for the establishment of similar schools in Cleveland, Minneapolis, Phoenix, San Diego and Seattle. These new schools are multi-denominational, community-based schools that have developed from the vision and commitments of educated laypeople with the professional support of local Federations.

While some would argue that the community Jewish high school is merely a

natural outgrowth of the day school movement and introduces little that is new to the American Jewish scene, I would like to offer a different perspective. It is my contention that the Jewish community high school offers a unique response to a new set of needs that have arisen in the Jewish community of the United States.

Union If Not Unity

Unlike the vast majority of elementary day schools, the community Jewish high schools that are being created are not affiliated with a particular denomination. The decision to make these new high schools multi- or trans-denominational can be attributed to two major factors. One is simply the need to pool resources. High schools are very expensive enterprises. More importantly, however, the community high school may be responding to a dissatisfaction with denominational structures among the baby-boomer generation and the need to bridge the rifts between denominations that have often characterized Jewish life in America.

There are precious few institutions in American Jewish life which allow for an exploration of the basic theological and ideological assumptions of the various religious movements. Even fewer places make it possible for particular understandings of Judaism to be played out in the presence of others who possess very different Jewish commitments and interpretations of Jewish practice. The moral impli-

sense of community among their members. But retreats are just one model, and we need to develop other creative, more normative responses to these challenges.

Miracles. Many groups who hold retreats need a miracle to motivate the true or lasting transformation they seek for their participants. What many fail to appreciate is that it is the work that goes into planning and programming a retreat that gives retreats a good name. Many people look at the American Jewish community as we approach the 21st century and say that in order to survive we need a miracle. Others look at us and recognize that the difference between miracles and magic is that magic can be made. ✦

♥ Endthoughts ♥

A liberal defense of judgmentalism

■ Steven M. Cohen

David R. Adler (*Sh'ma*, 26/511, "The wrong way to 'jewish continuity'") takes me to task on two occasions for an article on intermarriage and Jewish continuity I had published in *Moment* (December 1994). Adler claims that much Jewish continuity discourse would fall on the racist side of the equation. In this context, he objects to my phrase "diluted ethnicity," as indicated by the decline in intra-group friendships among American Jews. In the same article, he then proceeds to accuse me of adopting a judgmental stance toward the unaffiliated when I drew what he claims is an invidious distinction between 'weaker' (unaffiliated) and 'fitter' (affiliated) Jews.

I am particularly touched by Adler's comments, and not just because it shows he has been reading my work (or some of it). It so happens that we share something in common (not much, I'm afraid, but at least something): Adler is editor of *Response* magazine, a position I held for some time when I was his age, roughly 20 years ago.

Tribalism Is Not Racism

To make this reply to Adler perfectly clear at the outset, I find his critique important, wrong and dangerous.

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His critique is important because it eloquently articulates widely held sentiments in American Jewry today, particularly, I gather, among his twenty-something generation. No doubt, many would agree with what I regard as his most startling statement: The Jewish community's strictures against intermarriage would, in contemporary American parlance, fall under the racist category.

He is wrong because the Jewish people's historical emphasis on group solidarity, as expressed through marrying Jews and making friends with Jews, is not racist. True, both racism and Jewish tribalism (I happen to like the word, tribalism) share two features in common: They both recognize group differences based primarily on ancestral origin; and they both advocate treating majority and minority groups differently. But beyond these surface similarities lie numerous critical distinctions.

Distinguishing Public Policy From Personal Choice

Racism applies primarily to the public sphere: issues related to jobs, housing, schooling, political office, equal treatment under the law, etc. Jewish tribalism, though, applies to the private sphere: to one's family, religious life, most intimate friendships. The whole thrust of anti-racist movements in the U.S. and elsewhere has been to assure fair and equal treatment in the public sphere, while allowing individuals to construct their private lives as they see fit. No one can seriously claim that the tendency of Americans to seek out spouses and friends of similar cultural background (whether defined by education, region, religion, or ethnicity) is racist. Moreover, religion—even more than the other classifications—is seen as an acceptable basis around which to build family, friendships, and community. Would anyone in their right mind call racist the plea by a committed American Christian (or Mormon or Moslem) leader for religious adherents to marry one another, to make friends within the religious group, to become involved in the religious community, or to live in areas with many co-religionists? If so, then what is racist about urging similar behavior among Jews?

From all of us at *Sh'ma*
to all of you, our family of
readers and friends:

May you enjoy a year of
peace, promise and eternal hope

SHANA TOVA.

Next let us recall the arguments made by proponents of affirmative action for historically excluded minorities. They have claimed (rightly, I believe) that affirmative action differs from racist discrimination because the former give preference to a minority group for admirable purpose, while the latter denies equality to a minority with malevolent intent. Why does not the same logic apply to Jewish tribalism (vs. racism)? The norms of Jewish tribalism ask that Jews see each other as extended family, that they treat each other with special regard, that they take Judaism seriously enough so that they would inevitably seek out other Jews to share their most intimate, family-like times together. Why is that racist?

The Case For Judgmentalism

As for the charge of being judgmental, I plead proudly guilty. Since when are Jews enjoined to refrain from exercising judgment especially with reference to other Jews? Judgment is part and parcel of our tradition, from the Bible, to the Talmud, to the *shtetls* of Europe and *mullahs* of North Africa, to the civil rights and anti-war movements of the sixties, to present-day Israel, and to Jewish families and synagogues in all times and places. We are a judgmental and argumentative people. A long rabbinic tradition, derived from a straightforward reading of the Torah and consistent without culture through time, enjoins us not only to judge, but to reproach and reprove (*hochacha*).

If anything, Jews these days don't judge often enough or harshly enough, and when they do, they too often refrain from expressing their judgments of one another. As I pointed out in *The Case for Communal Conflict* (Response 31, 1976), Jewish communal organizations, particularly Federations, demand consensus over vision, agreement over passion. And Jews everywhere now participate in what my colleague Charles Liebman has called the therapeutic culture, wherein everyone's views no matter how ill-founded are validated by everyone else (I'm okay, you're okay).

Not only does such a spirit contradict every modern ideology of Judaism (so far), it contradicts the spirit of liberalism, the major socio-political ideology of American Jews (to which I happen to subscribe). Liberalism may stand for the right of every individual to express his or her views free of government interference, but it does not automatically validate everyone's views (shades of Voltaire?).

As for the case at hand, when I refer to weaker and fitter or stronger Jews, I am referring to the predictable ability (or inability) of some Jews to survive, as Jews, the rigorous test of modernity; that is, to remain identifiably

❖ ❖ ❖ Ta sh'ma ❖ ❖ ❖

We invite you to send us your favorite text and comment. Submissions should not exceed 200 words. Be sure to include proper citation of sources. Hebrew will appear in transliteration.

■ Lee M. Hendler

Ta sh'ma—come and study.

My eyes scan the page for the familiar:
the shape of a letter, the presence of a root
whatever lets me know I am partly home—
able to utter a neural sigh of recognition.
"You I know."
"You I have seen before."
And I am hearing and seeing at once
even though I am only reading and thinking.

Rejoicing in my disorientation
I grope toward Jerusalem.
A willing player in an ancient
game of Blind Man's Bluff.
I think I am getting somewhere
until Torah takes over.
Barely understood concepts play hide and seek with
my brain.

I count to ten and shout my warning
but all the good ideas are already
hidden in the best places.
So I run as fast as my intellect will take me
searching even as I go
for the telltale signs of
passing.

The echo of phrase
the force of act
the sense of moment
the edge of symbol
the sweep of time
the thrust of word
the presence of God.

When I find the last
I cease to play.
Wild pleasure renders up full joy
as I forget where I end and God begins.
For a moment
we are both in the same place.
Studying Torah together.

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Jewish despite the impact of modern individualism, personalism, voluntarism, and universalism, all of which are part of Judaism, but not to the extent that they dominate modern culture. When I say weaker or stronger, I don't necessarily mean worse or better, (although the objective character of strength is related to my subjective evaluation of quality).

We may disagree about what makes a Jew strong or good (or weak or bad). But we ought not have any disagreement that such distinctions exist, and that we ought to articulate our judgment as to who or what exemplifies those characteristics.

Mitzvah Requires Judgmentalism

Finally, I regard Adler's views in these matters as dangerous. If his views on ethnic solidarity prevail, then not only will many Jews intermarry, but American Judaism (unlike its predecessors in time or counterparts in space) will no longer define being Jewish as something ethnic, tribal, or national. If his rejection of judgmentalism prevails, then American Judaism will become the first ever to abandon the conception of commandment (*mitzvah*) and obligation (whether it is derived from God, Torah, rabbis, Jewish history, the Jewish people, the Jewish state, or some other sources). In such an eventuality, American Judaism will lose its transcendental power,

its claim to authenticity, its majestic links to the past and the future, and its ability to provide nurturing, meaningful communities. As sociologist Lawrence Iannacone has demonstrated (in an article entitled, *Why Strict Churches Are Strong*), American religious groups that are too faddish, too loose, and too oriented to individual taste are those which have suffered the most decline over the last thirty years. Those which have become too strict have degenerated into small sects. The key to success has been to find a stance that is somewhat strict, somewhat demanding, and somewhat at variance with the current *zeitgeist*. That is no easy task. But however difficult, it definitely demands both judgment and judgmentalism. †

*Sh'ma extends its sincerest condolences
to our friends and supporters*

Joan and Richard J. Scheuer

*on the loss of their beloved son,
Richard J. Scheuer, Jr.*

Through his generosity and kindness, he built enduring legacies. May his memory be a comfort to his family and a blessing to all he loved.

Sh'ma a journal of jewish responsibility

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