

THE JEWISH ADVOCATE®

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Underlining the J in JCC

A refreshing breeze swept through an auditorium packed with Jewish leaders a few weeks ago at the Leventhal-Sidman JCC in Newton. It blew away all the usual doom and gloom talk about dwindling synagogue affiliation and increasing intermarriage.

The speaker was Rabbi Irwin Kula, the president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, and a familiar face to fans of "The Today Show" and other network talk shows. He appeared as a guest of the Jewish Community Centers of Greater Boston.

Kula raised two fundamental questions: What does it mean to be a Jew? And how do we help keep Judaism alive and thriving?

If we're hung up on synagogue affiliation and intermarriage rates, he says, we won't find the answers.

Today's tolerant society – freeing us to live, work and socialize where we please – has thrown Judaism for a loop, Kula says.

To use his analogy, Judaism has developed a formidable toolbox for living, addressing matters ranging from our relationships with people and property to ways to enrich our bodies and spirits. The problem today is letting people know about it, notably the 70 percent of Jews who aren't affiliated with a synagogue.

Many check out after their bar and bat mitzvahs. They see Judaism's tools not as a means to live a more fulfilling life, but as a series of obligations: prayers to memorize, inconvenient rituals to observe, days to fast.

How do we get people to use the tools? By showing how the tools serve a purpose. If we need to drive in a nail, we pull out a hammer. When we grow concerned that our lives are on autopilot, we may discover that observing the Sabbath punctuates our weeks and creates a space to contemplate where we're heading.

"I don't celebrate Yom Kippur because I'm Jewish," Kula says. "I celebrate Yom Kippur because it's one of the most amazing technologies of forgiveness."

Kula and the JCC appear to be made for each other. Rather than trying to compete with YMCAs and sports clubs, the JCC is tying its future to putting more oomph into its first initial. With its "womb to tomb" membership, Kula sees the JCC as the ideal place to reconnect Jews with their religious identity.

Kula's organization is advising the JCC on how to infuse its programming with Jewish values and offer Jews new ways to engage their faith, both at its main building and its satellite locations throughout Greater Boston.

This fall, the JCC is launching a program for teens that integrates athletics and ethics. A new book club will explore the changing role of religion in people's lives. But much remains to be fleshed out as the JCC sounds out its current and potential members.

Kula's approach may strike some people as that of a business consultant obsessed with expanding market share. But he is not advocating that Judaism be watered down to attract the faithful. Indeed, as he told his audience of community and spiritual leaders, he might well have been among the most observant Jews in the room.

Kula is not saying toss the toolbox. He's championing it.

When the JCC decided to open on Saturdays, it came under criticism from synagogues for luring away worshippers. Who knows? If the JCC succeeds in communicating just a small portion of Kula's enthusiasm, people may just start to choose the shul over the pool.



By Charles A. Radin

Governing on faith

Quick now: What do Iran, Pakistan, Israel and Turkey have in common?

Quite a lot, actually.

All are countries whose current politics and foreign policies are being determined principally by the religious movements within them. All are states whose unity would be seriously jeopardized were it not for the glue of religious identity, but whose cohesion and ability to get along in the world are threatened by the prospect of highly religious citizens overwhelming the more-secular segments of the population.

In Israel, this is most recently illustrated by the controversy over education in Emmanuel, a community of perhaps 3,000 religious settlers deep in the occupied West Bank.

First, understand that Emmanuel lives and grows in inverse relationship to the idea of "two states for two peoples," the basic principle for resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that has been accepted by a succession of Israeli leaders.

Emmanuel blossomed in the 1980s when the settlement enterprise was booming, lagged in the era of the Oslo Accords and resumed stronger growth in the aftermath of the second intifada. The stronger Emmanuel and towns like it become, the less the chance a viable Palestinian state ever has of coming into being.

Now, consider what has gone on in this town in the last couple of years: The leaders of a state-financed school for girls there decided to segregate Ashkenazim from Sephardim.

Discrimination by Jews whose

recent ancestors came from Eastern Europe against Jews whose roots before creation of the state of Israel were in the Arab world was once widespread and unsubtle in Israel. That changed with the rise of the right-wing Likud and the political empowerment of the Sephardim.

But the prejudice is far from gone, and this led some to charge that the segregation in Emmanuel was based on racism. Defenders of the separation insisted it was not racist, but that the Sephardim did not adhere as strictly to Jewish law as the Ashkenazim. In the end, parents of Sephardi as well as Ashkenazi students were convicted of defying the authority of the court, then released to house arrest, and finally freed under terms of an agreement worked out by the chief Ashkenazi and Sephardi rabbis.

So what we have here is public funds being spent in ways over which the general public has no say, and a court system that bows to the grand rabbis rather than pursuing an impersonal and dispassionate justice. The lesson learned by those who believe their interpretation of G-d's law should override the courts' interpretation of Israeli law is evident.

"On this day, it has become clear to all that the ruling authority in the state of Israel belongs to the leading rabbis," Yitzhak Weinberg, one of the arrested parents, was quoted in *The Jerusalem Post* as saying late Sunday morning as he stood atop the low wall surrounding Justice Simon Agranat Square where fellow Hasidim and supporters were celebrating.

"Only [Shas spiritual leader] Rabbi Ovadia Yosef and [Slonim Rebbe] Rabbi Shmuel Barazovsky," the forces behind the agreement approved by the court, "will determine what is Torah, what is morality, what is justice," Weinberg said as he headed off to the bus that would take him and his fellow inmates to Ma'asiyahu Prison for their official release, the *Post* reported.

It does not require imagination to know what level of respect people of this persuasion have for secular Jews, for Russians of uncertain Jewish ancestry, for Christians and

for Arabs. And it is people of just this persuasion who are steadily gaining power and influence in Israel as the early Zionists' idea that the state could rest on a foundation of Jewish culture and the Hebrew language withers.

Now, look around the neighborhood.

Iran has suffered a terrible bout of civil strife rooted in the refusal of people of fundamentalist views to share power with – or even listen to – their more modern and moderate compatriots. More problems and bloodshed are almost certainly headed their way.

The disciplined structure of Shi'ite legal development and awareness of Persia's history probably will be enough to avert a complete implosion in Iran, but the same is likely not true in Pakistan. Without vibrant Islam at its core, there simply would not be a Pakistan, just a chopped-off piece of India with nothing to bind the tribalists of the North West Frontier Province to the cosmopolitans of Karachi to the Kashmir-focused militants of the Lahore and the east.

And in Turkey the divisions are far deeper than they might seem from afar. An hour east of Istanbul, European Turkey disappears. The level of development plummets. Cosmopolitanism disappears. Turkey is still by any standards an extremely moderate state, but it has changed a lot in recent years. Turkey, like Iran, will survive, and for some of the same reasons.

But Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Israel all are having problems dealing with the world outside the Middle East, and some substantial part of this trouble has to do, in each case, with the dependence of national identity on religion.

It's one thing to declare yourself a Muslim state, or a Jewish state, or a Christian state for that matter. It's another thing to grapple with the situations that arise over time as you are forced to define what it means to be a Muslim or Jewish or Christian state.

The lesson of history seems to be that the stronger the religious orthodoxy becomes, the more tolerance for "others" declines. It's logical. And tragic.

Letters to the Editor

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Lauds Lynch

I am writing to commend my congressman, Stephen Lynch, for his thoughtful comments at the community forum on Israel at Temple Beth Shalom in Needham on June 21. His perspectives on the current suffering in Gaza; the hardening of positions on both sides; and the problems inherent in the blockade were sobering and timely.

The bottom line – that the only solution is a two-state solution with a vigorous diplomatic effort led by our government – is one that, as a J Street member, I support. I hope that we continue to engage in this dialogue as a caring community.

DR. LARRY DIAMOND
Roslindale

Multiply minyanim

I read with interest Shoshana Razel Gordon Guedalia's excellent article in *The Jewish Advocate* about independent minyanim in the Boston area. In addition to the three "partnership" minyanim mentioned in the article, there are at least half a dozen other such groups, admittedly not identical in terms of davening style and participation of women, but independent nonetheless. These groups – found mostly in Brookline, Newton and Cambridge – gather for regular Shabbat and holiday prayers, and include both those established in the last decade and others that are close to 40 years old. The Synagogue Council of Massachusetts,

an umbrella organization for close to 200 congregations in the commonwealth, is in the process of meeting with the leadership of these minyanim to exchange ideas and explore their joining our ranks. What I learned from these meetings is that independent minyanim may be independent in how they organize and daven, but are quite open to the possibility of a meaningful and symbiotic relationship with the broader Jewish community. Let us all, synagogues and minyanim, learn from one another and grow together.

ALAN TEPEROW
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