



A Question of Membership (A)

Looking back, Rabbi Sheldon Ezring remembered few details about his meeting with Sherry Chayat to discuss her family becoming members at Temple Concord. While today Chayat often wears the robes and shaven head of a Buddhist monk, at the time, there were few outward signs that she practiced Buddhism, or that she was a priest. Ezring recalled, “She was a very nice, normal Jewish lady.”¹ As Chayat sat in Ezring’s office at Temple Concord, an historic Reform synagogue in Syracuse, New York, she approached the issue directly: she was a member at the local Conservative synagogue, but wanted to join Temple Concord to enroll her son in the religious school and begin preparing for his Bar Mitzvah. Born Jewish, Chayat was also ordained in the Rinzaï Zen Buddhist tradition; her husband, who converted to Judaism as a teenager, felt that his own Tibetan Buddhist practices enhanced his Judaism. Chayat recently attended a Bar Mitzvah at Temple Concord, and felt that this community would be a more compatible place for her family. Rabbi Ezring listened intently as Chayat spoke, but knew that this was a question he could not answer right away.

Rabbi Sheldon Ezring and Temple Concord

Rabbi Ezring, like the temple he served, had a rich Jewish history. As the grandson of a *ba’al tefillah* (a leader of prayers), with two brothers who are rabbis, he explained, simply: “I was brought up to be a rabbi.” Ezring was the sixth rabbi to serve the congregation in its long history: founded as the Society of Concord in 1839, it is the ninth oldest Jewish congregation in America. He brought more than a decade of experience to his role as senior rabbi: as a native of New York City, he found Syracuse to be more Midwestern and conservative than he expected, but the medium sized Jewish community was thriving. The Temple grew under Ezring’s leadership, to some 700 families. By the time Chayat requested a meeting, he had been at Temple Concord for less than a year.

A Decision

As a rabbi, Ezring often had to make difficult decisions. And sometimes, he had to say “no.” Ezring reflected, “One of the problems with being a rabbi, and especially a Reform rabbi, is people think you can say “yes” to everything, so you can’t say “yes” to everything.” He explained, “I’ve had people come to me to convert, and I ask, ‘You’re Christian, so do you believe in Jesus as the Messiah?’ And they say ‘Yes,’ and they say, ‘I still want to convert.’” Ezring added: “And I have to say, ‘Well, I’m sorry, I can’t help you, because belief in Jesus as the Messiah is what makes you a Christian.’”

In many congregations, Ezring recognized, rabbis had faced major challenges when the lines of faith were not clear. This was particularly true, he noted, if people promoted another religion: “Many, many rabbis over the past decades have had this happen when Messianics have secretly joined our synagogues, and then we’ve had to react to it.” Chayat and her husband, however, were not being secretive: they brought up their meditation practice as well as Chayat’s leadership role at the local Zen Center. They made it clear that they would not proselytize. The couple explained that they saw their Buddhist practice as complementary to their Judaism: at the conservative synagogue, their engagement with Buddhism was known, but not discussed.

In their conversation at Temple Shalom, Ezring recalled that Chayat and her husband described Buddhism as a “philosophy,” rather than a religion, yet he remained unsure. As they described their practice, he wondered how meditation was any different from what would be described as a “ritual.” He considered:

A Question of Membership (A)

“Rituals are a major part of religion. They’re a major part of Asian religions. They are Buddhists.” Further, he continued, “I mean, no matter how you get around it, from a Jewish perspective, if you got a Buddha in your practice, you’ve got an idol in your practice.” He added: “[She] was a Jew practicing Buddhism, and she wasn’t only practicing Buddhism, she considered herself a Buddhist priestess. If you are a priestess, you’re not practicing a philosophy; you’re practicing a religion.” And if Ezring said no to Chayat, he would have to say no to her husband and son as well: at the time, children could not join Temple Concord without both parents as members.

A Letter to the Central Conference of American Rabbis

Shortly after his meeting with Chayat, Ezring decided to pose the question (*she’elah*) to Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), seeking their perspective and advice. In return, the CCAR, the governing organization for Reform Judaism, would issue an answer (*teshuvah*) with their opinion on the case. Codified in the form of “responsa,” they provide guidance on particular issues while leaving the ultimate decision to the rabbi.

Ezring had written to the CCAR once before regarding the removal of a feeding tube from a man who had no hope for recovery: the CCAR responded that it “... was not permissible in light of Jewish Tradition.”² In that instance, he chose to support the family’s decision to remove the tube, rather than follow the guidance of the CCAR. While the question of the Chayat family’s membership was not a life and death situation, it was still complex and charged with emotion. Ezring explained, “Sometimes if you have an opportunity to pose a question, it might provide insight to others and give you more complete knowledge of the decision that you are making.”

Ezring reflected: “...Judaism is not a syncretic religion like Buddhism, like Eastern religions.” He added: “So, I really didn’t know what to do with it.” Yet Ezring emphasized:

I have no problem personally with Buddhism. I have no problem with any religion, as long as they respect other religions. I have a problem with all religions that say mine is the only way to God, because I believe God is bigger than that. Mine is not the only way to God, because I really believe one God created. If one God created, and there’s more than one religion, then for some reason, God wanted there to be more than one religion. I’m not wise enough to know why.

Ezring mailed his question to the CCAR, and awaited their response.

¹ All quotes from Rabbi Sheldon Ezring: Rabbi Sheldon Ezring, phone interviews by Emily Sigalow, August 24, 2012 and September 12, 2013.

² Central Conference of American Rabbis Responsa. *Hospital Patient Beyond Recovery*. 5750.5, CCAR Website: <http://ccarnet.org/responsa/tfn-no-5750-5-365-369/>, accessed September 2013.