



A Question of Membership (B)

As Rabbi Sheldon Ezring read the *teshuvah* (answer) from the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), he considered the points it outlined. It stated:

Without in any way denying the depth of Buddhist philosophical and ethical doctrines, there are fundamental differences between them and the teachings of Jewish tradition. *The latter clearly affirm this world rather than, as the majority of Buddhist traditions would, denigrate its importance.* Reform Judaism especially has downplayed the salvational aspects of our religion and has taught that we have an obligation to perfect this world in all its from the environment to its social structures. Judaism is a deed-oriented rather than a contemplative religion, and while the merits of the latter are great, it reflects a basically different approach to the needs of everyday life, and therefore Rabbi Leo Baeck took the view that Judaism and Buddhism are complete opposites, "two religious polarities."¹

Yet the CCAR also noted that the husband's meditation practice was not a particular concern:

To be sure, there is no conflict between Judaism and meditative practices -- after all, Jewish tradition itself is familiar with it. But we see a conflict when it comes to the world-affirming view we hold and that of a world-denying Buddhism. It is therefore inappropriate to consider a Buddhist priest as eligible for membership in the congregation. The husband alone *might* qualify, but as a family the couple do not, as long as the mother maintains her status as a Buddhist priest.²

The *teshuvah* continued:

There is also the matter of appearance (*mar'it ayin*). The Jewish community would be confused by what it would conceive as an experiment in religious syncretism and a watering down of Jewish identity. The couple must be brought to realize that with all the respect we have for their Buddhist practices and beliefs, the enlargement which they think they have brought to their Judaism may fit their own personal needs but does not fit the needs of a congregation. Their request to join the congregation should therefore not be accommodated."³

In this case, Ezring agreed with the CCAR. Ultimately, he felt "[t]hat a religion has to have some point of demarcation."⁴ He explained: "A religion has to have some red lines that cannot be crossed." For Ezring, Sherry Chayat "...was a leader who wanted to still practice her religion and her Judaism simultaneously." He would have to tell Chayat that she and her family would not be welcome as members of Temple Concord.

Having served as a rabbi since 1974, Ezring knew the conversation would be difficult. He explained:

When you say no to somebody, you generally make an enemy, especially when you're a liberal rabbi. Orthodox Jews expect it. They may not like the answer, but their life is much more guided by the rabbi. Liberal Jews always assume that the rabbi can come up with the answer that they want because we're liberal. And there are certain times you just can't."

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Ezring recalled, “She was better about it, I think, than many other people would have been, but we were never friendly again.” He continued, “I think her Buddhist tradition didn’t allow her to be [angry]. That would go against her Buddhist philosophy, at least outwardly. Inwardly, I don’t know.”

Looking Back

Sherry Chayat raised the question of membership at Temple Concord back in the early 1990s, some twenty years ago. Since then, Ezring explained, “The world has changed.” He reflected, “When I began my rabbinate I wouldn’t have thought of consecrating the marriage of two men, or two women. Today if it’s legal, I’m happy to perform the ceremony for it.” He continued, “I didn’t officiate in interfaith marriages until about five years ago. I had to compromise what I did when I’d say a blessing, but I didn’t officiate. Today I’m happy to officiate, and as a matter of fact, I will co-officiate.” He said, “You grow. You expand.”

Ezring is now nearing retirement, serving at Temple Beth Shalom in Hudson, Ohio. He left Syracuse 2009, and continues to hold the position of Rabbi Emeritus. Ezring reflected, “In the world back then, the congregation I’m in would not have been 75 percent interfaith marriage like the one I’m in now. In the world back then, I would have been very unhappy if either of my children married a non-Jew. Now I’ve already married one woman who was non-Jewish when I began to date her, and I’m in a relationship with another woman who was a Jew by choice. Things change.”

Yet one thing hasn’t changed, for Ezring: If Sherry Chayat posed the same question of membership today, he would have the same response: “No, because again, she’s a minister in another faith who wants to be a Jew and a minister in another faith. I have to say no. In that Syracuse congregation, I had an American Baptist and an Episcopalian minister married to members of my congregation. ...They were interfaith families. The non-Jews weren’t trying to also be Jewish.”

Further, Ezring supports the Union for Reform Judaism’s position against bringing up children in two religions. “I think it is confusing for children.” Yet he also acknowledged, “...my congregation today is 65 to 75 percent interfaith married, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if a number of the people were bringing their children to both. I just don’t ask the question anymore.” One of his current congregants wrote a book about meditation, and recently led a Moon Rite, yet Ezring doesn’t raise the issue. “I don’t want to get involved in those issues at this point in my life, because I’ve passed the stage I want to fight every windmill. I’m just, I’m not Don Quixote these days.”

He recalled that, centuries ago, if according to Jewish law a person was considered a doubtful *mamzer* (a person born from a tainted or forbidden relationship) they were not permitted to be married. Yet, Jewish law made an allowance that if they went to another city and found someone to marry, they could do so freely. “The unwritten rule there was you don’t ask too many questions. Sometimes it’s wise not to ask too many questions.”

¹Central Conference of American Rabbis Responsa. *Practicing Judaism and Buddhism*. 5752.3. CCAR website: <http://ccarnet.org/responsa/tfn-no-5752-3-123-126/>, accessed September 2013.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ All quotes from Rabbi Sheldon Ezring: Rabbi Sheldon Ezring, phone interviews by Emily Sigalow, August 24, 2012 and September 12, 2013.