

Boston Jews on a Mission for Unity

by Ann Green

"We must begin to see our community as a woven tapestry," writes Rabbi Rachel Cowan, "with many contemporary colors threaded across the long strands of tradition and history, creating vivid patches of activity." A beautiful, interdenominational tapestry was created last week in the form of the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts' 16th Unity Mission to New York.

The "mission of the Mission," explains Synagogue Council Director Alan Teperow, "is to bring together members of different denominations to promote mutual understanding and respect." 31 Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist and unaffiliated Jews, ranging in age from teens to 80s, spent two days visiting the major institutions of the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements. "Through dialogue, inspiring presentations from scholars and a peek into the practices of each denomination," says Peter Krupp, a member of Needham's Temple Aliyah, a Conservative congregation, "we were able to learn together, confront our preconceptions and begin to better understand each other."

The Mission's first stop was the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, for an address by Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, founder of the Center for Learning and Leadership and head of the Jewish Life Network. "True pluralism is based on dignity and mutual respect," said Greenberg, a leading light in interdenominational dialogue. "While I daven Orthodox, I consider myself to be a member of the whole Jewish people." Greenberg pointed out that the good news of life in the diaspora is our unprecedented freedom and acceptance as Jews, while the bad news is "the extraordinary rise in assimilation, with a concurrent rise in denominational polarization." He urged Mission participants to "challenge your leaders. We need to focus on what unites us. Pluralism means that I have my truth, but there is room for other truths."

After davening mincha, the afternoon service, the group was addressed by Dr. Morton K. Siegel, Senior Vice President of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. He acknowledged that many people have a hazy idea of what Conservative Judaism stands for, suggesting that "Intelligent retention of tradition along with sensible change" might be one way to introduce the Conservative philosophy. The Rare Book Room at JTS, which houses the largest collection of Judaica in the West, was clearly a

highlight for all. Rabbi Jerry Schwarzbard dazzled the group with a "show and tell" which included a portion of a 15th Century Guttenberg Bible and a censored copy of the Talmud from 1487. He also displayed fragments from the Cairo Genizah, the thousand-year-old collection of books and papers discovered in the 19th Century by Solomon Schechter, a founder of the Conservative movement. The group's mutual enjoyment of the presentation led one person to remark, "This really shows that our texts unite us."

At the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, many were taken with the chapel, designed by renowned Israeli artist Yaacov Agam, where they attended a morning service. As one walks across the room, the stained glass windows flow into different colors as they reveal the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. "Perhaps," says Teperow, "we can see this as a metaphor for the way our Jewish community's multiple colors are both mutually dependent and independent." HUC's Dean, Rabbi Aaron Panken, engaged the group in Torah study as a way of demonstrating how the movement turns to Halacha (Jewish law) as a "developing entity." The Torah, which is viewed as a human, multivocal text "is just as important whether it is divinely given or divinely inspired," said Panken, "It is what keeps us together as Jews."

At a side trip to the Center for Jewish History the group was charmed by Sharona Halickman, of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Halickman discussed her groundbreaking leadership role as Madricha Ruchanit in her Orthodox congregation, which enables her to be a member of the professional religious team, offering many spiritual and educational services to her congregants. The group was also given a tour of the Center's Genealogy Institute, which is designed to help nonprofessionals do research.

At the Orthodox movement's Yeshiva University, the group learned that YU not only trains rabbis, but also has a number of undergraduate and graduate programs, including schools of medicine, law, psychology and social work. Rabbi Robert Hirt, Assistant to the President, has spoken at all 16 Missions and is working with Teperow, the other seminaries and United Jewish Communities to replicate the Mission in other cities. "Jewish values," he said, "nurture those who study and help us to stay rooted in God and the Jewish people." He added that YU, while steeped in Torah, also embraces modern, secular knowledge. At the end of each day, Mission members got together to share their observations. While speaking with each other and with the various presenters, participants did not shy away from controversial topics.

The issue of patrilineal descent was raised with officials of the Reform movement, and the subject of homosexuality was broached with Orthodox rabbis. There was no perfect agreement on many subjects, but there was a general sense of the importance of exploration and of keeping the dialogue going. "The trip was immensely interesting and has set me thinking about how I can represent the different denominations in the library," says Judith Segal, an Orthodox participant from Brookline, who is Director of the Hebrew College Library.

As for me, the spirit of the Mission was embodied on the return trip to Newton by the sight of a minyan of tired travelers standing and swaying in the back of the bus to daven maariv so that one member could say kaddish.

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