

The Bully Pulpit: A Message from Rabbi Tilsen

Several Catholic Bishops in America made the headlines when they announced that they would not provide the sacrament of the Eucharist (communion) to Catholic public officials who vote to support abortion rights.

I'm all for clergy – especially Conservative rabbis – using the aptly-named bully pulpit to wield political power, but I am not quite sure how we could implement a comparable sanction in the Jewish world. I do not believe that denying Senator Lieberman the rite of single malt Scotch whiskey at *qid-dush* unless he votes according to our instructions will work. As far as I can tell, Joe is a man of principle, and besides, he seems to be able to get along with the blended Scotch, or even the Manischewitz Concord (which, coincidentally, is the same wine used by many churches).

Although there are important views widely held by the Jewish People, it would be difficult to pick out one single issue that we can claim as fundamental and universally held. "Support of Israel" comes close, but we have a very broad range of opinions as to what this "support" actually means. While our Rabbinical Assembly does issue little-read resolutions on questions of public policy, we are neither hierarchical nor centralized, as is the Catholic Church. The Chancellor can say whatever he wants, and we can agree or disagree. The Law Committee can issue *teshuvot* (legal determinations), and we can adhere to them or not. I have never heard

of any synagogue being expelled from the United Synagogue for any policy violation, except failure to pay dues.

Our religious heritage, as documented by the Mishna and other rabbinic texts, endorses the values of free speech, intellectual integrity and democracy. Individual sages were allowed to teach whatever they actually believed, even if it was not in keeping with the majority's view. The sages could speak their minds and vote their consciences.

It is true that the State of Israel has an official "Chief Rabbinate" (actually, two official Chief Rabbinate) whose determinations on everything from conversion to kashrut are "government endorsed." But that institution is scorned by all except the functionaries who feed at the public trough. The government rabbinate is a relic of Ottoman rule in Palestine and has no religious basis or legitimacy among the Jewish People.

There are no "sacraments" in Jewish life, at least in the way Catholics think about them. Don't tell anyone, but you don't really need a rabbi to become a bar- or bat-mitzva, get married or divorced, or have a funeral. It may be desirable to have rabbinic guidance and supervision, but there are really no special "powers" a rabbi has other than the endorsement of some rabbinical school attesting to the rabbi's training. The Cemetery Association may require (for good reasons) that a rabbi officiate at a



funeral, but there is no such requirement in Jewish law or tradition. In contrast, Church doctrine has it that there is no communion or sacrament without the authorized Church official.

The Jewish world is not prepared to make that kind of a claim on a diverse civil society. In general, we hold that the *mitzvot* apply to the Jewish People but, with a handful of exceptions, we are not to impose them on the rest of humanity. Hunting is illegal in Jewish law, but there is nothing in our law that prohibits non-Jews from game hunting or that impels us to try to stop them. Eating bacon is prohibited for Jews, but there is nothing immoral or wrong about non-Jews eating it (current medical advice and PETA radicalism notwithstanding).

We must confess that some sages believed that a prohibition on abortion is one of those few rules (such as the prohibition on murder) that we as Jews *should* impose on others. But even if we hold that view, we must see "abortion" in the context of a larger set of social conditions and weigh it with other values. If one really wants to stop abortions, then it is necessary to

continued on page 7

treated. Some need sewing and taping of parchment, and some need a new set of *etz hayim* (spools).

The cost of restoring our best scrolls is \$3,600 to \$6,000 each; a fund of \$50,000 would provide for the permanent regular maintenance of the scrolls. If you would like to learn more about the condition of our scrolls or about the restoration process, or would like to fund the restoration of one or more scrolls, please contact Rabbi Tilsen at 389-2108 x10 or jjtilsen@beki.org.

KINAHARA Kosher Alert

Based on the following information, we are now permitting the use of Hebrew National meat and other "Triangle K" supervised products at BEKI.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has accepted the supervision of Triangle K kosher supervision for all products. With this decision of the CJLS, the products of Hebrew National are approved as kosher. Members of the Law Committee made site visits to Hebrew National food processing plants in the mid-west, met with the supervising rabbi of Triangle K, with ritual slaughters and with others supervising kosher meat preparation for Hebrew National, before reporting to the entire Committee on Jewish Law and Standards

High Holidays Children's Programs

We are starting to plan our Children's Programming for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. As in the past we have strong programs for all three days run by parents. We have age appropriate thematic teaching material available for all volunteers in packets. This year we will have copies of each Children's Program materials for all group leaders.

We will offer two programs each day for the four age groups: Children's Havura, K-2, Junior Congregation and Cosmic Conversations. If you would like to volunteer, please contact Dr. Lauren Kempton at 389-2108 x 13 or lkempton@beki.org.

Jobs?

There are always BEKI members and members of the extended BEKI family who are in employment and professional transition and who are looking for full-time and part-time work. Our members looking for work include medical specialists, computer mavens, laborers, salespeople and more. In addition, many of our members work as professionals, trades people, salespeople and shop owners, and welcome the patronage of BEKI families.

If you have a position to fill, contact office manager Peggy Hackett at 389.23108 x14 or Rabbi Tilsen at 389.2108 x10.

continued from page 5

A Message from Rabbi Tilsen

look at the underlying matrix of issues including unwanted pregnancy, birth control, access to medical services and education, and women's social and economic status. Abortion cannot be a "stand alone" or "single" question. If you are really against abortion, can you vote against the "morning after" pill? Reasonable people (although not doctors) disagree.

At the level of actual legislation, it is not always clear what the relationship is between our values and a particular bill. A vote for or against a bill does not simply mean that a legislator is "for" or "against" anything. Sometimes conscientious legislators vote against a bill that is poorly written or unworkable even though they may support the bill's goals. Sometimes legislators compromise on a "package" of issues, or support a bill that is not optimal because it is just the best that they think is attainable. It is not fair to oversimplify the process – doing so is itself a poor way to influence public policy.

I do think clergy can, and should, play a significant role in the development of public policy, and that our religious values should inform our positions on civil questions. The Bishop's attempt seems clumsy, but who am I to comment on internal Church issues. Their approach would have no chance of success in our setting.