

Fun and Games

By Morris Speizman

During the 1930's and early 1940's, our congregation was composed of about 65 families. In the old Temple we had a very small kitchen, but a very dedicated group of ladies. The meals which they served on appropriate occasions have never, in my mind, been equalled by the greatest gustatory achievements of the kosher caterers at the Waldorf Astoria, or even Bluesteins of Baltimore.

Those were the days when board meetings and congregational meetings were events that were looked forward to with keen anticipation. There was no Country Club; there were no other "distracting" organizations; the Temple was the center of the community, and rightly so.

Some of our old-timers spoke with quaint accents, and one of the classics occurred during a congregational meeting. It happened that the husband and wife took opposite positions on the question that was being discussed.

They would take turns shushing each other and telling each other, "Sit down, sit down—you said enough." Finally, the husband in extreme exasperation at one of these interruptions, shouted to the chairman, "Mr. Chairman, I vont you should trow dat vuman out." And as I recall it, that broke up the meeting.

This same venerable gentleman at another meeting criticized the remarks of one of our younger men who was addicted to smoking one of those chin-rest pipes. On this occasion his classic remarks were to the effect that "Vot he sed mit the pipsicle in his mouth, I agree with, but vot he sed mit the pipsicle out of his mouth, I don't like."

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Looking back, there were a number of wonderful Rabbis who gave us spiritual leadership down through the years.

However, our congregation (and I am sure that it is true of many others) has a habit of enveloping Rabbis who have long since departed our communities, with an aura of great leadership, eloquence, energy and dedication. It may interest you to know, however,

that these were the very same kind of souls whose lives were constant torments of minor and major irritations, criticism and frustration, while they were the shepherds of our flock. To paraphrase Gilbert and Sullivan—"Indeed a Rabbi's lot is not a happy one."

I believe that this spirit is changing, because there is more maturity in the younger board members I see around me from year to year. True, we are still hypercritical of our religious leaders, but nevertheless, I think we are coming to a better appreciation of our own shortcomings, as well as their achievements in leading our spiritual lives. After all, every congregation gets the type of Rabbi they deserve. Think that over.

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In those earlier years, there was a recurrent feeling of resentment against the "clique that runs the Temple." There were always some members who would show up at the annual meeting and raise all types of issues in a dramatic way which would sway the congregation to action, some of which was perhaps not well considered or thought through. After the meeting was over, we would see nothing of these members until the next annual meeting, when another banner would be raised in defiance and protest. It got to the point where the Board was being emasculated.

The problem was solved in two very simple ways. First of all, we made it a point to elect every outspoken critic to the Board so that he immediately became part of the clique.

Secondly, we decided that if the Board was entrusted with the affairs of our Temple, it should be given the authority to hire and discharge all of our religious and other personnel. This latter arrangement seems to have worked out very nicely over the years.

As for the clique, the protesting maverick soon found out that there was indeed a "clique that runs the Temple," but it was a clique dedicated to selfless service rather than to individual aggrandizement.

At the following annual meetings, they became defenders of the actions of the Board, and so it should be, and

is, down through the years.

Some of the children I taught in Sunday School will still remember my method of chastisement. It is, of course, unthinkable that a teacher should use any form of corporal punishment on the little "darlings," regardless of how obstreperous they become. My method was to appoint a committee of student "Sergeants-at-Arms." I supplied two or three of them with a paddle, and the offending student was asked to participate in a small game of "guess who" with his back turned to the wall and arm bent over his or her eyes. I think we only played that game for two sessions, and it cured the discipline problem. I doubt whether such a system could be reinstated today.

Some of these very same youngsters are now middle-aged parents, and in a few cases they have "joined the other temple." One of my vagrant thoughts is that perhaps my harsh discipline at a tender age may have driven them from the Conservative Movement. I hope this is not so.

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I think that the group of youngsters that matured in our Temple family during my earlier years represented something unique. We were on the scene when such dramatic events were occurring in

Jewish life. The holocaust of Hitler was followed by World War II, and then of course, the establishment of the State of Israel. We were in our early thirties and forties, and we were afloat on a gigantic wave of history.

Our local friends started a new Reform Temple in 1943, and there was an intense amount of competition for every man and woman who stepped off a train or plane. I recall one of our annual plays in which a song was written by your humble servant, the music of which was to the tune of "Oklahoma." The words, as I recall them now, ran as follows:

Passover Wishes
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Director

PART II

Verse

*When a newcomer comes to our city
There is such a mad rush,
it's a pity*

*He's sported, escorted and
feasted with wine
Until his John Hancock is
down on the line.*

Chorus

*Then it's O.K. Shlomah
Pay your dues and never
mind the seats
We've got members here for
many a year
Without a place to rest their
feet...*

These days the contest, however, is on a much higher plane—without the wining, dining and signing so assiduously practiced in former years.

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With advancing years, my direct involvement in Temple activity, aside from worship service, and some "elder statesman advice" has declined. I don't miss the eternal haggling over the minutiae of Temple administration—but I know that along with such petty aggravations I am also missing a lot of fun.

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