

IN MY OPINION Why Jews Should Support Public Prayer

by David Schulman

The Chamber of Commerce's annual banquet was packed to capacity. Warm handshakes were being extended in all corners of the room, even a few pats on the back. Nervous laughter to the latest slightly funny jokes about headline topics abounded. Soon, everyone sat down for a festive meal and hopefully not too boring a speaker. Before the bread was broken, they had prayer. The invocation ended with, "in Jesus name we pray." At least for the few Jewish folks in the audience, the mood had just turned 360 degrees. Those few words can always be counted on for an immediate fifty point spike in the average Jewish person's blood pressure, a red flag exposing insensitivity and narrow-mindedness. I used to feel exactly that way, but one breakfast in a little diner in the small town of Sylva, North Carolina about ten years ago changed my mind.

Our breakfast group met every Friday. The subject of praying in Jesus' name came up quite naturally. I was in charge of the upcoming Jackson County Chamber banquet as outgoing president. I was going to give the invocation and benediction myself, assuring the night's non-denominational quality. Every previous year I had been what I considered "subjected to" the usual Christian prayers at such meetings and I had had enough. I told Bill, the local Presbyterian minister and one of the breakfast buddies, my solution. His answer floored me.

"I can understand why you would want to lead the prayers that way, and you should do it, but if you asked me to do the prayer and leave out the name of Jesus it would be insulting to my faith," he said. He continued to explain in a very rational way that it was not meant to insult Jews, Buddhists, or

anybody else. It would actually be insulting to him to be asked NOT to mention the precepts of his faith just as it would be for a Jewish person to be asked not to pray as he normally would. It was in no way meant as a blanket endorsement of Christianity for the whole group to unanimously agree on, but just an individual praying as his teachings said to.

I have never forgotten that breakfast. It does take objective treatment of the subject, standing back not as a Jewish person but simply as a non-threatened, non-defensive spiritual human. A human who knows if he or she is going to rightfully demand respect for his/her religion, must be equally demanding in giving respect to another's religion.

Anyone who thinks Jewish political power and lobby is so weak that allowing public prayer in schools and elsewhere would lead to Christian control of religious freedom is simply naive. I respect my friend Bill's right to pray in the name of Jesus, and he respects my right not to. It is not prayer in the public schools that threatens me, it is the unpenitent with handguns. It is not how we pray to God that has undermined society, but the lack of prayer. Let's not look for ways to stop prayer (For God's sake and ours, too), let's look for ways to do it more... each in our own way... both privately and publicly.



Schulman is an award winning writer and project director at the University of North Carolina at Asheville

Woman Named President of Jewish Seminary

The Academy for Jewish Religion, the nation's only Rabbinical and Cantorial School committed to the pluralism of the Jewish community and K'lal Yisrael, announces the Inauguration of Rabbi Dr. Shohama Harris Wiener as President, to take place on Sunday, November 20, 1994. Rabbi Wiener will be the first woman ever to be named President of a Seminary.

Rabbi Wiener has served as the Executive Dean and Spiritual Director of the Academy for seven years. A graduate of Wellesley College and Harvard University, she has devoted nearly twenty years as a learning specialist, community volunteer, wife and mother of three before coming to the rabbinate. Since her ordination by The Academy for Jewish Religion, she earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from New York Theological Seminary; her thesis focused on spiritual development.

Rabbi Wiener is the co-editor of *Worlds of Jewish Prayer* (Jason Aronson, Inc. 1993), editor of the forthcoming book *Worlds of Jewish Spirituality*, and the author of numerous articles

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on Jewish spirituality and contemporary halakhic concerns. Her latest article, published in the Spring 1994 issue of *The Reconstructionist*, is entitled "Connecting God's Names and My Name: A Spiritual Journey." Rabbi Wiener has served in Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform congregations, and is currently a member of an Orthodox synagogue and the Jewish Renewal network.

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