

# In My Opinion . . .

By Amy Krakovitz Montoni

It's obviously not too early to start talking about that holiday that comes in December. We already started talking about it on August 25 when the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School system presented their policy on religion in the schools at a meeting held at the Jewish Community Center. The contents of that policy and a report on that meeting can be found on page 4, but these paragraphs are my place to express my opinion—not of the policy, but of the reaction that members of this community have to expressions of Christmas in school.

Back in the 1930's, a little girl named Louise Carey attended the Boston Public Schools. In her elementary school, as in all elementary schools at the time, she was required to begin the day with a prayer. Not just any prayer, or a silent prayer, but all the children were required to say and memorize the Lord's Prayer. Now, Louise was a Jewish girl, one of many in her class, but she said the prayer because she had to. Did that change her life? Did that make her convert? Did that make her feel left out, singular, different? No to all of

the above. To quote her today, "I knew what I was. I was a Jew. Nothing they made me say could change that."

That little girl grew up to become my mother. So, when I was in 3rd grade and Miss Sullivan very politely asked the parents of the Jewish children if they had any objection to their children singing Christmas carols in class, my mother's response was essentially the same: "Sing whatever you want. You are a Jew. Nothing you say or sing is going to change that." (She was right.)

So now here we are today. I am the mother. I have two Jewish children who have it even tougher than I did as a kid. First of all, they're being raised in the south where Christianity is a far more vocal religion than where I was brought up, and their last name is not traditionally considered a "Jewish name." But when the teachers bring out those pine needles and reindeer after Thanksgiving, and they ask my first grader to count the balls on the tree, I just don't think his whole life is going to change. I don't think he'll cry because Chanukah is not included

in the curriculum and I don't think the decorations in the room will cause him to want to convert. I am certain he will ask for the millionth time why we don't have a Christmas tree. I always asked that question, too. My answer will be the same as my mother's, that we are Jews, we don't celebrate Christmas, we have our own unique and wonderful holidays and if you want to see a Christmas tree, go next door.

It just seems to me that we get too uptight about tiny little unimportant details. Here is what is important: that your children are getting a good rounded secular multi-cultural education in public school and that you provide your children with a solid base of love of Judaism and pride in their Jewishness.

So here's what you do when your children bring home the Santa Claus faces and the Christmas stars: bring them to synagogue Friday night or Saturday morning; light your candles Friday at sundown (candle lighting times are always listed in this publication); tell your children stories from your family holiday experiences; always remind your children to be proud of their Judaism and their heritage. No amount of ornaments or stories or even prayers can take that away from them. ✪



## Point of View

Each issue of the CJN features an article written by one of three rabbis active in the Charlotte Community.

This Month:

Rabbi Jim Bennett of Temple Beth El

## A Moment of Holiness

The story is told of two brothers who lived on two sides of a hill-top long ago. One brother was married and had a large family, while the other was single and lived alone. Each brother had a large farm with crops growing throughout the summer months.

One year, as the fall and the harvest season approached, each brother set out to begin the harvesting of the bountiful crops. As it happened, one night, the married brother woke up in the middle of the night and said to his wife, "My brother has no one to help him harvest his crops. He will never be able to gather enough for the winter. I have so much help and so much extra. Surely I can do an act of kindness for him and help him harvest his fields." Thinking that he would do this act in secret, he arose in the night and left to harvest his brother's field, leaving the piles of food near his brother's barn.

The next evening, after a long day of harvesting, the single brother noticed how much food he had gathered. That night, he awoke and thought to himself, "I am all alone. I will never be able to use all of this food. My brother, on the other hand, has a large family to feed. I think I'll bring some of it to him." Deciding to do this act of kindness in secret, he arose in the middle of the night, and delivered it to his brother's barn.

The third day, each brother thought to himself, "Even with all I have given my brother, I still have plenty for the winter. I will share even more with my brother." Each brother arose in the middle of the night and left to climb the hill to his brother's farm, to share some of his harvest.

Suddenly, at the top of the hill, the two brothers, arms loaded with sheaves of grain, collided, and realized what had been going on. According to the legend, the brothers embraced, and on that very spot years later, the ancient Temple was built. The very simple act of kindness was a moment of holiness.

A legend? Perhaps. Yet here in Shalom Park, here in Charlotte, we have many opportunities to make it real. This season of fall, with the festival of Sukkot, reminds us as Jews of the fragile nature of all of our lives. Whether it is recognizing that all of us in the Jewish community share a common history and destiny, and must work together, or whether it is recognizing the needs of the hungry and impoverished all around us in our world, we have the opportunity to seek to help our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings.

The very act of doing so is a moment of holiness.

The fervently Orthodox executive said, with a shade of doubt, that "it sounds like a prayer mall. But it fills me with a good feeling that there's a place where people are all sitting and being Jewish together."

Shema Yisrael's Rabbi Mintz, who was ordained in the fervently Orthodox Torah V'Daas yeshiva in Brooklyn, was for 17 years the spiritual leader of another Atlanta synagogue, a congregation affiliated with the Orthodox Union. He left in June with some 30 families in tow.

The other unique aspect of his idea in forming Shema Yisrael is that it asks for no dues.

Mintz expects congregants to

(Continued on page 14)

## Synagogue in Atlanta charts new path to religious pluralism

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) - An experiment in religious pluralism is unfolding in Atlanta, where a new synagogue is bringing together, under one roof, Jews connected with each of the four main movements of Judaism - Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist.

The newly established Congregation Shema Yisrael currently meets in a hotel and works like this: The various groups of worshippers gather, each in their own space, with their own prayer books and Torah scroll, in a ballroom divided into separate sections with movable walls.

After their respective prayer services end, they open the dividing walls, rearrange the chairs and, together, listen to each rabbi and prayer leader present a brief sermon. A discussion ensues, and then they share kiddush.

Orthodox/traditional and Conservative groups meet each week. The Reform group gathers three out of four Sabbaths. On the fourth, a Reconstructionist havu-

rah takes its place.

Call it "multiplex Judaism."

It is an idea whose time has come, says the rabbi and creator of the concept, Juda Mintz. "Everyone's talking about Jewish pluralism but not doing anything about it," he said. "This, I pray, will be a model for others."

It is apparently the first such Congregation ever created, though a similar approach regularly takes place on college campuses under Hillel's aegis - the model that Mintz says inspired him.

A recent Shabbaton on the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts similarly brought together Jews from each of the movements - but it was for a single Sabbath, rather than as an ongoing effort.

To be sure, there are a few synagogues that accommodate two different styles of worship. For instance, in the wake of discord over the issue of women being called to read from the Torah, some Conservative synagogues have split off into egalitarian and

traditional services.

But never have any of the sources contacted for this story ever heard of a pointedly multi-denominational and ostensibly permanent effort like Shema Yisrael.

"There is a great hunger for unity," said Rabbi Harold Schulweis of Conservative synagogue Valley Beth Shalom, in Encino, Calif., when called for comment. "There is a revulsion against the apartheid that exists among Jewish denominations."

But it is also a sign of these tentative times that when contacted, senior executives at two major Orthodox organizations, one centrist Orthodox and the other fervently Orthodox, both reacted with enthusiasm - privately, that is.

Neither was willing to say anything publicly supportive of the Atlanta effort.

"Mintz is a visionary. It's a brilliant idea, though truthfully I can't congratulate him publicly on founding non-Orthodox minyanim," said the centrist Orthodox executive. "If I did, I'd be crucified."

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