

In My Opinion...

By Amy Krakovitz Montoni

Today I am thinking about names. It's all because I have the *simcha* of planning No. 1 Son's Bar Mitzvah, which is scheduled for next spring. This is actually my sister's fault because she already has me worried about who is going to be called for which *aliyah*.

That, of course, got me thinking about names because when you are called to read from the Torah, everyone in the synagogue gets to hear your name and your father's name (or your mother's name). That in turn made me confront again how much I don't like my Hebrew name.

My Hebrew name is Esther. Now, Esther in and of itself is not a really bad name. It's okay. It's even okay in English. But the great cosmic joke of it is the middle name that my parents decided to give me to go along with Esther. Laugh if you will, but they had the audacity to name me Esther Malkah.

Apparently, the ancestor my mother chose to name me after managed to get through life as Queen Esther, but it was a little tougher for me in Hebrew school, especially around the time of Purim. Every time we heard the venerated name during the reading of the Megillah, my classmates would whisper, "That's you, Esther! You're the queen!" Read that sarcastically. Oh, yuck!

Well, the permanent scars of many years of Purim spent hiding from the Megillah will have to be the subject of my February opinion, as Purim comes on March 1st this year. But I am here to continue talking about names. And how I'm going to hide from my name during my son's Bar Mitzvah. I think I'll just ask that when they say my name, that they skip the "Malkah."

Now, my son's name is another matter. This is a name you can be proud of. He, too, has the name of a famous person, as did my father.

My son is Shneur Zalman. Okay, so he's Shneur Zalman Ben Esther (Malkah). But being named for a famous rabbi is quite an honor.

Frankly, I don't know how my family came about getting that name. My father's family is from the area in the Ukraine near Lyady. They never were clear about what town they were from, but if you look at our last name, you might guess Karkovice. That's my guess anyway.

I always wondered if I could live up to my namesake: could I ever be as brave? Would I ever even have such an opportunity (she got her chance because she was so beautiful)? I don't know. And for my son, too, it's a burden to be named after such a great man. I see much potential in him, but then I'm his mother. I look forward to his Bar Mitzvah with both anticipation and anxiety. Stay tuned. You've not heard the last of the mother's trials and tribulations in planning a Bar Mitzvah. ✧

Religious Freedom Fight Must Be Waged on Many Fronts

By Franklin M. Fisher

In the seemingly endless struggle over the conversion issue in Israel, the current impasse offers an opportunity to step back and look at some of the larger issues involved in making Israel safe for Jewish diversity. Most of the attention in this country has been focused on the efforts of the Conservative and Reform movements in Israel to achieve official recognition and legitimacy. Such standing is a prerequisite for the creation of a dynamic stream of modern Judaism that can appeal to the majority of Israeli Jews, who are now called "secular" for want of a viable alternative to the Orthodoxy that they do not or cannot embrace. But achieving real religious freedom in the Jewish State involves challenges both more fundamental and more complex than this. They lie at the heart of Israel's efforts to define its values for the next century.

Following the American model, the non-Orthodox movements have been concentrating their efforts on the legal front, seeking points of leverage in existing Israeli law to challenge the denial of their legitimacy by the Orthodox rabbinate and, hence, by agencies of the Israeli government. These efforts have brought some important - if tenuous - victories, most notably the 1995 Supreme Court ruling that, in the absence of explicit legislation to the contrary, the state must register as Jews people converted in Israel by Conservative and Reform rabbis. It was, in fact, to overturn this victory (won by the Reform Movement's Israel Religious Action Center and the Association for Civil Rights in Israel) that the Orthodox parties launched their campaign to enact the conversion bill. The bill would close the legal loophole by conferring on Orthodox rabbis, *de jure*, the monopoly over conversion they have long exercised *de facto*.

The firestorm of protest from North American Jewry has made it unlikely that the conversion bill will be enacted any time soon. But neither will the Israeli religious establishment relinquish its position of power and exclusivity. Those changes will not be easy to achieve and will require an effort that extends well beyond the capabilities of the non-Orthodox movements.

In addition to strengthening the legal foundations for religious freedom, those seeking to foster tolerance and pluralism are work-

ing to redress egregious inequities in public resource allocations - for schools, housing, and social services - that heavily favor Orthodox Israelis and reinforce their political influence. As they enable the ultra-Orthodox parties to deliver generous services to their followers, these subventions fuel a self-perpetuating cycle by enhancing their political strength and hence their ability to extract an ever-larger share of public resources. Several national organizations monitor these trends and seek to channel widespread but unfocused discontent into effective advocacy for more equitable distribution of resources, including state support for non-Orthodox synagogues, schools, and yeshivot.

More fundamentally, though, religious freedom cannot be achieved in a vacuum; it is indivisible from the other hallmarks of liberal democracy: respect for individual rights, equality of opportunity for all, freedom of cultural expression, safeguards for the rights of minorities. Since the Rabin assassination, there have appeared many worrisome signs that such values are in trouble in Israel. These include surveys revealing widespread racist and intolerant attitudes on the part of Israeli high school students and open contempt by some ultra-Orthodox leaders for Israel's Supreme Court and the rule of law of which it is the prime symbol. Meanwhile, the current government has slashed budgets for democracy education in Israel's schools. In such an environment, it is hardly surprising that equality for non-Orthodox movements is not a high priority for most Israelis.

Thus the struggle for religious pluralism and tolerance must be waged on many fronts. In building their synagogues, schools, and other institutions in Israel, the Conservative and Reform movements play an important role in this fight, but not an exclusive one. A host of civic and religious advocacy organizations are working alongside the movements to strengthen democratic values. Only in an Israel that fully respects diversity and equality can a progressive, innovative, and egalitarian Judaism hope to take root and flourish. ✧

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Treif and Hot

By Meir Salomon, Managing Editor, Viewpoint Magazine, National Council of Young Israel

Answering someone else's phone is generally a simple matter of taking messages. It is neither interesting nor rewarding. It can, however, on the rarest of occasions offer access to someone you may have wanted to speak with but would not otherwise have had the opportunity. And that's exactly what happened when in early August I was answering the phones for Rabbi Pesach Lerner, the Executive Vice President of the National Council of Young Israel.

Because the National Council tackles a surprising number of controversial issues, we get calls from a surprising number of controversial people. As the new managing editor of Viewpoint Magazine, I am familiar with the issues that the office confronts and can state that this is not done for the notoriety, but simply because it's the right thing to do. This desire to be involved in "doing the right thing," led me, after graduating from college, to my first job as Assistant Regional Director in New England for the Anti-Defamation League.

Ostensibly, the ADL's mission is to champion and to protect the

rights of any Jew facing anti-Semitism and persecution, and to fight every battle indifferent to its popularity or to its political ramifications. Inspired and inspiring sentiments! Unfortunately these words contrast starkly with my recollection of events in my first (and only) year working for them.

The year was 1986 and two headline issues were demanding responses from the major Jewish organizations. These issues caused heated staff meetings at the ADL New England Regional office. Though separate issues occurring on different continents, they shared one basic concept; the treatment of Jews. They also culminated in two of the most memorable phone calls of my life.

Each year our ADL office focused particular attention on one legal project, in addition to our usual caseload. I urged that we should continue to champion the issue of Soviet Jews, pressuring Premier Gorbachev, to fulfill his promises that the new Glasnost would permit free emigration for the millions of Jews desperate to flee the Soviet Union. The region's legal director countered, arguing that we had already addressed this issue and that apartheid was the now "hot" topic. My argument, with the eventual support of the regional director,

prevailed. We subsequently had a phone hookup to the office of the mayor of Moscow - a man named Boris Yeltsin.

In the second case, my arguments not only were rejected but were met with sharp criticism bordering on contempt. This issue, a political timebomb, raised the issue all good American Jews fear - the question of "dual loyalty." This case was a strong visceral test of how a Jewish citizen of the United States relates to himself as an American and as a Jew. It proved, moreover, to be most telling as a litmus test for American Jewish organizations. It was easy for the ADL and the other "major" American Jewish organizations to scream their indignation at the "evil empire of the Soviet Union." What did it cost them politically? Didn't everybody criticize Russia on human rights? But to criticize the US government and possibly suffer exile to the political "gulag" of unanswered calls to the corridors of power - that price was too high for a spy, regardless of his motivation. The issue is still hot, still *treif* to many and as anyone with even the most rudimentary knowledge of Kashruth is aware, *treif* and "hot" make for a uniquely contaminating combination and should be avoided and discarded. And this was exactly the view taken by the ADL (and most of the other

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