

NEWS: JUDAISM YOUR WAY

Rabbi Field embraces 'Jews on the edge'

By ANDREA JACOBS

IJN Senior Writer

Passionate is an apt description of Rabbi Brian Field, the vocally expressive director of Judaism Your Way, a local outreach organization targeting interfaith families and the unaffiliated since October, 2004.

Whether Jews approve of, tolerate or condemn intermarriage, it is an undeniable reality of the 21st century. The subject can be touchy at best, painful at worst.

"Some interfaith families we see have been told 'no' when they inquire about a lifecycle event at a synagogue," says Rabbi Field, who was ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in 1994.

"Others have received an ambiguous or ambivalent message from parts of the Jewish community: 'On the one hand, we want you, you're new blood; but on the other hand, we kind of wish that your non-Jewish spouse was Jewish — that you had made a different choice.'"

This attitude, which Rabbi Field summarizes as "welcome *but*," might be unintentionally communicated.

Nevertheless, people hear it loud and clear.

"People are sensitive," he says. "They pick up on the cues."

Judaism Your Way is attempting to "articulate a way of offering a Judaism that provides an unambiguous welcome and affirmation to Jews and their loved ones, whoev-

er they are and whatever they are," he says.

The mosaic of opportunities at Judaism Your Way — which has about 1,000 households on its mailing list but is not a membership-based institution — includes wedding ceremonies between Jews and non-Jews, baby namings, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs or "alternative coming of age celebrations," Shabbat services held in usual settings, regular holiday observances, and High Holiday services set in Hudson Gardens.

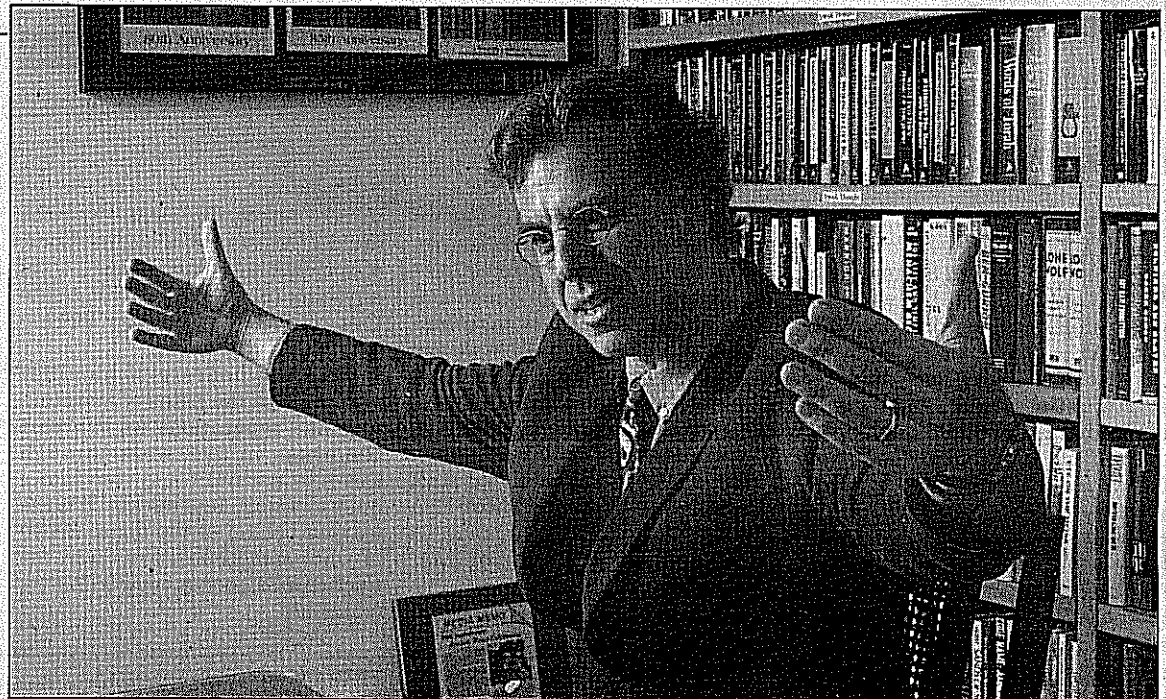
Judaism Your Way's Passover seder, scheduled Monday, April 9, 6 p.m., at Four Mile Historic Park, will "be very high energy," enthuses Rabbi Field, "with lots of conversation, dance, song and laughter."

He chose the last day of Passover for the seder "as a significant alternative. This is when our people actually crossed the sea."

Judaism Your Way functions as an entryway toward Jewish practice, learning and community — if that's what participants desire.

"One of the things we like to say is that wherever you are along your Jewish journey, we'll meet you there and help you figure out the next step," Rabbi Field says.

It's an accommodating philosophy that sounds eerily similar to the



Rabbi Brian Field, director of Judaism Your Way, wants a Judaism that genuinely accommodates the unaffiliated and the intermarried.

Shari Valenta

approach used by Chabad. But Rabbi Field stresses that unlike Chabad or other Jewish outreach groups, Judaism Your Way does not have a Jewish agenda that pulls participants toward more traditional forms of Judaism.

"We have a mutually referring relationship with other synagogues and organizations," he says. "Congregations refer people to us if the programming members want is

unavailable. Similarly, if someone in our group is looking for a deeper sense of community, I refer them to different synagogues, rabbis and Jewish organizations. I'm happy to do that.

"But we're also aware that there's a lot more that needs to be done Jewishly to engage all the folks out there. Is there another way of teaching Judaism, studying Torah, praying, and celebrating the holidays and

Shabbat that can engage those people whose needs are not being met in existing models?"

Yes, he answers with a wordless nod — Judaism Your Way.

Rabbi Field is aware of various criticisms leveled against Judaism Your Way, especially the fact that he performs interfaith marriages without requiring that the non-Jew-

ish partner convert.

While some area rabbis marry interfaith couples, the practice deviates from the Rocky Mountain Rabbinical Council's longstanding policy.

Rabbi Field, who belongs to the RMRC, requests that all Jewish and non-Jewish partners undergo "substantial" premarital counseling prior to marriage.

"Conversion is a very powerful option," he emphasizes. "Several people are studying for conversion with me right now.

"But I believe conversion is a deep matter of the soul.

"For some, it will be a natural part of preparing to marry a Jew. For others, it might not happen for 20 years, if at all.

"Conversion isn't for everyone.

"However, full participation in and contributions to Judaism are not precluded by a person's non-conversion," he adds.

"People say to us, you're like a parent who can't say no to your child.

"At Judaism Your Way, we answer that we want to embody a Judaism that finds a Jewish way to say 'yes' to as many Jews — *and* their loved ones — as possible."

Rabbi Field extends an open palm across the table.

"When Judaism Your Way looks at the world, we try to see it the way Jacob did," he says, referring to Jacobs' blessing of Joseph's two sons.

"When we see interfaith couples and non-Jewish participants in a Jewish setting, we don't see assimilation, dilution or depletion.

"We see blessing."

Rabbi Field, 49, has an affinity for helping Jews who stand at the spiritual edges of Judaism — "those with one foot out of the water and one foot in."

He was born in a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. His parents, who did not belong to a synagogue, sent him to the Peretz school, where Brian received an atypical Jewish education.

"I learned Yiddish but not Hebrew," he says, "a secular Judaism that celebrated Jewish peoplehood, Jewish history, Yiddish songs and Yiddish literature."

While attending the University of British Columbia, he took a course in post-biblical Judaism that

enlarged his perspective on Judaism. "I was excited by what I learned," he says. "Jews were not liberals who were always on the side of the underdog. They were diverse. The Jewish experience in Spain differed from the Jewish experience in the Mideast, which differed from the Jewish experience in Poland, which was very different than the Jewish experience in the US."

"It fascinated me."

He also developed a close relationship with the Hillel rabbi, who imparted additional insight to the intelligent young man.

"Little by little I started adding religious and historical pieces to the Yiddishist cultural Judaism I grew up with," he says now.

Always interested in teaching, Rabbi Field eventually entered the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College to pursue the rabbinate.

Dr. Arthur Green, who was president of RRC at that time and now heads the non-denominational Hebrew College in Boston, "once described Reconstructionism as Jewish religious humanism," Rabbi Field says.

"This concept allowed me to remain deeply rooted in my humanism while expanding my spiritual vocabulary."

After his 1994 ordination, he served as the rabbi in a new Reconstructionist congregation in New Jersey.

Two years later, he became the first rabbi at a Reconstructionist-Renewal congregation in Madison, Wisc., which he served for six years.

"That's where I learned that the part of the rabbinate which excited me most was working with people who were challenged by traditional Judaism," says Rabbi Field, "people who still wanted to engage in Judaism but needed some help."

In 2002, he became the first non-Christian chaplain at a large Catholic health care conglomerate in Madison and Milwaukee.

"I enjoyed the work — meeting individuals where they were."

Two years later, Rabbi Field heard about plans to start Judaism Your Way in Denver.

He accepted the position because it meant he "could have a rabbinate that would be based on reaching out, working with people at the edges of Judaism and expanding the reach of Judaism itself."

"I'm very happy with this job," says Rabbi Field, who married Debbie Zucker in 1995 and is the father of a 10-year-old daughter.

"It feels perfect for me."

Being warm and welcoming is commendable, Rabbi Field says of communal efforts to accommodate the Jewishly disenfranchised and the intermarried.

But it's hardly sufficient.

"Warm and welcoming behavior is really just being a good host," he says. "And most of know how to be good hosts."

He applauds synagogues that have created energized programming to attract more members, and is very pleased that interfaith groups are available at almost every liberal congregation in Denver.

But Judaism Your Way — and Rabbi Field — would like to steer the conversation in another direction.

He suggests that non-Jews who fully embrace their spouses' Judaism might embody G-d's attempt to begin healing the Jewish psyche of inner traumas carved by centuries of persecution.

"Whether a Jew is 65 or 40 or 35, the painful legacy of what it means to be Jewish sits with us. I'm the parent of a Jewish child. How long before (the historical negatives) become part of how a child defines his or her Jewishness?"

In the interfaith groups he leads, Rabbi Field hears the Jewish partner "invariably articulate" a negative legacy of Judaism that is influenced by anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and endless wrongs committed against the Jewish people.

"But the non-Jewish partner will invariably respond, 'It goes without question that our child will be raised Jewish,' or 'Judaism will be a large part of who they are.' I hear Christians speak with enthusiasm and love and respect about the gifts of Judaism again and again.

"Maybe this is G-d's way of helping heal the Jews of all the traumas they've suffered. Maybe, in the words of Torah, there are ways to think of ourselves other than as a people who dwell apart."

Reflecting on Judaism Your Way's ultimate goal, Rabbi Field mentions Abraham and Sarah, whom the Talmudic rabbis traditionally identify with the *mitzvah* of hospitality.

"There were openings on all four sides of their tent so no one would have to struggle to get inside," Rabbi Field explains, then pauses.

"What would a four-sided, tented Judaism look like?" he asks, a vivid smile spreading over his intense features.

"This is what Judaism Your Way is trying to do."