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JUDAISM YOUR WAY
—
EDITION

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BIG TENT — seriously and literally

‘JYW’ Undergoes tremendous growth in attendees, staff, mission.

By **ANDREA JACOBS** - IJN SENIOR WRITER

While some synagogues struggle to maintain members, Judaism Your Way's successful outreach model is attracting unaffiliated and interfaith families by the thousands.

JYW does not have a permanent

JYW HAS AN EVOLUTIONARY CONCEPT OF JEWISH COMMUNITY

building, a sanctuary, Shabbat services or religious school. It has a mailing list but is not membership-based. There is no standing minyan or 24/7 rabbi — standard features in typical Jewish denominational settings.

What it offers is an “I meet you where you are, for who you are” embrace to Jews regardless of their distance from Judaism, attitude toward G-d, relationship status or sexual orientation.

Predicated upon an evolutionary concept of community, it takes the term of “big tent Judaism” seriously and literally.

JYW's office is located in the Coldwell Banker building on 6th and Grant. High Holiday services take place at the Denver Botanic Gardens. The Open Tent B'nai Mitzvah program travels to the Denver and South Denver JCC, the HEA's Goldberger Youth Center and the Boulder JCC.

The Sturm Family Foundation provides the financial foundation for JYW, which recently launched an endowment campaign.

Reconstructionist Rabbi Brian Field was hired to direct JYW, founded in 2004. While Field remains the focal point, he's no longer the sole dispenser of learning, counseling and compassion.

Dr. Caryn Aviv, who began leading services half time in 2011 and went full time in 2013, adds style and substance.

Denver native Amanda Schwartz, now in her last year of rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary, leads family services and co-leads other major services.

Wendy Aronson has joined the group as executive director.

“We've got great folks, great people, doing this work,” Field tells the IJN. “Before I was the only one. Now it's a team. It's far from just me.”

High Holiday services are the primary stimulus for newcomers, he says. Initially held in Hudson Gardens until attendance outgrew the big tent, JYW moved to the Denver Botanic Gardens four years ago.

“DBG's large tent can accommodate about 1,000 people,” Field says. “We figured at the rate we were growing, we would enjoy many years here. That first year, we jumped from 500 to 900 at the major High Holiday service.”

“We realized it wouldn't be long until we maxed out at the Denver Botanic Gardens. In 2014, having filled the tent, we rented DBG's Mitchell Hall, which seats about 300.”

For the first time, Field led High Holy Day services in the tent and Aviv officiated in Mitchell Hall.

A total of 6,770 people attended 14 different services during four days, representing a 21% increase over 2014.

From 1,000 to 4,000 names since 2007.

Judaism Your Way is launching a survey to determine the exact demographics of its followers, which will be released by the 2016 High Holidays.

Field, who performs interfaith and same-sex marriages, has highly vocal critics but is unafraid to confront their objections “in a pastoral rather than contentious way.”

The following is an edited transcript of the IJN's interview with Rabbi Brian Field.

IJN: When we interviewed you in 2007, you described Judaism Your Way as an “attempt to articulate a way of offering a Judaism that provides an unambiguous welcome and affirmation to Jews and their loved ones, whoever they are and whatever they are.”

Now you're going gangbusters. How did you do it?

Field: That's a good question. How did it happen? On the High Holidays, people gather in a park. When you're surrounded by nature, I think it opens your heart. Spirituality at its best opens your heart. This reminds people that in Jewish space you can do that — and it's not that hard. Over the years, more and more people heard that message, mostly from those who attended our services. “I'm going to JYW's High Holiday service; come with me.”

People come to us for the High Holy Days not just to celebrate this time but as a way to step back into Jewish engagement. Over the centuries, that's the time for our people to renew, reunite, return. For us, it's been a very powerful way to issue that invitation.

I was talking to a photographer, a young woman who was taking pictures at a Bar Mitzvah where I officiated. She had just moved near Boulder and was asking people, “Where should I go for the High Holidays?” Many told her to come to JYW. It's a place to land Jewishly when you first arrive in town.

For those who haven't had a relationship to Judaism for a long time, it could be a place to remember what's great about connecting to other Jews. Again, we're meeting outside and it gives you a sense of spaciousness. It's not like you're trapped in a room. If you want to get out you can get out. People retain their sense of freedom.

I also think the way we do High Holiday services gives them a signal about how we approach Judaism in all the other things we do, whether it's adult education or Bar and Bat Mitzvah tutoring. I can't tell you how many people who signed up for our B'nai Mitzvah program first checked us out during the High Holy Days. After hearing us speak at services, they said, “OK, that's someone who would be good for our family.”

Or an interfaith couple or a mixed heritage couple comes to services and say, “They are so welcoming. Maybe that's a person who could officiate at our wedding ceremony; a person with whom we could have a mean-

ingful conversation about navigating the interfaith/mixed heritage journey in a Jewish way.”

IJN: Your approach to outreach differs from others because you have no intention to ultimately create the “perfect” Jew. Describe your mission.

Field: Most Jewish outreach organizations focus on a specific demographic. We don't. Traditional outreach efforts have been directed at families with young children. That's not our focus, although we don't ignore that population at all. What we've noticed is that most of the people coming to JYW are my age, in their 50s. Empty nesters if you will, or people whose kids are grown and want to find something for themselves. Contrary to conventional wisdom, our large programs [High Holidays, the eighth day Passover seder and Chanukah celebration] haven't been demographic or constituency specific. That's important to us; it's one of the ways we're trying to replicate community as opposed to simply serving a single group.

One of the things we've noticed over the years is that young adults in their 20s and 30s are coming to our High Holiday services, which are not directed toward young adults.

I'm in my 50s. Caryn is in her 40s. Neither one of us is an expert on young adults. We offer a universal Judaism here; an unambiguous welcome to people regardless of their individual circumstances. That's a lot more than putting on a frozen face and saying, “We're glad



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you’re here.” It has to do with explicitly recognizing people in their respective situations and saying, “Great, we see you. We celebrate you.”

There is not one preferred way of being Jewish. There is nothing better about being straight than being gay. And — this is going to be controversial — there’s nothing better about being a Jewish-Jewish couple than being an interfaith or mixed-heritage couple. I think one of the reasons JYW is doing so well is that year after year we’re learning how to recognize people where they are on the journey — and it’s unending. Our identities are becoming more diverse. We want to have a conversation with you so we can fully understand you. That will make the Judaism we offer better, and it will also make the Judaism we practice better.

Welcoming is fully seeing and not pretending. It’s not “don’t ask, don’t tell.” Judaism is big enough and elastic enough and strong enough for you to be who you are. I’ll give you an example. During the High Holidays we give aliyot to people who resonate with a particular theme. It may be a Torah passage or related to a sermon.

One of my teachers and friends, Larry Bush, made a poster that I have in my office. There are three phrases or words in the center. On the top it says, “I deny.” Right under that it says, “Ad-nai.” And beneath that is, “I dunno.” [He laughs.]

So in 5775, we talked about those three ways people might relate to the Jewish religion. We had one aliyah for the deniers, one aliyah for the believers and one aliyah for the “I don’t knowers” [agnostics]. Forty or 50 people came up under the rubric, “I deny.” As I looked around I saw that people had

tears in their eyes. It was the first time they came up as an atheist and got to be close to the Torah. Now, others got really upset: “How on Rosh Hashanah, the day G-d is proclaimed as King, can you call up people to the Torah who deny the existence of G-d?”

I remember one woman was very moved because she was allowed to come to the Torah with her son, in her truth, for the first time. Maybe we need to think of the Torah as something larger than what we’ve thought in the past.

IJN: I can hear traditional Jews exclaiming, “Rabbi Field is tearing Judaism apart.”

Field: I’m a participating member of the Rocky Mountain Rabbinical Council. I teach in the Introduction to Judaism classes. I co-taught the Hartman program on Israel with traditional Jewish rabbis. None of them said I’m tearing Judaism apart. They get it. I’m part of the Jewish team.

Through the years, my colleagues have learned that Judaism Your Way gives people an opportunity to say yes. When an interfaith couple asks certain rabbis to perform a marriage, they will say, “We can’t marry you but we know a colleague who will do a great job.” Sometimes it’s one of their congregants. If someone decides we are unable to provide what he or she wants, we will recommend a congregation. We don’t have a standing minyan. We don’t have a school. So if you want a sustained, continuous kind of community, we’re delighted to refer you. There’s a back and forth.

Far from tearing the Jewish people asunder, we actually believe that we’re part of the work of bringing the Jewish people back together. There will always be an important need for synagogues, and for us as well.

IJN: I’m sure you are aware that recognizing homosexuals and performing same-sex marriages draws severe flack within some Jewish circles.

Field: I could give you four or five different answers to that question, but I’ll be succinct. I’ll start with the famous quote from the prophet Micah: “What does G-d want from you? Seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your G-d.”

Believing in a G-d that confirms all of my prejudices is something any spiritually developed person should be suspicious of. G-d is bigger than one’s prejudices. As a people, we know what it’s like to be marginalized. We shouldn’t do it ourselves.

In terms of the prohibitions against homosexuality in Leviticus, we see the word associated with male sex as to’evah, which we translate as abomination. But if you do a thorough analysis, to’evah is associated with ritual acts. A much more accurate translation of to’evah is taboo. Abomination has this ick factor — and you can quote me on that.

A taboo is related to culture and society, and societies change over time. It’s more of an emotionally neutral term. I would say [the prohibition against homosexuality] is a moral taboo, and that’s the reason it’s outlawed.

When Moses asks for G-d’s name at the Burning Bush, G-d says, “I will be what I will be.” It’s an amazing piece of Torah, and there are many ways to understand it. G-d didn’t say, “I will be what I was.” A living Judaism and a living spirituality needs to keep evolving, and the language we use to invoke the infinite, the numinous, the sacred, must continually change. The language needs to be one that people hear, and reso-

“NOTHING BETTER ABOUT A JEWISH-JEWISH COUPLE”

nates as deeply true. We’re moving in that direction.

IJN: Judaism Your Way is definitely antistatus quo. By reinterpreting centuries old Jewish precepts, are you becoming the new status quo?

Field: I don’t like the word status quo. Status quo implies something immutable. That’s not what we’re about.

There was a time when the way to do Judaism was to obey the rules of the king, live by the admonitions of the prophets and perform rituals in accordance with the kohanim. There came a time when, for external and internal reasons, those forms of Judaism were no longer sustainable. A new form of Judaism that responded to where Jews were — dispersed, without an army, without political power, living in small communities with rabbis — arose.

I don’t think this is any different. For an increasing number of Jews, the Judaism we grew up with isn’t serving us any longer. Just like 2,200 years ago, our leaders were saying, “Our kings are vassals to the Romans. No one’s doing effective prophecy anymore. What do we do?”

Between 60% to 70% of our people are not affiliated, and there’s an equally high rate of intermarriage. JYW is asking, what’s next for Judaism? That’s our job. It’s like looking at a photograph, which gives you the momentary impression that things are fixed, stationary — but everything is constantly changing.

There’s a very famous midrash (and I have no idea where it comes from) that compares the two seas in the land of Israel: the Kinneret and the Dead Sea. With the Kinneret,

you’ve got the Jordan River flowing in and the Jordan River flowing out, and it’s fresh — filled with life. Then you’ve got the Dead Sea; the Jordan’s flowing in but nothing’s flowing out. It’s the lowest point on earth.

There’s the status quo in which you hold on to everything, and the status quo where you constantly accept new things and let the old stuff leave. One is filled with life, and the other one isn’t.

You need the fixed elements. If I’m going to drink a glass of water, I need the glass, I need the container — and I’m going to use it over and over again for nourishment. That’s the old kavah-kavanah argument: fixed prayers versus the sudden, more personalized prayers. Where religions get in trouble is when we elevate the kavah, the fixed, over the spontaneous. But religions also can get in trouble if they are only about spontaneity, because then you have no way of transmitting the insights you’ve acquired to the next generation. The status quo is a construct. It’s a term of convenience we use — and it often works.

I think there’s a deep wisdom in how Judaism approaches this question: the six days of the week and Shabbat. The Earth does not stop moving on Shabbat, but how we engage each other is different.

If our six days are all about making and creating, then Shabbat is the day we can rest and simply be. If our whole week is about preserving the status quo, then Shabbat is the day we can open up.

IJN: JYW’s underlying philosophy of Judaism sounds like the pledge two people

make to each other when they fall in love: “I love and accept you for who you are now, not some future ideal I envision in the future.”

Field: When you’re in a covenantal relationship with another person, you have no idea what’s around the corner. You love them deeply enough to enter into a covenant with them, but you don’t know what’s ahead. Part of what being in a covenantal relationship means — and we are talking about the Jewish people now — is knowing you’re going to evolve. Who you were and how I saw you on the day we stood under the chuppah is not who you will continue to be. You will be who you will be.

That’s the difference between a contract and a covenant. Under a contract, if you change I can hold you to it and say, “Wait a minute, this is not what I agreed to!” But a covenant recognizes that you will change and evolve; you will reveal more and more of who you are to me, and I will do the same. It’s more of a dance, a fluctuation.

I think of my relationship with my own wife. My ability to see things in her is much different than it was 10 years ago. Was she showing it to me back then and I just couldn’t see it, or is she showing me things that weren’t there because she’s evolving and growing?

The central metaphor between the Jewish people and G-d, or the Jewish people and each other, is that it will be what it will be. When we talk about “your way,” that’s what we mean. Our job is not to be so in love with what was that we are unable to see what is becoming.