

TRIGGER SCRIPT

LETTERS: BINTEL BRIEFS FOR TODAY

By Lois Silverman

Scene: Editorial offices of a weekly Jewish paper

Actors: Editor and staff writer of the advice column, Bintel Briefs for Today

Time: 10 minutes plus discussion

WRITER: Can I come in?

EDITOR: Could I stop you if I tried?

WRITER: Not today, Boss, not today.

EDITOR: What's on your mind?

WRITER: You know that new feature we decided to run, the advice column?

EDITOR: Yes, you were all for it, weren't you? Bintel Briefs for Today.

WRITER: I know you didn't like the idea and I'm beginning to agree with you.

EDITOR: Why?

WRITER: Look at these letters. Each one is worse than the last.

EDITOR: They can't be all that bad.

WRITER: Really? Look at this one from a 17-year-old girl whose mother and father marched for civil rights in the 60's. They taught her that everyone is equal—whites, blacks, browns, Asians, gays, disabled. She starts dating a gentile, and now her parents are objecting. She can't believe they're such hypocrites. She's really confused, but doesn't want to sneak around to see the guy. What should I tell her?

EDITOR: She's not going to marry the guy, is she?

WRITER: How do I know?

EDITOR: Well, say, something like: If your parents were so active in the Civil Rights Movement, give them time and they'll come around.

WRITER: I can't write that.

EDITOR: Why not?

WRITER: I can't advise someone to continue dating a non-Jew.

EDITOR: Come on! Don't tell me you're that narrow-minded.

WRITER: I'm not "narrow-minded." I'm concerned about Jewish continuity.

EDITOR: Calm down. You're taking this way too seriously.

WRITER: Sorry, but my brother married a non-Jew and it's torn my family apart...

OK, forget that girl. Tell me what to write to this woman whose husband is in jail. He was caught in an insider's trading deal that he claimed he knew nothing about. She can support her family financially, but it's moral support she needs. She's ashamed to go to the synagogue. The kids had to transfer schools. Her in-laws never stop crying and her own parents aren't any better. She asks what she should do to make it through these next five years. Well, what should I tell her?

EDITOR: I am beginning to see your problem.

WRITER: Or this one who found out her child is gay. Her husband accepts it with a lot of difficulty. She feels guilty and embarrassed. Listen: "Why do we have to label people? It limits how we view people and how they view themselves. A person is just a person.

EDITOR: Aren't there any easy questions in that mailbox?

WRITER: Sure, if you think abuse, drugs and alcohol are easy questions! Or there's pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, date rape, divorce, and single mothers.

EDITOR: Sorry I asked. What's that one?

WRITER: "Please help me. I know that being a Jew has never been easy. There have always been obstacles and pressures from the outside, but why are there so many now from inside? My husband and I have been out of school for only a few years, and we don't make much money. We have a lot of student loans. When we wanted to join our local synagogue, there were dues, initiation fees, building bonds, and religious school tuition for our six-year-old. When we told them we couldn't afford to pay that much, they told us to go someplace else. But there's only one synagogue and we want to become part of the community, but we really can't make ends meet with what the synagogue wants to charge us. What do we do?"

EDITOR: I certainly sympathize with that.

WRITER: This one from a new college graduate could just as easily have been written by a senior citizen: "The leaders of the Jewish community want us to remain Jewish and follow the traditions, right? So why aren't they helping keep down the cost of kosher food? Buying kosher meat is just too costly now that I'm on my own. And what about the people who are on fixed incomes? Are we better Jews for keeping kosher?"

EDITOR: Did she really write "better Jews?"

WRITER: Hey, the letters only get worse. Read this one:

EDITOR: "When my father got cancer last year he really began to suffer. And it isn't just physical. He never complains, but I can see it in his eyes. He's lost his will and I don't know how to help. Just before he went into the hospital this last time, he asked me a favor, could I get hold of some pills? The next day he went into the hospital and he's been there ever since. He doesn't say anything, but his eyes plead for help. We once had a dog. When he got old and sick, the vet said we should have him put to sleep to be humane. We did and we cried, but the dog was at peace and we didn't feel any guilt. What

should I do now about my father?”

EDITOR: What should she do? How can you tell her what to do?

WRITER: That’s the point. I can’t really help them make their decisions. What they decide will change their lives.

EDITOR: My grandmother used to say that everything is *bashert* (pre-determined).

WRITER: You mean I should tell these people that we are just pawns in the great stream of life? No matter what we do the outcome is pre-ordained?

EDITOR: How do I know?

WRITER: Well, all I know is that my grandmother would have known what to do. Answers to questions came easier then. She would have said, “*Gott vil helfen*, God will help.”

EDITOR: Well, they had fewer problems then.

WRITER: I don’t think there were fewer problems, just more basic ones like food and survival.

EDITOR: You’re right, I guess. The world today does present us with challenges that our grandmothers wouldn’t have dreamt of in their worst nightmares.

WRITER: Yes, the problems are different. But there must be some guidance from Judaism for those who have questions! Judaism has to lead me to the answers the way it did my grandmother. It must be relevant for today. It must be!

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can Judaism be relevant for today? Should it be? Should it change with the times?
2. Were there really fewer problems in our grandmothers’ times?
3. Are things in life really *bashert*? Is this a Jewish value?
4. Is there ever justification for euthanasia? What does Judaism say about assisted suicide?
5. What responsibilities do Jewish communal organizations have to keep individuals Jewish? Where does the synagogue fit in?
6. Is observing *kashrut* a prerequisite for being a good Jew? Is being a member of a synagogue?
7. Should financial considerations determine one’s Jewish lifestyle or affiliation?
8. How can congregations and Sisterhoods support victims of abuse, rape, drug abuse?
9. Should a person’s acceptance in a Jewish community be determined by his/her sexual preferences?
10. How can Sisterhoods be supportive of gays and the parents of gays?
11. What does Judaism have to say about “white collar crime”?
12. What should be a Jewish parent’s approach to interdating?