

LETTERS

by Lois Silverman

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This is a trigger script designed to introduce a variety of contemporary Jewish issues for discussion. A comprehensive list of questions follows the script. TIME: 10 minutes plus discussion

Woman sitting at desk; enters another woman.

A: Can I come in?

B: Could I stop you if I tried?

A: Not today, Boss, not today.

B: What's on your mind?

A: You know that new feature we decided to run?

B: Which one?

A: The advice column.

B: Yes, you were all for that one, weren't you? Bintel Briefs for the 90's.

A: I know you didn't like the idea for a small Jewish weekly—well, I'm beginning to agree with you.

B: Why?

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

B: They can't be as bad as all that.

A: 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 that everyone is equal—whites, blacks, browns, Asians, gays, disabled. She starts dating a gentile, and now liberal Mom and Dad are objecting. She can't believe they're such hypocrites. She's really confused, doesn't want to sneak around to see the guy. Well, how do I answer her? What should I tell her to do?

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

A: How do I know?

B: Well, say, something like: If your parents were so active in the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's, give them time to come around. They'll eventually understand your feelings.

A: I can't write that.

B: Why not?

A: I'm Jewish. I can't advise this girl to continue dating a non-Jew.

B: Gail, come on! Don't tell me you're that narrow-minded.

A: I'm not "narrow-minded."

B: What would you call it?

A: Concerned about Jewish continuity.

B: Calm down, Gail! You're taking this thing too seriously.

A: 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, but he claimed he knew nothing about it. Anyway, he was tried and convicted. She has a job that enables her to support her family. But it's moral support she needs. The synagogue was always there for her, but now she's ashamed to go because she can't bear the curious looks and pity. The kids had to transfer to another school. She can't visit her in-laws because they never stop crying and her own parents aren't much better. She asks what should she do to make it through these next five years. Well, what should I tell her?

Or this one who found out her child is gay. Her husband is finally accepting it, but with much difficulty. She feels guilty and embarrass. Listen: "Why do we have to identify people by a word. I thought what people did in the bedroom was private and no one's business but their own. Why label them by their sexual preference? Its tunnel vision. It limits how we view people and how they should view themselves. We don't say, 'Hey, there's a cripple,' or 'hey, there's an idiot.' A person is just a person. Homosexuality exists. But can't we leave it alone?"

B: Aren't there any easy questions in that mailbox of yours?

A: Sure, if you think child abuse, spousal abuse, drug and alcohol abuse easy questions! Or there's pre-marital sex, extra-marital sex, date rape, divorce, and children born to single mothers.

B: Sorry I asked. (points to another letter) What's that one?

A: [reads]: 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 Judaism itself? My husband and I have been out of school for a only few years, and we don't make much although we both work. We have one six year old and many student loans. When we wanted to join our local synagogue, there were dues, initiation fees, building bonds, and religious school tuition. When we told the officers of the synagogue that we could not afford to pay what they wanted, they laughed at us and told us to go someplace else. But around here there is only one synagogue. We want to become part of the community, but we really can't make ends meet now without the burden of what the synagogue wants to charge us. What do we do?"

B: I hear senior citizens face similar dilemmas.

A: Sure they do and more. And this one's from a new college graduate but it could be written by a senior citizen: "The leaders of the Jewish community want us to remain Jewish and follow the traditions of our ancestors, right? So why aren't they helping to keep down the cost of kosher foods. It cost almost 50% more to buy kosher meat than traf, and buying kosher meat is often too costly for me now that I'm on my own. And what about the people who are on fixed incomes? Should we have to pay whatever the food industry wants to charge in order for to continue our tradition? Or should we go traf—after all are we better Jews for keeping kosher? What would you do?"

B: Did she really write "better Jews?"

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

B: [reads] “When my father got sick with cancer he began to suffer. And it isn’t just physical suffering either. He just can’t accept the fact that he’ll have to live the rest of his life attached to a plastic bag. He never complains aloud, but I can see it in his eyes—he has lost his will to fight, and I don’t know what to do to help him. Just before he went into the hospital this last time we talked. He told me a lot about himself that I didn’t know. Then he asked me a favor. Could I get hold of some pills. I didn’t know what to say and so I said I’d try. The next day he went to the hospital. He’s been there for three weeks now. He doesn’t say anything to me, but his eyes plead for my help to get free of his pain. We once had a dog. He became old and very sick. The vet said we should have the dog put to sleep to ease his pain—to be humane. We did and we cried for that dog, but the dog was at peace—no longer hurting and we didn’t feel any guilt. What should I do?”

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

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

B: My grandmother used to say that no matter what we do it’s “bershert.”

A: You mean I should tell these people that we all are nothing more than pawns in the great stream of life. We are pre-ordained to fail or succeed and no matter how we choose the outcome is still the same?

B: How do I know.

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

B: Well, they had fewer problems then, Gail.

A: I don’t think there were fewer problems, just more basic ones. How would they get food?. How would the family survive?

B: 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.

A: Yes, the problems are different. Now survival seems easier for the individual, but survival as a people has grown harder. But there must be some guidance from Judaism for me and for all the others 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

The following questions all arise from the trigger script. Clearly, there are more questions than discussion time will allow. Choose those questions which relate to aspects of the script you wish to highlight and/or emphasize. Add additional questions of your own as desired.

What is the definition of religious relevance?

Can Judaism be “relevant” for today? Should it be?

Should Judaism change with the times and current moral tenor or should it set standards for people to follow?

How can Judaism survive as part of the lives of the younger generation? Should it?

Were there really fewer problems in our grandmothers’ times?

Are the problems of today worse than those which our grandmother faced?

Did our grandmothers really rely on Judaic teachings to make decisions?

Are things in life “bashert?” Is this a Jewish value?

Is there ever justification for euthanasia?

Is the analogy of the old and sick dog and the very ill parent apropos?

How might a child who helps a parent die deal with his or her feelings? Can Judaism help?

What responsibilities do Jewish communal organizations have in keeping the individuals of the community Jewish? Where does the synagogue fit in?

Is observing *kashrut* a prerequisite for being a good Jew? Is being a member of a synagogue?

Do state and federal governments have a role in regulating the cost of kosher foods? Is this a case where the separation of church and state should apply?

Should financial considerations determine one’s Jewish lifestyle? One’s religious affiliation?

How can Congregations and Sisterhoods support victims of abuse? of rape? of drug abuse? Does the size and location of the Congregation or Sisterhood affect the response? Should it?

Is there a need to encourage young marrieds to join congregations? How does a congregation offer such encouragement? Does the size and location of the congregation affect the response? Should it?

How does one counsel unmarried Jewish mothers?

How can a Sisterhood offer help to families which are hurting due to alcoholism, drug abuse, a disabled family member, an imprisoned family member—when the family will not ask for help?

Should a person’s acceptance in a Jewish community be determined by his/her sexual preferences?

How can Sisterhoods be supportive of parents of gays?

Can one reconcile “white collar crime” with the teachings of Judaism? If so, how?

What should be a Jewish parent’s approach to interdating?

How should a parent react to a child’s dating a gentile? to an intermarriage?