

**RESPONSA-Teaching What Reform Judaism Believes**  
**Old York Road Temple - Beth Am, Abington, PA**  
**December 2, 2005**  
**Ellie Tepper, Gabe Schnall, Amy Provost**  
**NORTH AMERICAN TIKKUN OLAM AWARD WINNER 5766**

**Touchstone Text:**

"Justice, justice shall you pursue." "Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof"

-This passage from Deuteronomy is one of the most often quoted Biblical passages. The word justice (repeated twice) is exemplified in meaning. The issues in this program mostly concern equality and justice particularly related to the reform movement.

**Goals:**

1. PP's will learn how they personally relate to the beliefs of Reform Judaism within many areas.
2. PP's will further their knowledge

**Objectives:**

1. PP's will become members of a responsa by answering frequently posed questions.
2. PP's will learn how their beliefs on a subject differs from the Reform Judaism's answer.
3. PP's will vocalize their ideas to the group and then hear how a rabbi stated the problem should be solved using Reform Judaism.

**Materials:**

Index cards, 1 per PP  
Pencils/Pens, 1 per PP  
Set of responsa questions  
Slips of colored paper

**Primary Source of information:** [www.urj.org/responsa](http://www.urj.org/responsa)

**People:**

About 4-5 PP's per leader  
One group leader per group (5 leaders)  
One facilitator for introduction and wrap up

**Space Needed:**

Individual space for groups, preferably far from others

**Time Table:**

00:00-00:05 Program Introduction  
00:05-00:10 Break into groups  
00:10-00:30 PP's will answer group question  
00:30-00:50 PP's will move to another group and answer question  
00:50-01:00 Wrap Up

**Detailed Procedure:**

Before the program begins, group leaders know what their question is and where to go in the room.

**00:00-00:05 Program Introduction**

Facilitator says: "Welcome to the P&P Reform Responsa. As some of you may not know, a Reform Responsa provides answers to questions about Reform Jewish living. These answers are more of a guide to how you should solve the problems versus what you MUST do. The

Responsa aids other Reform Jews on how to face some important (an unimportant), contemporary issues in today's society from a reform perspective.

We are going to split into groups and make our own responsa today. In each group, the leader will read you a frequently asked question. On an index card, you will write how you would respond to the posed question and then compare it to what Jewish text, society and Rabbis would say. Then the leader will go around and ask each PP to read their response. To split into groups, everyone was given a slip of paper in five different colors. Can each group leader please say what color you are? Please keep your slip of paper and do not switch to be with your friends. Good luck and have fun."

### **00:05-00:10 Break into groups**

Make sure PP's stay with the color they were assigned. Each group leader should have everyone go around the circle and have each PP say his or her name, school, and favorite ice cream flavor.

### **00:10-00:30 PP's will answer group question**

As described in the introduction, PP's will answer the question posed and write their answer on an index card. Group leaders will be assigned a question from the first group of questions. After everyone shares their answer, the group leader will read the answer from the opinion of Jewish text, society, or Rabbis (depending on the question). Then the groups will compare their answers to the ones given and discuss the differences.

### **00:30-00:50 PP's will go to another group and answer that question**

This time, PP's will split up by the number on their slips of paper. Make sure again that PP's go where they are supposed to be. This time when you go around the circle, have each PP say his or her name, school, and their favorite sport or after school activity. Then follow the instructions above. Group leaders will be assigned a new question from the second group of questions.

### **00:50-01:00 Wrap Up**

When the whole group comes together, the facilitator says: " I hope you all learned about the reform outlook on certain societal issues. As Jews, it is important for us to understand the religious opinion on the simplest things. Next time you have a problem put it into various perspectives, one being the religious point of view. If necessary, you can always email it to an actual responsa through the URJ. I hope you enjoyed this program and had a great time tonight."

### **Questions For Responsa** **Colors**

#### **Question 1 (Red): Mixed Family**

The family of a mixed marriage with a Jewish mother and a Catholic father have two male children. They have agreed to raise the children as Catholics and the children are currently enrolled in Catechism classes on a regular basis. The parents would like the children to attend the synagogue Religious School in order to provide the youngsters with some understanding of their Jewish heritage. I have agreed to meet with the family privately but do not feel that they belong in the Religious School. What should our attitude be toward this kind of situation? (Rabbi T. P. Liebschutz, Winston-Salem NC)

#### **Question 2 (Orange): Conversion**

A couple has recently joined a congregation. The man is Jewish; the wife is Christian. They had two children, one sixteen and one eleven. Both have been raised in "a vaguely religious small town atmosphere" with attendance at various Protestant Sunday schools. Neither child has been baptized or formally entered into a Christian church. Now, as the parents live in a

large city with a Jewish community, they wished to raise their children as Jews. Unfortunately, the older daughter was killed in an automobile accident. May she be buried in the congregation's cemetery? (D. M., Los Angeles, CA)

**Question 3 (Green): Erasing G-d's name**

The writer is using traditional Hebrew Biblical texts in his studies. They have been entered into his computer screen. He needs to erase them constantly as he moves forward or manipulates the screen. This leads to erasing the divine name. Is this permissible? (Levi Dannenberg, Boston MA)

**Question 4 (Blue): Homosexuality**

May a rabbi officiate at the "marriage" of two homosexuals? (Rabbi L. Poller, Larchmont, NY)

**Question 5 (Purple): Mixed Racial Marriage**

My question has to do with the marriage of an African American man to a Jewish woman. The man is a writer and a university graduate; the woman is still a student at the university. They are both over 21, and have been engaged for a year and a half. The man wishes to convert to Judaism. He attends services and writes reports on the Jewish books he reads. I have attempted to discourage the union, but the couple remains steadfast in their emotions and convictions. The woman's family is violently opposed to the marriage, and insists that I do not officiate. I am seeking a response from you as to whether Judaism sanctions such a union, and whether you feel that it is incumbent upon a rabbi to officiate.

**Answers for Responsa  
Colors**

**Answer 1 (Red):**

There is little in the tradition which has any bearing on this question. We have long ago, as a Conference, decided that enrolling children in our Religious School is tantamount to the beginning process of conversion (Report of the Committee on Mixed Marriage, *Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook* 1947). This involves children whose parents have decided on a Jewish direction for their future even though the non-Jewish parent has not converted to Judaism. We have also decided in a number of responsa that children cannot be raised in two traditions, but the parents must make up their mind about the religious future of their offspring (W. Jacob *Contemporary Reform Responsa* #61; etc). Each of these responsa indicate that it is the task of parents to decide on the religious education of their child, and that it must be Jewish or Christian, but cannot be both.

In this case the parents have decided to raise the children as Catholics. Although we may not like this decision, we must accept it. As you indicated we should not place these children into the regular Religious School classes as this may lead to confusion for them rest of the class. Furthermore, we do not want to indicate to our children or our congregation that we consider this kind of family as normative.

Your suggestion of meeting with the family or the children privately is certainly a good one and would provide an introduction to their Jewish heritage and minimally a feeling of closeness to Judaism. In larger communities it may be useful to organize this on a broader basis.

**Answer 2 (Orange):**

Most of our congregations have been lenient about the burial of an unconverted spouse of a Jew. They have done so by considering each individual plot in the cemetery as a separate family section, akin to the caves or small plots of land which were originally used for burial in the land of Israel (B. B. 102a). This meant that although the entire cemetery is considered as holy, sanctity actually lies with each section of graves. A non-Jewish burial in one section would, therefore, not impinge on the sanctity of any other grave. It is also clear that occasionally non-Jews have been buried in Jewish cemeteries throughout our history beginning with the Mishnaic period (M. Git. 5.8, 61a). For both of these reasons, most Reform Congregations have granted permission for the burial of a non-Jewish spouse or any other non-Jewish family member.

On these grounds alone, we may readily grant permission for burial in the sad case of this young woman. The specific rules of the local cemetery should, of course, be consulted.  
March 1984

**Answer 3 (Green):**

The tradition was concerned with reverence for the written name of God, the *tetragramaton*. This was one understanding of the third commandment (Ex 20.7; Deut 5.11), and also of the commentaries to an injunction in Deuteronomy (12.3 ff). In the considerable discussion which followed in subsequent literature, we find an emphasis on the sacredness of the name of God whether written in the *Torah*, another book, on a metal vessel, or even as a tattoo on the skin (*Yad Hil Yesodei Torah* 6.1; *Sefer Hahinukh* #437). Ultimately, the decision was made that the name was sacred only if it was written with intent to be sacred (*Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 274 and commentaries).

The computer disk intends to make the text available for study and not for any sacred purpose. Furthermore, removing a section from the screen is akin to turning the page and does not obliterate the item from memory. If we take this one step further and ask whether such a disk can be reformatted, or must it be buried like a book? We may state that the recorded form is not Hebrew but binary, and it becomes Hebrew only through a transformation which takes place through the computer program. The above-mentioned care does not apply to translations or transliterations. It is permissible to utilize the text on the computer and to erase it when the user has finished it.

**Answer 4 (Blue):**

The attitude of our tradition and of Reform Judaism to ward homosexuals is clear. For a full discussion, see the responsa by S. B. Freehof and W. Jacob (*American Reform Responsa*, # 13, 14). The resolution of the Central Conference of American Rabbis on homosexuality deals exclusively with the civil rights and civil liberties of homosexuals and seeks to protect them from discrimination. It does not, however, understand it to be an alternative lifestyle which is religiously condoned.

Judaism places great emphasis on family, children and the future, which is assured by a family. However we may understand homosexuality, whether as an illness, as a genetically based dysfunction or as a sexual preference and lifestyle -we cannot accommodate the relationship of two homosexuals as a "marriage" within the context of Judaism, for none of the elements of *qiddushin* (sanctification) normally associated with marriage can be invoked for this relationship. A rabbi can not, therefore, participate in the "marriage" of two homosexuals.

**Answer 5 (Purple):**

The Jewish attitude to intermarriage, all through history, has been conditioned by religious, in some instances even by political, but never by purely racial considerations. Even in the "racialism" of Ezra, the motivating force was religion, i.e., to safeguard the purity of the ancient faith. In the Rabbinic *Halacha*, conversion to Judaism gives the convert the status of a Jew, qualifying him for marriage with members of our religious group. Since the young man in question, though of African American race, is desirous of adopting the religion of his Jewish fiancée, there is no valid reason, having its basis in Jewish law, why the couple shall not be united in matrimony by a rabbi.

Obviously, the laws of the given State interpose no objection to mixed racial marriages, or the requisite license would not be issued. Empowered by the State to sanctify the union, and satisfied that the religious conditions have been met, the rabbi who solemnizes the marriage will be doing no more than duty requires of him.

If, because of personal relations with the members of the young woman's family, the rabbi concerned deems it inexpedient to act as the officiating minister, he can arrange with another rabbi in the area to perform the service.

**Questions for Responsa  
Numbers**

**Question 1 (#1): New Years**

This year December 31 falls on Friday, and thus New Year's eve coincides with Shabbat. Many Jews will be tempted to celebrate the secular new year and thereby forsake Shabbat services and observances. What is the religious propriety of hosting a New Year's eve party on Shabbat in the synagogue? (Rabbi Seymour Prystowsky, Lafayette Hill, PA)

**Question 2 (#2): Gambling**

Several organizations of our Temple are planning to raise a special fund for the erection of a school house adjoining our present building. One of the principal means they hope to use is a bazaar. That will involve certain gambling devices such as wheels of chance and other similar contrivances. They would like to know whether such measures are ethically permissible

**Question 3 (#3): Christmas**

A large apartment building has both Jewish and Christian residents. Traditionally the foyer has been decorated with Christmas trees and wreaths. Recently the board has had requests for *Hanukkah* decorations as well as the *menorah*. Is this appropriate? (Teresa Dorfan, Kansas City MO)

**Question 4 (#4):**

Recently, our Confirmation class was examining what our Jewish tradition says about being Jewish in a non-Jewish world. The following question came up, and we were wondering if the Responsa Committee would address it:

Some of us go with friends to social programs of Christian youth groups. In the past, when they have realized that we are Jewish, several of our friends and/or family members have responded Anti-Semically. Should we conceal our Jewish identity from them? (Rabbi Mark Glickman, Dayton, OH)

**Question 5 (#5): Mourning a non-Jew**

May an individual observe *Yahrzeit* for a non-Jewish leader in the community? The individual was very close to that person throughout life. (Richard Adler, Montreal Quebec)

**Answers For Responsa**

**Numbers**

**Answer 1 (#1):**

Is it appropriate for a synagogue or a Jewish organization to celebrate the secular New Year? If it is appropriate, what should be done when New Year's eve falls on Shabbat? In as much as our synagogues are not only Houses of Prayer but also Houses of Assembly, and seeing that it is customary to hold social events in the synagogue's social hall, there should be few objections to making it the locus of a New Year's eve party, provided it meets the required standards of moderation and good taste. But may such a party in the synagogue be held on Shabbat?

R. Solomon B. Freehof held that the worshipful mood of Shabbat contrasts too sharply with the hilarity of New Year's eve and said: "Let the joyous New Year party this year be moved to another hall [i.e., outside the temple premises] ... Let the synagogue stand alone and unique as a place of worship."<sup>10</sup>

While this caution needs emphasis, the Responsa Committee believes that the civic new year *can* be observed on Shabbat, as long as the sacred day's spirit prevails. Indeed, we urge the congregation to explore creative ways to attract Jews to celebrate Shabbat when it falls on December 31. For example, the congregation might consider hosting a more elaborate *Oneg Shabbat*; those attending could listen to Jewish music; or a movie could be shown that is compatible with Shabbat. But the latter, and not New Year's eve should be the dominant focus of the evening.

A further bonus of a Shabbat celebration on New Year's eve would be the presence of a sober, sane and safe environment. While many may choose to forsake the joy of Shabbat for the bacchanalian irreverence of the secular observance, let our Reform congregations offer a sacred alternative.

**Answer 2 (#2):**

Legally, there is no objection. We can look at the matter from the following aspect: the Jewish law, while disqualifying a gambler from giving evidence in lawsuits, stipulates that this applies only to professionals whose sole occupation is gambling (see Choshen Mishpat, 34.16). Moreover, although one lending money on interest is debarred from being a witness (*ibid.*, 34.10), if he does so with monies belonging to orphans whose guardian he is, he is not disqualified "because he thinks he is doing a *mitzvah* in order to increase the funds of the orphans" (*ibid.*, 34.11).

There is further the case, bearing more directly on the subject of the question, of a respected Jew of Modena (Italy) who was in straitened circumstances and was about to sell a very valuable *Sefer Torah*. The rabbi of Modena, R. Ishmael Sacerdote (died 1811), a famous Talmudist and author of *Responsa Zera Emet* (3 volumes), even issued a letter of recommendation for this scheme, urging its furtherance as a "*mitzvah*" (see *Zera Emet* III, no. 144).

However, "ethically" there are grounds for scruples, especially if the attractive features of the bazaar are advertised and brought to the notice of the non-Jewish clergy. The *New York Times* (June 14, 1935), for example, devoted a column to the report of a special committee of the United Lutheran Synod of New York, which strongly condemned games of chance at bazaars for raising money for the support of Lutheran churches. Such Jewish affairs, especially if much publicized, may lower the respect for Judaism in the eyes of non-Jews. Hence, discretion is advisable even from this angle alone.

### **Answer 3 (#3):**

We have traditionally opposed both *Hanukkah* and Christmas decorations in public offices and schools. Although an apartment complex is somewhat different, it would probably also be best to follow this pattern in apartment buildings and leave religious celebrations to individuals. However the removal of Christmas decorations in this setting will only arouse animosity, so it may be better to add *Hanukkah* decorations to create a sense of fairness. There is nothing wrong with displaying a *menorah* in such a setting (see *Responsa* #76). Other decorations such as *dreidels* or colorful illustrations of the Maccabee story could also be used.

We should remember that *Hanukkah* remains a minor holiday for us and, is not the equivalent of Christmas. The display of a *menorah* for *Hanukkah* would be appropriate in an apartment setting. It will add to the festivity of this holiday season.

### **Answer 4 (#4):**

The question which your Confirmation class asks may therefore be answered in this fashion:

We are permitted to hide our identity only under very special circumstances, and the situation to which you refer does not qualify. Instead, the students are encouraged to proclaim their Jewishness proudly and defend it with all their might. They will find out who their real friends are. We think that you will have a very interesting session.

### **Answer 5 (#5):**

In the long periods of our history during which relationships between non-Jews and Jews were good, we frequently honored them. So, non-Jews were welcome to worship in the Temple (I Kings, 8.41 ff) and participated in its construction as did Hiram, King of Lebanon. Furthermore, non-Jewish sacrifices were acceptable (Meg 73b), as were gifts by pagans unless made with idolatrous intent (Ar 7b). Much later the famous Bevis Marks synagogue (1702) in London contained a roof beam which was the gift of Queen Anne. There was no mention of specific memorials requested with these gifts, but they were publicly acknowledged as the gift of non-Jews. So, gifts by non-Jews to the synagogue are acceptable as long as they are used in accordance with the desires of the congregation (*Yad Hil Matnat Aniyim* 8.8; *Tur Yoreh Deah* 258; *Shulhan Arukh Yoreh Deah* 254.2 and Isserles, 259.4).

We were, of course, also obligated to bury the dead of non-Jews (Git 60a) and to deal with them in every way as Jews through the *hevrah qadishah*. The usual memorial prayers may be recited for non-Jews and this was done frequently through the ages.

When a non-Jewish ruler who was good to our people died, we mourned him with the appropriate services and several such services from the last century have been preserved. As

we honor the dead in these ways there would be nothing wrong with commemorating their *Yahrzeit* in the customary fashion.