

# Sh'ma

*a journal of Jewish responsibility*

23/455 MAY 28, 1993

## Looking backward, looking forward

*Eugene B. Borowitz*

This issue marks the second of *Sh'ma's* transitions to CLAL, that of editorial leadership. (My responsibilities as publisher were transferred last January.) I now turn over that role to Nina Beth Cardin with great pleasure and anticipation. In the five months we have worked together, her considerable editorial talent and sophistication have greatly impressed me. It is easy for me to move to an active advisory role knowing that *Sh'ma's* ideals and its readers are in very capable hands, not only hers but those of my senior colleagues and wise old friends, Yitz Greenberg and Harold Schulweis.

Let me now say some things of the many that could be said about the turmoil, exasperation, friendship, generosity and *chutzpah* that gave birth to this unlikely project.

*Sh'ma* was a child of the late 1960s, not of its hippy romanticism but of the idealism which created "the underground press"--a movement with which *Time* magazine quickly identified us. (With mixed feelings I noted that, as always, alas, the gentile praise made us more Jewishly acceptable.) "Underground" meant irreverent, with "the establishment" and its conventions as the primary targets. Our founding Contributing Editors agreed that we would have no "sacred cows," not even our individual views on a topic. No one opinion could now have the last say; to represent Jewish ethics responsibly we knew we had to be pluralistic. So, too, titles and reputation weren't the way to get something published; having something fresh to say was. Ego-trips and pretentiousness were anathema, even for the Editor; content without airs was the goal, anything else being met by a healthy skepticism. It will not do to exagger-

---

EUGENE B. BOROWITZ is founder and Senior Editor of *Sh'ma*. This issue is dedicated to him with gratitude and admiration.

ate even now; we remained so staid that it took some years for us to stumble into, almost accidentally, an annual Purim issue--and, sign of the times, its mockery has decreasingly focused on current issues and figures. Eager to survive and be read, we stayed small and celebrated brevity, mercilessly cutting articles that wouldn't get to the point or end. We didn't worry about alienating our organizational sponsor or our "angels" since we had neither. We did worry about keeping faith with our readers not just because we cared but because we were astonished that more than 20% of them each year sent us a contribution to keep us going. We also did that by operating like misers, having learned from Marx that averting bankruptcy was the price of continued irreverence. (And thus we turned over to CLAL a solvent enterprise.) For long we didn't even correct typos, figuring college-educated readers could do that themselves. I finally gave in on the typos but not the rest.

What irked me then--and since--and led me to create *Sh'ma* was all the people who kept saying Judaism had relevance but wouldn't prove it by responding to one live ethical issue. Questions abounded in that era of openness and the way Jewish leaders remained evasively platitudinous forced us to do better. I also couldn't stand the idea that thinking Jews--*Sh'ma* wasn't aimed at professionals--were always being treated to "basic Judaism" when increasing numbers knew something about our tradition and were quite expert or experienced in thinking about serious issues. So we assumed that our readers had read the Anglo-Jewish press and mass magazines and wanted us to take issues a step forward.

For years Arnold Wolf and I had been talking about the kind of magazine the community needed but no one ever wanted to trust us with one. Many of our ideals came into *Sh'ma*--the title was Arnold's, the tag line mine. Other friends, across "denominational" lines, happily joined us and I was buoyed by the enthusiastic reception I got from people I didn't know then but wanted along. As to technical know-how, I assumed that all devoted Jews would help a worthy project and so I *shnorred* from my suburban neighbors more expertise than I could ever hire. One friend, Seymour Udell, printed *Sh'ma* for free for three years to let us see if we could find our public. And when that surprisingly happened, he set us free to face the real world of budget. So, too, only one writer in 23 years has insisted on payment; when Isaac Bashevis Singer won the Nobel prize he said he had to do so to defend the dignity of being a Jewish writer. He very graciously accepted our \$25.

Our example has had little effect in persuading Jewish donors they don't need *kavod* (public recognition), Jewish organizations that they don't need the kind of overhead that eats up program, and Jewish authors that lots of words and heavy rhetoric don't show how smart and elegant you are. Bloat still characterizes our style though budget-cutting is teaching us some discipline.

Best of all, however, there are people to carry on, readers who still want to decide for themselves after hearing the several Jewish sides, writers who are willing to share their expertise or insight knowing a caring readership awaits, and a leadership willing to take up this pesky-lovable publication and carry it forward. For it must not stand still, despite the accomplishments of the past. Where we began in a time of ethical exhilaration, our mood is more ethical exhaustion and depression. Where once we embraced the world even as we dug our Jewish roots deeper, many today turn inward hoping the problems will go away. Our everlasting sense of Jewish urgency now needs to be roused anew and given fresh direction, new voices wait to be found, new possibilities need to be searched out.

The first signal of this fresh enterprise will be a facelift for *Sh'ma*. Our graphic design has served our purpose and means very well over the years (despite our changing some typefaces as new and cheaper technology became available). By fall, a new design should be in place, symbolizing the renewal under way. Blessed be God who still does miracles for the people of Israel.□

## Listening to eugene borowitz

*Jonathan D. Sarna*

The first issue of *Sh'ma* appeared on November 9, 1970. The stock market that year hit a seven-year low. Campuses across the nation were erupting in turmoil in protest against the Vietnam War; at Kent State University four students were killed and nine wounded by National Guardsmen. Angela Davis had just been arrested on kidnapping, murder and conspiracy charges. Lt. William L. Calley was about to be court-martialed for the Mylai massacre of 102 South Vietnamese civilians. Meanwhile, Russia was threatening to intervene in the Middle East, and nine Jews lay under indictment in Leningrad for attempting to hijack a Soviet plane to freedom. *Sh'ma* reflected the strains of this tumultuous

---

JONATHAN D. SARNA teaches *American Jewish History* at *Brandeis University*.

period; it was, as Eugene Borowitz wrote in its opening page, "the child of troubled times."

The troubled times contributed to what may now be seen as a turning point in the history of American Jewish journalism. Besides *Sh'ma*, an array of so-called "alternative" Jewish newspapers began publishing in 1970, including *Genesis 2*, the Boston Jewish student newspaper; *Achdut*, a short-lived journal of Jewish High School Activists; and *Hoshomer* published by the "Jewish Liberation Project." Just a year earlier, *The Jewish Radical* had begun to appear in Berkeley, and in Washington, D.C. a journal sprang up entitled *The Jewish Urban Guerilla*. The Jewish Student Press-Service, also established in 1970, serviced these journals and gave them a collective voice.

These "alternative" Jewish periodicals stressed, as *Sh'ma* did, their independence from the Jewish establishment and their commitment to freedom of expression. They reflected a new minimalist aesthetic, eschewing high gloss and expensive graphics. They promised to respond to the pressing social and political demands of a new era and to an array of daunting problems facing the American Jewish community.

But where most of these journals were student run and politically radical, *Sh'ma* was neither. Borowitz appealed instead to responsible Jews of all ages offering a spectrum of views on contemporary issues, "a vigorous dialectic of opinion." Too old and too experienced to share the certainties of the "under thirty" Jews (at 46, he was closer to 50 than to 30), he offered as an alternative a public forum and a sympathetic ear. "If we could... learn to listen to one another, particularly when we are in fundamental disagreement," he wrote "we might thereby give a sign of how society can become community."

The 455 issues of *Sh'ma* that ultimately appeared under Borowitz's editorship very much reflected this philosophy. Twice a month, year after year (with time off for a long summer vacation) he invited readers to listen to an astonishingly wide range of Jewish voices: from the right-wing Orthodox to the unabashedly secular, and from the politically mainstream to the radically fringe. At this prodding, the habitually inarticulate spoke up in *Sh'ma*'s pages as did the community's most articulate professionals and intellectuals. No theme proved too hot to handle. Any subject that was important enough for American Jews to think about was important enough for *Sh'ma*'s readers to consider and debate.

Twenty-three years later, the troubled times that spawned *Sh'ma* have faded into history, and the revolution that transformed American Jewish journalism back in 1970 seems all-too-tame. But the passage of time has done nothing to diminish the urgency of *Sh'ma*'s message and the preciousness of Eugene Borowitz's legacy. For he more than anyone else articulated and embodied the mission of *Sh'ma*: its call for Jewish responsibility, its commitment to freedom and diversity, and its insistence that Jews, even when they disagree, must listen to one another. □

## On 23 years of *sh'ma*

*Leonard Fein*

Edmond Wilson was wrong, and Gene Borowitz proves it: Wilson wrote that no good editorial idea is worth more than 10 years. I suppose he simply hadn't come across an idea as good as Gene's in creating *Sh'ma*, nor an editor as adept as Gene at translating this informing idea to the printed page.

Back in the days I was doing *Moment*, and especially during the (very many) months where our usual cash trickle has been reduced to a cash ebb, I had a recurrent fantasy: The phone would ring, and it would be Mort Zuckerman (or some such), and he'd offer me the editorship of the *Atlantic*, at an outrageous salary with a perfectly golden parachute to boot. The fantasy was always short-lived, little more than a flash, interrupted not by reality but by my inability to alter my response to the mogul: "But *Moment*." I'd say, "is exactly the magazine I want to be doing. I don't want to be a magazine editor, I want to be *Moment's* editor."

So also, I imagine, Gene Borowitz, composer and conductor of *Sh'ma*, whose manner of conducting was the almost imperceptible nod of the head, movement of the finger, rather than the heavy-handed attention-begetting look-at-me manner more commonly encountered among conductors, editors, founders.

The remarkable thing about *Sh'ma*, plainly, has been--and so may it be in the years to come--the extraordinary openness of its pages. Gene Borowitz is not exactly a person without opinions, judgements, commitments. Yet he refrained from imposing himself on the pages of his product. On the contrary: In issue after issue, one

---

LEONARD FEIN is a writer and a *Sh'ma* Contributing Editor.

encountered on those pages of wildly differing views, people one would otherwise not be likely to have encountered, living as we mostly do in insulated enclaves. Yet the cumulative effect was not a Babel, nor the screeching match with all too often characterizes disagreement in our community. Instead, all of us who wrote for *Sh'ma*--well, almost all of us--felt as if we were writing letters to a remarkably fair-minded editor, or, perhaps more precisely, responding to a maitre de salon--that is, that we'd been invited to participate in an ongoing conversation and that, if we behave ourselves, we might be invited back.

No small thing. It's not what I'd tried to do with *Moment*, nor would I have known how to do it. My own editorial disposition was to stake out an ideological place, and to do battle against the oh so many benighted who wanted to stand in some other place. No apologies for that, but great admiration for a passionate one who placed the value of interchange above the value of victory. There's real discipline in that, not a common virtue, still rarer among people of passion.

Letters to the editor, written mainly by people who either knew each other or knew of each other, but with a mixture of *amcha*, too, a reminder both that there were eavesdroppers to our ongoing conversation and that the rabbis and the scholars and the wordsmiths have no monopoly on insight, not even on knowledge and wisdom.

Sometimes, frustration, as we bounced almost giddily from topic to topic. I have no doubt that the interaction on most of the topics raised in *Sh'ma*'s pages could have been extended over many months. But: New issue, new topic, as if to say: Jewish life has many things worth arguing about.

For one such as I, who believes that the greatest peril we face in contemporary Jewish life is boredom, *Sh'ma* came as a reminder that boredom is not our inevitable condition. It wouldn't have worked nearly so well if it had patterned itself after, say, *The New York Review of Books*. Its brevity was an invitation, an encouragement not to set it aside until one found the time to work it through but, instead, to dip immediately in, a quick refreshment and then back to the grind. I've never known whether the fewness of its pages was the child of choice or of necessity, but if necessity, how fortunate a circumstance it was.

Most magazines/newsletters (what word we should use here I've never known) promise ever so much more than they deliver. Not so Borowitz's *Sh'ma*. It never