Orthodox Isn't Enough

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Pamela Ehrenkranz is CEO of UJA/JCC Greenwich. She teaches weekly at the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning and has lectured and taught classes on Jewish text for the past 20 years. She has traveled extensively in the Jewish world, helping to raise awareness of Jewish communities in need. This article appears in issue 28 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

What could be a better place to work for a traditionally observant Jew than a Jewish organization? Jewish holidays are not considered vacation days, and there is little resistance, if any, to the need to leave early on a Friday to reach home and prepare before the start of Shabbat. So when I moved from the for-profit world to a Jewish non-profit 20 years ago, I never anticipated any Jewish dilemmas. In retrospect, that was a deliciously naïve perspective.

In reality, a professional who is an Orthodox Jew faces both challenges and opportunities in a secular Jewish organization. The challenges are considerable, because this world is a 24/7 place, with people expecting instant response and constant connection. Unplugging and being off the grid for the 25 hours of Shabbat was tolerated. But when I became unreachable for three days because of Shabbat followed by a two-day holiday, being unavailable became an obstacle. On one such occasion, my boss asked if I could take her calls, “just this once” because “we had an event coming up.” Unexpectedly, I confronted a world in which many of my Jewish practices were considered “other,” even though I worked exclusively with Jews. I had simply assumed working in the Jewish world that observing the holidays would have been a given.

The challenges began to mount. After a while, donors with whom I was friendly began inviting me to *semahot* that took place on Shabbat, or that were not kosher. I found myself trying to repeatedly explain why I could not check email on

a holiday that a majority of Jews in our community don't celebrate, such as *Shemini Atzeret*, and so forth. Should I hire a qualified candidate who was interviewed off-site at her request and who ordered a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich during our breakfast meeting? The response to these quandaries has significant impact. In fact, it is the quintessential opportunity. But first, a more detailed look at the challenges.

On the same day that I began my job at a small Jewish Federation in 1996, a Chabad House opened its doors in a town where, at the time, people still felt the need to say "Shana Tova" in a whisper at the supermarket. An influential board member took me out for coffee to tell me that if I ran an article in the Federation newspaper about Chabad being in town, I would be responsible "for the collapse of the Federation and for thousands of Jews going hungry in Israel and around the world." His position was that the Jewish community was not ready for Chabad, and that the community would want to distance itself from the Federation if we were seen as supporting their operation. This man belonged to a Conservative synagogue, and was deeply connected to Judaism—and I was new on the job.

So when the editorial meeting took place, I suggested we hold off on the announcement. After all, I did not want to be responsible for the destruction of the Jewish community! The editor, an equally influential board member, affiliated with the Reform movement and self-avowedly secular, informed me that withholding the announcement was unethical. She said she would abide by a decision to delay for one month, but if the news that a new Jewish organization—albeit one that did not have even one follower in town—was omitted from the next publication, she would resign. I was stunned. The editor had no allegiance to Chabad, but she had a strong allegiance to the local community and to doing the right thing.

My 30-something-year-old-Orthodox-self went home with more questions than answers. How could I have missed that I was being pressured into protecting a political interest? How could I, observant and committed, have been so willing to make an unethical editorial call? I was taught that my Judaism was supposed to guide me in every situation—religious or secular— but this time it eluded me. The lesson I learned here came not from my own Jewish center but from hers—and so began my experience of wisdom that comes from learning from every person. We ran the article. The irony? Chabad has become one of the most successful synagogues for young families in town, engaging them in sold-out and standing-room-only religious, educational, and social programming; day camp; and preschool. All of this in the same town that was not "ready" for Chabad 20 years

ago.

A few months after I was hired, several donors suggested that we hire a kosher caterer for our annual gala. For as many years as the Federation had hosted a gala, a non-kosher caterer had always catered it—serving dairy foods and fish with the explicit instruction not to prepare or serve any meat or shellfish products. At that time not one donor had a religious problem with eating dairy or fish when eating out, and I do not know for sure what prompted the request. A special executive committee meeting was called, and the president of the Federation asked me to come to his office a few days prior to the meeting. He wanted me to prepare a few remarks and to recommend a position. “I can’t,” I told him. I tried to explain the concept of *nogeiah ba’davar*, that I had an interest in the outcome of the vote. “I don’t understand. Why would you care one way or the other?” he asked. “Because I keep kosher. I would have to recommend that we use a kosher caterer. I am Orthodox.” He looked at me for a minute and mused, almost to himself, “I wonder if we knew that when we hired you—*if we would have* hired you.”

I was more surprised than he was. How could he not know? How could being Orthodox be viewed as a negative attribute for an employee in a Jewish organization? Over the years, I came to learn that he meant no harm; he was a *mensch*, kind, generous, and above all, fair. I think he was just wondering aloud, but a small part of me knew he was right: had my observance been revealed in advance, it might have been an impediment in this overwhelmingly secular community in a town that didn’t warmly embrace Jews. I clearly didn’t fit the stereotype that those who interviewed me might have held, but for the first time, I was sensitized to the fact that I needed to be cautious in some way about my newly revealed Orthodoxy.

In the end, we decided not to create a policy on *kashruth,* despite the fact that the outcome of the vote was to hire a kosher caterer. That board meeting was very contentious, and the call for a kosher caterer was won by only one vote—not a decisive majority. Because the conversation focused essentially on the issue of inclusion and making it possible for any Jew to eat at our events, we decided that as a community organization, decisions like this would be backed by our most critical values—and one of those was the value of being welcoming and inclusive. Since then, whenever an event chairperson asked what the policy was on kosher catering, we told them we did not have a policy. We did, however, have a guiding principle of inclusivity. If event chairs wanted to make a case to the board that fancier presentation or a more sophisticated menu trumped inclusion, we would

hire a non-kosher caterer and have a dairy menu. No one has ever opted for the non-kosher caterer. Today, no one even asks the question. We simply have kosher events. It required restraint on my part to distance myself from that debate and not offer my personal point of view. And I learned to try to keep strong boundaries between my personal ritual observance and beliefs and my professional decisions. The community always comes first—as long as I do not violate my standards of observance.

Several years after the *kashruth* vote, I went out for a drink with a divorced lay leader and her boyfriend, whom she had wanted me to meet. She was a board member and a friend. I knew three things about this man: that he was important to her, that he was separated but not divorced from his wife, and that he had a daughter. While we were in the restaurant, other members of the board saw us and came over to say hello. The next day, I got a call from a friend of one of the board members who greeted us in the restaurant, who was also a board member, "summoning" me to Starbucks. "I heard you were out with so and so and her married boyfriend for a drink. What a shock that you would stoop so low! How dare you be seen with her and a married man—if your father could see you, he would be rolling over in his grave with shame. *You*, who are the moral compass of this community, have lost all credibility."

There is a lot to say about this conversation, including the fact that while she knew and respected my uncle, who was an Orthodox rabbi, she had never met my father. She could not know that my father had once instructed me never to stick my nose into other people's significant relationships or to pass judgment on them. I wanted to say that it takes tremendous *chutzpah* to invoke the imagined disapproval of my recently deceased father, that it is God who judges these situations, not I, and that my moral compass was in the same place it was the day before. But I wanted to keep my job, so I stayed silent. When I got back to the office, I started calling board members who still held my trust. "Is this a violation of my position? Am I not to go out socially with board members if I, or others in the community, disapprove of their relationships?" It took only a few calls for a couple of things to become clear: first, that no one else on my board agreed with the woman who had scolded me, but that being Orthodox held me to a different standard from everyone else; second, that I could see that in a few short years, being Orthodox was no longer a negative—I was seen as the moral compass. Or was that just another assumption?

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that I, too, had bought into some well-worn stereotypes. The setting was the Melton Adult Education course that I team-

taught several years ago with an Orthodox rabbi. At one session, a participant in the class indicated that she thought Orthodox women were enslaved by the routine of cleaning and cooking prior to Shabbat, and then serving and cleaning up after the meals, especially when dishwasher use was forbidden. She imagined that on Friday night, all a woman could be was exhausted. I told her that in my home, although it may not be the norm, these tasks were shared equally, but that she should ask the rabbi what he thought the following week. Although I made a mental note to warn him, I forgot.

As he came out of the class, I asked him if the notion of women being enslaved on Shabbat came up. He nodded. “Oh no! I am so sorry—I meant to give you a heads up. What did you say?” I admit to having been a little panicked. “I told the truth,” he said. My spirits were dashed. “What’s the truth?” Without even breaking a smile, he said, “My wife has a full-time job and I am home on Fridays. So the entire responsibility of preparing for Shabbat falls to me.” Why did I think I needed to warn him? Because the archetypal image of the exhausted woman was in my mind, too: the wife, preparing everything and the man coming home from *shul* to a warm, clean house and a delicious meal that he had no part in preparing had been branded in my consciousness from childhood stories—and perhaps from a bit of childhood experience.

Another colleague also made me confront my stereotypical assumptions. When filling out forms for the annual Federation conference and the *shabbaton* that preceded it, she blurted out “I am so offended by this form!” I was filling out the same form and found nothing offensive in its request for standard information: name, address, credit card, and a box to check if I was Sabbath observant, presumably so I would be housed on a lower floor in the hotel. “What offends you about this?” I asked. She, clearly upset, said, “I am assuming that the boxes ‘I am Sabbath observant’ and ‘I am not Sabbath observant’ have to do with the elevator on Shabbat. How should someone like me answer this? I light candles every week. I go to *shul* often. I always observe the Sabbath—just not the same way you do, not by Orthodox standards. It’s offensive to me that I should have to write that I am not Sabbath observant!” I saw her point. I shrugged and said, “So, write that you are,” which seemed like a logical response to me. “But then I am potentially taking away a room on a lower floor from someone who really needs it. That’s not right, either.” Despite her being offended, she exhibited respect for others and their personal needs. There was another moral compass in the office, one who understood that language matters, that many Jews “Remember the Sabbath day,” perhaps not in the same way Orthodox Jews remember.

Yet there are times when my personal observance inevitably collides with my ethical and professional obligations to the organization in a more complicated way. Although ritual observance is important to me personally, caring for vulnerable Jewish populations is part of my personal practice as well as my professional mission. Every extra dollar spent might deprive a person in need; charity dollars are to be allocated carefully.

On the Thursday before a weekend when Yom Kippur fell on Shabbat, a Jewish colleague informed me that, after morning Yom Kippur services, she would be picking up the van we needed for an event the next day. “Why would you do that on Yom Kippur?” I wanted to know. “First of all, it’s $90 cheaper. Second of all*, that bothers you, not me*. There is a break in the services for a couple of hours, and it fits my schedule better to do it this way.” I was stunned. She was an affiliated Reform Jew, deeply committed to the Jewish people, Israel, and the community.

“I don’t understand. Do you think we, as an organization, should be renting a van on Yom Kippur? Doesn’t it strike you as incongruous?” I was feeling a twang of guilt both for being holier than thou and for suggesting the extra expense. “Well, if we were a synagogue, I would feel differently. But we are a secular Jewish organization. It’s not part of the mission statement. Our mission is to help people and to use the charity funds in a responsible way.” I couldn’t help but feel that, just as certain basic ethics in the Torah are not spelled out but nonetheless expected, not doing business on Yom Kippur was implicit. Her argument, however, was crystal clear. She worked for a Jewish organization but, like the people who supported us, ritual observance by Orthodox standards did not define her as an individual or a professional. I walked away. It gnawed at me all day as I tried to keep those personal and professional standards separate and clear. But I could not. I went into her office before heading home. “I don’t want you to pick up the van on Yom Kippur. And I don’t want the Federation to incur additional cost. So please, pick up the van on Friday afternoon. I will donate the $90.”

And so I did. We had no time to get an official policy from the board, and it was not clear to me if a secular Jewish organization should limit how and when employees conduct business through the lens of ritual observance. The interaction has been a springboard for many conversations about how we see the Jewish world, our obligations or responsibilities as Jews, and what being a “good Jew” looks like, if there is such a thing. Most importantly, it opened the door for us to engage in exchanges about our deepest Jewish values and priorities, to determine where we have common ground, and to accept the merit of the other’s

perspective. Hours of debate and conversation have led us to adopt our own policies that seem to work for the community and for each other. We have learned to recognize in advance when colliding values will put us in a position of conflict, so we now have the luxury of time to creatively resolve it. But both of my colleagues showed me that my own lens was too narrow; that language matters, and the expression “observant Jews” is not synonymous with “Orthodox Jews.” They both helped me understand that there are other negative perceptions about Orthodox Jews: that we set the rules; that we don’t make room for people to observe differently from the way we do; that we want to impose our language and our standards on others because we judge them. In judging them, or making them feel that we do, we alienate them.

Consider the way we refer to formerly Orthodox Jews; we say they are “*off the derekh*” which implies that there is in fact, only one way to be Jewish and this language implies criticism and condescension. We are in a unique position to change these perceptions among colleagues and lay leaders by choosing our words more carefully and widening our embrace of the diverse ways Jews connect to Judaism and to community. We need to stop believing that we have the monopoly on truth and that our observance of rituals or Shabbat somehow makes us better Jews than non-Orthodox Jews. The greatest opportunity of being an Orthodox professional in a secular world is that you can begin to shatter the stereotypes.

It takes a little *tzimtzum*, self-contracting and humility, for any Orthodox Jew—not only professionals in Jewish organizations—to be part of the secular Jewish world, and to set boundaries, when possible, between one’s personal standards and professional ones. I can attend a *simha* without making the *baalei simha* feel bad about the food or the timing or the place. It is not always necessary to say, “I need a kosher meal.” Sometimes, you just don’t eat where you can’t eat. If I can’t be there until two hours into the *simha*, rather than deliver an explanation about Shabbat and its restrictions, I simply ask, “Would it be okay if we arrive a couple of hours late?” *Hamevin yavin*. (Those who understand will understand.) The many years in this job have reminded continually that there are two equally important aspects to being an observant Jew—the rituals and the interpersonal mitzvoth. Orthodox Day Schools provide a great deal of training about what to do and what not to do when it comes to Jewish ritual observance. But Rabbi Joseph Telushkin said “the greatest disservice we do is to equate religion only with ritual observance.” It is the stereotype of equating being Orthodox with being religious.

We need to consider that there are secular Jews who are as scrupulous about observing the mitzvoth that govern interpersonal behavior as Orthodox Jews are about trying to observe both. Since the Torah dictates both sets of mitzvoth, we must find room to consider those Jews who are philanthropists, honest, and stringent about their ethics and commitment to social justice as Jewishly observant.

The gold standard clearly is commitment to both the ritual and interpersonal rules. The word “observant” seems never used to describe how we treat others. But it should be. For Orthodox Jews to meet that gold standard, they would have to be both Orthodox and observant, paying the same careful attention to caring for the needs of others individually and communally, and to using language that demonstrates dignity and respect to all Jews, despite our differences. Ultimately, we need to use our commitment to Torah and mitzvoth to exhibit that traditional ritual observance is not only about accepting Torah obligations; it is a commitment that should lead us to become more compassionate and ethical, to be *a* moral compass, not *the* moral compass in our diverse Jewish communities.