

This Month in American Jewish History

Thomas Jefferson to Mordecai M. Noah, May 28, 1818

SIR: Thank you for the Discourse on the consecration of the Synagogue in your city, with which you have been pleased to favor me. I have read it with pleasure and instruction, having learnt from it some valuable facts in Jewish history which I did not know before. Your sect by its suffering has furnished a remarkable proof of the universal spirit of religious intolerance, inherent in every sect, disclaimed by all while feeble, and practiced by all when in power. Our laws have applied the only antidote to this vice, protecting our religious, as they do our, civil rights, by putting all on an equal footing. But more remains to be done. For altho' we are free by law, we are not so in practice. Public opinion erects itself into an Inquisition and exercises its office with as much fanaticism as fans the flames of an auto da fé. The prejudice still scowling on your section of our religion, altho' the elder one, cannot be unfelt by yourselves. It is to be hoped that individual dispositions will at length mould themselves to the model of the law, and consider the moral basis on which all our religions rest, as the rallying point which unites them in a common interest; while the peculiar dogmas branching from it are the exclusive concern of the respective sects embracing them, and no rightful subject of notice to any other. Public opinion needs reformation on this point, which would have the further happy effect of doing away with the hypocritical maxim of 'intus ut lubet, foris ut moris.' Nothing I think would be so likely to effect this as to your sect particularly as the

more careful attention to education, which you recommend, and which placing its members on the equal and commanding benches of science, will exhibit them as equal objects of respect and esteem.



Editor's note: Read more about Mordechai Manuel Noah on the Jewish Virtual Library website at <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/mordecai-manuel-noah>. Noah was "the most influential Jew in the United States in the early 19th Century." He was a lawyer, politician, diplomat, journalist, publisher, author, playwright, philanthropist and early Zionist. He was a founder of New York University and launched a project to build a Jewish hospital in New York City, which, after his death became Mt. Sinai. Jefferson's reference to, "Intus ut libet, foris ut moris est" ("think what you like, but say what is expected of you", or "Inwardly according to your will, outwardly according to social convention") must have resonated for Noah, whose family fled the Portuguese Inquisition. For more on the context of Jefferson's historic letter go to <https://www.haaretz.com/jewish/this-day-jefferson-opines-on-the-jews-1.5270284>. In this letter, Jefferson describes his philosophy of religious freedom.

Please Attend a Shiva Minyan by Janet Zimmerman

Many years ago a good friend of mine, an HJC congregant, lost her father. My friend, who was devastated, assumed that since she was an active member of the congregation, lots of supportive people would show up for shiva minyans. Well, not many people came, and she asked me for help. I wound up calling my brother, who is not a member of our synagogue, and he rushed over to help out my friend. I vowed then and there that I would work to ensure that this kind of situation didn't happen again. I volunteered to be the person who, if needed, would help a bereaved congregant have enough people to say kaddish.

Here's how the process works: When Rabbi Saks meets with the family of the deceased, he asks if they might need help ensuring a minyan of 10 people. If the answer is yes, then the rabbi contacts me. I then call the family to find out how many people they need each night. Then, I call or email "regulars," I reach out to groups such as Sisterhood and morning minyan, and then I go through the roster and contact other people until I have a minimum of 10.

To help with this process, we now have a new system, an online link, thanks to Cantor Gordon and the Ritual Committee. When the HJC office sends out a notice that someone has passed away, in that notice is a clickable link, which brings you to a Google spreadsheet. You can simply type your name into a box which indicates the date you will attend. This is a very easy and simple way to organize and streamline the process.

When someone loses a beloved family member, the grief can be overwhelming. Having the support of our fellow congregants can be so very helpful and comforting. Oftentimes it can feel quite uncomfortable to walk into the home of someone we don't know. It can feel awkward, especially if you feel that the person has no idea who you are. But many congregants have told me how meaningful it has been for them to have people they don't know come at a time of intense sadness. The gratitude of the mourner is palpable and real. We often refer to ourselves as the HJC family. We celebrate holidays together, share meals, attend programs. We also need to be there for each other during hard times. That's what a family does for its members. Please think about attending a shiva minyan the next time you see a notice that one is needed. And if you have children who are past the age of bar/bat mitzvah, add their names to the spreadsheet and bring them! They will rightly feel important that they are counted in this meaningful mitzvah. If you are not able to use the spreadsheet for any reason, you can email me. My contact information will be on the notice that is sent out.

Please try and push past the feeling of discomfort of going to an unfamiliar home, and realize that the mourner will be so appreciative of your presence at such a supremely sad time in their lives. You don't need any special skills, you don't need to read Hebrew or know the prayers. You just need to be there.