

Media Coverage of Religious Services

March 2, 2000

"They shall declare My glory among these nations."

Isaiah 66:19

Question:

Under what circumstances may news media attend and cover religious services?

Answer:

On February 1, 1996 the Temple Board adopted a Statement of Principles regarding photographing and videotaping during services. The question has arisen whether and if so, to what extent, that statement applies to media coverage of religious services.

The prior statement stressed the primacy, of services as a time of prayer and stated: "Nothing may distract the worshipper from worship." Thus, it added, "it is of the utmost importance that the decorum and spirituality of the entire worship service be maintained, religious event."

The prior statement also recognized the important values served by allowing photography and videography during services. Accordingly, the statement allows videotaping and photographing in the sanctuary or chapel prior to and during religious services, but only under specified tightly controlled circumstances designed to ensure that they are unobtrusive and do not interfere with the mood and decorum of the worship service. However, that statement did not specifically refer to activities of the news media.

The news media differ in some respects from others who wish to photograph or videotape services. Their presence is for the purpose of providing information outside the Jewish community, while others primarily engage in these activities to create a family record or to enable the aged or ill to enjoy services at home or in the hospital. Often several TV stations or other media may wish to cover the same event, resulting in a larger presence at services. Normally they wish to cover only a portion of the service, so there could be concerns about disruption as they depart. Finally, they potentially could disrupt the privacy of individuals who do not wish to be the subjects of their photography or videography.

We believe the Tanach helps answer this question. Isaiah 66:19 declares: "They shall declare My glory among these nations." And, to like effect is Psalm 96:1-3:

"Sing to the Lord a new song,
Sing to the Lord all the Earth.

Sing to the Lord, bless His name,
Proclaim His victory day after day.

Tell of His glory among the nations,
His wondrous, deeds, among all peoples."

In our modern society the media enable us to share the message of Judaism. Moreover, we believe our well-being is advanced by openness to non-Jews. Media accounts or broadcasts of portions of our services enhance understanding by non-Jews and help us to combat ignorant views of Jewish religious practices.

A Reform responsum notes "the considerable effort we have made to teach the non-Jewish world about Judaism," and our "effort to make an effort to bring about understanding the broader Christian community." Walter Jacob, Questions and Reform Jewish Answers: New American Reform Responsa, #61 (CCAR 1992). As long, as rules of Shabbat observance are not broken, this responsum allows non-Jewish tour guides to give tours of a historic synagogue on Shabbat afternoon.

Finally, past practice at Congregation B'nai Israel supports openness to media presence at services. For example, the September 13, 1858 Sacramento Union described services in great detail, mentioning, "The ceremony consists of the prayers, in Hebrew, the reading of the Law by the appointed Reader, and others called up out-of the congregation." In the days when television was still in black and white, there was television coverage of a Yom Kippur service with Rabbi Hausman. This custom has continued to the present day.

We think these sources lead to this conclusion: In general, the media may attend, photograph, and video religious services as long as they do not interfere with the decorum and spirituality of the service or the privacy of congregants. The Rabbi may determine that a particular time or place is inappropriate for media attendance; in case of such a determination, the media should not attend the service. At all other services, the general rules for photography and videography which govern others should govern the media as well. The appropriate lay leaders should exercise tight control over the movements and actions of media during services. Media representatives must respect the fact that our services are a time of prayer and reflection. As the general rules indicate, this respect includes the period before services begin.

Approved by the Temple Board on
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recommendation from the
Religious Practices Committee and the Rabbi