



## 92nd Street Y

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In my youth, everyone had heard of the YMCA, the Young Men's Christian Association. It was founded in 1844 "to put Christian principles into practice by developing a healthy body, mind and spirit". And it spread around the world. If you have spent any time in Jerusalem you could not avoid the YMCA building and tower. Once it was the tallest construction in West Jerusalem. Now it is dwarfed by apartment blocks, hotels, and office towers.



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To a young Jewish boy fresh from the UK, the YMCA Jerusalem in the 1950s reeked of alien smells, sights, customs, and ideology. It was the Arnold of Rugby public school system transferred to the Middle East, a legacy of the British Mandate and colonialism. The indoor swimming pool was the only one in Jerusalem in the fifties until the late, unlamented Presidents Hotel added a minute plunge pool. The YMCA pool in Jerusalem was not only segregated, but you had to swim in the nude.

The Young Men's Christian Association was founded to bring robust Christianity, directly and indirectly, to a world of young pagans. In my youth almost wherever you travelled you were bound to find cheap YMCA hostels and, to be fair, not too many evangelists. It was an institution, and it provided a great service for working- and middle-class men and women (although women had the Young Women's Christian Association) away from home, and it also provided social and cultural facilities. It is all now much reduced. There is still a large YMCA almost opposite where I live in New York City that is often patronized by Israeli youth groups coming to the city looking for convenient, cheap accommodations.

The Young Men's Hebrew Association was established some ten years after the YMCA, in Baltimore, primarily to offer young immigrants an alternative to a Christian sporting and social atmosphere; it was a very secular organization and made no serious attempt to provide any Jewish content. Eventually the

organization was largely absorbed by the Jewish Community Centers, but a few remained independent, and the most famous today is the 92nd Street Y in New York. It offers a very wide range of services. It has a first-rate cultural program with lectures and concerts, and nowadays it even has a rabbi on its staff. It is, in spirit and execution, primarily an organization for Jews more than a Jewish organization. In this article I hope to make that point.



There is a reserved young lady in my community, still in high school, who tries her best to adhere to tradition. She is outstandingly good with children and helps in the weekly children's services. She was accepted by the Y to join its team of paid helpers for its summer day camp. The program includes weekends, which occasionally involves travelling on Shabbat. She did not want to break Shabbat. But whether rightly or wrongly, she feared for her job, and so she kept quiet. You might argue that if she cared enough about it, she should have refused and accepted her fate. But she was not strong enough. Perhaps she reasoned that if a non-Jew drove she could live with it. But when she got to the campsite, she was directed to start clearing it up, which obviously involved a lot of hard work.

I find it very sad that an organization founded to help Jews retain their identity, regardless of how inclusive or non-denominational, should be so insensitive, so unaware Jewishly. One can understand a non-Jewish organization not even considering the possibility that someone might want to keep Shabbat. But one founded by Jews and for Jews? We hear a lot nowadays in the Jewish world about religious coercion and fanatics imposing their standards on others. How about the reverse? Perhaps the organization will say that a junior official went beyond his brief, or that it was an unfortunate error of judgment, or as I have said that it was her fault for not speaking out. They might not be wrong, but still I find it sad.

I am reminded of my late father's comments after his first visit to the USA in 1955. He was struck by the professionalism of the communal organizations in contrast to the amateur way things were done in the UK. But he was shocked at how Jewishly ignorant they were and how little they were aware of the

sensibilities of traditional Jews and the requirements of orthodoxy. Communal leaders taking him around felt under no obligation to provide kosher food whether for visitors, meetings, or functions. The truth was that in those days Israeli diplomats and politicians notoriously disregarded any Jewish religious sensibilities. It was not until after the Six Day War that the pendulum began to swing the other way. In Europe too, many Jewish organizations paid no heed at all to dietary or other religious requirements. Often they were more sensitive to other religions than their own. But over time things have improved dramatically. It is one of the achievements of the growing Orthodox and Charedi presence that most Jewish organizations now realize that a non-Orthodox Jew can eat kosher but an observant Jew cannot eat non-kosher.

I do not object to Jewish organizations that serve the whole community opening their facilities on Shabbatot and festivals. But I do expect them to be proactive in not requiring Jewish employees to work them, and they should make their requirements clear from the start. In our world we bend over backwards to avoid offending other religions and cultures, yet we seem all too careless about our own. Obviously there are people within the 92nd Street Y who still need to be sensitive to practicing Judaism.