

## MALVERNE: A CASE HISTORY

SAMUEL CHIEL

**M**ANY CIVIL rights leaders believe that the racial crisis will be more easily resolved in the South than in the North. In the South, the inequities are more obvious. In the North, the tension is below the surface, rising only during specific crises. It is more subtle, more unexpected and, perhaps, even more hostile. Malverne, New York, and the Jewish community within it, has been involved in such a crisis for the past several years, and its experience may provide some guideposts for other Northern communities which increasingly will be faced with similar problems.

Malverne is part of School District #12 which contains three elementary schools, two of which—in Malverne and Lynbrook—are predominantly white. The third, the Woodfield Road School, in the unincorporated village of Lakeview, is predominantly Negro.

In September 1962, a group of Negro parents, supported by the NAACP, brought suit to the State Commissioner of Education, James E. Allen Jr., in which they maintained that the Woodfield Road School was a school of distinct racial imbalance (80% Negro and 20% White). In order that Negro children might receive an equal education, they asked that the elementary schools of District #12 be completely integrated.

Commissioner Allen appointed a distinguished Advisory Committee to study this suit and the local situation. After many months of study, visits to the community, discussion with the local School Board and leaders of the communities, the committee concluded that the suit was justified and recommended that the Princeton Plan be adopted in School District #12 for the purpose of achieving full integration.

The Princeton Plan would involve assigning all the children in the school district to schools based on grade level, rather than on area of residence. Thus, all kindergarten through third grade children would attend certain schools, all those in the fourth and fifth grades would study at another. All of the children in the sixth grade and above would continue to attend the single Junior and single Senior High School of the district. In effect, all the schools would be integrated.

On June 17, 1963, Commissioner Allen recognized the suit of the

Samuel Chiel is Rabbi of the Malverne Jewish Center in Malverne, Long Island.

Negro parents as justified, and ruled that the Princeton Plan should be put into effect in School District #12 as of September 1, 1963.

In response to the growing tension in the community, the clergy of the district formed a Coordinating Council, consisting of governmental and religious leaders. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, this effort to provide unified leadership for the community proved unsuccessful.

During the summer months, an opposition group was formed which challenged Commissioner Allen's authority to order implementation of the Princeton Plan. The issue is currently pending before the U. S. Supreme Court.

When the school semester began on September 4, 1963, the School Board informed the residents of our communities that since the issue was in the court, the *status quo* would continue in force. The Negro community of Lakeview expressed considerable frustration and unhappiness at this news, and began a series of demonstrations—picketing and sit-ins—protesting the action of the School Board. In addition, the leaders of the Negro community decided that they would boycott the Woodfield Road School in order to express their indignation at the manner in which the Board of Education had handled the situation. However, greatly concerned that their children should continue their schooling and not fall behind in their studies, they sought cooperative aid from the general community. The month of September saw the religious communities take their position in this effort.

*Wednesday, September 4:* The Negro leadership asked all the clergy of the district for the use of the facilities of the churches and synagogues, so that they might establish a "Freedom School" for their children.

*Sunday evening, September 8:* The Social Action Committee of the Malverne Jewish Center invited the officers of the congregation to meet with them in emergency session, to consider this request. After lengthy discussion, the committee voted to recommend to the Board of Trustees that the facilities of the synagogue be made available to the Freedom School.

*Monday morning, September 9:* Rev. Farley W. Wheelwright, minister of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Central Nassau, outside our community, announced that the facilities of the church—four classrooms—would be available immediately to the Freedom School.

*Monday evening, September 9:* The Board of Trustees of the Malverne Jewish Center considered the recommendation of the Social Action Committee. Upon advice from legal counsel that the congregation would in no way be violating the law by granting this request, and after long, thorough soul-searching deliberations, the Board of Trustees felt

morally bound to respond to this request for help, and voted overwhelmingly to make its facilities immediately available for use.

*Wednesday morning, September 11:* Eighty Negro children in the first and second grades, and one white child in the second grade, together with their qualified, volunteer, white teachers, began their studies at the synagogue. They used the facilities for approximately two weeks, until the leaders of the Negro community decided to end their protest and send the children back to the Woodfield Road School.

*Thursday morning, September 12:* Father William Murray of the St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Malverne, announced the opening of his church's facilities to the Freedom School. Classes started at the Episcopal Church on Monday morning, September 16.

*Monday evening, September 16:* A special congregational Open Forum was scheduled, to explain the decision of the Board of Trustees of the Jewish Center. The Board's decision had met with a mixed reaction on the part of the congregation. While many had expressed their whole-hearted approval, others were vehement in their opposition. The Forum would give all congregants the opportunity to express themselves.

Approximately 250 people attended the Open Forum. The Board's action was explained in terms of the essential moral issue, and a Fact Sheet with questions and answers was distributed to each congregant. Many questions were asked, many comments made; there was much animated discussion. The major objection raised by those opposed to the Board's action seemed to be a feeling that this matter should have been brought before the entire congregation for its approval, rather than any opposition to the Board's response to a moral issue. The leadership of the synagogue felt that the Open Forum had been very helpful in informing the congregants and giving them a greater understanding of the meaning of this historic decision.

During this kind of crisis, one is subjected to a great many pressures. Often small and insignificant in themselves, they have a substantial cumulative effect.

One day, during the operation of the Freedom School, I was stopped by a non-Jewish neighbor of our synagogue with whom I often chat about the weather and similar important matters. He was furious and asked me what we thought we were doing by bringing all those Negro children into our school (and, incidentally, into his neighborhood). I explained that we had received a request for help and that as a House of God, we felt we could not refuse. Surprisingly, this explanation seemed to calm him; he said he now understood the situation better.

The local Chief of Police told me he was bothered by the fact that, since we were operating a Freedom School, he had to station police

at our synagogue, taking them away from other duties and spreading them too thinly throughout the community. He concluded our lengthy discussion by telling me what advice he had given his son before the boy entered military service: "Whatever happens to you, whenever you're faced with a decision, I want you to do what your conscience tells you is right." Then he told me: "Rabbi, I don't agree with you, but I can see you are doing what you believe is right, and I'm with you all the way."

One of my congregants told me sadly that his non-Jewish neighbor had forbidden his six-year-old son to play with my congregant's son, because the Jewish boy's father belonged to a synagogue which had done "a very terrible thing."

I received a hysterical call from one of the ladies in the congregation. Her non-Jewish neighbors had come to her in great anger, demanding an explanation of our action. What should she tell them? I repeated my explanation (which I was to do many more times during the next few weeks) and since she didn't call me again, I assume that her situation improved.

Our School Board directed a letter of harassment to Father Murray and myself on official stationary, asking whether we realized that we were probably violating State Law. We replied that we were not legal experts. We were responding to a call for help from people who wanted to educate their children, and we would always give help under such circumstances.

I received some heartening letters of commendation from members who were very proud of what we had done. I also received some letters opposing the action, though not as many as I had expected. I received a number of vicious anonymous phone calls. Several anonymous letters informed me that I was doing a terrible thing to the Jewish community, which had enjoyed such wonderful relationships before I came to "ruin our town." I also received a gentle hint that something was amiss when, for the first time in the eight years I have been in Malverne, I was given a parking ticket for parking in front of my own synagogue. After my conversation with the Chief of Police, I can only assume that this was the act of an individual policeman.

The problem has not been solved. The case is being appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States. Perhaps the full lesson will be apparent only after the decision has been rendered and our community no longer finds itself in the unhappy position of uncertainty about the future. However, certain tentative conclusions can be made now.

I was very disappointed with the reaction of the local clergy. Though they reported that each of them had asked their governing bodies for permission to use their facilities for the Freedom School, I cannot

help wondering how strongly they had really urged this. It is possible to ask in such a way that refusal becomes a certainty. While recognizing that most clergy, like most laymen, do not want to get involved in a controversial situation, I nonetheless consider the sin of the clergy to be far greater than that of the laity. If leaders do not lead, how can the laity be expected to follow? I believe that clergymen need a far more intensive education in their theological schools concerning commitment to a moral cause. It cannot be assumed that in situations of moral complexity, each clergyman will reach the right decision on the basis of his study of the right texts.

I learned a number of instructive lessons about my own congregation. As one astute member put it, after leaving our Open Forum:

*If it had happened in another congregation, I would have been very proud. Here—I'm not so happy.*

We live with the illusion that the American Jew is generally liberal in his approach to political and social issues. However, when a situation confronts him in his own backyard, his liberalism has a way of vanishing in the face of what he considers to be a threat to his comfortable way of living. I believe that most congregants are far more willing to have their rabbi march in Selma than they are to have him involve himself—and them—in a local issue.

I learned something, too, about the effectiveness of sermons. Though at times convinced that sermons are utterly worthless, there are moments when I have the feeling that they are effective, especially when I am thoroughly convinced of the rightness of the cause I espouse. To my astonishment, I discovered that some of the people who were most vociferous in their opposition to me and my stand were the same people who had regularly heard me preach about this subject. It is dangerous to assume that when people listen to your words they also agree with you.

Finally, I have come to believe that a congregation is meaningfully educated only when its members are actually confronted with a crisis and are to take specific action in response to it. Obviously, we must continue to teach our adults and children in classrooms and through sermons. But I am convinced that real learning happens only through involvement in the process of making a moral decision and carrying it out.

After its lengthy discussion of this issue, and its overwhelming decision to open our doors to the Freedom School, our Board of Trustees now understands far better the meaning of moral decision. They have had to defend their stand. And I have good reason to believe that they are quite proud of what they did.

The Open Forum in which the congregation was confronted with

an action that had been taken, was extremely helpful. The meeting began with high tension. During the day, I was treated to many rumors: there would be an attempt to force me to resign at the meeting; there would be a boycott of the Services on the High Holy Days; etc. But the result was quite different. The meeting provided an opportunity to ventilate strong feelings, pro and con. Those who were opposed were doubtlessly not converted. Those who approved were certainly greatly strengthened. And the vast number of uncertain people were, I believe, greatly reassured.

My experience in this situation has left me with the indelible impression that each of us, rabbi and congregant alike, far from being discouraged by our experiences in this area, ought to seek out new opportunities to engage in the battle for civil rights. This struggle is a concrete expression of the teachings of our faith. It gives to each of us the privilege of taking part in shaping the history of our times, and enables us to share in the process of restoring human freedom and dignity.