

Some Experiences of an Orthodox Jewish Professor

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Since 1968 I have been teaching mathematics at Stevens Institute of Technology. During the 2000-2001 academic year I was a Visiting Professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, New York. None of this is particularly unusual except for the fact that I am an Orthodox Jew who goes in “full regalia.” What this means is that I wear a full beard, a yarmulke (skullcap), and my Tzitzis show. (See Numbers 15:37-41 for the biblical source for Tzitzis.) Clearly there is no way that a student can mistake what I am. On the other hand, the numbers of Jews in the undergraduate schools at Stevens and at USMA are relatively small, at most 3 or 4% in any given year. Also, the vast majority of faculty at both of these institutions are not Jewish, let alone observant.

Stevens Institute of Technology

How does my looking and being different affect my students and my colleagues? The answer is not simple. I still recall the first class I taught in the fall of 1968. It was an undergraduate course in probability, and I must say that when I came in to class I was somewhat apprehensive about how the students would react to my appearance. However, this anxiety quickly disappeared when a student walked into class wearing a yarmulke! After all, I wasn't alone now. What is ironic is that in my more than 33 years at Stevens at most 5 undergraduates wearing yarmulkes have attended the school. It was just my good fortune that the first one was in the first course I taught.

I find that students are quite curious about me, but are also reluctant to ask. While most know about beards and yarmulkes, almost none know about Tzitzis, so I have gotten a few questions over the years about this. (When I get such a question, I figure that there are either no Jews in the class or *none of the Jews* in the class know what Tzitzis are.) Occasionally I do talk about something Jewish as an aside, and the students appear to be listening attentively. In fact, they seem to be fascinated about these topics.

In recent years I have been using the WEB as an integral part of my teaching. I have a midi file that plays Jewish music when the site is accessed. (<http://personal.stevens.edu/~llevine>.) Students like this and want to know what kind of music this is. Encouraged by this I have begun sharing more "Jewish" things with my students. For example, a few years ago before Rosh Hashanah I decided to bring a shofar (ram's horn) to class, speak a little about its significance and then blow it. Students present actually clapped when I was finished. Since then I have continued this on a yearly basis.

West Point

I was invited to spend the 2000-2001 academic year at USMA as a visiting professor. The Department of Mathematical Sciences provided me with an apartment on the post (campus) within short walking distance of the math building. While I went home for Shabbos virtually every week, I was a presence at USMA the rest of the time.

At USMA I encountered an environment that I had little experience with. For example, I was “sired” constantly. Every email from a cadet (student) began with “Sir” and concluded with “Respectfully.” I found myself being treated with the utmost respect by both the cadets and the faculty and personnel at USMA. Since the head of the mathematics department had told me that one of the (non-mathematical) reasons why they wanted me at USMA was to expose the cadets to diversity, I even introduced more about Judaism to my classes at West Point than I do at Stevens. It should be kept in mind that none of the students in my classes were Jewish, yet I spoke to them about Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succos, Chanukah, and Passover. In addition to blowing shofar during the first semester, I passed around a lulav and esrog for them to see. I also explained the significance of Chanukah and spoke of the military aspect of this holiday. Before Pesach I brought in hand schmura matzoh and let them taste it. I also explained the prohibition of having and eating any chometz during Pesach.

Ma 205, the first semester course that I taught, required the students to write an essay. I was told that it could be on any topic that I chose, so I had them write on the topic, “What I have learned in this math course that has nothing to do with math.” The papers that I received were most revealing. Here is a sampling:

At first I did not know what to think. My first day of Ma 205 and I noticed something different, a Jewish Professor. I am not prejudiced by any means, but I had never met a Jewish person before, let alone a professor of math. I have been in Ma 205 for more than six weeks now, and I have learned plenty of math course objectives. I have also learned some things that have nothing to do with math. I learned about the shofar, which is a ram’s horn played in long or short durations to signify the beginning of the “then High Holy Days.” I find it interesting that the horn seems to mock a human’s cry. I also learned about Rosh Hashanah, which is the Jewish New Year. I had always seen this day marked on various calendars, but I never knew what it meant until I took this class. Although learning about a new culture in math class may have seemed awkward at first, I feel that I have obtained valuable knowledge of Jewish culture, and, more importantly, I learned something I didn’t already know.

It has been said that you shouldn’t let classes get in the way of your education. That statement has certainly held true in this class. From my perspective I have learned a lot about subjects other than math in this class. I grew up in a small town in New Mexico, and never knew any Jewish people until I came to West

Point. My experience with Professor Levine has dispelled so many misconceptions that I had about Jewish people. I always thought that people of the Jewish faith would somehow seem foreign to me if I were to meet them. However, now I realize that they are just like me in many respects. I guess I always thought Jewish people spoke a different language and used a different thought process that would leave me utterly confused. This has not been the case. This new understanding of a culture (that I have never been exposed to) is probably the most valuable thing that I will take from Ma 205.

Besides greatly augmenting and enriching my previous body of mathematical information and skill, the first block of Ma 205 has served to teach me many lessons that I may never have learned in any other classroom. I have learned much about the religion of Judaism. For example, I know that in the Old Testament it states that whenever one wears a four-cornered garment he will attach tassels to each corner in order to remind him of the presence of God. I have also learned that the blowing of the ram's horn at Rosh Hashanah is symbolic of the crying of the Jews. Its rhythm is meant to mimic that of a human's wail. I learned an old Yiddish expression that has become one of my favorite sayings, "A man plans and God laughs." Most importantly, this class has served as a reinforcement of a principle that I already knew but had never personally witnessed or experienced: that one need not be Christian to be wholly dedicated to and a servant of God.

As a visiting professor at USMA I was allowed to shop at the post commissary (food market), shopette (convenience store that sells wine and liquor) and PX (Post Exchange). After meeting and speaking with the manager, the commissary began stocking Empire Kosher poultry that was kept separately in a special freezer. A line of Manischewitz products was also brought in and displayed prominently. The manager of the shopette ordered four varieties of Baron Herzog kosher wines at my request. In general every effort was graciously made to assist me.

One day while I was coming out of the commissary there was a woman in front of me with a wagon full of groceries. There were two small children sitting in the wagon staring at me. The woman turned to me and said, "They think you are Santa Klaus! From the moment that they saw you in the store they were on their best behavior." I replied, "Perhaps they should hire me to wander the store." "Yes," she said, "And maybe you will make house calls around bedtime to help with putting them to bed."

At one point a military member of the mathematics department invited me and another member of the department, who is a Catholic priest, to his home for dinner. I explained to him that this was not possible, since I keep kosher. He had no experience with this, so I pointed out to him a number of the common kosher symbols that are on well-known products. I then suggested that we all go out to dinner at a kosher restaurant in Monsey, NY, which is about a 30-minute drive from West Point. He told me that he would speak with his wife and get back to me.

The next day he told me that he had spent a good deal of time looking at the food products in his home and was amazed at how many of them were kosher. He also said that his wife had known Orthodox students when she went to college and had some familiarity with kashrus.

A few weeks later the four of us, the MAJ, his wife, the Catholic priest and I went out to dinner. When I offered several choices of restaurants and one of them was a kosher Italian dairy place, the Catholic priest, who is of Italian extraction, insisted that we go to the Italian one. Everyone enjoyed the food. I then took them on a tour of a kosher supermarket that was nearby. They were fascinated. The Observant Jewish workers and shoppers in the market kept trying to make some sense out of our unusual foursome.

Differentness

It is in the area of advising that I think that my "differentness" counts most. Many students have come to me over the years with all sorts of school and/or personal problems. I think this is because the students know that I stand for something and that I am willing to stand up and be counted for my beliefs. They appreciate commitment, despite the fact that it is to something with which they are completely unfamiliar. And, whether rightly or wrongly, they seem to think that a person with such commitment will be able to help them.

As far as my time at West Point goes, I wonder if perhaps at some point in the future one of the cadets that I taught might be an upper level officer who is brought some request relating to Judaism by a subordinate. Hopefully, s/he will remember "old" professor Levine's mathematics classes and deal with the situation in a positive manner. One never knows the far-reaching implications of even the smallest of our actions.

All of us who teach are concerned with creating a good learning environment for our students. One of my concerns from time to time has been the fact that my appearance might encourage students to keep their distance. Fortunately, my personal experiences run contrary to this. As one student once told me, "Professor, students are concerned with whether or not someone is a good teacher. You are known as such a teacher, and the students don't care at all what you look like!"

About the author:

Yitzchok (Lawrence E.) Levine, Ph.D., has been a professor of mathematical sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J., for more than 30 years. In that capacity he has taught a wide range of undergraduate and graduate mathematics courses. Levine also served as head of the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens from 1990 to 1995. Recently, he was a visiting professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at the United States Military Academy at West Point. His research interests include ordinary and partial differential equations and perturbation methods. He has also made a number of presentations on the use of technology as a teaching and learning tool.

