

Judaism

Vol. 48, Iss. 3

Research Library Core
pg. 277

Summer 1999

The Mitzvah to Encourage the Convert

by Rabbi Harold M. Schulweis

Well things are not fine, and it doesn't take a demographics wizard to realize that. Things are worse than we ever imagined. Consider the following: Since 1945, while the American population has more than doubled, growing from 133 million to about 270 million, the Jewish population in America has remained the same at about 5.7 million. In effect, during the last 50 years 6 million Jews have disappeared in America. But even this is not the full picture! We've lost more than six million. After all, since 1945, over one million Jews have immigrated to America from Russia, Israel, and a host of other countries. We've lost closer to 7 million Jews since 1945! And even if every Jew in America would remain fervently and actively Jewish, due to the critically low Jewish birthrate alone, our American Jewish community will shrink by 20% every 25 years. Combine the impact of fertility and assimilation, even with a zero drop out rate, and it is clear that more than 1/3 of our numbers will disappear. In just two generations, two out of every three Jews will have vanished. Don't be hysterical, Buchwald, you will tell me, only six of your ten children will be missing. Have we lost our minds? How dare we debate over whether it's acceptable to have 42% or 52% intermarriage. Is 5% OK? Is 1% acceptable? These are our children. I say that as long as there is a single Jewish child or adult who needs to be reached, it is immoral, I insist on the word, yes, immoral to expend Jewish resources trying to convince a gentile to put on a Yarmulka.

I'd like to close with a quote from Gary Tobin, from p. 186, *Opening the Gates*: "There is no guarantee that welcoming converts will work in the long run. Indeed, we may invest hundreds of millions and then billions of dollars in a communal debacle." Those dollars could save our children. Let us choose life for them.

The Mitzvah to Encourage the Convert

HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS

RABBI DANA KAPLAN'S INFORMATIVE ESSAY ENUMERATES the lamentations of "the ever dying people," a dirge supported by surveys and studies in the last decade and reiterated in sermons and lectures from the pulpit and platform. The bete noir has been misidentified as intermarriage. While rhetorically we admit that intermarriage is a symptom not a cause, our institutional projects commit a fallacy of misplaced concreteness: De facto, we treat the symptom as a cause. That inversion misdirects our struggle against the erosion of assimilation.

The symptoms are external; the causes are internal, within. The internal problems of interfaith marriages call for a double pronged inreach-outreach program. That approach

must precede, not only chronologically but spiritually, the situation presented as interfaith marriage.

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I write from the perspective of a congregational rabbi who has felt compelled to initiate and implement a pluralistic outreach-inreach program for unchurched Gentiles and unsynagogued Jews who are joined by affiliated synagogue mentors, all of whom attend lectures and seminars. The mentors have pledged to open their doors and lives to the seekers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. I will shortly explain my motivation and method but I would like first to confess my frustration with the conventional ways I have followed in dealing with the phenomenon of intermarriage.

An Interfaithless Couple

Jeff's mother calls me with a not untypical request. Her Jeff has met Kathy who is "a lovely lady but a Catholic." Jeff's parents are members of my congregation: They are 9-1-1 Jews, who mainly call on the synagogue in emergencies. "Would I officiate at Jeff's wedding?"

For the sake of his parents, Jeff has come to see me. All Jeff wants is that I perform the marriage. From the initial conversations with both Jeff and Kathy it is clear that all they require from me is the performance of an interfaithless union. Their religious antecedents seem much the same. They are secular, privatistic, not particularly religious.

Jeff is part of our national statistics. According to the National Population Study of 1990, 1.2 million native born Jews when asked with what religion they identified, answered "None." Jeff is de-facto a none-Jew, as Kathy is a none-Christian.

And who am I to them? In their eyes I am a facilitator, a customs-and ceremony officiant, an accessory to a wedding event, placed high on the list along with the caterer, florist, and band leader. They prefer the benefits of clergy without the complication of conversion. Conversion is an instrumental matter, a temporary inconvenience, a means necessary for them to overcome the obstacle to matrimony. Still, Kathy is compliant, willing to undergo a ceremonial conversion because it will please Jeff and his parents.

But I've had experience with other Kathys before. I ask Jeff to leave us alone in the study. In pursuing the conversation with her it is evident that there is more to Kathy than she presents. Jeff, of course, has never talked to her about the possibility of conversion to Judaism. In this he is a dedicated libertarian. He would not coerce her. Nor would I. But in the course of our conversation it is evident that Kathy is a searching spiritual person who has done a good deal of investigation of other religions from New Age religions to Zen Buddhism, but curiously not of Judaism itself. She is attracted to Jews and to Judaism and is aware of the warmth of the Jewish home, the absence of dogma, the emphasis on family, and on education. Has she thought of conversion to Judaism?

She has been convinced that Judaism is not for outsiders. She knows this because she has been told by many Jews, secular and religious, that you have to be born into Judaism, and that conversion is not the traditional way to Judaism. She echoes what I have heard from Jews and non-Jews alike and in fairly vulgar terms. She repeats the joke she was told by one of Jeff's friends. "What is the difference between a virgin and a shiksa? The answer: a shiksa remains a shiksa." The point is that a shiksa is incontrovertibly unconvertible. Being

Jewish comes with the chicken soup. You cannot become a Jew by immersing yourself in a mikvah. "Blood is thicker than water." I am embarrassed by this racism but no longer surprised.

When we speak further about Jewish values, Kathy is seriously taken with the possibilities of conversion. But when Jeff returns to the study he is strangely upset with me. He had sought only a rabbinic presence, my ecclesiastical cloth to cover the embarrassment of his parents. He had certainly not expected talk about a series of classes of conversion, lectures, a Beth Din tribunal, and a mikvah immersion which would complicate their schedule. In all of this Kathy remained compliant and silent. After all, Jeff is the born Jew.

When they left I felt disturbed. It was not only that I felt myself being used by Jeff and his parents, but that I was caught in a web of symptoms. Was I treating the symptoms as if they were causes? The wrong questions were being asked and the wrong answers were given. The conversion was an after-thought. The ceremony was wagging the faith, the rite overwhelmed the passage. Moreover, the problem was with Jeff, not with Kathy. Who was the cause and who was the symptom? It was a mis-meeting. Jeff had to be spoken to differently and Jeff's parents too. There are buried questions that had to be raised. Why is my token presence so important? What has Judaism, the covenant to do with this contact? And how have I dealt with Kathy and how did she feel? Was she a commodity, an "it" used to pacify his parents' need for Jewish respectability? Did I regard Kathy as a surrogate for the holocaustal hemorrhaging of my people, a replacement for our low fertility rates?

I sought a different opportunity to speak with them, to unlock their questions, to transmit something of the wisdom and pertinence of Jewish faith and practice. I needed to reach out to them both. If becoming Jewish is a sacred process, it cannot be confined to discussion of a celebratory event. It's not the wedding, it's the covenantal commitment to Judaism that is at stake.

I recognize that there are many Kathys out there who are reading books on religion and attending lectures in ashrams and not for the purpose of matrimony. Why is the synagogue so closed to them, why is the perception so deep and pervasive that being Jewish is a matter of birth, not becoming? I was left with many questions.

Opening the Doors of the Synagogue

About two years ago, after many such mis-encounters with Jeffs and Kathys, I decided to organize and implement a Keruv program which would be different in a number of ways. With the enthusiastic cooperation of Rabbis Edward and Nina Feinstein, we created a pluralistic outreach-inreach program with some distinctive features. I sought a faculty that would be drawn from rabbis in the community, Orthodox, Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, who would teach subject matters ranging from rites of passage to theology from their distinctive ideological points of view. The idea was predicated on the belief that God did not create denominations and that Judaism is not a seamless univocal tradition. At the end of some seventeen sessions of lectures and meetings those unchurched seekers who sought to become Jews had the chance to choose their own rabbis, their own Batei Din so that they would choose to live Jewishly in a manner compatible with their own beliefs and convictions.

Following a few announcements in the Jewish press and in the LA Times we found people of all backgrounds and faiths, lapsed Christians and lapsed Jews, flocking to our lectures. Each session was filled with between four to five hundred Jews and non-Jews.

There were whispered criticisms. Is it Jewish? Does Judaism encourage conversion? Can a non-Jew become a Jew? Who are "they" to "us" and in caring for them do we neglect guarding our own vineyard?

We had occasion during the lectures to point out to the audience of seekers what many had forgotten, had not known, or never considered. Who are we Jews and where did we come from? Had we forgotten that the first Jew by choice was the founder of Judaism, that Abraham was mandated by God to "get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house unto the land I will show you . . . and I will bless thee and make thy name great. Be thou a blessing and I will bless them that bless you and curse them that curse you and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3). Judaism's birth was through conversion. Who else was there for Abraham and Sarah to make into a people except the pagan non-Jewish population around them?

Had we forgotten what we recite in the Passover Haggadah, our reminder that "in the beginning our fathers were idolaters," heathens and slaves, and that on Passover we celebrate not the birth but the becoming of the Jewish people?

Did we forget that every single day throughout the year, three times a day we pray the thirteenth benediction of the Amidah which singles out righteous proselyte?' (gayray iztdek) as a blessing for us, and for God?

Had we forgotten that on the festival of Shavuot which celebrates the revelation of the law, the rabbis selected, not the book of Ezra but the book of Ruth to be read to the congregation. Did we remember that Ruth was a Moabite woman and that in the Torah the Moabite was prohibited to be married to a Jew and according to Deuteronomy, a Moabite was not to enter the congregation even to the tenth generation? And yet it is Ruth, the exemplary Jew by choice, who is celebrated as the great-grandmother of King David from whom the messiah is to spring.

It is important that the community be reminded that the rabbis in the Talmudic era proudly claimed Bitya, the daughter of Pharaoh, and Yithro, the father-in-law of Moses, Zipporah, the wife of Moses, and Shifra and Puah, the Egyptian midwives who refused to obey the edict of Pharaoh to murder Jewish males and saved Jewish lives, as Jews by choice. With pride the Talmud informs us that Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shemiah, and Abtalion were all descendants of proselytes.

"Them" and "Us"

But there were many voices from high sources in Jewish life who criticized our efforts and said that we should be spending more energy on "us" rather than on "them." But surely when "they" become "us" they are no longer "they." Moreover, what in fact did the Keruv Program do for "us," for the congregational mentors themselves? The numbers of synagogue mentors who came from our synagogue and attended all the lectures did so in a dedicated manner different from their attendance at other adult education courses. The mentors were enlivened by the Keruv Program because they felt possession of a significant cause. They were learning in order to teach.

Debunking the Myths

The bias against outreach searches for its own myths. "Judaism doesn't believe in conversion." Yet, the great Jewish historian Salo Baron has pointed out that two thousand years ago Jews were ten percent of the Roman Empire because they were extremely successful in converting pagans to Judaism. So successful were they that the emperors

Domitian and Hadrian made proselytism to Judaism a capital crime. It was not Judaism that prohibited the proselytization of non-Jews, but Hadrian's laws forbidding Jews to circumcise non Jews that proscribed proselytism. Not Judaism but Roman Christianity prohibited conversion.

Still, other myths discourage pro-active proselytism. Secular Jews use other arguments to oppose an open door to Jews by choice. "Not faith but culture and ethnicity present barriers to conversion." But what cultural aspects of Jewish life do they who neither read Yiddish nor Hebrew have in mind that is beyond the reach of Jews by choice? The secularists refer to culinary matters, the joys of lox and bagels, of knishes and kugel, and a smidgen of Yinglish and Hebronics. But I know their children. They exhibit no proclivity toward gefilte fish or lox and bagels. Maimonides himself ate neither cholent nor tzimis, nor understood "mame-loshen." Did that bar him and his descendants from Jewish identity and loyalty? Neither ethnic culture or identity is innate. They can and are cultivated through the programs of Keruv.

Speaking of Maimonides I turn to the magnificent answer he offered Obadiah, a convert to Judaism who asked Maimonides whether he, a Jew by choice, could recite the prayer "Our God and God of our fathers." Someone had told Obadiah that because his ancestors were not Jews he dare not recite that prayer. In Maimonides' response he writes, "By all means you should pray 'Our God and God of our fathers' for in no respect is there a difference between us and you. Do not think little of your origin. If we trace our descent from Abraham Isaac and Jacob your descent is from him by whose word the world was created."

Thinking back to my conversation with Kathy I realized that these non Jews who came to the lectures had not come to my office brought by a Jewish partner seeking my ceremonial imprimatur. Most of the non Jews during these two years were not interested in matrimony. They were spiritual seekers; that realization enabled me to address them differently. Importantly, I never thought of them as making up for our terrible Holocaust losses or as surrogates for our lagging demographic statistics. I never spoke to them about their conversion for the sake of appeasing Jeffs parents. They are not to be used as means for our ends.

Either/Or

The Kathys in our midst have to contend with Jeffs who wonder why she spends so much time and energy on him, why in the world she would choose to be Jewish? In that incredulity lies one of the primary sources of our dissolution—the vacuity of Jeff's Jewishness. In truth, Jeff is unaware of the superordinate system of values and wisdom and spiritual depth in Judaism, not only wonders what it is that possesses Kathy to become Jewish, he wonders what possesses his parents to insist on a Jewish wedding. Both Kathy and Jeff must be encouraged to become Jews by choice. The outreach program is as much for the native born as it is for the searching stranger.

Either educate "them" or "us" is a perverse disjunction. If Judaism is understood as a faith and culture that has something of supreme value to offer the world, then out-reach is very much part and parcel of Jewish teleology. Not either/ or but both/and. The reluctance to share our wisdom with the spiritual seekers is less a sign of particularistic fidelity than a trivialization of Judaism. If we have nothing to say to the other who seeks, we have nothing to say to ourselves or our own. The seekers ask us hard questions. "Tell us why Judaism is so important? Tell us how it can enrich our lives and the life of the universe?" As much as they would know "how" and "when," they ask "What for?" That root question we must answer not only for them but for ourselves and our children, for all who choose to be Jews.

The Talmud observes that the precept to understand and to love the stranger in our midst, which the rabbinic tradition takes to mean the proselyte, appears 36 times in the Torah. The stranger in our midst is our self, our very selves. Proactive conversion must be placed high on the Jewish agenda of the next century. In the words of Gary Tobin, "Proactive conversion can revitalize the Jewish community."

Conversion Today

STEPHEN C. LERNER

FOR THE PAST FORTY YEARS AT LEAST, VOICES IN WORLD Jewry have argued for a more open, unapologetic approach to conversion of the unchurched to Judaism. That such viewpoints have been heard with hardly even whispers of reproach both within and without the organized Jewish community says a good deal about the position of the Jews in the United States and indeed throughout the world. Furthermore it testifies to the self-confidence of Jewish leaders in spreading the message of Judaism on these shores.

It is estimated that some 200,000 individuals have converted to Judaism within this past half century. That's a significant number and underlies Gary Tobin's most recent call for a more pro-active policy to conversion. As a rabbi in the field who has converted almost one thousand men and women to Judaism during the past two decades, I have a perspective born of thousands of hours of experience which may cast some light on this discussion.

Tobin's advocacy of greater outreach to Gentiles follows similar calls by a number of rabbis and Jewish activists. My personal experience, however, cautions against pie in the sky expectations of hordes of would-be proselytes banging down our doors for admission. I wish it were otherwise; nevertheless, unless Judaism radically alters its value system—a proposal I do not in the least endorse—I do not believe that widespread conversion to Judaism is likely. Certainly we can and should increase the numbers, but incremental increase is all we can and should expect.

Some may wonder: What about "my house shall be a house of prayer for all peoples"? What about the striking universalism of the last paragraph of the Aleinu? Don't they stress our obligation to bring all the world to Judaism? Examined carefully, these examples of universalism really do not suggest or require that one who worships God truly must perforce become Jewish. Phrased succinctly, the message might be: accept our God, yes, but not necessarily our faith.

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