

Outreach and the Intermarried

The Unfinished Revolution

Eric Yoffie

The Jewish community of the mid-1970s looked very different from the Jewish community of today. The intermarriage rate was spiraling out of control, and although every segment of North American Jewry was affected, we had no idea how to respond. In our synagogues, converts to Judaism were at best grudgingly accepted; to be a convert in those days meant to carry a stigma, forged from the history and the prejudices of a once-beleaguered people. More often than not, the convert confronted a disapproving family, and a none-too-tolerant Jewish community. And remember: this was the reality in Reform synagogues no less than in Conservative and Orthodox ones. And we are not talking here about the ancient past, but of a condition that prevailed a mere quarter of a century ago.

Intermarried couples were hardly mentioned at all in those days. They too joined our synagogues, but exceedingly rare was the temple that both acknowledged their presence and openly confronted the issues that their membership entailed.

In the face of this reality, Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler stood up before the national board of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations on December 2, 1978, in Houston, Texas, and gave an extraordinary speech that shook North American Jewry to its very core. In that speech, he articulated a clear and unequivocal message that radically changed the Reform movement's approach to conversion and intermarriage.

He said that we would not merely accept or tolerate the convert; we would fully and enthusiastically embrace her. He said that we would not sit *shiva* for our children who intermarried. This did not mean that we endorsed intermarriage, but it did mean that we refused to reject the intermarried. In our community, we would welcome the intermarried into our synagogues and our families and our homes, draw them near to us, and include them in our celebrations and observances. We would do this in the hope that the

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OUTREACH AND THE INTERMARRIED

non-Jewish partners would ultimately convert to Judaism; and if not, that they would commit themselves to raising their children as Jews. He also said that in an era of full equality of men and women, the time had come to reconsider the principle that Jewish lineage is determined solely by the maternal line; and he referred the matter to the CCAR for its consideration.

These points were important not necessarily because they were new. Their significance lay in the fact that they were presented as a program of action and were proclaimed in a loud voice, for all to hear and understand. Alex understood that a movement that professed to have principles but refused to state them plainly in fact had no principles at all; that caution at a certain point becomes cowardice; and that while we must never surrender to the realities of the world, we must adapt to those realities in a way that is consistent with our most deeply held values. In other words, we could no longer confine our principles to policy statements hidden away in a file or a manual; what was required of us was to delineate them clearly and publicly, and then to bring our actions in line with our convictions.

So the Houston speech was followed by the establishment of the Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach (now the Commission on Outreach and Synagogue Community), a joint effort of the Union and the CCAR, which worked to make real in congregational life those convictions that Alex had so passionately articulated.

More than twenty-five years later, the same conscience that motivated Alex forces upon us the question: Have we been successful? We have not accomplished all that we should have, and below I give my analysis of what is yet to be done. But there is no question that the Outreach work of this movement must be seen as nothing less than a triumph. The easiest way to measure the extent of our impact is to ask: What would have happened if that speech in Houston had not been given?

We all know the answer. In the absence of Outreach, tens of thousands of intermarried couples who are now members of our congregations would have been forever lost to the Jewish people. In the absence of Outreach, innumerable Jews who marry non-Jews would be denied any but the slimmest hope of a Jewish future. In the absence of Outreach, resentment and the sting of rejection would, much too often, be the lot of those who now find a secure place in our community. In the absence of Outreach, there would be far fewer Jews-by-choice, and they would still be battling the ambivalent and

even hostile attitudes to which they have so long been subjected. In the absence of Outreach, ours would be a weaker and more divided movement, denied the surge of energy, religious renewal, and adult learning that is a direct outgrowth of our Outreach efforts.

Of course, if Outreach had not been initiated in 1978, it would have come into being on its own. Individual rabbis and lay leaders would have insisted that doors be opened, attitudes changed, and prejudices rejected; indeed, some were already doing so in 1978. But the fact that Alex Schindler's speech gave rise to an organized, movement-wide campaign, supported by both the Union and Conference, meant that what would have happened piecemeal over four score years happened instead in a mere two decades; it led to one of the most remarkable and thoroughgoing revolutions in the history of Reform Judaism and, indeed, in the history of the Jewish people.

Outreach, it should be noted, was not simply a practical response to a practical problem. It was that, to be sure, but it was also built on a carefully constructed theological foundation, beginning with the premise that all of Judaism is a rejection of primitive tribalism. Yes, there is a biological dimension to Judaism, but it is only one dimension of many; and yes, Judaism speaks the language of fate, but it speaks as well the language of choice. A tribalistic view of Judaism would be one that exalts the prestige of blood and that roots Judaism solely in race; such a view is utterly contrary to our tradition's most basic teachings.

But it would certainly be wrong to conclude that Outreach rests on some vague, love-the-stranger universalism. Judaism is not a universalistic religion; the opening chapters of Genesis specifically reject universal solutions to the human situation. The Tower of Babel, the eternal symbol of a world of "one people with one language," is portrayed as an act of hubris, destined to remain unfinished, no matter how much violence may be committed in its name.

Instead, the starting point for Jewish Outreach, and all Jewish theology, is our unique destiny as a religious people, tied to God in a covenant that we trace back to Abraham and Sarah; for 3500 years, we have been taught to follow Abraham's example, and to "keep the way of the Eternal, doing what is right and just." Developing the nuances of meaning and obligation that flow from this covenant is the ongoing task of the Jews; it guides us in a world that is redeemable but not yet redeemed. We have paid a heavy price for our reli-

OUTREACH AND THE INTERMARRIED

gious destiny, but we have also been eternally blessed by our conviction that this is the reason for our survival; we know that God has established this covenant with us and has sustained us that we may offer a taste of goodness and compassion to a despairing humanity.

In short, Outreach begins not with an act of inclusion *per se*, but rather with an act of self-definition. We begin with an affirmation of our particularism, of our apartness, of our unique destiny. This may seem anomalous, but of course it is not; the first step of Outreach, and the single most important step, is to have a clear sense of who we are, and of the boundary that exists between us as Reform Jews and the society around us.

This theological starting point has proven itself to have great practical significance. If we have learned anything at all after twenty-five years, it is this: you do not draw people in by erasing boundaries and eliminating distinctions. If there are no clearly defined distinctions between our Jewish values and the values of the world around us, then what reason would serious people—Jews or non-Jews—have to cast their fate with ours? We have learned too that intermarried couples are not attracted to us by minimalism or watered-down Judaism. They are attracted by compelling ethical teachings, by ritual experiences rich in meaning, by the mystery of Shabbat, and by the possibility of religious commandment. We have learned as well that the Jews most successful at the work of Outreach are those who know who they are, who communicate the power and beauty of their heritage, and who model proud and assertive religious behavior. Jews who are confused about who they are and what their movement stands for are utterly incapable of opening for others the door to our Jewish world.

Well, then, is our work done? Hardly. For all of our very considerable achievements, the Outreach revolution is an unfinished revolution. In the broader Jewish community, outreach principles have yet to gain broad acceptance, and in places where law or custom has given control of Jewish life to the Orthodox rabbinate, what we know as Outreach is rejected out of hand. The treatment of non-Jews and potential converts by the Orthodox establishment in Israel and parts of Eastern Europe is shameful and a crisis in the making for the Jewish people. While not the topic of this essay, it will need to be addressed by our movement and by others in the very near future if catastrophe is to be avoided.

But even in North America and in our own synagogues, our task is far from complete. In my view, there are three major challenges that we have yet to confront, each related to the place of the intermarried couple in the Reform congregation.

It should be said that we have reason to be proud of our work with the intermarried. We have been aggressive in our efforts to make them feel at home in our congregations and to envelop them in a network of Jewish learning and support. I have suggested that when an intermarried couple joins a Reform synagogue, we should relate to the non-Jewish partner as one who has the status of *ger toshav*. In the Bible, the *ger toshav* is the stranger who lives among Jews; he has not adopted the Jewish faith, but he has acquired Jewish customs, values, and friends. He adjusts to his Jewish surroundings, and in some measure even assimilates into them; portrayed in the most positive manner imaginable by the biblical text, he is granted exceptional privileges and protection by biblical law. In fact, the *ger toshav* is someone so special, so deserving of compassion and love, that at a later time the term *ger* comes to mean a convert to Judaism. This, however, was not its original meaning; the biblical *ger toshav* is a stranger, but at the same time as close as one could come to being an Israelite without a formal change of status.

Not every non-Jewish spouse fits this category, of course, but surely the assumption of our movement should be that this is the situation that either does exist or potentially might exist. Therefore, we do not assume hostility or resentment or indifference on the part of the non-Jewish partner; on the contrary, we assume that the non-Jew who has married a Jew and then joined a synagogue is positively inclined toward identification with our people and tradition. More often than not this is the case; and by conveying our unequivocal acceptance, more often than not the non-Jewish spouse comes to see him/herself as a *ger toshav*, sharing the values of Judaism and participating in the rituals and the customs of our community.

But the first challenge that arises is: When the non-Jewish spouse undergoes this transition, do we recognize it appropriately? True, we welcome all such spouses, including those who do not identify as Jewish in any way. But there are distinctions to be made here, and they are significant. Those who at first are uninterested in Jewish life, or uncertain and uncomfortable with it, often, in the course of time, change their views, gradually throwing in their lot with the lot of the Jewish people. When a spouse involves him/herself in the activities of the synagogue; offers active support to the Jewish

involvements of husband or wife or partner; learns something about the rituals and customs of Jewish life; attends Jewish worship from time to time; and, most important of all, commits to raising children as Jewish, he or she has become a *ger toshav*, deserving not only of welcome but of our profound thanks.

These spouses, it needs to be plainly said, are heroes—yes, heroes—of Jewish life. While maintaining some measure of attachment to their own traditions, and sometimes remaining practicing Christians, they nonetheless support our congregations and encourage their children in their studies and Jewish commitments. They shlep the children to Hebrew school, do what is needed to maintain a Jewish home, and take on the burdens and the planning of their *b'nei mitzvah*. Not infrequently, they assume responsibilities that, by any reasonable calculation, rightfully belong to the Jewish spouse. And very often they do all this without recognition or appreciation, from either their Jewish family or their synagogue.

Our obligation, therefore, is to make certain that this appreciation is extended, particularly in our congregations. One way to do this is to reconsider the terminology that we use with reference to the intermarried. Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin has recently suggested that the term “intermarried family” does not really apply to a family that is raising Jewish children; in this instance, we should speak of “Jewish families with non-Jewish members.” With this language, we make clear that they are behaving exactly like other Jewish households and indeed are doing so under more difficult circumstances; we are also offering our praise for those who are too often forgotten and taken for granted, and sometimes, even in the Reform world, are treated with grudging acceptance rather than a full embrace.

Another way to express our thanks is with a formal ceremony of recognition. Some of our synagogues do this in a low-key way, perhaps at an annual breakfast meeting. Others choose a dramatic point in the liturgical cycle. Rabbi Janet Marder asked non-Jewish spouses to come to the *bimah* on Yom Kippur morning, expressed the pride of the synagogue in their accomplishments, and then had the congregation stand as she blessed them with *birkat kohanim*. Not everyone will be comfortable with the Yom Kippur setting, but surely we can agree on the need to institutionalize in some appropriate way recognition for these remarkable individuals and their families.

The next challenge that we face is the decline in the number of non-Jewish spouses who are converting to Judaism. While I have seen no definitive statistics on this question, there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that interest in conversion has waned in our congregations.

In the early years of Outreach, Alex Schindler often returned to this topic, and his direction was clear. Alex told us: "We need to ask. We must not forget to ask." And for a while, our movement actively encouraged conversion. Many of our congregations promoted conversion in a variety of ways, and in particular adopted the practice of holding public conversion ceremonies during regular worship services at which the new convert would deliver a *d'var Torah*. But such ceremonies are far rarer now than they once were.

There are those who claim that the reason for the decline is that we have been so successful in making non-Jews feel comfortable in our congregations that we have sent the message that we neither want nor expect conversion. Indeed, some have argued that an aggressive campaign to promote conversion is undesirable and contradicts our desire, stated above, to recognize the non-Jewish spouse who is raising Jewish children. After all, if they can be warmly embraced and fully accepted without conversion, then why should they bother to convert? And why should we ask them to?

The answer to this question is that the synagogue is not a neutral institution; it is unequivocally value-laden. It admits, without apology, its commitment to building a vibrant religious life for the Jewish people. It wants families to function as Jewish families, and while intermarried families can surely do this, it recognizes the advantages of an intermarried family becoming a fully Jewish family, with two adult Jewish partners. To be sure, Judaism does not denigrate those who find religious truth elsewhere; the existence of our covenant does not deny the existence of other covenants or other truths. Still, our synagogues emphasize the beauty and grandeur of the ancient and awe-inspiring faith known as Judaism, and we joyfully extend membership in our covenantal community to all who are prepared to accept the responsibilities that it entails.

The most convincing advocates of conversion are those who were active in the synagogue as non-Jews and raised Jewish children before deciding to convert. Without diminishing in any way the integrity of their earlier experience, they often share with us the fulfillment that comes from embracing for themselves what they have long taught to others. And by the way: most non-Jews who are

part of synagogue life expect that we will ask them to convert; they come from a background where asking for this kind of commitment is natural and normal, and they are more than a little perplexed when we fail to do so.

Special sensitivities are certainly required. We can ask, but we should not pressure. We can encourage, but we should not insist. If someone expresses unwillingness, we must respect that; and if someone says "I'm not ready," we must listen. If we pursue conversion with a heavy hand, the result could be to generate anger and resentment. And yes, there will be those for whom conversion will never be an option.

But none of this is a reason for inaction. The fact is that we usually do not ask. My conversations with both rabbis and lay leaders lead me to believe that in most instances we do not encourage conversion by non-Jewish spouses in our synagogues. Perhaps this bespeaks a natural reluctance to do what we fear will give rise to an awkward or uncomfortable situation. But whatever the reason, alongside our lengthy list of Outreach successes, this must be counted at least a partial failure. The time has come to reverse course by returning to public conversions and doing the other things that invite and support conversion in the synagogue. These might include featuring monthly columns in the temple newsletter about choosing Judaism as an adult; highlighting messages of congratulations to new converts, alongside those for *b'nei mitzvah*; and regularly asking panels of converts to share their stories. There are other possibilities, as well, and it is clear that this is one area of our Outreach work that cries out for new initiatives and new ways of thinking.

The third challenge that we encounter is how to deal with the challenge of intermarried parents who enroll their children in a Reform religious school while simultaneously enrolling them in a Christian Sunday school. At the URJ Biennial held in Atlanta in 1995, a resolution was adopted that encouraged Reform congregations to establish a policy of enrolling in their schools only those children who are not receiving formal religious education in any other religion. Many congregations, however, have chosen not to comply. Reports indicate that some synagogues have, in effect, adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" approach; even when it is clear to the religious school principal, the religious school teacher, and the rabbi that the child is regularly attending a church school, nothing is said to the parents and no effort is made to discourage further attendance in Hebrew school.

A variety of factors explain why the Atlanta resolution has not been consistently implemented. Intermarried parents may wish to educate their children in two religions with the idea that the children will decide at a later time what is right for them; the parents may believe that this is the right course or they may simply want to avoid the difficulties and family complications involved in making a firm decision. The Jewish parent and grandparents may feel that even if the child is not to be raised exclusively Jewish, some exposure to Jewish tradition, no matter how partial, is better than none at all. And synagogue officials are reluctant to take steps that may alienate interfaith families and even cause them to leave the congregation. In a movement that rightly sees itself as inclusive, synagogue leaders hesitate to support policies that are seen as intended to exclude and that appear to erect fences rather than build bridges.

Nonetheless, the original reasons for adopting the resolution remain compelling. Concern for the welfare of the child and the integrity of the religious school prompted the Outreach Commission to propose the resolution in the first place. It has long been the policy of the Commission to encourage interfaith couples to choose a single religious identification for their children. To do otherwise is to place an impossible burden on the children that may imperil their emotional and spiritual development; both psychological experts and common sense suggest that for young children, especially, receiving two religious educations causes confusion and distress and places the child in the position of choosing between the religion of one parent or the other. Furthermore, our religious schools, in partnership with parents, are dedicated to giving the gift of Jewish knowledge and identity to those who attend—in other words, to making committed adult Jews out of Jewish children. When parents attempt to raise their children as “both,” they put themselves at cross purposes with the mission of the school and create a situation that even experienced religious school teachers may be unable to handle. Despite the good intentions of all concerned, dual education may very well result in a child ascending the *bimah* for her bat mitzvah wearing a cross or preparing for bar mitzvah while being confirmed in the Catholic Church.

If we are to induce congregations to reexamine the original resolution and their own policies, perhaps the best starting place is a reminder that the resolution encouraged synagogues to allow families to have a period of exploration and learning while they are determining which faith tradition will be chosen. One approach

OUTREACH AND THE INTERMARRIED

might be to add a parent track for children in kindergarten and grades one and two so that undecided couples might study Jewish tradition and be counseled by the rabbi. This would be permitted with the clear understanding that before the child entered the third grade and began the process of bar/bat mitzvah preparation, a firm and binding commitment to raise the child as a Jew would be made.

Our congregations, of course, are autonomous religious bodies, and they will make their own decisions in this area, as they do in all areas. We all recognize as well that the divorce of an intermarried couple with children creates unique circumstances that require special sensitivity. Nonetheless, there is every reason to confront these issues, and we must offer guidance as a movement to those congregations that are prepared to do so. Turning our heads and pretending that our schools and our children do not face such problems is not the Reform way. I am optimistic that we will find a way to handle them appropriately. Yes, it is difficult to formalize boundaries; it breaks our hearts to have to say “no.” But when it became necessary to create boundaries in the areas of governance and liturgy we did so, and when it is needed in the educational realm we will do so again. This is because we remember the lesson of King Solomon, who—faced with two mothers claiming the same child—knew that the parent who refused to cut the baby in half was the one who loved him more.

These challenges—extending recognition and thanks to non-Jewish spouses committed to creating Jewish families, actively encouraging non-Jews in our congregations to convert to Judaism, and assuring that our religious school children are being educated in only one religious tradition—constitute an ambitious agenda for the years ahead. But why should we be deterred? In a scant quarter of a century, our Reform movement took the radical idea of Outreach and made it a central pillar of North American Jewish life. In the process, we reached out to the affiliated and the unaffiliated, to the intermarried and the Jew-by-choice. In so doing, we deepened our own love of God and strengthened our destiny as a holy people. Our Outreach work has just begun.