

# OUTREACH, INTERMARRIAGE, AND JEWISH CONTINUITY

## Toward a New Synagogue-Federation Partnership

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*To develop a community plan that strategically addresses outreach, it is imperative that synagogues and federation build a cooperative partnership. Such an alliance would develop a communal strategy that would identify every possible doorway into the Jewish community for the unaffiliated, create new programs to meet the needs of the unaffiliated, and coordinate all those programs into an organic network.*

I have a fantasy about the Council of Jewish Federations' (CJF) 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS). In my fantasy, CJF makes the historic decision to publish the entire survey in the traditional format of the Talmud. The text of the survey, with its tables, graphs, and data, would be printed in the center of the page. Around the margins, in a different typeface, commentaries and analyses of our best scholars would be printed. I imagine these scholars poring over the text, as if it were scripture, trying to wring every last drop of insight and implication from its data. Of course, in fine talmudic tradition they would vehemently disagree and debate each other across the pages of the text, just as did Rashi and the Tosephists, medieval rabbinic commentators.

I have a second fantasy, not nearly as positive as the first. In this fantasy the National Jewish Population Survey is "Dead Sea Scrolled," with various sections parceled out to individual scholars who would study them independently for the next decade or so. Should this fantasy become reality, I hope that someone will give a copy of the entire text to the Huntington Library

in Pasadena so that the general public can sneak looks at it.

I do not mean to suggest a cavalier attitude toward the NJPS. It is an extremely important document, if for no other reason than it provides hard data to confirm most everything about Jewish life—and in particular about intermarriage and Jewish affiliation—that which Jewish communal professionals have presumed for years, through intuition and experience. I do not need statistical tables to tell me that more people are intermarrying; intermarriage is a fact in most every family that I know.

### IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT WE ACT

I want, and the community needs, to have the NJPS *studied*, with the Rashi and the Tosephot commentaries. The danger is, however, that it will be studied *only*, and not acted upon. The last thing our Jewish community needs are more studies, assiduously developed and prepared by committees, publicized, and then set on the shelf. What we desperately need are effective techniques, strategies, and programs that address the critical issues of Jewish identity and affiliations and that meet the needs of the complex Jewish life portrayed in the NJPS.

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It is time for us, as Jewish professionals and together with our lay leaders, to take seriously a credo suggested by Tom Peters in his best-selling book, *In Search of Excellence*: "Failure is better than committee process." I recognize that this is a form of federation heresy. Nevertheless, we have studied, discussed, and analyzed this data carefully. Now it is imperative that we take the next step, that we *act*. If we create programs and fail, so be it. At least we will learn important lessons from the failures. And be assured, there will be no successes, there will be no decrease in the rate of intermarriage, there will be no dent in the percentage of unaffiliated unless we act now.

The focus of perhaps the greatest attention in the 1990 survey is the increasing rate of intermarriage. The debate over real percentages, types of samples, and other research methodologies can best be left to demographers. That intermarriage is more prevalent than ever—the price of the "brutal bargain" as it has been called and of an abundance of freedom never before experienced by any Jewish community in history—is simply a matter of fact.

### CONNECTING JEWS TO JEWISH LIFE

For me, intermarriage and Jewish continuity raise two questions: Can the community reframe the reality of intermarriage into an opportunity for connecting Jews to Jewish life, and can the community marshal its resources to create and provide meaningful messages about Jewish life and inviting experiences rich in Jewish values, meaning, and spirituality that will magnetically attract Jews to a deepened connection with Jewish community and Jewish life? These two questions are integrally related. To answer them, however, will require a community plan that strategically addresses outreach, be it to the pre-intermarried, the already intermarried, as well as the JNRs (Jews, No Religion), the marginally affiliated, or those whom we know as or who call themselves "just Jewish."

### A NEW COOPERATIVE PARTNERSHIP

The community plan model that I suggest requires the basic recognition that there is not one community institution, agency, or organization strong enough and well positioned enough to itself have a large impact on either the intermarried or the marginally affiliated. Minimally, a new cooperative partnership needs to be built between federation and synagogues so that together they might address the issue. Barry Shrage has already outlined the basic need for this collaboration in his article in this issue. There he argues that synagogues are the "primary gateways" through which the marginally affiliated might enter Jewish life. He suggests that federations could help synagogues by providing resources needed for additional staff who would have more personalized contact with potential congregants, as well as funds for innovative programs and family education.

Although it is true that synagogues do serve as a central gateway to Jewish life, I do not believe they will be able to bear the brunt of an affiliation plan by themselves. In fact, neither federations nor synagogues are going to make more than a dent in this problem alone. Federation's expertise lies in communal planning and fund raising; it has not the ritual, emotional, or spiritual content to create long-lasting Jewish affiliation. On the other hand, synagogues, which can provide the ritual, emotional, and spiritual content of identity, do not have the resources (except in unique circumstances)—either financial or personnel—to provide what is needed. In this regard, Shrage is absolutely correct: Admitting synagogues to the allocations process is vital. Together, a synagogue-federation coalition might have the resources and the central community power to make a difference.

The first step in creating such an alliance would be to convene the community synagogue leadership—lay and rabbinic—with federation leaders so that together they might become educated about the realities

of Jewish life as revealed in the NJPS. It must be made clear and repeated over and over that the issues of outreach, intermarriage, and affiliation are not merely a challenge for federation alone; they are not challenges for liberal Jews or secular Jews alone; it is not a matter of *this* synagogue or *that* denomination taking on these issues by themselves. The issue of intermarriage and its implications for Jewish life in the future is one that affects the entire Jewish people. It is a community issue that requires a community response.

An invitation to synagogues to join forces in working together and with federation on a communal challenge will be a double-edged sword. For the synagogues, it will require transcending their congregational and denominational agendas and working for the common good of *K'lal Yisrael*. For federation, it will require honestly inviting synagogue leadership into the communal planning process, including rabbis as full partners, recognizing synagogues as full and equal community agencies, and most importantly, making significant resources available to synagogues for their part in the community plan. It will also mean community leadership together giving serious thought to how synagogues might become more effective institutions—more than a gathering place for the “davening minority,” those in need of a life-cycle celebration, and those wanting a religious school education for their children. It will require synagogues accepting a community mandate to serve the Jewish community as a whole and to not draw the boundary line at membership. Most rabbis already understand this transforming need. What is needed is a hand extended in partnership from federation.

#### SYNAGOGUES MUST BE HEARD

It may be argued that many synagogues, particularly the more traditional Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, at worst will be antagonistic to an outreach effort to the intermarried and at best will be

highly uncomfortable with it. Yet, they must be invited into the process anyway. Their rabbis' and leaders' opinions must be heard, recognized, and accepted as legitimate expressions of an authentic ideology. All opinions expressed around the planning table should be treated as such. It may be suggested to the more traditional elements of the community that although they, in particular, may have difficulties endorsing the notion of outreach to the intermarried, the Jewish community as a whole is not about to turn its back on any Jew who might potentially and reasonably be attracted to Jewish life. It may be pointed out that it was community and interdenominational cooperation that helped make the State of Israel a reality and that laid the foundation for the redemption of Soviet and Ethiopian Jewry. It may be said that federation, representing the entire Jewish community, can and should do things that synagogues cannot. Traditionalists might be invited to participate in an aspect of the plan that is suitable for them and that does not require an abandonment of their ideological principles. Perhaps Orthodox rabbis might join forces to work toward defining new halachic norms for the conversion of children born to non-Jewish mothers. Rabbi Simcha Cohen of Los Angeles, an Orthodox rabbi, has, in fact, taken courageous steps in this direction. Similarly, some synagogues might form a coalition, as part of a community plan, to create an ongoing series of outreach events to enable Jewish singles to meet each other. This, too, should be a part of a community approach to intermarriage and affiliation.

#### WHAT INTERFAITH COUPLES SEEK

Although including the synagogues in a communal planning strategy is a critical step, the partnership assigned to address issues of intermarriage and Jewish continuity must be much broader. Synagogues are not the only purveyors of Jewish meaning and identity in the community. Synagogue

professionals and lay leaders tend to be bound by their denominational ideologies. The unaffiliated, and particularly interfaith couples, are not seeking specific denominational ideologies. They are in need of openness, warmth, and space to explore. Specific ideologies tend to limit, if not hinder, that exploration.

All agencies that might provide an opportunity for people to draw closer to Jewish life need to be included. With outreach, the more players at the table, the better. It was said of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, that he could look into the soul of an individual and know exactly what act of *tikkun*—of repair—was necessary for that soul's bliss and fulfillment. No one today is the Baal Shem Tov. We cannot look at individuals and say to them "you need Reform" or "you need Conservative" or "you should go to the JCC." We cannot afford the luxury of saying, "This is the only available Jewish doorway to the Jewish community." What we as a community need are as many open doors, as many gateways to Jewish life as possible. We need the federation to convene all the agencies in the community that might in any way be responsive to intermarried couples at a point when they can be attracted to connect to Jewish life or that are responsive to any unaffiliated Jew, for that matter. Jewish Community Centers, Hillels, Jewish family service agencies, Jewish preschools, Bureaus of Jewish Education and religious schools, Jewish hospitals, counseling services, adult Jewish education programs, and Jewish institutions of higher learning—all these and more need to be at the planning table with the synagogues.

I envision all these players, sitting with top federation leadership, convened by federation, developing a community strategy that

- identifies every possible moment of entry and doorway into the Jewish community for the intermarried
- identifies as many of the potential needs

of the target group as possible

- develops new programs for the agencies involved to meet those needs and to be responsive to the entry point
- coordinates all these programs into an organic network, in which information flows back and forth and people are moved and tracked through the system

It is precisely this model of community planning that has been adopted and funded in Los Angeles, and in many other communities throughout the country, for the acculturation of Soviet emigres. If we are willing and able to do this for Russian Jews, what prevents us from doing it for our American-born next-door neighbors? Or for our cousins?

In addition to synagogues and community service agencies, room must be made at the planning table for new, innovative, "alternative" programs as well. In Los Angeles, the Jewish Feminist Center and the independent School of Jewish Meditation have been hugely successful in attracting and connecting hundreds of unaffiliated Jews and Jewish life. These, and other alternative programs that we have not yet even begun to generate, are capable of conveying meaningful possibilities for enrichment through Jewish connectedness. Enough time and energy must be devoted in the planning process to create, shape, and fund these alternative doorways to Jewish life.

If we are serious about reaching out to interfaith couples, or to individuals before they become involved in interfaith relationships, we must create positive, powerful expressions of Jewish life that provide meaningful Jewish experiences and messages toward which people will gravitate. The era of scare tactics, guilt, and exhortation is over. Insisting that parents "just say no" is simplistic and will not alone convince our youth. If we want people to affiliate, to become more Jewish, we must provide the sense that Jewish life is beautiful, enriching, intellectually vibrant, and spiritually fulfilling.

### CAN FEDERATIONS MEET THE CHALLENGE?

If federations are serious about taking on the challenges presented by demographic studies—including outreach to the intermarried and the issues of Jewish continuity—we will need to create appropriate structures in federation to work on this challenge. A CJF survey of large and intermediate communities found that only two communities had intermarriage and outreach on the planning agenda. Perhaps a few others have continuity on the agenda. The likelihood is that there are few federations, if any, with a department dedicated to these issues. The problem with pursuing the course of action suggested in this article—that we go into the community and find out from the intermarried themselves what it is they need from the Jewish community—is that in all likelihood they will tell us! If we have not planned in advance and developed the systems necessary to be responsive to the expressed needs, if we do not have departments and staff dedicated to this work, we will have lost an opportunity that may be difficult to regain.

We have been talking about affiliation and studying it for 20 years. We have watched the rate of intermarriage steadily increase over the years. We have listened to rabbinic voices pleading with us to take issues of Jewish affiliation and continuity seriously and to put them on the federation agenda. The NJPS provides one more in-

centive, one more call to action. If we do not begin to act now, it will not only be a *shanda*, it will be irresponsible.

### SPIRITUAL REDEMPTION

As a scholar with CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, I traveled around the country and taught groups of federation leaders about the rabbinic concept of *Pidyon Shevuyim*—the redemption of captives. The religious duty to redeem captive Jews who may be in physical danger resonated in such a profound way that these leaders began immediate Operation Exodus campaigns, frequently making gifts themselves three or four times.

There is a corollary concept known as *Tinok She'Nishbah*—interpreted by many to include a child who is spiritually a captive, who cannot learn to live as a Jew. This spiritual captivity is as dangerous, as heinous as physical captivity. Now that we have learned the lesson of physical captivity and have responded magnificently as a national community, is it not time that we turn our attention to the possibility of opening Jewish doors to all who are willing to enter? Living in the unique circumstances of freedom in the United States does not protect us or our children from becoming a *Tinok She'Nishbah*. Spiritual redemption, creating possibilities for stronger Jewish connectedness, is also a mitzvah. All it requires from us is a commitment, and a new communal partnership.