

WILL OUR GRANDCHILDREN BE JEWISH?

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In a voluntary society, people will only choose to be Jewish if they are convinced that Judaism is a vital and meaningful context in which to live their lives and that the Jewish community is their home. Synagogues and federations must work closely together to provide intensive Jewish education, create meaningful Jewish experiences and connections for college-aged youth, and encourage the integration of converts into Jewish life.

Here is my confession. I did not find the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) depressing. I do not mean to suggest that serious issues do not confront us; on the contrary, that is exactly what makes the study so exciting. Forgive the analogy, but the successful dieter gets on the scale, looks down, gulps, and then acknowledges the need to diet. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to the growth and development of the Jewish people have now gotten on the scale, look down, and gulped. We have reached that wonderful moment when we have begun to face ourselves honestly, with full awareness of what some of the new realities are and what some of the challenges will be. The windows and doors are open, and all things are possible.

For 50 years or longer, we have seen ourselves as two communities—religious and secular. And perhaps we would like to continue such a division, each community secure in its absolute priority in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people. Yet, in the face of the glaring realities—diminishing resources, confused identities, decreasing populations—it is apparent that those divisions serve no one, if they ever did. Each of these segments of the community is shifting; in some ways, much of the religious world is becoming more communally oriented, embracing a wider

definition of Judaism and Jewish life, just as the organizational world is increasingly more interested in and attracted to the institution of the synagogue and to Jewish learning.

There *are* still two communities, but they are no longer divided along organization/religious lines as much as lines of connection and disconnection. There is a committed community and a community that is not yet committed. If we are to serve these two communities—if we are to provide the *way* for the committed to live fuller, more meaningful Jewish lives, as well as a *vision* for the not yet committed to want to—we will have to reconnect the religious and organizational worlds in ways that until now we never imagined. Only then can we leverage the energy and knowledge of each segment of the community.

The most serious mistake we can make now, as we analyze the NJPS and respond to it, is to focus all our attention on the intermarriage statistic and to design programs in response to it. Yes, the figure is alarming. No, it is not the problem. As important as outreach programs to the intermarried will continue to be, unless and until we manage to convince Jews that Judaism is a vital and meaningful context in which to live their lives and that the Jewish community is their home, all the outreach in the world will be ineffective.

Come into my study and listen to the intermarrying couple speak with me, usually under duress, at the prodding of the Jewish parent. The Jewish partner sits dis-

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interested at best and argumentative at worst. He recounts abuse stories of his Hebrew school, the irrelevancy of his Bar Mitzvah, the politics of the State of Israel, and the obsession in the community with fund raising, ending the diatribe with the statement that none of this is too important to him. His non-Jewish spouse listens uncomfortably and says, somewhat wistfully, "But I love your parents' seder. All the singing and discussion, and history and ethics." Frankly, she is not the problem. He is. And he does not look very different when he is marrying another Jew.

The strong likelihood is that, since the time we handed him a kiddush cup at his Bar Mitzvah, until the moment he has grudgingly come back to my office, he has had almost no meaningful Jewish contact. We packed his Jewish knapsack with that which a 13-year-old can comprehend, along with the requisite gifts; he added a little resentment about missed softball games and some embarrassment over an adolescent voice squeaking in front of hundreds of people, and we sent him away, informing him that he was now a responsible Jew.

Perhaps he showed up at a confirmation class; more likely, not. His parents likely left the synagogue after the Bar Mitzvah anyway. At college he may have wandered into Hillel on Yom Kippur and wandered right out again. Now 10 years later, he has lived in the city, worked hard, and maybe someone has solicited him. He can't figure out why. By what right do we have to expect that he will regard Judaism and the Jewish community as important? For 18 years—a lifetime—nothing has reached him, touched his Jewish existence. There are the possible environmental crises, of course: death of a parent, an anti-Semitic attack on campus, or a war in Israel. Yet, failing that, the last intense Jewish experience he had was when the band leader called him up for the traditional candle-lighting ceremony.

I became a congregational rabbi out of a deep belief that synagogues hold the potential for perpetuating Jewish life by

nurturing Jews where they live, by creating and instilling a sense of rootedness in the traditions of our people and a sense of belonging to that people. Yet, for synagogues to realize this potential we will have to rethink the way we educate leaders to serve these synagogues, redirect our energies toward young adults we never see, and find ways to integrate them, the synagogue, and the organizational world into the fabric of Jewish life.

Clearly, synagogue communities and those who lead them need to spend less time in their buildings and more time in the homes of Jews. We need scores of rabbis and Jewish family educators working with individual families, helping them deepen their connection to Jewish ritual, life cycles, and ethics. In my own synagogue, we have begun a Shabbat Seder program, where we actually encourage people to stay home on Shabbat, suggesting that, rather than coming to services, they invite a few friends to their house, who bring dinner with them. We train these families, using a Shabbat haggadah, complete with four questions and blessings over the wine and challah and some thematic material that draws on Jewish tradition to address contemporary issues.

Such intensive projects cannot depend only on rabbis. Ideally, family educators should work directly with families. We need a cadre of Jewish educators trained to work with families *in their homes*. We need to get our supplementary school teachers off the Tuesday and Thursday cycle and into the real life cycle of the tradition.

Rabbis need to leave their buildings to work not only with families in their homes but also with Jewish communal professionals, who are working daily in the community with sometimes scant Jewish background and knowledge. Communal workers can receive the context from which the meaning in their work derives and so feel that much more secure in the work that they do and their legitimacy for doing it. Rabbis can leave the parochial world of their synagogues and go into the community, learn-

ing more about the issues that confront Jewish professionals in their daily efforts to serve the community.

Both the synagogue and the organizational world need to broaden and deepen their commitments beyond their respective buildings and memberships. The most obvious place to begin is on the college campus. Each month, six or seven volunteers come to my synagogue to prepare packages of Jewish life in a box for members' children who are in college or are single and in their twenties. Seventy boxes are prepared each month, and ours is a small synagogue. This kind of program needs to be done on a broad scale, for all Jewish students on campus, regardless of affiliation. These boxes contain so much more than the Hanukkah candles of the variety we gave to Hebrew school students. Candles yes, but also articles and educational materials that respect their adult minds, challenge their assumptions, address their concerns. These young adults need to feel connected to the Jewish community—to their synagogue or to some synagogue or community.

Is it not ironic that most synagogues require at least two rabbis to serve congregations larger than 500 families, yet there are many college and university campuses across the country with thousands of Jewish students—thousands—and only one Hillel rabbi or perhaps two. These Jewish students need community no less and perhaps more than synagogue members; they need Jewish role models, Jewish support groups, intellectually challenging Jewish discussions. They need *havurot*; they need dinner on Shabbat. Although the organizational world has tried valiantly to serve this population, it has done so with underpaid and undertrained staff in grossly insufficient numbers.

The first place to look for cooperation between the religious and organizational worlds is in the rabbinical seminaries, where Jewish leaders are being trained. Trained for what? They must be trained to serve the Jewish community as it is emerging,

not as it used to be or as we might wish it was or even as a few of us still see it in a few pockets here and there. My own seminary, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, has designed a program to prepare students who wish to specialize in campus work. These rabbis, in addition to courses in Bible and Talmud and history, learn about comparative religions, counseling psychology, and substance abuse. Such specialized training requires funding from a community that has determined that vulnerable populations need serious attention. These rabbis will need to be compensated and supported appropriately, working alongside others trained in Jewish communal work to serve the college population.

Religious denominations cannot bear the sole responsibility for the education of rabbis. That responsibility should be assumed by all who recognize the value of Jewish leadership, in all its manifestations. Seminaries must open their doors and windows to the communities they seek to serve. It is possible to graduate from a rabbinical school today with only the vaguest notion of the composition of the community outside the synagogue. Ask a random sample of my colleagues whether they know what the acronyms stand for of the organizations that carry on the serious day-to-day work of the community. Do not be surprised if they stare at you blankly. Rabbis—bearers of the religious tradition of our people, who are educated in the sacred texts that still offer guidance and wisdom and certainly perspective, and who are, by dint of their training, taught to feel Jewish pain and the pain of the individual—now need to be trained to serve Jews where they are. Although Jews certainly are in synagogues, they are also on campuses, in hospices, in geriatric facilities, and in the agency world. To serve these populations adequately, rabbis need to be trained in an entirely different way, which will require a tremendous cooperative effort between the religious and communal worlds.

I want to suggest two other places of in-

tersection between the synagogue world and the organizational world, both of which have a direct bearing on the NJPS findings. If Andy Warhol is right and each of us gets 15 minutes of fame, then my 15 minutes usually comes right before a wedding ceremony I am about to perform. As a Reconstructionist rabbi, I spend hours with couples helping them design their ceremonies, and although I do not mean to denigrate that work, it seems to me that all of us—religious and communal leaders alike—miss a terrific opportunity to reconnect these couples to the community. The Catholics take full advantage of this opportunity, and we should emulate their approach. Before Catholics marry, they must participate in pre-cana, a retreat program to educate them about Catholic dogma and the Catholic church. I, of course, am told about this program by some of the intermarrying young Jews who actually go to these retreats, which are required by all priests. Wouldn't it be terrific if, throughout the country, day-long programs were offered for couples who are getting married? It seems to me that, if the caterer can require a deposit before serving dinner, then we can require this workshop before we officiate. It would give couples a chance to revisit their roots, free from the conflicts of Little League and the pressure of their parents. It would give them an opportunity to rethink Jewish questions, with an adult intellect and attention span. It would give both the religious and organizational world an opportunity to listen to these young people's issues and to address their concerns and have them address ours as well. There could be Tay-Sachs blood testing, a mini-course in how to set up a Jewish home, and a workshop on raising Jewish children. There could be a session on giving of time and financial resources to the community and on how to join a synagogue. All this in one day, you ask? Perhaps not, but we ought to start an effort somewhere to reach this population, and we ought to be asking more of them than we do. They

ought to be asking more of us, too. For this kind of program to work effectively, it must be conducted by synagogues and rabbis and a multitude of organizations, each contributing its experiences and wisdom. We must all search for the high road, resisting the temptation to become bogged down in the mire of our own parochial issues.

If we go only by the NJPS statistics, our direction is clear. We should encourage born Jews to marry those who wish to convert. Ninety-nine percent of these parents raise their children as Jews, as compared with some 60% of born Jews married to other born Jews. Clearly, much more intensity and effort must be assigned to programs of conversion. Again, this is an important area for cooperation, though here I would redirect energies into the synagogue, using trained community workers within the congregations themselves. People do not merely convert to Judaism; conversion is not only a matter of learning Hebrew and Jewish texts and ritual so that converts can be better Jewishly educated than the people they marry. In the process of conversion, Jews-by-Choice are reorienting their identities and becoming part of a people. Every synagogue should have a conversion program that integrates those choosing Judaism directly into the life of the congregation. I accept Mordecai Kaplan's formulation of identity formation in the Jewish community: belonging comes before behaving and believing. Synagogues, with the value of belonging as the highest priority, represent the best hope for the successful integration of those choosing or considering Judaism.

To oversee these programs, we need qualified administrators; to run them, we need rabbis trained to do this kind of work, as well as group workers, social workers, and counselors. We need the committed members of our synagogues as well. Each community must have teams of professionals, who work in conjunction with lay and professional leaders within each synagogue.

The best aspect of dire news is that it puts long-time accepted obstacles into perspective and forces us to look for ways around those obstacles. Although these obstacles are neither so high nor so wide as we have perhaps imagined, they must be faced. Religious and organizational worlds function in vastly different ways; we will have to learn each other's language better and adjust to the best of each other's style if we are to face successfully the challenges before us. Within the religious world specifically, interdenominational tensions, most of which in my opinion exist for no good reason whatsoever, must come to an end and quickly. "Who is a Jew" and "what is a Jew" are interesting and even important questions within the context of a healthy and vibrant and growing community. But soon they will be asking "who *was* a Jew" and "what *was* a Jew" if we cannot come together on that which

matters most to the lives of our people as they connect to the tradition.

I do not mean to suggest that the young man I described earlier, having benefited from my ideal Jewish community, will not be sitting someday in my office with a non-Jewish mate. I suspect that factors beyond our control are at play in choosing a spouse. However, I do mean to suggest that the difference between resentment or acceptance, indifference or commitment, will be found in intensive Jewish education, the creation of meaningful Jewish experiences and connections in college, the opportunity to revisit important Jewish identity questions with others in the same search at the point of choosing a partner, and enthusiastic and intimate options for conversion. My young man will be Jewish if he has no other choice. In a voluntary society, without the option of coercion, that means saturating his soul, positively and creatively.