

CONTINUITY AND CONVERSION

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Continuity efforts to prevent the assimilation of American Jewry have neglected a vital component: encouraging the conversion to Judaism of the Gentile romantic partner in an interfaith relationship with someone Jewish.

The assimilation of Jews is, in its accelerated stages, exemplified by intermarriage. Intermarriage statistics have therefore become the communal barometers of American Jewish survival. The most-quoted, even if exaggerated, statistic of contemporary American Jewish life is that, according to the Council of Jewish Federations' 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS), 52 percent of Jews who had married since 1985 had married an unconverted Gentile. However, in terms of continuity, there was another important statistic in that study: 739,000 Jews by birth, 28 percent of all then-married Jews, had an unconverted Gentile spouse. These marriages involved 664,000 children, only 25 percent of whom were being raised exclusively as Jews. That is, barring an adult decision by those children to choose or revert to Judaism, three-quarters of the children in these households will be lost to the Jewish community.

The Jewish community has reacted energetically and honorably to this problem. It has reemphasized education, especially day schools. It has promoted inoculating Jewish experiences, such as a trip to Israel or a summer at Jewish camp. It has funded programs on Jewish family education and synagogue revitalization.

However effective all those significant endeavors turn out to be in preventing intermarriage—and we will not know for a generation—none of them deals with existing or future intermarried families.

To meet the needs of those families, some in the Jewish community advocate reaching

out to the intermarried, welcoming them into Jewish life, and providing programs and services for them. The success of these enterprises has been unclear, in part, their proponents suggest, because a pitifully small amount of money has been spent on outreach.

The existence of outreach programs has resulted in considerable distress among many Jews who, concerned about limited resources and the potential for success, want to focus on keeping active Jews within the community. In addition, these preventionists believe the intermarried have their own agenda of family therapy and unconditional acceptance by the Jewish community, rather than a Jewish agenda of continuity, measured by such means as raising the children as Jews.

The continuity debate then has substantially been between prevention and outreach. However lively and provocative the debate has been, it has too often omitted or relegated to secondary status the crucial element of encouraging conversion to Judaism.

As the NJPS authors noted, conversion to Judaism took place in only 5 percent of the marriages since 1985 between someone born Jewish and someone born Gentile. Yet, conversion makes the crucial difference in the Jewish continuity of the family. A conversionary family is, using any criteria of assimilation and continuity, profoundly more Jewish than a mixed married family and virtually indistinguishable from a marriage between two born Jews.

For example, in a famous study, Peter Y. Medding et al. (1992) constructed an index of Jewish identification that included 11 behaviors, such as synagogue membership, donating to a Jewish charity, and lighting Hanukkah candles. The authors concluded, "There is little difference between inmarried and conversionary marrieds on the index, but the gap between them and mixed marrieds is

quite wide" (p. 32).¹ That is, in the key measures of continuity, born Jews who married other born Jews have about the same Jewish identity as families in which one partner converted to Judaism. This remarkable fact is central to understanding why conversion can contribute so much to Jewish continuity.

It is important, though, to recall the warning provided by Jonathan Sarna (1990) and others that the convert's identification is primarily religious. The positive effect of this identification is to infuse more religious observance into Jewish life. However, according to some studies, converts also have a weaker sense of ethnic identification, identify less with Israel, and are less opposed to intermarriage for their children than born Jews. It is important for advocates of conversion to see these problems. In part, they indicate a profound need to expand conversion efforts so as to develop programs to integrate converts more fully into the community, to encourage their identification with a people and not just a set of beliefs and practices. The concern on the part of those who worry about the lack of identification is that the conversion will last for a single generation, so that the children of the converts will revert to the parent's pre-conversion religion or to another non-Jewish religion. This serious possibility would be mitigated by both Jewish continuity programs and the Jewish education of the children of a conversionary marriage.

Indeed, the contribution of conversion to continuity and a hopeful sign about the Jewish identity of the children of a conversionary marriage can be seen perhaps most starkly by

focusing on the Jewish education of the children. In the Medding study, the focus was on the Jewish education of children aged 10 to 13. In conversionary marriages, 100 percent of the children who affiliated with the Conservative movement were giving their children a Jewish education. The corresponding figure for the Reform movement was 93 percent. Overall, including all conversionary marriages, 84 percent of conversionary couples were giving their 10- to 13-year-olds a Jewish education. In contrast, only 11 percent of mixed-married couples were educating their children Jewishly, and it is crucial to remember that some of these families were raising and educating their children in two faiths.

If conversion to Judaism makes the crucial difference among intermarried couples, why have not more efforts to encourage conversion been forthcoming? The three major reasons are the following: (1) both prevention and outreach advocates have ambivalent feelings about encouraging conversion; (2) many born Jews have ambivalent, if not negative, feelings about conversion to Judaism itself; and (3) the continuing tensions, especially between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews, about such issues as who can conduct a conversion and what are the legitimate acceptable motives for conversion have prevented both national and local communal organizations from obtaining the necessary consensus to implement conversion programs.

Advocates of both prevention and outreach speak favorably about encouraging conversion, but, for differing reasons, emphasize other approaches. As a result, conversionary efforts are supported in theory, but only secondarily in practice.

For those who advocate prevention, there is a concern that money spent on conversionary activities reduces funding available for the Jewish core on whom, according to the preventionist reading, Jewish survival depends. In addition, according to some who hold the preventionist view, welcoming converts sends the wrong message to Jews, a message that intermarriage is tolerable be-

¹Note that the authors use more technical language than I do in discussing the issue. For them, a "mixed marriage" is one between a born Jew and an unconverted born Gentile. I am using the more general and more popular terms of "intermarriage" or "interfaith marriage" interchangeably with "mixed marriage" to refer to such a couple. We all use "conversionary marriage" to refer to a marriage between a born Jew and a born Gentile who has converted to Judaism and "inmarried" to refer to a marriage between two born Jews.

cause the Gentile partner can always convert. Such a view would then undermine preventionist measures.

There is, though, no contradiction between prevention efforts and encouraging conversions to Judaism. The two efforts seek different audiences and are mutually supportive. Consider how encouraging conversions actually helps in prevention measures. This effect can best be seen by using a commercial metaphor. An advertiser wants to sell, say, precious gems from a famous store. That advertiser has two publics in mind for any ads. The first public consists of potential customers who might be convinced by the ad to purchase the gems from that store. The second public consists of current customers who shop in that store and already buy the gems. The purpose of the ad for this second group is to make them feel that their past purchases were smart ones, that the store is a good place to shop, and that the gems they bought are still desirable. Similarly, encouraging conversion to Judaism includes sending a message not only to potential converts but also to born Jews, a message that Judaism is so attractive that others want it also. It is this message that reinforces the belief of born Jews that their choice to retain their Jewish identity is a smart one.

Additionally, to argue for encouraging conversion is in no sense to argue that intermarrying is acceptable because the Gentile can always convert. After all, the staunchest advocates of encouraging conversion would say that such conversions only occur in a very low percentage of interfaith marriages so that the odds of a conversion occurring are not good. Even if the day should come when the percentage of conversions is very high, there are still arguments for in-marriage, such as the couple having a shared religious and ethnic background.

The advocate for conversion then can also lobby for the view that marriage between two born Jews is the ideal, but that when an intermarriage is pending or has occurred, encouraging conversion will be the key determinant in the Jewish continuity of the family.

The argument for encouraging conversion is not that conversionary efforts be given equal weight with preventive measures, but that they be given weight proportional to their need and their potential impact.

This brings us to funding for all such efforts. Such a concern by preventionists, that funding for conversionary efforts will take away money for prevention, is important but misplaced. There are, to begin with, many no-cost and low-cost techniques to encourage conversions, such as having rabbis discuss conversions more openly, having volunteers give lectures on the subject, using the Internet (see for example, the Conversion to Judaism home page at www.convert.org), and so on. There are, for example, many in the Jewish community who do not currently engage in voluntary work but would do so to welcome converts. Such new volunteers would come from the pool of converts, their families and friends, and others. Such volunteers would donate monies specifically targeted for conversionary projects.

More importantly, encouraging conversion can result in a net financial gain to the Jewish community (though the human gain is of course far more crucial). This is so because conversionary families give substantially more money to Jewish charities than do intermarried families. In the Medding (1992) study, 81 percent of conversionary families gave to Jewish charities, in contrast to only 57 percent of mixed-married families. This difference shows up in all major studies about conversion. That is, any money spent on encouraging conversion will result in substantially more funds coming into the Jewish community. Also, it is far easier to gauge the effect of the monies spent on encouraging conversion than the effect of monies spent on prevention. The number of conversions is the simple determinant of success. (Of course, this is an oversimplification because conversionary efforts might not have an effect for many years. Conversion is a process, not a simple decision.)

The preventionists question the validity of outreach programs. They argue that, for

example, in order to make Gentiles and marginal Jews feel comfortable, outreach programs are too rarely authentically Jewish. Preventionists question an outreach program that substitutes family therapy for Judaic content. They believe that the audiences for such programs too often do not have an agenda compatible with the Jewish communal agenda. However valid these arguments are, they simply do not apply to conversionary efforts. Those efforts to encourage conversion are authentically Jewish. They offer the very heart of Jewish content. The agenda for such efforts overlaps the Jewish continuity agenda of the community.

Preventionists also need to justify the alternative to encouraging conversion—writing off all intermarried couples. For a variety of moral and practical reasons, such a view is unconscionable.

Those who favor outreach also have concerns that encouraging conversions may scare intermarried couples away from Jewish institutions if the Gentile partner thinks the Jewish community's sole agenda is conversion. Clearly, conversion is not possible or appropriate for everyone in a mixed marriage, and those who do not voluntarily wish to consider conversion should not be subject to threats, emotional blackmail, or coercion. It also is the case that those who do not wish to convert but who do wish to raise their children Jewishly should be welcomed by the Jewish community. Encouraging conversion then is not in contradiction to drawing in intermarried couples to the Jewish community.

It is also true that the decision to consider conversion can come at any time in an interfaith relationship, from before marriage to after decades of being married. Therefore, it is inaccurate to frame the issue as one of conversion versus outreach.

Nevertheless, outreach advocates do have a point. Those who advocate the encouragement of conversion clearly do have a hierarchy of preferences. The first level is the conversion of the Gentile spouse. The second level, absent spousal conversion, is the conversion of the non-Jewish children of the

marriage, or, if the children are halachically Jewish, then raising them exclusively as Jews. The third level is raising the non-Jewish children of the marriage as Jews, though this seems to imply an eventual conversion of those children as well.

Will this attitude, forthrightly stated, frighten intermarried couples from attaching themselves to the Jewish community? Clearly, part of the answer to this question centers on the venue of programs and their presentation, the nature of how and the pace at which conversion is presented, and so on. Too much is at stake, however, to mislead intermarried couples or their Jewish families into thinking conversion does not make a, in fact *the*, long-term difference in the Jewish continuity of the family.

The indelicate question that conversion advocates must ask is, At what point after the intermarried couple is welcomed does the option of conversion arise? Some might say it will arise naturally without any specific planned mention of it. This undependable possibility is insufficient. Conversion as an option needs to be raised specifically in gentle, appropriate ways at frequent stages of the welcoming process. For example, conversionary literature, lectures, and films can be made part of the overall outreach strategy. Clearly, we need to develop additional strategies that draw the intermarried couples to our community and simultaneously allow them to explore Judaism at their own pace so that they may consider conversion.

Outreach programs and conversion programs can work in concert, but those outreach advocates who never wish openly to raise conversion as an option or who think doing so is unwise, unworkable, inappropriate, or futile will surely continue to have problems with programs that explicitly do so.

The virtue of outreach programs is that they do what prevention programs, by definition, cannot and do not want to do: deal with the already intermarried. The problem, though, is to what extent such programs actually foster Jewish continuity. Having conversion as a primary goal helps answer

that question. More significantly, welcoming without the goal of conversion significantly diminishes the possibility of Jewish continuity.

Many born Jews grew up with the belief that conversion was a distinctly un-Jewish activity and that the Jewish legitimacy of converts was questionable. This lingering view also inhibits the establishment of conversion programs. Put into the context of the continuity argument, the question is, If conversion is supposed to aid continuity, is encouraging conversion itself an example of continuity or discontinuity—that is, are conversionary efforts just a desperate, even non-Jewish reaction to a contemporary social problem?

In fact, encouraging conversion to Judaism and welcoming sincere converts were widely praised in Jewish sacred literature and practiced at key points in Jewish history. However, such efforts have, for a long while, been dormant.

Clarifications are needed to understand the role of conversion in Jewish history so that it can be seen as a resumption of a Jewish task, not a novel response to a contemporary problem. Therefore, conversion is itself a continuity of Jewish tradition, but a continuity overcoming a long break. In this sense it resembles the status of Zionism a century ago: an ancient tradition with advocates trying to give it rebirth.

Welcoming converts by the Jewish people typically proceeded by such means as the following:

- Creating literature useful in attracting potential converts to Judaism: The Septuagint, the oldest existing Greek translation of the Bible, was prepared, in part, to offer Judaism to non-Jewish Greeks. Other literature, such as the *Sibylline Oracles*, also could be used to attract converts.
- Inviting Gentiles to the synagogue to learn about such subjects as the Torah and Jewish ethics
- Adopting abandoned Gentile children and

raising them as Jews

- Marrying Gentiles and bringing them to Judaism
- Having individuals teach interested Gentiles about Judaism. For example, it was an actor named Alityrus who interested Poppaea, Nero's wife, in Judaism.

The extent, organization, and success of these activities have been widely debated among scholars. What is undebatable is the variety of supportive comments about converts in sacred literature. Although there are a few seemingly negative comments about converts in the Babylonian Talmud, most are overwhelmingly positive. The most intriguing comment (B.T. *Pesachim* 87b) is by Rabbi Johanan who asserts that God exiled the Jews from their sacred homeland for only one reason—to increase the number of converts. It is a striking notion that so wrenching an event as exile should be seen as having a divine use. That use had to have been considered so valuable that it justified exile from the promised land.

It is a fair question to ask why, if encouraging conversion was widely praised and arguably widely practiced, do most contemporary Jews think of such activities as distinctly, even characteristically, un-Jewish? What changed the attitude of the Jews toward conversion?

The first reason for the change in Jewish attitudes toward welcoming converts was that Roman and later Christian and Moslem authorities punished both the Jewish community for encouraging conversion and the converts themselves. This punishment included exile or death for the converts in some cases. The powerless Jewish community made the prudent decision to curtail its conversionary activities. Eventually, needing to rationalize that retreat from conversionary work as well as its loss of national sovereignty and its general powerlessness, the community found justification in a particularist interpretation of Judaism that centered on following religious laws and waiting for the Messiah to bring people back to the Land of Israel and

welcome those who would embrace Judaism in the days of the redemption.

A second reason for the change in attitude flowed from the Christian transformation of what conversion meant and how it should be undertaken. For Jews, conversion was to be offered but not mandated; salvation did not require being Jewish but rather being good. Christianity transformed this notion of conversion into one in which conversion became obligatory for salvation. Additionally, Jews generally used the methods described above, although there were a very few aberrant cases of Jews forcibly converting people. These methods, perhaps because conversion was now seen as necessary to save souls, were transformed into more aggressive ones and included, for example, bribery and forced baptisms. These and other changes made the idea of seeking converts repugnant to Jews. The interrelationships between Jews and Christians made conversion to Judaism less likely; Jews generally did not see Christians as likely conversion candidates, and Christians generally saw Jews as a people whose religion had been superseded at best and as a people guilty of deicide at worst and so hardly worth joining.

This transformed attitude of the Jews eventually found its way into Jewish legal codes, finishing the process of altering the perception of conversion activities from a vital Jewish activity to a repulsive one. So complete was this transformation that the question of seeking converts seriously emerged again only in the nineteenth century. The Reform movement revived the ancient idea of seeking converts in the confluence of the modern ideas of religious reform and liberal universalism.

The interest in conversion has increased tremendously in the last thirty years most importantly as a perceived antidote to the rise of intermarriage. Clearly, seeing conversion only as a response to intermarriage does an intellectual disservice to conversion's role in Jewish thought, literature, and history. However, since encouraging conversions among non-Jewish spouses was included as one of many approaches, it is a continuity, a legiti-

mate part of Jewish tradition.

There have been a variety of contemporary efforts by the Reform and Conservative movements especially to encourage conversion among the intermarried. The Reform movement, and particularly Rabbi Alexander Schindler, openly advocated conversionary efforts to combat intermarriage in the late 1970s. Rabbi Schindler, though, went even further, advocating going to the "unchurched," whether or not they were romantically involved with someone Jewish. The Reform movement set up a Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach in 1983.

The fate of conversionary efforts within Reform is instructive. Non-Reform Jewry, and many from within Reform, were concerned about efforts to reach the unchurched and such efforts never materialized fully. In addition, much of the Reform outreach effort has focused on welcoming the intermarried and, arguably, less on specifically conversionary activities. In addition, it remains unclear whether the conversionary efforts that do exist have been compromised by the Reform embrace of patrilineality.

The 1983 resolution on patrilineal descent declared that the child of one Jewish parent (that is, not exclusively the mother) was considered Jewish. The presumption, the resolution continued, was to be established through unspecified acts of identifying with Judaism and the Jewish people. The resolution's relationship to potential converts is this: Why should a prospective female convert become Jewish for the sake of religious unity in the family if her children will be considered Jewish anyway? The movement is still grappling with that question.

The Conservative movement, prompted to seek a comprehensive response to intermarriage, issued a position paper in 1995 advocating prevention, and, if that fails, encouraging conversion, or, if that is not likely, encouraging the family to raise the children as Jews. It remains to be seen whether the Conservative movement is capable of balancing all three elements of their response.

Outside of the Reform and Conservative movements, very little conversionary activity

is occurring in the organized Jewish community. Orthodox Jews, while welcoming individual sincere converts, in general adhere to the anti-conversionary tradition that has existed since the Middle Ages. They have so far refused to recognize conversions that are not deemed in accord with *halacha*, Jewish law. Such conversions include all those performed by non-Orthodox rabbis. The communal chaos caused by differing views on conversion continues to inhibit conversionary activities. For example, the lack of agreement about conversion among the movements prevents coordinated communal efforts to encourage conversion.

There seems little likelihood of a compromise on the conversion issue, although there can, of course, continue to be efforts to find one. In the meanwhile, the pressing, some would say desperate, needs of continuity call for a temporary, even if unsatisfactory, *modus vivendi*. The Orthodox, to present one such possibility, would continue to oppose non-Orthodox conversions, but would not veto or interfere with organizational efforts to encourage conversion among the non-Orthodox intermarried. Such an understanding would free both national and local agencies to engage in conversion efforts without causing a break in the already fragile fabric of communal life.

Those communal conversion efforts are needed badly. While individual rabbis, teachers, congregations, and movements engage in the basic work of conversion, they need broad communal support. Communal organizations need to determine how they can work with the religious community to increase conversions. For example, federations

can fund programs about conversion and, most importantly, fund rabbis who are charged by their respective movements with organizing regional conversion efforts. Such efforts can include increasing the number of Introduction to Judaism classes, alerting interested people to the classes, counseling potential converts, speaking about conversion, teaching about the history of conversion efforts, developing programs that integrate the already-converted more fully, and so on.

These and a wide variety of similar efforts by Jewish organizations can have modest goals, but the obvious should be pointed out: As the percentage of conversions among the intermarried rises, the demographic effects of intermarriage will decrease. Along with preventive measures and appropriate outreach efforts, the Jewish community can, if it has the will, meet the challenges that American society poses to Jewish continuity.

The Jewish people managed to stretch back two millennia to recover the political will needed for the Zionist enterprise. Such a heroic reaction to their unsought historical trials provides hope that they can now summon up the strength to deal with the debilitating lures of assimilation.

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