

OUTREACH TO INTERFAITH COUPLES

A Conceptual Approach

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The conventional definition of outreach, under which Jewish communal boundaries are extended outward in an effort to increase access to the community, is inapplicable to the great majority of interfaith couples at the beginning of their religious decision making. Because their religious and ethnic identities are unclear and unresolved, they are not able to take advantage of the offer of greater access. For most interfaith couples, the Jewish community must operate under a second definition of outreach—providing the means by which the couples can explore and reach clarity in their religious and ethnic identities. In cooperation with synagogues, which operate under the first definition of outreach, the Jewish Community Center should provide programs based on the second definition of outreach.

OUTREACH AS THE EXTENSION OF COMMUNAL BOUNDARIES

Outreach to interfaith couples, as to other populations, is most often understood as an attempt to encourage greater Jewish involvement by making Jewish life more accessible. We extend ourselves to meet interfaith couples halfway in order to make it easier for them to join us within the Jewish community. In the process, we push our communal boundaries outward, expanding our definition of who we are. There is an implicit quid pro quo. If interfaith couples will identify themselves with us, we will redefine our limits in order to encompass them.

If we understand outreach in that way, as the extension of Jewish boundaries, then outreach efforts will generally be connected with the ceremonies by which the Jewish community defines its boundaries and authenticates the status of its members. Reaching out to interfaith couples will mean offering them easier access to those

authenticating rituals: a Jewish wedding, conversion for the Gentile partner, *brit milah*, or Bar/Bat mitzvah for their children, etc. The most prominent and controversial examples of this kind of outreach are the Reform movement's decision on patrilineal descent and the willingness of a minority of Reform rabbis to perform intermarriages. Both are examples of communal self-extension beyond traditional limits—redefinitions of where Jewishness ends—in order to make it easier for interfaith couples to gain Jewish authentication for themselves and/or their children. Equally important, though less revolutionary, is the increased openness to conversion of the Gentile partner by both the Reform and Conservative movements in the last few decades; this openness contrasts with the view of many traditional authorities that a desire to convert in the context of marriage should be presumed to be insincere. Both movements have made efforts to facilitate conversions and, short of that, to help interfaith couples raise their children as Jews. In the Conservative movement, many synagogues have become increasingly open to participation by interfaith families, though without extending membership to the Gentile spouse. Reform

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synagogues commonly offer family memberships to interfaith families, including the Gentile spouse.

Some of the most bitter controversies in the American Jewish community today are over specific policies associated with this kind of outreach to interfaith couples. The debate comes down to the question: To what degree are we willing to redefine our Jewish limits in order to reach out to those who would otherwise stand outside those limits? No community can exist without boundaries. But where are those boundaries to be drawn? How far can we extend ourselves without destroying ourselves? Clearly, there is no unanimity on that question, even within the individual religious movements. The Reform rabbinate appears united behind its decision on patrilineal descent, but is divided on the question of officiating at intermarriages. The Conservative rabbinate has taken a decisive stand against both patrilineal descent and officiating at intermarriages, but remains divided on other questions, such as the degree to which the Gentile spouse and non-Jewish children of interfaith couples should be included in synagogue life. The Orthodox rabbinate, in general, has opposed the relative openness to conversion by the Gentile partner on the part of the Reform and Conservative movements.

The political turmoil associated with questions of where to draw the line is probably inevitable. Issues of communal self-definition are bound to be highly divisive. Their very divisiveness indicates how crucial they are.

It is important to recognize that the kind of outreach discussed thus far, as crucial as it is, is inherently limited in its application. It can be applied only to those interfaith couples who are ready to meet the Jewish community halfway, which means that they are clear about where they wish to go.

But what about interfaith couples who cannot yet commit themselves to the implicit *quid pro quo* that this kind of outreach represents, who are not in a position

to accept our offer of easier access because they are still struggling with their own sense of direction? Extending ourselves to meet them halfway or even three-quarters of the way will not help them because they are not yet ready to take the corresponding step toward us. Easier access is not yet what they need. What they need is help in making fundamental decisions about the roles that their religious and ethnic heritages will play in their lives, as individuals and as families in the making.

The decision to intermarry can often bring long-dormant questions of identity to a crisis in the partners' lives. Differences in background that might have seemed attractive or at least inconsequential to them during courtship can suddenly and unexpectedly become sources of conflict when it comes to planning a wedding, establishing a home, or deciding how to raise children. According to Paul and Rachel Cowan (1987), these conflicts can become "time bombs" in these couples' relationships. Ambivalently felt, half-understood loyalties to religion and ethnicity often reassert themselves in those and other contexts, creating tensions that the partners need to clarify and resolve. In order to begin negotiating solutions within the relationship, they need to confront their own backgrounds and clarify what they wish to bring with them into their marriage. Paradoxically, had they chosen partners from the same background, they might never have needed to grapple with the meaning of their pasts in their present lives. As long as their religious and ethnic attachments remained unchallenged, they might have continued to avoid those questions with relative ease. Contrary to the stereotype of interfaith couples as indifferent to religion and heritage, they are often spurred by their differences to explore exactly those issues. Yet, at the same time, they are often poorly equipped to deal with those questions, which in most cases have not come up for them since adolescence and for which they lack an adult vocabulary.

In many cases, the partners' questioning

and exploration of their religious and/or ethnic backgrounds left off many years before—often at age 13 for Jews. Therefore, they commonly find themselves at an earlier stage of emotional (as well as intellectual) development in the religious/ethnic realm than in most other areas of their lives.

The process of differentiation from the family of origin that defines the transition to adulthood in our society has, in many cases, barely begun for them in the area of religious and ethnic identity, the very area in which they suddenly need to make difficult choices (see article by Perel in this issue). Hence, their ability to address freely the questions at hand and negotiate solutions in the relationship is severely impaired. In many cases, they find themselves suddenly constrained by feelings, ideas, and attitudes about their religion and/or ethnicity that they internalized in childhood, but about which they have thought very little since then. In some cases, those internalized messages from childhood were meaningful to them at an earlier point in their lives. Equally often, the messages themselves were confused and ambivalent. In any case, the partners have difficulty making sense of and taking responsibility for those feelings and attitudes now. They are a part of their past that remains very powerful for them, but which they have never been able to reclaim on their own terms as adults. That adult reclamation requires a degree of emotional independence from family that, in the realm of religious and ethnic identity, they are less likely to have achieved than in their secular selves. In this neglected part of their identities, they find themselves either bound by or trapped in rebellion against ideas and feelings that they have brought with them from their childhood, but cannot fully acknowledge as their own.

The definition of outreach discussed thus far, under which we extend our Jewish boundaries outward toward interfaith couples on the implicit condition that they meet us halfway, is inapplicable to those in that unresolved state. Until they

have a clearer idea of what they want, of what is meaningful to them, they are not in a position to meet our condition of identification with the Jewish community. Trying to apply that definition of outreach to them makes no sense for them or for us.

When designing programs for interfaith couples who are in that state of limbo, it can be tempting to try to maintain the same definition with a slight modification. Clearly, we cannot ask them for a *quid pro quo*—a commitment to conversion, synagogue affiliation, or a Jewish upbringing for their children—as a condition for entering our programs. But we might judge the success or failure of our programs by the degree to which participants opt for those Jewish commitments at the end. In that way we maintain our definition of outreach as a conditional enterprise. Our efforts will be justified only by reciprocal steps from the couples to whom we reach out. Rather than imposing that condition on them, we impose it on ourselves as the standard by which we will judge our success after the fact.

There is a problem with that approach. In setting those terms for our own success, we make ourselves dependent to an unhealthy degree on the couples with whom we work. Our sense of competence depends on decisions that they will make, decisions that have much more to do with them than with us. By not explicitly setting conditions for the participants in advance, we cede any control over the outcome. Yet, we will judge ourselves by the very outcome over which we have ceded control. We need them to make particular decisions for our sake, which we know they are not yet ready to make.

Finding ourselves in that trap of our own making, it is almost inevitable that we will exert pressure, overt or subliminal, on the couples with whom we work. They cannot help but sense our dependence on them, our need for them to make particular choices to vindicate our efforts. Our inability to grant them full freedom of movement will tend to hinder their ex-

plorations, which is counterproductive both for them and for us. With the Jewish partner, if the pressures that we represent echo those of his family of origin, we will be placing ourselves in the middle of his struggle with his family, hindering his process of differentiation from them and locking him into old patterns of compliance and/or rebellion, rather than helping him grow. With the Gentile partner, if the pressures that we represent echo those that the Jewish partner or his family are putting on her, we will be placing ourselves in the middle of her struggle with them, becoming a lightning rod for her feelings of resentment. In any case, both partners will find themselves reacting to our agenda, rather than clarifying their own. The result, even if they settle on a superficial resolution to their crisis, will be a continuation of the underlying confusion that generated it in the first place.

If we wish to work productively with interfaith couples in that unresolved state, we need to formulate a second definition of outreach, a definition under which the vindication of our efforts does not depend on an outcome that the couple is not yet in a position to choose.

A SECOND DEFINITION OF OUTREACH: REACHING BEYOND OUR COMMUNAL BOUNDARIES

One way to free ourselves to work more productively with interfaith couples in that unresolved state is to think of outreach in that context not as a matter of extending Jewish boundaries, but of reaching beyond those boundaries entirely. Under this second definition, we are not pushing our Jewish boundaries outward in the expectation that the couple will join us within those expanded boundaries, meeting us halfway. Instead, we are working outside those boundaries altogether, leaving behind the whole question of how far they can be extended. The limits of Jewish authenticity, however we define them, are irrelevant to our purpose. It is not that we reject

those limits; they are simply beside the point. Outreach by the first definition, with all of the controversy associated with it, may or may not come into play later. After the partners have determined where they wish to go, we may have to decide how far we are willing to push our communal boundaries outward to accommodate them. For instance, if the Gentile partner decides that she wishes to convert to Judaism, a *beit din* will have to authenticate that decision (which means returning to the first definition of outreach). But for now, our goal is to help the partners chart their own course. Whether or not we will be able to define that course as a Jewish one is not the question at hand. Without necessarily shifting our Jewish boundaries at all, we can reach past those boundaries if need be.

It is natural to ask why the Jewish community should commit time and resources to this second kind of outreach, rather than limiting ourselves to the first. Why invest ourselves in working with interfaith couples in a state of indecision when we could be working with those who are ready to make a commitment to us?

The answer is that, in the majority of cases, the second kind of outreach is a prerequisite to the first. The number of interfaith couples in need of outreach by this second definition is greater even than it would first appear, in that it includes not only those couples who are explicitly undecided about their direction but also those whose underlying lack of clarity is masked by a premature solution that they are attempting to impose on themselves.

In many cases, interfaith couples approach us with a solution already in mind. They define their problem not as a need for help in negotiating decisions within their relationship, but as a need for authentication by the Jewish community of a decision that they have already made. They might be concerned, for example, about what it will take for them to have their children accepted as Jews, or what the Gentile partner must do in order to

convert, or whether they will be able to find a rabbi who will perform their wedding ceremony in the absence of conversion. In other words, they define themselves as being in need of outreach by the first definition, rather than by the second.

In some cases, that is because they have already explored and clarified the issues at stake together. They have reached some real decisions as a couple and are turning to the Jewish community to authenticate those decisions. But in other cases, as we talk with them, we find that they are not as clear about what they want as they present themselves as being. For instance, if we ask the Jewish partner what is important to her about her own Jewishness, what it is that she wants to share with her partner, or transmit to her children, or express through her Jewish wedding ceremony, she may have difficulty answering in terms that are meaningful to her partner or to herself. Usually, this is because the Jewish loyalty that she feels and has asked her partner to accommodate (and which, in this case, he has agreed to accommodate) is a loyalty that she has never been able to take responsibility for, to take possession of on her own terms. The voice in which she hears its claim on her is a voice that speaks to her only out of her childhood, not her adulthood. The result is that, just as she cannot articulate in meaningful terms why she wants what she wants, her partner cannot help but be confused about that to which he has agreed. Their apparent resolution can best be understood not as a real decision on their parts, but as an attempt by both partners to bypass a dialogue that neither one of them feels equipped to undertake.

When working with an interfaith couple in that situation, if we take them at their word and define their problem as a need for Jewish authentication—that is, if we define our task with them as outreach by the first definition above—we are likely to find ourselves on an unproductive path. In the first place, we may well find it difficult, as representatives of the Jewish community,

to give them what they are asking for. Authenticating an apparently Jewish position that, at a deeper level, is so unclear (or which, in some cases, we cannot define as a Jewish position at all) will often present difficulties for us. Moreover, because our need for a clearer and more decisive commitment from them is not met, we are likely to find ourselves explicitly or subliminally pressuring them, which in turn will make it more difficult for them to make real progress. As discussed above, they will find themselves reacting to us, rather than clarifying their own convictions. Most importantly, even if we could give them, or help them obtain the Jewish authentication that they are asking for, that alone would not be a real solution for them. As long as the deeper questions of what they want remain unclarified and uncommunicated within the relationship, their underlying tensions cannot be negotiated and will probably re-emerge at some point later on.

A more productive initial agenda for working with couples in that situation is to attempt to reframe their problem, to help them arrive, through counseling or group work, at a redefinition of what it is that they need at this point. We can try to move them back a few steps by drawing out and helping them acknowledge the unanswered questions that underlie their apparent solution—questions that, on some level, one or both partners probably sense anyway—and offer them help and support for addressing those questions. In other words, we can attempt to engage them in outreach by the second definition, rather than by the first. This will be helpful to them, because it will refocus their energies in a more productive direction. It will be helpful to us, in that we will be free for the time being of having to be the judge of their Jewish authenticity, a role that can only hamper our effectiveness with them at this point in the process. Questions of authentication by the Jewish community can wait—in fact, must wait—until the partners are clearer about where

they stand as individuals and as a couple.

In asking the Jewish partner to accept that redefinition of the couple's immediate need, we are in effect challenging him and giving him permission to begin differentiating himself from his family of origin in the realm of religious/ethnic identity. If the Jewish partner has defined the couple's problem as a need for Jewish authentication, although he cannot express what his own Jewishness means to him, it is probably because he is so closely tied to his family in this area that he has no room to define what is important to him as an adult. He is trying to satisfy Jewish demands that he internalized long ago, but has never been able to take responsibility for on his own terms. When we ask the Jewish partner to set aside the question of Jewish authentication long enough to define his own Jewish convictions together with his partner, we are asking him to separate himself from his family to a degree that will allow him to join his partner in a shared search. Sometimes, helping the Jewish partner understand the issue in that way—by drawing out and identifying the family voices that he is struggling with within himself—can help him achieve that realignment in his relationship with his family vis-a-vis his partner. Giving the Gentile partner permission to ask the Jewish partner for greater support in their shared exploration can serve the same end.

APPLICATION OF THE SECOND DEFINITION OF OUTREACH: PROGRAMS AT THE 92ND STREET Y

At the 92nd Street Y in New York City, we have developed a number of programs for interfaith couples in keeping with the second definition of outreach. Our two primary programs are an 8-week Workshop for Interfaith Couples, which was developed by Paul and Rachel Cowan in 1981, and a 30-week introduction to Judaism called *Derekh Torah*, which primarily but not exclusively serves interfaith couples. *Derekh*

Torah, which was founded by Rachel Cowan in 1984, was originally affiliated with Congregation Anshe Chesed on the upper west side of Manhattan. It moved to the 92nd Street Y in 1987. Both programs meet for weekly two-hour sessions in groups that are limited in size. Since 1987-88, about 200 individuals have participated in the Workshop programs and 450 in *Derekh Torah*.

The Workshop for Interfaith Couples concentrates on self-exploration and communication, rather than education. The emphasis is on helping the partners explore the feelings and attitudes about their religion and ethnicity that they took from their families as children and to define which aspects of their heritage are meaningful to them as adults; that is, what it is that they want to bring with them into their marriage. The function of the group leader is to raise those questions and to support the participants' explorations, sometimes through structured exercises and sometimes through free discussion. The group functions as a support structure in which the couples can transcend their isolation.

The *Derekh Torah* program, although primarily an introduction to Jewish content, also offers built-in opportunities for this kind of self-exploration and communication. The program begins with an intake interview with the director, in which prospective participants are helped to articulate their unanswered questions about their relationship to Judaism as a way of defining their agenda in the program. (If the Gentile partner is consciously struggling with his relationship to his own heritage, we often suggest that the couple explore that as well in another setting.) Two of the 30 sessions, one near the beginning of the program and one near the end, are set aside as in-class identity workshops dedicated to the same kind of self-exploration as the 8-week workshop format. These sessions are led by a family therapist with special expertise in religious

and ethnic issues¹; during them, the class instructor joins the class as a semi-peer. Outside of class, the instructor meets privately with the class members to help them monitor their development and keep their agenda in focus.

The *Derekh Torah* curriculum is a broad survey of Jewish theology, history, holidays, rites of passage, worship, and ethics. In addition to the 30 class sessions, each group participates together in two Shabbat meals. The program is supplemented by a series of related educational workshops held at 92nd Street Y, which are open to the public as well.

The program emphasizes discussion of personal responses to the material, as well as formal learning and analysis, so that students can use the group as a support structure in their search for personal meaning in Judaism. In order to create a sense of informality, the classes meet in private homes, instead of classrooms. The instructors play a complex set of roles: organizing and presenting material, raising intellectual challenges and drawing out more personal responses by students, sharing their Jewish commitments as well as their own unanswered questions, supporting group interaction, creating Jewish experiences for the group, and serving as a private counselor for students. The instructors' task of relating to the group very personally, while at the same time creating a nonjudgmental environment in which students' leeway is not restricted, is a challenging one. The teacher needs to be deeply engaged in the group without being so personally invested in the students' struggles that the students' freedom is limited. Training workshops for *Derekh Torah* faculty, in addition to dealing with teaching techniques, help equip instructors to separate their own needs from those

of their students by providing opportunities to examine their own unresolved identity issues and to understand the issues with which their students are struggling.

In a high percentage of the interfaith couples who come to *Derekh Torah*, the Gentile partner is considering conversion to Judaism. For those couples, we present the process ahead of them as a shared one, in which the Jewish partner needs to join the Gentile partner in study and exploration in order to define what it is that he wishes to share with her. Under our model, no commitment to conversion is solicited or expected. In fact, if the partners come in with their agenda narrowly defined as conversion, our task in the intake interview is often to reframe the problem as discussed above, shifting their focus from the conversion itself (a matter of authentication by the Jewish community) to the exploration and decision making that they need to undertake within the relationship.

We must distinguish very sharply, however, between conversion study, which ought to have no expectations attached, and conversion itself, which is inherently conditional. Conversion depends on the prospective convert having crossed a certain threshold in the development of his or her Jewish commitment. In other words, at the point when participants in the program are ready to talk seriously about conversion, they are in need of Jewish outreach by the first definition. They are asking not only for nonjudgmental help but also for Jewish authentication of the decisions that they have made.

Participants in *Derekh Torah* who decide that they wish to convert are referred to rabbis in the community; we work with Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist rabbis in the New York area. Each rabbi takes responsibility for setting his or her own standards of commitment. From the time of the referral, the prospective convert proceeds on two tracks simultaneously. Participation in *Derekh Torah* re-

1. These sessions are led by Esther Perel, who also leads a series of training workshops for the *Derekh Torah* faculty dealing with these issues.

mains unconditional while the conversion depends on meeting the sponsoring rabbi's standards. In order to keep the two tracks separate, thereby preserving the nonjudgmental character of the program, we refrain from acting as sponsoring rabbi for any participants in the program ourselves.

Other Populations

Although *Derekh Torah's* primary population is interfaith couples, the program also attract a variety of other people. Some are children of interfaith parents seeking to define their identities. Some are children of Jewish parents who, for any number of reasons, have never worked out the meaning of their Jewish identity. Others are children of Gentile parents who have been attracted to Judaism, but are not in a relationship with a Jew. The common thread among the varied participants is that all, because of some life transition—a new relationship or the break-up of a relationship, the birth of a child, the death of a parent, or the approach of old age—feel the need to define the meaning of Judaism in their lives and at the same time feel ill-equipped to pursue that search.

Because of their mixed backgrounds, interfaith couples face questions and dilemmas that are especially complex. Yet, their need to explore Judaism and define its meaning in their lives is a need that they share with a much broader population. Seeing others in their group who have come to explore Judaism for other immediate reasons, particularly Jewish individuals and couples, can be an important source of support for interfaith couples, in that it normalizes their own need for learning and support, diminishing their sense of isolation from the Jewish community.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER AND THE SYNAGOGUE

Outreach to interfaith couples by the first definition discussed above, under which we extend our Jewish boundaries outward for the sake of interfaith couples who seek ac-

cess, meeting them halfway so that they can more easily join us within those boundaries, is a task that belongs primarily to synagogues and their movements. As the focus of Jewish religious life in America, the synagogue is the place to which interfaith couples turn when they are ready to move toward Jewish identification. Congregational rabbis, their congregations, and their movements therefore have primary responsibility for extending themselves (and deciding how far they are willing to extend themselves) to interfaith couples who are looking for a way in. Outreach by the second definition, under which we offer unconditional help to interfaith couples who are not yet ready to make Jewish commitments, can be and in many cases needs to be pursued in the synagogue as well. Yet, for programs in which this second kind of outreach is the exclusive focus, the Jewish Community Center often provides a more favorable context. Whereas the synagogue is properly perceived as a place of Jewish religious commitment, an institution that represents Jewish authenticity, the JCC is generally perceived as a more religiously neutral setting. JCCs are often criticized by congregational rabbis for that neutral character. Yet, it is precisely that character that places JCCs in a better position to help interfaith couples who are not yet clear about their direction. Many interfaith couples seeking education and counseling from representatives of the Jewish community with no implicit strings attached would prefer to walk into a JCC, even if such help were available in a synagogue.

That same neutral character precludes the JCC from engaging in outreach by the first definition. Since the JCC is not an institution that attempts to define boundaries of Jewish authenticity, it cannot engage in boundary-setting activities, such as conversion. The rituals of Jewish authentication properly belong to synagogues and their movements.

The delineation of those two complementary definitions of outreach offers a potentially productive division of labor

between synagogues and JCCs. In Manhattan, the development of the 92nd Street Y's outreach programs, which function entirely under the second definition of outreach, has brought us into a closer working relationship with synagogues, which function under the first. We work with interfaith couples and others who seek the education and support that they need in order to begin negotiating and defining their direction. Many of them, particularly those weighing conversion, have been referred

to us by local congregational rabbis. As participants in our programs decide to make Jewish commitments to conversion and/or to synagogue affiliation, we refer them to congregational rabbis. This model of cooperation is a productive one that could be emulated elsewhere.

REFERENCES

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