

A DECADE OF REFORM JEWISH OUTREACH: ACHIEVEMENT AND PROMISE

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A decade of outreach efforts under Reform Jewish auspices has led to a change in Jewish communal attitudes toward intermarriage—from “outrage to outreach.” Yet, outreach remains a delicate balancing act of rejecting intermarriage but not the intermarried and many questions remain unanswered. As we enter the second decade of outreach, the inextricable link between outreach and inreach and the need to articulate a Jewish identity for the twenty-first century become clearer.

Reform Jewish outreach efforts under the auspices of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach have just marked the end of their first decade. Through outreach, we have touched individuals, couples, and families who might have been lost to us a generation ago.

The achievements of the past decade include the following:

- A strengthening of the entire process by which an individual becomes a Reform Jew: an innovative Introduction to Judaism program, improved rabbinic counseling techniques, and full integration of converts into the community
- “Times and Seasons” workshops for intermarried couples and programs for parents of intermarried couples
- Workshops for teachers in our religious schools to enable them to work constructively to nurture the Jewish self-esteem of all the students while maintaining the Jewish integrity of the religious school
- An extensive library of manuals, guidebooks, and films about intermarriage
- Workshops for teenagers and college students on interdating and Jewish identity development

Presented at the Paul Cowan Memorial Conference on Intermarriage, Conversion, and Outreach at the City University of New York, October 24, 1989

- Development of a 5-day outreach internship for rabbinical students in which they come to Congregation Emanuel in Denver to observe a comprehensive outreach effort in place in a congregation (see the article by Heller in this journal)
- A full-time associate director and part-time regional coordinators in almost every UAHC region who offer assistance to all our member congregations

It is these very tangible aspects of outreach—the programs, materials, and resources developed over the past decade—that have caused the less tangible change in climate, in attitudes in the Jewish community; that is, the shift in communal response from “outrage to outreach.” Perhaps our proudest achievement in outreach is the development of a vocabulary about intermarriage, a way to talk about what makes us most uncomfortable.

Yet, outreach continues to be a delicate balancing act—rejecting intermarriage but not the intermarried and expressing openness and welcome while defining communal boundaries and maintaining Jewish integrity. After a decade of effort, these questions remain unresolved:

- Because we deal with a population that is unaffiliated with the Jewish community, how do we get our message out to the people who need to hear it?
- What happens to participants when they

finish an Introduction to Judaism course or a workshop for intermarried couples?

- Considering the changing demographics of the Jewish community, how can we help our institutions do long-range planning?
- If outreach is seen as a success, what does that mean? Do we have to accept intermarriage as a fact of American Jewish life? What message does this give to our children?
- Can we talk about "prevention" of intermarriage?
- What will be the impact on our congregations and communities of large numbers of Jews-by-Choice and intermarried couples who enter without Jewish pasts and Jewish memories? Will outreach lead to the de-Judaization of the synagogue?
- What are the limits of outreach? How do we find the point at which we draw the line yet not be seen as unwelcoming?

Outreach is still a field without experts.

As workers involved in outreach efforts, we continue to learn from each other. The people we reach, probably more than anyone else, continue to be our teachers. They challenge us to define ourselves, to explain what we stand for. The questions asked by Jews-by-Choice and intermarried couples—what does it mean to be a Jew or to live a Jewish life, what is the value and meaning of ritual, does being Jewish mean more than merely not being Christian—are the same questions we must constantly ask ourselves.

As we enter the second decade of outreach, we are learning that outreach is really not about conversion or intermarriage, it is about being Jewish. Jewish identity is at the core of outreach. Outreach empowers, enabling born Jews and Jews-by-Choice alike to own Judaism. It is about continuity and connectedness. Outreach leads to inreach, and inreach leads to outreach. In the coming years, inreach to born Jews will play an increasingly important role.

Inextricably linked with outreach is the need to articulate a Jewish identity for the

twenty-first century. In our highly mobile society, we can no longer identify Jews by name, face, or neighborhood. The "other" has become "us" or is related to us by marriage. Tomorrow's Jewish identity must not only take into account Jewish history and experience but must also reflect that Jews are members of a post-post-immigrant, post-post-Holocaust generation. We cannot transmit nostalgia; we can only transmit what we own and what lives in us.

How does intermarriage intersect with the changing Jewish community? Is it the cause of those changes or the effect of them? Many lament the loss of the old ways and assign responsibility for that loss on interfaith couples or Jews-by-Choice. For example, "*they*" don't understand the importance of the State of Israel, "*they*" don't support Jewish causes in this country, "*they*" want to shift the focus of Jewishness from peoplehood to religion. Yet, consider these questions.

- To what extent are these changes the result of fourth and fifth generation acculturation that would have occurred even if there was no intermarriage?
- To what extent are these changes inevitable?
- To what extent is outreach held accountable for those changes?
- To what extent can outreach in fact influence those changes?
- To what extent can outreach have an impact on the future and how can we guide that impact?

Given the enormity and complexity of the task of outreach, it is all too easy for outreach workers to feel isolated and overwhelmed. That is why it is important to focus on the commonalities of outreach efforts, whether they are undertaken in a synagogue or Jewish Community Center or are under the auspices of a federation or a religious movement. First, all outreach efforts share the common goal of maintaining the integrity of Judaism and ensuring the survival of the Jewish people.

Second, successful outreach can only be undertaken after an in-depth examination of its goals, constituency, and direction. And finally, outreach efforts are struggling with the same issues. Are we doing therapy, values clarification, or adult education? How comfortable are we in being assertive Jewishly as we reach out to the intermarried? Is it even possible to be neutral in

outreach? In true outreach fashion, each question gives rise to so many others. Outreach challenges our creativity and touches our very will to survive.

Rav Kook teaches, "The old must be renewed and the new must be made holy." That is the best description I can offer of the mission and promise of outreach.