



Let's Not Undermine Religious Conversion

by Jack Wertheimer

Rates of conversion to Judaism reached unprecedented levels in the 1970s and early 1980s in response to two factors: families exerted strong pressures on their intermarrying off-spring to create Jewish homes; and synagogues established educational programs to facilitate the conversion of non-Jews married to Jews. But then, when new initiatives toward greater "hospitality" were introduced in the 1980s, rates of conversion to Judaism declined steeply. The Reform movement redefined Jewish identity in its decision on "patrilineality" and congregations included non-Jewish spouses as active participants in their religious services and governance. These actions undoubtedly encouraged some conversions to Judaism by exposing non-Jews to synagogue life. But in the aggregate, their impact was to provide a major disincentive to conversion: For why convert if one already enjoyed virtually all the privileges of being Jewish? Most critically, these well-intentioned policies undermined efforts by families to bring about the conversion of a non-Jew who had married into their midst.

In light of the unprecedented openness of many contemporary synagogues, one can only wonder what Egon Mayer and Gary Tobin require when they insist that the Jewish community has been insufficiently welcoming of converts. The dust-jacket of Tobin's new book completely distorts the current reality when it portrays a synagogue with padlocked gates. Anyone who visits congregations around the country knows how many not only integrate converts but elevate them to positions of leadership. And so it should be since our tradition forbids us to discriminate against the convert.

As for Tobin's goal of converting the "unchurched," it is noble to speak of sharing the beauty and values of our religion with the world at large (which in any event has unprecedented opportunities to learn about Judaism through the Internet and Jewish Studies programs). In truth, there is no evidence of Americans in the "millions" hungering for the good news about Judaism. But there is ample evidence of a dire shortage of rabbis and trained religious educators to serve the current population of Jews. One can only shudder at the misplaced priorities of those who first wish to save the world before setting the Jewish house in order. And one can only marvel at the naivety of those convinced that "unchurched" Christians so lack an attachment to the religion of their birth that they crave a new religious option. Fortunately, no one in the Jewish community is as quick to write off "unsynagogued" Jews, for they, after all, are the majority.

The actual need perceived by some observers -- including Mayer and Tobin -- is for a means to "convert" non-Jews not to Judaism, but rather to Jewish peoplehood and community. Precisely because they recognize that only a small minority of non-Jews married to Jews truly wish to undergo a transformative experience (i.e. a genuine "conversion"), some advocates of a more aggressive outreach initiative wish to find a new way of conferring membership status in the Jewish community, a status that does not require the assumption of religious responsibilities. Not surprisingly, both Tobin and Mayer write with great impatience about rabbis who, true to their roles as teachers of tradition and adjudicators of Jewish law, remain steadfast in expecting converts to live as religious Jews.

Tobin would like to reduce those expectations. He would only ask the convert "to instruct the children in Jewish life, and not to raise a child in another religion; and he would insist on a "commitment not to practice another religion and accept the essence of ethical monotheism." Fortunately, no current version of Judaism sets the bar this low. One wonders whether any religion defines as its main imperative the expectation "not to practice another religion."

Still, Tobin's minimalism pales in comparison to Mayer's radicalism. Until the day before yesterday, intermarriage was considered an act of betrayal and a cause for familial, if not communal, mourning. Mayer would have us go to the opposite extreme: the Jew who intermarries carries no burden of responsibility; only the Jewish community has an obligation -- to "love" the intermarried. That interfaith families are loved by their relatives is understandable, but why is the rest of the Jewish community obliged to love them unconditionally? Mayer never traces the source of this imperative, but it should be amply clear to anyone who has studied Jewish history going back at least to the days of Ezra that Judaism has taught otherwise. Perhaps this is why neither Tobin nor Mayer bolster their arguments with any evidence from the Judaism they seem so eager to share with the world.

Sadly, their proposals to welcome minimally committed converts or semi-converts will further undermine efforts to bring interfaith families into the Jewish fold precisely because they will obviate the need for serious conversion. Even more dangerously, by creating multiple new categories of Jews, their programs will further contribute to the current confusion in the Jewish community about the nature of Jewish identity. Although they differ in details, the programs offered by Mayer and Tobin promise to convert the Jews into something they have never been -- a people bereft of religious convictions and religious boundaries.

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