

Are We Embracing the Intermarried

This is an account of an unsuccessful joint interview—unsuccessful not because it was an interview of two people at one time, not because they were inarticulate or uncooperative, and not because they always agreed with one another, but because they did not represent the range of opinion within the concerned Jewish community on a number of matters.

The subject was *keruv*—outreach, which turned out to be largely outreach to the intermarried. The two men had been known to disagree. Would they sit down together, face to face, and answer my questions? They would.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie is the newly elected president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC). By virtue of this position, he is a, if not the, leading spokesperson for Reform Judaism. Steven Bayme is Director of the Communal Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee.

Both had what we called “boundaries” beyond which they would not go to bring intermarried couples into the Jewish community. Bayme identified himself as a Modern Orthodox Jew. If a child of his fell in love with a non-Jew and decided to marry that person, Bayme would refuse to attend the wedding, he said.

Yoffie, too, had boundaries. He would refuse to officiate at a mixed marriage and would only reluctantly, if at all, refer them to one of the over 40 percent of Reform rabbis who do officiate at mixed marriages.

That is the range within which the discussion took place. To the extent that it was a somewhat narrow range, the interview was unsuccessful. But we have no doubt that this imbalance, if that is what it is, will be corrected by readers’ responses to this presentation. Thus, we will be able to present an even wider range of views on this highly divisive topic.—H.S.

Bayme and Yoffie vigorously disagreed with one another about what was appropriate in reaching out to the intermarried.

Bayme: There is room for outreach. It’s important as a vehicle to keep the dialogue alive with couples who are not yet ready for conversion to pave the way to conversion. But outreach poses dangers on two major grounds. (1) It may very well not work. Two-thirds of mixed-marriage couples have no interest in anything the Jewish community could possibly say or do. They’ve taken a walk. That’s the price of living in a free society. I don’t think we should be chasing people who have no desire to be chased. (2) When outreach is successful, it poses the danger of a cultural transformation within the Jewish community in which we alter our values, we alter our language, we alter our perspective of mixed marriage so that we can no longer say that we’re in the business of encouraging in-marriage. In other words, outreach, even when it works, can make it difficult, if not impossible, to discourage interfaith marriage. Outreach poses a danger of becoming neutral toward mixed marriage.

I hear statements by outreach advocates to the effect that we [Jews] are nonjudgmental about mixed-marriage; we’re neutral towards the phenomenon. Someone even got on the *Today Show* and said that the



Eric Yoffie



Steven Bayme

or Diluting Judaism?

"Jewish community is past discouraging mixed marriage."

The Jewish community is divided into three major components. It has a core of about 20 to 25 percent who are full-time Jews. At the other end of the spectrum, there are 10 to 20 percent who are unaffiliated, uninterested. The target of the Jewish continuity initiatives ought to be the broad middle, those 50 to 55 percent who have an interest in leading a Jewish life but may not have the will to be able to do it. They deserve the support, encouragement, nurturing of all the religious movements to become serious Jews. Regrettably, it is only a minority of mixed marrieds that are in that middle category; the majority of mixed marrieds are in the outer category. In that context, the emphasis upon outreach is misplaced.

Yoffie: The dangers of drawing people in, as described by Steve, I think are greatly overstated.

Intermarriage is a reality. We have not found the way, even in the midst of a new seriousness of purpose of American Jews, to stem the tide of intermarriage.

There is a very broad consensus in our community, when we look at our intermarried children, that the overwhelming need is to draw them into the community, to find a way to make them part of our synagogues, to promote their identity with the Jewish

people. What is the appropriate response after an intermarriage? For the overwhelming percentage of American Jews it is, I believe, "Embrace them, be inclusive."

Our first preference surely would be for the non-Jewish partner to convert. If that is not possible, do all that you can to assure that the children are raised as Jews.

We're talking about an enormous number of people here; we are not prepared to write them off.

Outreach and inclusiveness is not inconsistent with drawing lines and drawing boundaries. In the absence of boundaries, it's impossible to be a serious Jew. If there is no line between who I am and the rest of the world, if there is no distinction between embracing the values of Torah and being beyond the boundaries of Torah, then there is no reason for me to be Jewish or for anyone else to think seriously of joining the destiny of the Jewish people. But outreach is not inconsistent with boundaries, and boundaries are essential for serious Judaism.

Bayme and Yoffie had different boundaries, however, as might be expected.

MOMENT: *How would you respond, Steve, if one of your children were to intermarry? I assume you're against intermarriage, but what if a kid comes home and says, "Dad, I'm in love with a non-Jew, I know you disapprove, but*

I'm going to marry that person anyway."

Bayme: I want them to know, number one, that we strongly disapprove.

MOMENT: *They know that already, don't they?*

Bayme: Beyond that, they have to take the responsibility, as adults.

MOMENT: *Would you go to the wedding?*

Bayme: I certainly would not go.

Yoffie: Let me tell you what the boundaries are for me. I don't perform interfaith marriages. I personally do not believe that rabbis should marry Jews and non-Jews. I think that it is possible to explain to a couple why performing such a marriage is not possible for me and at the same time to urge them to affiliate with the Jewish community and to join a synagogue.

MOMENT: *If they wanted to be married by a rabbi, would you urge them to look for another rabbi who would marry them?*

Yoffie: My personal practice is to urge that they be married in a civil ceremony.

MOMENT: *Is that embracing? Is that inclusive?*

Yoffie: It's inclusive in that I explain to them why I do what I do; then I make it clear to them they would be welcome in my synagogue or in other synagogues. I urge them to join the community, to affiliate with a synagogue and to

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immerse themselves in various aspects of Jewish life.

MOMENT: *What would you say to them when they say, “Rabbi, we respect your decision, but we very much want to be married by a rabbi. It would be very meaningful to us, and it would be encouraging to my future spouse to be welcomed in that way by my religion. I understand your reasons why you won’t marry us, as much as we’d like you to, and we respect you for that. But would you recommend a rabbi who would marry us?” What would be your reply to that?*

Yoffie: I would recommend them to somebody in the community who I felt had a responsible policy on officiating at an intermarriage.

MOMENT: *A rabbi?*

Yoffie: A rabbi.

Bayme: In 1979 only about 10 percent of the Reform rabbinate was willing to perform mixed marriages under any circumstances; now it’s over 40 percent. In 1979 the common position was “I don’t perform mixed marriages, nor do I recommend anyone who would.” Now I think we’re hearing a much different message. That new attitude runs the risk of neutrality toward mixed marriage. For the 60 percent who don’t perform mixed marriages, I think the dominant attitude is one that Eric [Yoffie] expressed, namely that “I don’t do it, but if you push me, I’ll recommend someone who does.”

I gave an address before the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1991 where I discouraged rabbinic officiation at intermarriages. After the speech, the director of outreach of UAHC circulated a letter saying “Prevention is the wrong goal.” Once you say prevention is the wrong goal, then you’ve offered a statement of neutrality toward mixed marriage.

My fear is that within the Jewish community the language of intermarriage prevention can become politically incorrect. In our well-intentioned desire to be inclusive, someone who gets up before a Jewish communal forum and says the Jewish community wants to do what it can to discourage interfaith marriage is going to find his or her life extremely difficult. That is not what most American Jews want to hear right now.

I was recently asked by a Reform rabbi if I would address the officers of his NFTY [National Federation of Temple Youth] group. Rather than give a formal address, I decided just to ask them questions. Quite innocently, I asked, “How do you kids feel about interdating and interfaith marriage?” The unanimous response was—the current message of the Reform movement—that it’s okay as long as the children are raised as Jews. As prime evidence of that, they pointed out that the NFTY coordinator—a paid worker—was herself in a mixed marriage. Now that, to me, is a statement of ideological neutrality.

The basic message of the Conservative movement is, focus mostly on Jews who are already in the synagogue and help them to lead a Jewish life. I support that.

The Reform movement has become the basic address—it’s perceived this way within the Jewish community—where those who are less religious are welcomed. I think Eric is correct in fighting that, in saying that the basic message of Reform Judaism must be serious Judaism.

But its image in the community is that it is the place for the less committed. Therefore, the Reform movement has the potential to reach larger numbers of people. I want to see them do that, but not at the price of diluting serious Judaism.

Yoffie: Obviously, I don’t agree with Steve’s characterization of our image. We offer a distinctive liberal approach to Judaism. Many people are drawn to us because they identify with who we are and what we believe. We are committed to thoughtfully changing and adapting Judaism in a non-*halachic* framework. We believe in the absolute equality of men and women in all aspects of Jewish religious life. We believe in social justice, the jewel in the crown. I don’t deny that there may be elements of our constituency who join because they’re less religious and some see us as somehow being less religious. But the majority of people who associate with a Reform synagogue do so for positive reasons. They identify with those values that I have just articulated.

I also accept the fact that we are seen as the place that is most open to mixed married couples. In that sense, we have a critical role to play because we are not going to write those Jews off, and we are not going to write our children off. My hope is that ultimately all synagogues and all movements will find some way to create an appropriate role for intermarried couples who are drawn to Judaism.

Bayme: To me, there is a tension within the Reform movement. Some committed Reform Jews resonate to the kinds of messages Eric is talking about. There are people who say that being a Reform Jew does not mean I am less a Jew; it means I am distinctive in my liberal approach to ideological Jewish issues and practices. But the Reform movement also has a large number of people who are not Reform Jews. The movement has the responsibility and the burden, if

you will, of speaking on behalf of people who are not Reform Jews ideologically but may be loosely affiliated [with Judaism].

The tension between the two groups is reflected in the debate, "Should rabbis officiate at mixed marriages?" Those Reform rabbis who say no recognize that you can't be distinctive when you become neutral toward a mixed marriage, which is what rabbinic officiation, by and large, means. Those Reform rabbis who do officiate are arguing that our primary obligation is to represent those who are not Reform Jews but who are loosely identified with the Reform movement. That's where the pressure for greater outreach is coming from. I think that is a real tension within the movement.

The percentage of conversions of a non-Jewish spouse in an intermarriage has in recent years, both men agreed, declined. The two men had different explanations. But there may well be others.

Bayme: Conversion rates among intermarried couples have plummeted over the last ten years. In 1980, when the American Jewish Committee released its study on conversion and mixed marriage, we were estimating that one in three mixed marriages would end up in conversion to Judaism. By 1985 it was one in six. By 1990, when the National Jewish Population Survey was released, a mixed marriage ended up in conversion only in five percent of the cases. Now I ask myself, why has conversion plummeted? The most obvious reason is that mixed marriage has become far more acceptable.

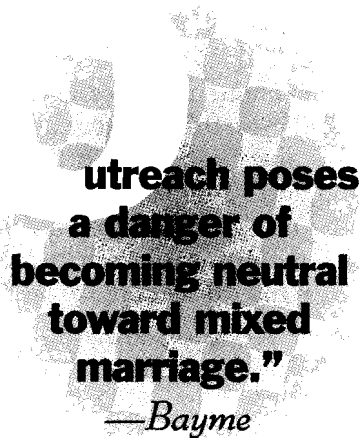
Yoffie: There is less pressure to convert because families impose less pressure and partners no longer feel an obligation to urge conversion. All that is part of the reality of the world in which we live. We have found no solution to that throughout our history. Arthur Hertzberg

points out that as a historical fact, if you look at a free, open, democratic society where Jews enjoy full civil and political rights, by the third generation the intermarriage rate will reach 50 percent. This suggests that we don't have a great deal of control over this.

Despite their differences, the two men agreed that religion was the only way to stem intermarriage and that the synagogue must be the primary instrument for inculcating religion.

MOMENT: *What would you do, Rabbi Yoffie, to prevent intermarriage?*

Yoffie: The solution is serious Judaism. The one answer is Torah, Torah, Torah. To the extent that we're serious Jews, we're going to be far less likely to marry out.



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—Bayme

The covenant between God and the Jewish people is an inclusive covenant. Every Jew has within him or within her a presence of *Shechinah* (God's presence in the world and, according to Kabbalah, the feminine aspect of the divine). When a Jew marries a non-Jew, we don't push them away. We draw in that Jew. If that requires that we draw in and embrace the non-Jewish partner, we do that as well. I'm not prepared to write off his son or my son, his daughter or my daughter.

As a religious leader, I'm in the business of promoting serious

Judaism. The best way to promote serious Judaism is for two committed Jews to marry each other. I have no problem saying I discourage intermarriage. At the same time, once it occurs, we welcome the intermarried into the community and wish to draw them towards a commitment to Judaism. We live with tension. We can discourage intermarriage and still welcome the intermarried.

MOMENT: *Where are you going to draw the boundaries, Rabbi Yoffie? You have already said that there's one boundary: You won't marry a Jew and a non-Jew, you won't officiate at such a marriage. In your view, could the non-Jewish spouse join the Jewish spouse on the bimah for an aliyah?*

Yoffie: When I was a congregational rabbi, the non-Jewish spouse joined the Jewish spouse on the bimah.

MOMENT: *Could the non-Jewish spouse recite the blessings?*

Yoffie: I did not permit that.

MOMENT: *So that's a boundary.*

Yoffie: For me, that was a boundary.

MOMENT: *In other words, the non-Jewish spouse could stand there but not open his or her mouth.*

Yoffie: We did offer non-Jewish spouses other options. It was inappropriate in my view for a non-Jewish spouse to say a blessing before or after the Torah for obvious reasons.

MOMENT: *Tell me what the obvious reasons are.*

Yoffie: *Asher bacher banu* (who has chosen us) is an inappropriate phrase for a non-Jew to say, to make a reference to being chosen if one is a non-Jew and not a member of the Jewish people.

MOMENT: *Do you subscribe to the traditional understanding of the chosen people?*

Yoffie: Do I view the Jews as the chosen people? Absolutely. We are a chosen people with a particular destiny and with a particular relationship with God. As a matter of history

and as a matter of faith, we are people chosen by God to fulfill a particular destiny in God's creation. That's what it means to be a Jew, someone who identifies with the destiny of the Jewish people.

Conversion rates among intermarried couples have plummeted over the last 10 years. The reason: Mixed marriage has become far more acceptable.

—Bayme

MOMENT: Do you think most Jews believe that?

Yoffie: Some believe it, some don't. Some act as if it's true even if they don't believe it. Whether they believe it or not is not, for me, the essential question. As a religious leader, my task is to teach Torah and to move them in that direction. I believe that Judaism is so attractive, so compelling, that the power and profundity of Jewish faith is so overwhelming that, appropriately presented, many non-Jews and, in particular, spouses of Jews, are open to, and ultimately can be brought to embrace, Jewish tradition. That's at the heart of my approach to outreach. When that's not possible, their children can still be raised as Jews.

There are essentially three categories of boundaries that we face

when we're talking about non-Jewish couples who are members of synagogues. First, issues of membership: Are they formally entitled to be members? Second, issues of governance: Are there certain leadership positions in the synagogue that a non-Jew should be excluded from? Third, issues of ritual: Are there public rituals from which a non-Jew should be barred? In the Reform movement—and we are not halachic—the drawing of boundaries is something we do only with reluctance. We offer guidance, we offer direction. As a movement, we are reluctant to take a halachic or a quasi-halachic stance, to proclaim that some things are forbidden. Having said that, we *do* do that on occasion. In this instance, individual congregations have come to their own resolution of these issues. In all three areas most of our congregations have come to eminently sensible resolutions. They've drawn boundaries in reasonable places. In some instances, congregations have made decisions with which I may not be comfortable. But by and large, it has worked out very well.

MOMENT: Is it important to have a clear boundary between Jew and non-Jew?

Yoffie: Absolutely, it's important. If we're just like everyone else, there's no point in anyone being a Jew. Otherwise, the whole Jewish enterprise of 3,000 years makes no sense.

MOMENT: Rabbi Yoffie has said that the synagogue is the primary vehicle for Jewish continuity. Do you agree with that Steve?

Bayme: Absolutely. That's why I think the answer to the continuity question depends on whether the religious movements, particularly the liberal religious movements, the non-Orthodox religious movements, will be serious in their Judaism.

MOMENT: What percentage of Jews are members of synagogues?

Bayme: A minority—about 43 to 45 percent.

Yoffie: As far as I am concerned (this is not something that a lot of people will be happy to hear), outreach is an enterprise for the synagogue, because Judaism is primarily a matter of religious commitment. The synagogue is the vehicle for promoting religious commitment. Other institutions may have minor roles to play, but there is no way that outreach, as I understand it, is ultimately going to be successful and touch the hearts of people and draw them in unless it is carried out by a serious, religious institution. So it's primarily the concern and responsibility of the synagogue. The primary responsibility of communal institutions—I want to be clear here—is to support those religious institutions, namely, the synagogue.

The two men agreed that non-synagogue institutions had a very limited role in Jewish continuity, another issue on which this interview did not reflect the full range of Jewish opinion.

Bayme: Most of the pressure for increased outreach to mixed marriages today is coming from non-synagogal settings—the Jewish community center, the Federation, the family and children service agencies, even Hillel. Much of my problem with outreach is precisely that the further away it gets from the synagogue, the greater the tendency toward ideological neutrality toward mixed marriage.

Yoffie: Write that down. I agree with it.

There is an effort among community centers to be involved. I see some dangers in that. The synagogue absolutely has to be the central address and the leadership. If a decade from now we find outreach programs being run on a major scale by non-synagogue institutions—community centers and others—I would consider that to

be a disaster. I am supportive of community centers. They do vital work, but they are not primarily religious institutions entrusted with observing Torah.

Outreach will be successful only if you promote religious commitment as the heart of identification with the Jewish people. [The Jewish Community Center] is not an appropriate address for that. There has been a shift in Jewish Community Centers toward full-time Jewish educators on staff. In other words, the Jewish Community Centers are becoming a central address in serious Jewish education. I think that must be warmly welcomed. That's their major contribution. It's an entry point to Jewish life. The danger is when outreach to mix-marrieds becomes located in a non-synagogal atmosphere. Then all of the assumptions, all of the pressures, all of the cultural apparatus that goes with it, are that we are completely neutral toward mixed marriage.

It's even been suggested that outreach programs should be kept out of the synagogue because of the discomfort that certain ele-

ments of the community may have with the synagogue structure and the implications of the synagogue structure relating to a more religious commitment. That kind of approach to outreach I consider to be an utter disaster.

As might be expected, the two men disagreed on the amount of money devoted to outreach efforts.

Bayme: The reason I became so active on the issue of resources spent on outreach is that we were confronted by outreach advocates, especially the Jewish Outreach Institute, who were calling for a broader allocation of resources to outreach to mixed-marrieds. What offended me most was when the president of the Jewish Outreach Institute called for an allocation of \$6 million per year to outreach mix-marrieds as a vehicle memorializing the six million of the Holocaust. I was offended by it theologically.

What percentage of the synagogue's programming is being devoted to outreach to mixed-marrieds? I don't think we have any answer to that.

Yoffie: That's a totally meaningless question. In the average synagogue, there is no distinction between general educational work, youth work, and outreach. There is no compartmentalized allocation that goes into outreach. True, rabbis do spend time trying to draw in interfaith couples, teaching conversion classes. But in a sense, anything you do has a connection to outreach because you try to promote serious Judaism. But the notion of local synagogue allocations to outreach is simply a nonsensical notion. That's not the way synagogues organize themselves.

Bayme: I would simply define my activities as providing a corrective to pressures in the community to increase the dollars. It's not a matter of taking away the small number of dollars currently being

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—*Bayme*

spent, but of resisting greater pressure to continue further programming around outreach.

The pressure for outreach is not coming from the mixed marrieds themselves. If it were, you could say, "Well, listen, this is the target population that we're trying to bring closer." The pressure is coming from parents and grandparents.

Yoffie: If we use that criteria for our allocations, it's not clear we'd be spending money on anything. Who is it that generates pressure for allocations in areas of education and camping and day schools? It's parents and grandparents who care about the future, who care about their own immediate family members and want to promote serious Judaism for them. The notion that the target group itself has to be a vocal advocate of this programming—that's preferable. But, it's not, generally speaking, the way it works. There ought to be a great deal more money allocated to out

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here ought to be a great deal more money allocated to outreach. You would be talking about a tiny percentage of overall allocations.
—*Yoffie*

Outreach

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reach than we currently have, and you would still be talking about a tiny percentage of overall allocations.

I asked Rabbi Yoffie to describe one of his movement's outreach programs.

Yoffie: One of the programs is called "Taste of Judaism." It's three sessions, two hours each, taught by a highly trained teacher, usually a rabbi, on the fundamentals of Jewish life. It's offered at no cost and advertised in the general media. This is key. People on the margins don't read the Jewish media. The idea is that this is a gateway into the Jewish community. It leads to further study in our "Introduction to Judaism" courses and hopefully to synagogue affiliation.

The program has been wildly successful. People really are flocking to these programs. What's interesting is the mix of people who come. We get Jews on the margins, people who have been disaffected. They see the advertisement, and it reignites some kind of Jewish spark. We get intermarried couples. They say, "It's time for us to struggle with Jewish issues." Maybe they're thinking about children and want to take a serious look at Judaism, almost always at the urging of the Jewish partner. We also get a number of non-Jews because they are fascinated by the prospect of learning more about Judaism. Those who are utterly disinterested and really have no connection, we don't know how to reach them.

MOMENT: *Steve, what do you think of the "Taste to Judaism" program Rabbi Yoffie has described?*

Bayme: Hardly any of these programs has been evaluated. That's a real lack in Jewish life. If you ask program directors how they're doing, you will find there's not a program across the country that's not succeeded. Every program is batting 1,000 percent. Our inability to evaluate what's working and what's not working is a real absence in Jewish life. Secondly, I'm concerned to the extent these programs are creating an atmosphere in synagogues in which the officers of NFTY—the ones that are most committed—are saying that the primary message we brought from the synagogue is that intermarriage is OK as long as the kids are raised Jewish.

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Outreach

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MOMENT: *Rabbi Yoffie, what would you say to the executive director of a JCC who says, "I want to have a program of Jewish education, I want to encourage people in home observance, to light candles, to say kiddush on Friday night, to have a seder, to observe hagim in some way or another, but I have to tell you that many, many people who walk through these JCC doors are turned off by synagogues. I want to reclaim them for Judaism, and that's a kind of outreach that I think is important." What would you say to that JCC executive director?*

Yoffie: I think that approach is a mistake.

MOMENT: *Why?*

Yoffie: We don't want to create an alternative to the synagogue—for people who desperately need the connections and the support and the religious guidance that a synagogue can provide.

MOMENT: *But they say, "I don't need it!"*

Yoffie: I don't believe that they don't need it. The notion of there being a population out there that's open to Judaism but which is hostile to religious expressions of Judaism is a concept that

I don't accept. I don't think it's rooted in reality. I think, as a matter of policy for the Jewish community, we have to direct our efforts toward bringing people into the synagogue and into religious life.

Bayme: There ought to be an acknowledgment there is no Jewish continuity absent a serious commitment to Judaism. That's where I think Eric and I agree. And the JCC should be building on that theme, ultimately bringing their constituency into Jewish religious life. JCCs should not be operating at cross-purposes with synagogues, certainly not as an alternative to synagogues. The last thing we need is a fifth Jewish dimension—a fifth Jewish alternative. What we do need is an agency or a set of institutions that is going to be able to connect Jews to other mainstream Jewish institutions.

Unfortunately, much of what drives outreach is a kind of false hope, a false expectation that if only we reach out to these people that they will flock to us. A rough analogy is a voter registration drive that assumes that people who are registered will later vote, when the num-

ber of registered voters who actually vote is quite low. You have to ask to what extent a well-intentioned effort at marketing dilutes this thing called Jewishness.

The most horrendous example I've seen occurred just before Rosh Hashanah. An outreach group took out ads on the Internet: "Hear the Shofar in Cyberspace!" They're very proud of it; they said this is a wonderful thing, how we got people for whom Rosh Hashanah would otherwise be meaningless to hear the shofar.

MOMENT: *Maybe the people who put this on the Internet were saying, "If you're not going to synagogue to hear the shofar, at least hear it on cyberspace; maybe next year you'll hear it in a synagogue." That might be their rationale. They may be saying (a) that obviously it's better to hear the shofar in a synagogue, but it's better to hear it on the Internet than not to hear it at all and (b) that if you hear it on the Internet this year, maybe next year you'll hear it in a synagogue.*

Bayme: If that happens, wonderful. But I'm skeptical. We must avoid transforming what we are in the well-intentioned desire to reach people out there. 🍷