

The Challenge of Outreach: Turning On Turned Off Jews*

Rabbi Richard J. Israel

Director, Hillel Foundations of Greater Boston, Massachusetts

. . . In addition to being Jewish, if we are to attract the unaffiliated, we must be interesting. The number of policy issues which are debated within the American Jewish community are very few indeed, and boredom can be a by-product of consensus decision-making.

To discuss the question of outreach only as a technological issue, as if a number of clever organizing ideas would solve our problems, is, I think, a mistake.

It is relevant to see how we all lost those hard-to-reach Jews in the first place. Though contemporary assimilation is not altogether unique, we should still see if we can understand some of the reasons for the phenomenon. Outreach would have been difficult to explain to our forefathers. It seems unlikely that they had an outreach conference in Vilna at the turn of the century, or that there was concern about unaffiliated Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto in the forties. In both of these situations, Jews had options about the sort of Jews they wanted to be, but the option not to be Jews was hardly available. Our people today *have* clear options not to be Jewish. Without having to be programmatic assimilationists, they can drift away quietly as non-Christians, something that could not have happened easily to many generations of the past.

They are able to drift away for two reasons: because we are now living in an open society, and because of the special origins of the American Jewish community. The open society is self evident. With respect to our origins, it should be noted that we are essentially an Eastern European Jewish community, but only a segment of that community.

In the old country, one could have divided that community with reasonable accuracy into three categories: The Orthodox, the Zionists,

and the Socialists. The members of all three groups were hard ideologues. The Orthodox by and large stayed in Eastern Europe because they didn't want to come to a *trayfe* land. There, they were murdered by the Nazis. The Socialists abandoned their Judaism and joined the revolution. They were killed during the war, succeeded in assimilating, or are now those who, either they or their children, are currently trying to get out of the USSR. But, they did not come to the United States as a significant group earlier. The Zionists who could get out, of course went to Israel.

Though they had grown up in a world of Zionism, Socialism, and Orthodoxy, the Jews who came to the United States were therefore the Jews who had no special commitments to life in Israel, or to staying in Europe. They were Jews who were religious, but not really Orthodox, who were friendly to Israel, but not really Zionists, and who were liberal, but not really Socialists . . . In short, a group of lukewarm, non-ideological Jews, whose *pareve* qualities made them well suited for the pragmatic life style of the United States. Thus, in our Jewish community today, we are less likely to derive our Jewish values from the Bible or the Talmud than we are from the Three Bears. That is, we generally want our Jewish community to be not too hot, not too cold, but just right. It is no wonder that the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews are easily blurred, and that we are now in search of folks who have drifted, or may be on the verge of drifting out.

Another way to get insight into the outreach problem is to look at the major patterns of affiliation of those who *have* chosen to join up, patterns which suggest why some others do not.

* Presented at the Fall Forum of the New England Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Boston, October 17, 1979.

First of all, there are the current ideologues. They are the smallest group, though probably the most rapid growing affiliation group. The Zionists or Socialists barely exist. The only significant ideological group making claims on the American Jewish community is the one that is also the most recent Eastern European group in the American Jewish community . . . namely, Orthodoxy.

Second, the largest Jewish affiliation group is the ethnic. These are the essentially non-ideological people who join synagogues, contribute to CJP, eat lox and bagels . . . all because they feel Jewish, even though the Jewishness is largely without content.

Third, there are the *shlemiels*, the group the Glocks have described in their studies of Protestant churches as "the poor of spirit." They are the people who hold themselves together with bits of psychic string and glue. They desperately need the Jewish community to provide them with the structure which makes it possible for them to keep going. They volunteer to the point of making us feel nervous and guilty. They fight for causes we wish they weren't quite so zealous about. They always ask those dumb first questions at public meetings. They often become angry at us for not making our agendas identical to their agendas. They make us feel inadequate, for we don't have enough love to sustain them.

Finally, there are the professionals, the group that I am going to talk about because we know them so well. We have met the enemy and we are they.

Being a professional is one very important way to affiliate with the Jewish community. The professional role permits many of us to be active, committed Jews without having to have any sort of an ideology. We can solve our Jewish problems by working for the Jews. We don't need to bother making inner commitments—after all, (we tell ourselves) we are already giving our time. The pattern works so well that many of our laypeople have learned to adopt it, which is one of the reasons that Jewish Federations succeed. Federations are veritable beehives of ideology-free Jewish

activity. People are asked to give money for the Jewish people, and for Jewishness, without ever having to ask why it is important for there to be Jewish people or a Jewish tradition.

How many Jews does it take to blow a shofar? It used to take only one. Now, if we are to believe the UJA poster with all the hands, no one blows it, but five one-armed Jews just chase each other to see who can exhibit it the best. A possible interpretation of that poster is that Jewish symbols are dramatic and powerful—as long as they are not used within their traditional contexts. It may also suggest that cooperative activity (those hands checking each other's pulses) is more important than the final outcome. But ultimately, only one Jew can blow a shofar. It must be one's own personal Jewish act. You can't get a note out without committing something of your *neshamah*. Activity without high seriousness is Judaism without *neshamah*. In the long run, it won't work.

If we now have to beat the bushes for the unaffiliated, I submit that at least one of the reasons they are unaffiliated is that the currently available patterns of affiliation do not work for them: Orthodoxy is too foreign. Their own ethnicity is diluted beyond the point where it can be cultivated by anything short of a major anti-Semitic upsurge. The *shlemiels* scare them away, and Jewish professionalism appears to be empty bureaucracy without importance.

(On this last, I was intrigued with how many of my former Yale students were surprised that I was willing to leave the post of Hillel Director at Yale to become the regional executive for Hillel in Boston. For me, it seemed like a logical step up. For them, it was an irrational step down. When at Yale, they felt I was connected with the world of culture and civility, even though I worked for the Jews. In Boston, I would be a bureaucrat like every other bureaucrat in the world.)

Though administrative skills tempered with blandness, consensus, and neutrality may have served us well in the past, we may now need to be different if we are to interest those who

have not joined us thus far. Though I don't remember the precise text, Eugene O'Neil has one of his characters confront her son saying, "Why are you leaving me? I only want you to stay and take care of the grocery store. It is a small thing." The son replies, "Yes it is a small thing and that is why I will not stay. But if you were to ask great things of me I would move mountains." It may be time for us to ask great things of one another, and that means more than raising money. We may need to work toward a return to Jewish community with content.

We are deceived if we believe that being professional means to have no position. We have forgotten that the original meaning of the term professional, was someone who had something to profess. A professional believed in something so strongly as to want to transform personal conviction into a life's work.

Several years ago, I needed someone to be a *hazan* at the Federation weekend. A person I knew to have real cantorial skills was working at the Federation of that community. His supervisor strongly opposed my friend's filling that function because it would make it difficult for lay people to be able to view him as "professional" if they also saw him as a cantor. I am arguing that we ought to be in this business because it is our whole lives and not just what we do from nine to five, and the more lay people see that we also are cantors and light candles and are up to date on Jewish books and know some Hebrew, the better it will be for the Jews. We have no right just to be technicians. We have to care enough to want the Jewish community to be one that we are not embarrassed to be in. We must work for a vision, not just an agency, otherwise we might all just as well be selling life insurance.

Not only ought we have a vision, we ought to try to inject that vision into our work in our agencies. Those agencies certainly attempt to put out a Jewish product, but not necessarily with a Jewish process. Not long ago, my office borrowed an electric typewriter from one of the other Hillel offices. The typewriter that we

borrowed broke down. Who should pay for the repair, my office or theirs? The other staff person and I had a quick discussion of analogous cases which were cited by the Talmud, and we were able to work out a decision. That was nice and it was easy.

The harder questions are: Can we distribute tasks in such a way that people will not have to work on Shabbat and Yom Tov in order to catch up with assignments? Can we hire, fire, and supervise people Jewishly? Can we accept functional assignments, do management by objectives, zero based or 15% up and down budgeting, raise more money . . . can we do all these things now only for the Jews but in Jewish ways?

It is not clear that the Jewish tradition has the resources to deal with all such questions, but I believe that it is very important to try to keep the issues alive. It is important that we remain deeply concerned if we are to stand for something, and therefore be worth affiliating with.

To raise one child Jewishly is very tough work. Those who struggle with that task know that the real Jewish relationships of people in a home determine the Jewish outcome of a child's education far more than any slogan that might be expressed by the parents. To raise a generation of Jews and Jewish institutions is just as hard. To do so, both our own internal lives and those of our institutions must be Jewish in important ways. Not that ideology alone can save the Jewish community but it is an important dimension that has been neglected. Having it won't save us, but not having it may be fatal.

In addition to being Jewish, if we are to attract the unaffiliated, we must be interesting. The number of policy issues which are debated within the American Jewish community are very few indeed, and boredom can be a by-product of consensus decision-making. Why should there not be debates at least among the professionals of the community about the wisdom of building new community centers, Project Renewal, support for day schools or the hospitals? With such debate, we

can either stand behind these allocations more effectively or oppose them more effectively. What we do is act as if these issues are not our problem, that the lay people own the community, not we. We are just hired hands. Unless we say what we think, not only on the small technical issues, but on the large substantive ones as well, the Messiah will never be brought by our committee meetings.

I am not saying that a Jewish community whose professionals spend all of their time debating, would be an improved Jewish community. Certainly there is a point beyond which ideological discussion is non-productive, when we have to get to the task at hand even if we do not have unanimity. There will be times when pulling together will be a greater virtue than lively discussion. But the folks currently making decisions usually think that the time for pulling together is always. I disagree. We ought to express ourselves as Jews with convictions, perhaps even as Jews who care as much about the direction of the Jewish future as any lay people. At least one way to make outreach work easier is to make the Jewish community more lively.

To be sure, there are many technical things that we need to learn from one another. To say that we ought to have Jewish passions is not to say that we should run sloppy shops. For example, to find out how to reach young adults, we have to know about their socializing patterns, and their developmental tasks, and how we might relate to these. If we are to recruit effectively, it is important to spend energies on the most promising Jewish populations, not the least. We must determine which they are.

But I also believe that each of us has Jewish sparks which ignite unpredictably during our lives. At those magic moments, we want to bring our small sparks to a larger fire. If there is no fire (the fire that I would define as a warm lively Jewish community which engages real issues), if there is only a community of technocrats moving chairs around efficiently, then those sparks will never come together. They will cool and vanish, and our best techniques will mean very little. We can only bring people back if we have something to bring them back to.