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De-Constructing the Outreach-Inreach Debate

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As is widely recognized, the concern for Jewish continuity has stood at the top of the organized Jewish community's agenda, at least for the last five years or so. Quite naturally, the issue has provoked a number of key strategic debates. One of the earliest was between what may be called "associationists" and "educationists." Another divides the educationists into two camps: the advocates of "near-inreach," and the proponents of "far-outreach" (Cohen 1993).

With regard to the first debate, by associationists I refer to those who believe the main goal of what have been called "Jewish continuity" programs is to increase opportunities for Jewish association, to bring Jews together, especially single young adult Jews. The principal aim here is to encourage them to engage in romance, marriage, and parenting. In contrast, Jewish educators, rabbis, enlightened lay leaders and communal professionals (as well as their high-paid social science consultants) have argued for a different approach. They contend that Jewish continuity demands Jewish content, that association is only a necessary, but not a sufficient, step to promoting a higher quality of Jewish life. For them, Jewish education – in some form, if not in all its forms – is the *sine qua non* of the Jewish continuity enterprise. This debate, I submit, has been resolved by

Jewish continuity enterprise. This debate, I submit, has been resolved by the victory of the educationists. Jewish continuity commission after Jewish continuity commission has placed Jewish education at the top of their agendas for action (e.g., North American Commission ... 1995).

However, the other debate -- the one among the educationists, the one pitting advocates of near-inreach against advocates of far-outreach -- remains alive and well and thriving. It is that debate I wish to examine in this paper, to “de-construct,” if you will. For as critical as that debate may be, even more critical are the fundamental assumptions and differences that divide these two camps. And whatever one’s position on the relative desirability of far-outreach or near-inreach, one may find oneself on one side or the other of the several intriguing ancillary questions that surround this debate. In short, I wish to treat this debate as a “sugya,” a controversy rich in meaning and implications.

Stating matters simply, the two camps differ over their ideal main target audience for discretionary educational resources. The far-outreach advocates are most concerned about the high rates of intermarriage and the consequent likelihood that thousands of Jews or their children will cease to identify as Jews. Hence, they target the intermarried, their spouses, their children, potential converts, and the least Jewishly involved of all sorts. Their principal tools are programs designed to entice the least involved to give serious consideration to the finer and more attractive aspects of Jewish living.

In sharp contrast, near-inreach advocates are most concerned about enlarging, enriching, and nurturing the activist core of the most involved Jews (Wertheimer et al. 1996). They (and as a long-standing member of the inreach party, I must say, “we”) ask: Where are we most likely

to find new recruits to augment this activist group -- be it defined in terms of frequent synagogue attendance, or serious Jewish commitment to Tik-kun Olam, or regularly celebrating Shabbat, or attending day schools, or visiting Israel; or regular text study, or any of a number of reasonable criteria? Obviously, the potential new recruits are to be found among the group I dubbed the "moderately affiliated" over a decade ago (Cohen 1985), those who already belong to our institutions, yet are not exactly enthusiastic participants in Jewish life. Not only are these people easier to locate than the most peripheral or the totally unaffiliated; but, by definition, the current levels of Jewish involvement among the moderately affiliated place them closer to those of the most engaged Jews whose numbers we seek to expand.

But, as noted above, the argument between these two educationist schools goes deeper than the selection of the most appropriate target audience. It goes also to such broader questions as our image of the future of American Jewry, the purposes of Jewish education, and the function of standards, boundaries, and norms. Each of these issues bears elaboration.

~~The advocates of far-outreach ground their position on a particularly gloomy view of the American Jewish future. They cite the high and rising rates of intermarriage as a cause for alarm. They argue that the next few years constitute a brief window of time during which we may have the last chance of assuring the Jewish identity of thousands of intermarried Jews and their families. The likely and eventual departure of the intermarried couples' children from the Jewish people will severely deplete the numbers of American Jews.~~

Near-inreach advocates have a somewhat less alarmist view of the American Jewish future. Members of this camp are impressed by the ex-

tent to which Jewish residential density, observant Jewish home life, and Jewish education are closely associated with Jewish in-marriage. That is, those who live in areas with higher proportions of Jewish neighbors, those whose parents practiced more Jewish rituals, and those who experience more hours and years of more intensive forms of Jewish education are those who are more likely to marry Jews (Medding et al. 1992; Cohen 1995). As a corollary, those who intermarry disproportionately derive from those living in areas with low Jewish density. On average they were raised with weaker Jewish backgrounds at home, and they underwent fewer and less intensive Jewish educational experiences. From a human capital point of view, we are fortunate that, notwithstanding the occurrence of intermarriage among some people with very strong Jewish backgrounds, mixed marriage more often affects those in whom we, as a community, have invested considerably fewer resources in terms of Jewish upbringing (see Cohen 1996).

Some of the more alarmist observers, usually associated with far-outreach advocacy, have warned that intermarriage is striking everywhere, even in the best of Jewish families. While technically accurate, this formulation projects a uniform Jewish population, ignoring the sharp variations in intermarriage among different sub-segments. In point of fact, rather than seeing the population as uniform, we would do well to conceive of American Jewry as segmented, with different segments bearing different characteristics and requiring different policies. Policies that may be appropriate for the least involved Jews are certainly inappropriate for the more engaged, if not entirely counter-productive.

The far-outreach and near-inreach advocates also differ over the impact of intermarriage on the individual level. Far-outreach advocates be-

lieve that with intervention, intermarried families stand a good chance of serious Jewish involvement. The near-inreach proponents as dubious about such claims.

While sensing the complexity of this state of affairs, near-inreach advocates regard the potential effectiveness of outreach to the mixed married as highly limited. Their skepticism is amply illustrated by the remarks of one inreach professional I interviewed. When I asked him why he refused to work with intermarried Jews, he replied: "After I'd finish with them, they'd go back to their Gentile spouse and kids; I can never 'close' with them in the same way as I can with in-married Jews." My own estimate is that less than one grandchild in ten of mixed married couples will identify as primarily Jewish in the next century, provided recent trends apply to the coming generations as they have in the past (Cohen 1994).

Despite their decidedly pessimistic view of the impact of intermarriage on the individual level, near-inreach advocates tend to be more optimistic about the future of American Jewry on the group level. The highly selective character of those who intermarry noted above makes for a rather paradoxical portrait. Thus, despite sharply higher rates of intermarriage among younger Jews than among older Jews, today's younger Jews in the aggregate are no less likely (if not more likely) than their older counterparts to observe Jewish ritual practices, belong to congregations, attend services, and send their children to intensive forms of Jewish education.

A national study of Conservative synagogue members in which I recently participated demonstrates some surprising results among those members aged 35-44 (Wertheimer 1996). They are more observant and much, much more Jewishly educated than those 20 or 30 years older. They are the first cohort to report higher levels of ritual observance than their

parents, reversing an earlier pattern among Conservative Jews who were marked by sharp declines in ritual observance from the homes of their youth to their own homes. About one in five is sending his or her children to day schools, a figure roughly three times as large as that when they were youngsters in the '50s and '60s.

Paradoxically, the surge in intermarriage – surely a negative trend in itself – has been driving these positive developments. We may compare two groups of 35-44 year olds: the adult children of current older members of Conservative congregations, and current members of Conservative synagogues. The latter are largely, though not entirely, a subset of the former. Among the form (those 35-44 who were raised by Conservative synagogue members), the intermarriage rate is about three times as high as among the latter (current members 35-44). This comparison suggests that about two thirds of formerly Conservative young adults who intermarried have gone elsewhere, either to Reform temples or none at all. Their departure leaves behind a more committed, more involved Conservative membership. In addition to this consequence of intermarriage, Conservative Jews (and, I take it, others too) are responding to the intermarriage threat by opting for increasing levels of intensive Jewish education, both for themselves and their children. Intermarriage, then, with all the damage it does to Jewish involvement, produces some unanticipated counter-trends that serve to somewhat ameliorate its adverse impact on Jewish identity.

The Conservative movement's shift to the religious right follows a similar counter-modern tendency among the Orthodox that got underway in the late 1960s, and it parallels similar tendencies among the elite of the Reform movement. If these trends take hold, when coupled with intermar-

riage, we may well be seeing the transformation of American Jewry to a demographically smaller but culturally more distinctive group. "Leaner and meaner" is the term I have used to describe this phenomenon. Moreover, the number of Jews who are highly active – corresponding roughly to the most active quarter of American Jews today or just under 1.5 million individuals – may well be holding steady. This trend may be taking place even as the periphery experiences higher rates of intermarriage, as well as a higher velocity of both born-Jewish exports and formerly Gentile imports.

In short, the situation as a whole may not be as desperate for American Jews *as a group* as some far-outreach advocates may have us believe. Rest assured that there will be Jewish continuity despite intermarriage. The question is not one of Jewish continuity, but of what kind of Judaism will continue.

And here we come to a matter that extends beyond numbers to issues of quality. For analytic purposes, we would do well to divide Jewish identity into two spheres: the public sphere and the private sphere. The public sphere refers to Jewish organizations, politics, and fund-raising. Its rhetoric is sprinkled with such themes as community, solidarity and peoplehood, or such slogans as, "Keep the Promise" and "We are One." In contrast, the private sphere of Jewish identity relates to family, ritual, synagogue, religiosity, and education. Its rhetoric is characterized by such terms as spirituality, meaning, search, and journeys. Its language is softer, more comforting, non-judgmental, and, these days, more personally engaging. The private dimension is the more spiritual and narrowly religious dimension encompassing aspects of Jews' relationships to God. The public dimension is more ethnic, encompassing Jews' relationships to peoplehood. The peoplehood dimension of which I speak, and for which I have grave concern, consists of a number of

related and overlapping sentiments: a sense of family ties, of kinship and similarity with Jews everywhere; feelings of special obligation toward and particular responsibility for Jews in distress; feelings of common ancestry and of common destiny; and conceptions of differentiation from what we once called “goyim,” in our private and unguarded moments.

Whereas the Jewish tradition insists upon and socializes Jews to both public and private commitments, the decline of the tradition has been accompanied by the bifurcation of these two spheres, as they have become increasingly distinctive aspects of Jewish life.

Of primary importance for our present concern is that over the last several years, the public sphere has declined, whereas the private sphere has been holding its own. Thus, with respect to indicators of Jewish activity in the private realm, day school enrollments are up, as are Jewish studies courses, and the publication of Jewish books. As I mentioned, ritual levels are increasing among Orthodox and committed Conservative Jews. Softer evidence points to continued ferment and creativity in Jewish feminism, Jewish spirituality, Jewish healing, and in what has been called the Jewish renewal movement.

But Jewish life in the public sphere seems to be in decline. It involves fewer and fewer Jews whose commitments seem to be increasingly tenuous. In addition to the stagnation or decline in contributions to Jewish federations, there is diminished mobilization around political causes (of all sorts); rapidly aging memberships of mass Jewish organizations; and a decline in volunteerism, particularly when comparing women born after World War II (now middle-aged and younger) with their older counterparts. Privately, federation officials wonder whether their entire system will be left standing twenty years from now.

Keeping these distinctions in mind, the far-outreach approach may work best for that segment of Jewish identity least in need of attention these days, that is, the more private, personal, faith-oriented aspects. By definition, far-outreach aims at individuals who are most likely to emphasize the purely religious conceptualization of Judaism, and least likely to be comfortable with the ethnic, particularistic or peoplehood aspects of being Jewish. As a piece of evidence, we may point to a line of research on converts suggesting that they more thoroughly (or more quickly) participate in the religious aspects of Judaism than do born-Jews; but they trail considerably in such ethnic dimensions as in-group friendship, Jewish organizational membership, philanthropic giving, and attachment to Israel (Medding et al. 1992).

American Judaism has become more of a personal faith and less of a tribe, less of an ethnic polity. In contrast, Jews in Israel and the former Soviet Union, have emphasized the national elements of being Jewish and downplayed the religious conceptualization. In this context, to the extent that far-outreach succeeds, it brings into American Jewry (or retains for American Jewry) precisely those individuals whose conception of Judaism differs most markedly from that held by the clearly more ethnic Jews in the past, or the more nationalist Jews today in other parts of the world. In this sense, far-outreach without a strong peoplehood component may actually hasten the transformation of American Judaism toward a Western, frankly Protestant Christian religious model.

The debate between far-outreach and near-inreach advocates, at least implicitly, raises another critical distinction, one concerning the role of choice. Far-outreach workers in effect say to the least involved Jews: Judaism is a rich and impressive religious system with numerous possibilities for finding meaning, transcendence, and community. You don't have to buy the whole package

to appreciate it – at least not at first – but you are enjoined to pick and choose those aspects of Judaism you find most appealing. Indeed, you will find in Judaism answers to some of your most difficult, urgent, and significant life issues. In effect, this approach says, “Ask not what you can do for Judaism; but ask, and find, what Judaism can do for you.”

The near-inreach advocates, as more traditional sorts, in effect offer the opposite approach. On the tradition-modernity continuum, with commandment at one pole and choice at the other, they are situated closer to the command pole and further from the choice pole. For them, the purpose of educating Jews is so that they can produce Jewish achievements of one sort or another. Judaism has a purpose and we are interested in recruiting Jews to fulfill that purpose, much as Moshe Rabbenu sought to bring the Jews out of Egypt, not for freedom alone, but as we read repeatedly in Exodus, so that B’nai Yisrael could worship their Lord.

In this regard I want to introduce the notion of the “National Jewish Cultural Product,” kind of a collective sum of the achievements of the Jewish people. Its definition embraces such items as well-functioning communities, Judaic learning, scholarly productivity, the arts, feminism, social action movements, and political influence, as well as such notable achievements as securing the release of Soviet Jews, American support for Israel, and public recognition of the Holocaust. Obviously, the definition of the National Jewish Cultural Product – its contents and how much weight we give to each item – is a matter of values or ideology. However, the idea that what we are about is more about achieving certain collective Jewish objectives than simply having Judaism enrich our lives – however we define them – is one I submit for your consideration. The question put starkly is that between Judaism for Jews or Jews for Judaism.

If we think in terms of who can best contribute to the National Jewish Cultural Product, then we come upon another implicit distinction between far-outreach and near-inreach advocates. The former say, in effect, that the most crucial transition is that between the far-outer boundary of the community to a place where Jewish identity is reasonably secure. For them, the key goal is to avoid total alienation from Jewish identity of the intermarried and their children. For the near-inreach advocates, the critical transition is that from the moderately engaged to the highly involved core, the group that contributes most prodigiously to the National Jewish Cultural Product, however we choose to define it. For the, the key goal is recruiting more Jews to the most active segment of the population.

The final distinction between the two camps concerns the role of standards, demands, boundaries, and barriers. The far-outreach advocates are concerned that we lower barriers to participation to make entry into the Jewish community as easy and as inviting as possible. They are concerned that too many and too difficult demands – be they in the realm of learning, or tzedakah, or ritual performance, or community participation, or doctrinal fidelity, or whatever – will alienate many potentially active and committed Jews, and will dissuade many of the least involved from ever crossing the thresholds of our communities.

In contrast, the near-inreach advocates have been operating in line with the research of one Lawrence Iannacone, a prolific sociologist of religion who has applied rational economic theory to the study of American religion. In a series of articles, highlighted by one entitled, “Why Strict Churches Are Strong,” Iannacone argues that certain religious groups have grown numerically and prospered qualitatively (1993) These groups have stayed somewhat out of step with the larger society, they demand some sorts of sepa-

ration from others; they articulate and enforce distinctive moral codes; and they only slowly adapt to changing social currents. Of course, if churches are too strict, they devolve into sects. If they're not strict enough – and here's the key point – they attract all sorts of free-riders, low-commitment members who eventually undermine the morale of the all-important high-commitment members. In contrast, moderately strict groups manage to nurture and eventually expand the high-commitment core that are essential to their strength. So, while in the short-run churches may gain adherents by lowering barriers and demands, in the long-run they suffer the adverse consequences of attracting and retaining only the least committed.

If all this is so, then why do churches operate against their interests and lower their demands, becoming less strict over time? Apparently, most churches are led by wealthy, white, men who have less need than others for highly demanding (and ultimately fulfilling) religious communities. The most socially prestigious have numerous other outlets for their symbolic and social lives, and understandably prefer churches that demand less rather than more, even though the lower status members would be better served by more demanding, stricter churches.

The implication of this research for American Jewry is obvious. We need to set, articulate, and maintain high standards and expectations in terms of communal participation and in terms of some substantive areas, of which the most prominent are ritual observance, Torah learning, and social justice.

Personally, I come to this policy conclusion with extraordinary credentials. My personal credo is fairly tolerant and latitudinarian, even libertine and heretical at times. But my policy conclusions are, frankly, more conservative and demanding. In these matters, professional judgment must win out

over personal preference. To recall the motto of the Corleone family, “This isn’t personal, it’s business.”

As a final word, in this connection, I want to say something about the responsibilities of Jewish leaders as I understand them. I do not believe that we can allow our idiosyncratic personal preferences and values to totally control our behavior and pronouncements as leaders. By definition, Jewish leaders have been given, and have assumed, responsibility for leading the Jewish people in the difficult ongoing confrontation with modernity. As such, we are not free to always indulge our personal whims and insights, as creative as they may be. Rather, we need to balance the side of us that is individualist and innovative with the needs of a people that has historically been collectivist and traditional. Of course, where to strike that balance will ultimately fall to the judgment of each of us. But, then, that is one of the responsibilities of sound Jewish leadership, as it has been since the days of our patriarchs and matriarchs, and as it shall be until the End of Days.

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The author would welcome responses to the paper. Please indicate if you have any objections to the publication of your response in our interactive Internet Forum devoted to JERUSALEM PAPERS IN JEWISH CONTINUITY.

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