

In my lifetime, every study of the future of North American Jewry has been expressed in terms of the doom and gloom of shrinking numbers. This, despite the fact that the history of the North American Jewish Community is one of continual growth in numbers and power. For the past century and a half, immigration and the baby boom fueled massive synagogue construction.

The American Jewish community and in particular the Conservative movement was proud of its large suburban congregations, seeing them as a sign of success. However, we really shouldn't take credit for those numbers. Our congregations just happened to be in the right place - the right country - at the right time.

For a century and a half, Jews poured into our congregations, but the spigot has been turned off. All across the country, synagogues are experiencing a drop in membership. There are no more large numbers of Jews immigrating, moving into our suburban neighborhoods, or being born. There is increasing competition for those who are left and are serious enough to want to affiliate.

We have seen that happen here, with a drop in membership over the past 15 years. However, the news is not all bad. The number of our Shabbat morning core has been virtually unaffected despite the drop in membership. This summer I began to notice something very interesting. We used to begin the service with fewer than a minyan, but our minyan would arrive, most of the time, before we began Shaharit. It has become more common for us to begin with a minyan or get a minyan within 5-10 minutes of the start of the service. On one particular week, at the point when we reached the magical number of 10 people, 6 of them were Jews by choice. The Jews by Choice hit 10 when the Jews By Birth were only at 6. In fact, were it not for the Jews by Choice, we would not have had a minyan until the Torah service. By the end of the service, the score was about 30 Jews By Birth and 20 Jews by Choice.

The Jews by Choice come early. That particular week they set up the kiddush, one was an usher, and they really get into the idea that Judaism is meaningful and important. The Jews by Choice are serious Jews. They don't come to shul to socialize and talk during the Torah reading. They come to pray and learn. Many of them have converted just in the past 15 years.

Moishe Rosen and Jews for Jesus and the Southern Baptists have been great for the Jews. They poured money into programs teaching Christians how to evangelize among Jews. They taught Christians Torah, mitzvot, and the secret language of the Jews. But Christians are smart. They recognized that the Christian story of the Bible and the Jewish story of the Bible are incompatible. Some continued to accept the Christian story of the Bible as a kind of Midrash. Others rejected the Christian Midrash and began to explore the literal meaning of the words of the prophets. This led them to seek an authentic Jewish tradition, and this is where we as a Conservative congregation have a huge advantage. Potential converts are generally made to feel unwelcome in an Orthodox synagogue. They are turned away outright from a Chabad House. This is a population thirsting for an authentic understanding of God's word, and they are not going to go to the Reform Temples, which to them feel too much like the church they are leaving. They walk through our doors, and feel like they have come home.

We are seeing a major shift happening in our Jewish community, from being a community whose Jewish practice is a romanticization of the Judaism of their grandparents to one whose practice is devoted to understanding and living Torah as a literal expression of God's will. We are ahead of the curve in Grand Rapids, but if our fellow Conservative congregations in North

American don't follow our lead, their numbers and the strength of our movement will just keep diminishing.

I foresee potential tension within our community as this shift continues. Those who grew up Jewish will likely feel displaced by people who have been Jewish far less than a generation. One might think: What right have they to run our synagogue? One might be threatened by someone who comes into Judaism, a religion that we have been our entire life, and claims by their actions that they understand how to do it better than we do. It is potentially threatening to have someone claim to find a path to God through Judaism when our entire life we may never have had a significant moment of connection to God through Jewish practice.

The shift call into question the definition of Judaism as a religion versus Judaism as a culture. The "new Jews" are not so much interested in Jewish culture as they are in the religious system. However, it is not necessarily clear that religion trumps culture in Judaism. If Judaism was purely a religion, then why do we continue to accept as a Jew, completely and without question, a person born Jewish who does not observe or believe? We ought to say to a Jewish atheist or secularist that he or she does not count in a minyan.

In fact, prominent rabbis throughout Jewish history have had a very difficult time with the entire idea of conversion. In Poland, Rabbi Shlomo Luria forbade conversion as do Syrian Jews in the US today. True, it was due to historical circumstances but there was a sense that Jews were intrinsically different. A leopard, as it were, cannot change its spots.

Clearly, culture is important in Judaism. I'm thinking of Mordecai Kaplan's idea of Judaism as a civilization. Our religious civilization includes many elements that might be considered more cultural than religious - food, music, art, literature. Culture is determined by location and time - medieval sepharad generated different literature than modern Europe, for example. I think we are moving into an era in which our Jewish culture will be profoundly changed because of an influx of Jews by Choice. I don't know exactly what it will look like, but the music of Matisyahu, although a Jew by birth rather than choice, may give us a glimpse. His music is an example of a bizarre new fusion of reggae and hassidut - a foreign culture welded on to Jewish liturgy. Classical cantors might be rolling in their grave, but this is part of the new Jewish music, a new expression of Jewish culture.

I reject the notion that Jews are intrinsically different as racist. That our genetic pool contains certain genes more frequently than others is a reflection of a historical reality that the doors to conversion were closed from the outside - the church - before they were closed from the inside. I define Judaism as a set of practices based on Torah, read through the lens of Rabbinic literature. I define Jews as a tribe of people who collectively, although not necessarily individually, have committed themselves to the pathways of Judaism and Torah.

A Jewish atheist may be counted in a minyan, but he or she may not lead a service. That's the different between being part of the Jewish cultural tribe and being a practicing religious Jew.

We should not be threatened by outsiders coming in and sharing our Judaism. In fact, it will be helpful if we keep in mind that we don't own Judaism. We are but one link in a long chain of tradition. In addition, it is a misreading of history to imagine that each link in the chain, every generation of Jews, has preserved Jewish culture in some pristine state against contamination from the outside world. We are fooling ourselves if we think that we have remained pure and unaffected by our surrounding culture. We should not imagine that those who come into Judaism

from the outside are somehow polluting our culture just because they have not absorbed exactly the same set of historical memories that born Jews have accumulated from our Eastern European ancestors and their immigration/holocaust experience.

We should not be threatened by a new generation of Jews by choice who look at Torah with eyes untainted by our particular set of lens clouded by pogroms, genocide, anti-semitism, and exclusion. For centuries, one of the reasons to be Jewish was that non-Jews were as a rule evil, primitive, and dangerous. As the boundaries between religious communities have broken down, we have been able to see that this is not the case. Nonetheless, we still might feel a sense that something that belongs to us has been stolen by outsiders who have not earned the right to be Jewish through centuries of persecution.

How does one earn the right to be Jewish? According to Halakha, by accepting the yoke of Torah and the fate of the Jews as one's own. However, to Jews whose level of observance is relatively light, this doesn't seem serious enough. We think that one must earn one's Jewishness by surviving a pogrom. If we personally didn't live throughout a pogrom, then at least our grandparents did, and that counts.

We are going to learn from an influx of "new Jews" whose connection to Torah is emotionally positive. We are going to learn not to romanticize the ugliness of the past, but rather to develop a new appreciation for the compelling nature of Jewish ritual and prayer. We will create a seeker friendly environment for Jews and potential Jews alike.

The moment anybody walks through our doors, they are greeted and made to feel welcome. Despite the fact that our service is primarily in Hebrew and there are relatively few page announcements, we attract a steady stream of seekers because we are true to our mission: We create a vibrant Conservative Jewish community, helping each individual follow his/her spiritual path using traditional Jewish practices. Members of our congregation are willing to support anyone who is sincere in exploring a traditional Jewish path. We welcome all, we sit next to them, we help them follow the service, we show them how we love Torah.

Congregation Ahavas Israel is going to lead the Conservative movement in the 21st century in a move to capture the energy and enthusiasm that the Jews by Choice can bring to traditional Judaism. May we embody the spirit of Rabbi Shimon bar Lakish who was about to rob and assault Rabbi Yoḥanan when he was moved by Rabbi Yoḥanan's Torah to change his ways and begin learning himself. May we embody the spirit of Rabbi Akiva, who as an ignorant shepherd embraced the study and practice of Torah at the age of 40, and became one of the leaders of his generation. And may we continue to embody the spirit of Hillel, who pulled in the potential convert by summing up the essence of Judaism on one foot - "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor." So may our community be transformed. Amen.