

Current Jewish Periodicals

In her essay "When Jews Convert" (*Reform Judaism*, Fall 1991), Ruth Mason confronts the statistic that "more than 200,000 American Jews now embrace another religion," also including comments of those who have become Christians. For example, Amy Krieger Rippis converted to her husband's Greek Orthodox Church, noting that her ethnic, non-religious parents maintained only a nostalgic link with folklore and Jewish jokes. Although she was given, by her account, a "strong Jewish education," she concedes that it was "without faith." When she met devout Christians at Northwestern University, she found their "inner strength" to be appealing, while her "grandmother's chicken soup and warm fuzzy feelings about family" provided little in the way of spiritual answers. Reverend Rochelle Birnbaum had no Jewish education. "Not having a Jewish education meant walking into synagogue and not knowing what was going on." Her spiritual quest led her to the Episcopal church and priesthood.

Donna Ambrogi had no Jewish religious identity to reject, and she was drawn to progressive Roman Catholic intellectuals at the University of Chicago, where she was exposed to "Catholicism at its best." The campus Hillel did not "grab" her. She still feels that she is part of the Jewish people, is concerned about anti-Semitism, and concedes that her biography might have been different if she had read Martin Buber as a youth. Egon Mayer suggests that such converts try to "reconstruct their personal histories in order to make sense of their lives."

Rabbi Sanford Seltzer (of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) admits that American Jews are not spiritually inclined, but claims that this trend is changing and that "the [Reform] synagogue is responding." However, he does not outline what the response to spiritual thirst and quest happens to be. Rabbi Alexander Schindler (also of UAHC) believes that Reform Judaism has been too rational in its approach and must become more non-rational in order to attract adherents.

Dru Greenwood, the recently appointed head of Reform Jewish Outreach, is interviewed in this issue of *Reform Judaism*. While conceding that the percentage of Reform conversions to Judaism on the part of intermarried couples has fallen from 18% in the early 1970's to 9% today, she takes comfort in the fact that the actual numbers of converts are increasing. Unstated is the fact that the population of converts from which this larger number is drawn is a much larger number of intermarried couples. She is also comforted by the statistic that thirty years ago 36% of Jewish intermarrieds converted "out" while today only 9% do so. Greenwood insists upon respecting the decisions of the intermarried couple (even if there is no move to conversion), and she simply supports the maximizing of Jewish content in the home. She takes note that the Conservative movement is now also making an outreach to the intermarried. For Greenwood, all Jews in an open society are "Jews by choice," and there must be both "outreach" and "inreach," fusing the components of Jewish spirituality, Hebrew language, Israel, history, social responsibility, and ethnicity.

For Steven Bayme (American Jewish Committee), "conversion is a 'symptom' of what ails the Jewish community." Bayme argues that the real problem is the

weakness of Jewish identity: “We’ve been so occupied by external threats that we’ve neglected the essence of what being a Jew is all about.”

The October 1991 issue of *Moment* has several entries of interest to the readers of *Tradition*. In “A ‘Critical Mass’ of Judaism may Prevent Inter-marriage,” Suzanne F. Singer observes that in the recent past, news of an intermarriage would be a cause for surprise. The recent 1990 National Jewish Population Study has shown that “slightly more than half of all Jews who marry choose a spouse who was neither born nor raised a Jew. Just 25 years ago, only approximately 10 percent of marrying Jews chose non-Jewish partners.”

Singer observes that the reason young adults living an observant Jewish life engaged in the modern world don’t intermarry is that “their Judaism has reached a ‘critical mass’ that requires a Jewish spouse (or a serious convert to Judaism) to share it.” By observing Shabbat, kashrut, Succot, family gatherings, and regular religious Torah study, “a gentile spouse becomes almost impossible.” Even interdating is not a serious option for people who live this life style, she argues.

Singer argues that she is not advocating Orthodoxy; she asks only for a Jewish pattern of living that is sufficiently intense to render intermarriage a non-option. Previous Jewish generations in America had a Judaism that was reflexive; Singer claims that we need enough content in communal Judaism to make intermarriage unthinkable. She does not explain how this might be achieved, either theologically or sociologically, in a non-Orthodox setting.

In the same issue of *Moment*, Jacob Neusner unleashes a rather strident polemic against Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz. After conceding that his previous reviews of R. Steinsaltz were “generous evaluation(s),” he demands that R. Steinsaltz avoid what he takes to be inappropriate exercises in public relations. According to Neusner, R. Steinsaltz says things that “he knows to be untrue,” because he neither quotes the findings of secular Talmudic scholarship nor is he respected in the “Yeshiva world.”

Neusner argues that it is arrogant for R. Steinsaltz to compete with Rashi or Maimonides. He strongly objects to what he takes to be R. Steinsaltz’s “claim” that he is the first to render the Talmud accessible, as others, including Neusner himself, have offered translations of the Talmud. Neusner concludes his broadside by affirming that he is a “constructive critic” who has devoted his life “to studying the same holy books “in the service of the unique God who gave us the Torah.”

Interestingly, *Moment* runs a regular “Responsum” column penned by Rabbi David Golinkin, a senior lecturer in Talmud at the Conservative rabbinical seminary in Israel. In this same issue, Golinkin examines the Jewish law as it relates to cigarette smoking, at the same time offering a critique of the mind, method, and authority of the late Rav Moshe Feinstein. After mustering the many sources that require a Jew to care for his or her own health, he questions why ultra-Orthodox rabbinical authorities in general, and R. Feinstein in particular, have not issued prohibitions against smoking. (Golinkin does not define his term “ultra-Orthodox.”) According to him,

Rabbi Feinstein’s position on smoking was one of the most unfortunate decisions of our generation. If he had forbidden smoking in 1964, thousands of Jews who looked to him for halachic guidance would have kicked this deadly habit. . . . We hope that the ultra-Orthodox *poskim* will soon realize what all other *poskim* realized years ago: smoking is lethal and is therefore forbidden by Jewish law.

Actually, some thirty years ago, R. Moshe felt that there was not enough scientific evidence tying smoking to cancer to straightforwardly rule it forbidden. He later went on to recognize the potential danger of passive smoking, outlawing smoking in the *bet medrash* if anyone present objected. Instead of directly condemning rabbinic sages who smoke, R. Moshe allowed Scripture to express his opposition, saying that “God protects the simple” who would smoke; but he did write that whether or not smoking could be technically forbidden, clearly everyone—and *benai Torah* in particular—should be aware of the potential health hazards of smoking and hence neither smoke nor allow their children to do so.

Coincidentally, this past October the Rabbinical Council of America Roundtable published its paper on smoking. It noted:

Rabbi Feinstein based his inability to forbid smoking on the argument that when a specific action possibly entails an element of danger and people are willing to take that risk (which albeit is only a risk), one cannot forbid people from that action. . . . At the time Rabbi Feinstein wrote this responsum, the presence of both [conditions] warranted halakhic license to smoke. Today, however, in light of the scientific evidence published in the decade since this responsum was written, and based upon Rabbi Feinstein’s explicit definition, it is clear that neither of these considerations obtains any longer. . . . [Thus,] based upon present research and the stated argument of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, the smoking of cigarettes constitutes a blatant violation of the Torah’s commandment against inflicting harm on oneself and hence is absolutely prohibited *halakhah ulema’aseh*.

A review in *Sefer Assia* (5) also notes the many *poskim*—all as “ultra-Orthodox” as R. Moshe—who have taken note of more recent scientific studies and have ruled that cigarette smoking is unequivocally forbidden by Halakhah.

In *Jewish Action* (Winter 5752, 1991-2), Professor Judith Bleich of Touro College examines the Frankfurt Secession Controversy” in which the late Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch’s Frankfort congregation left the organized Jewish community because it could not be part of a Jewish community which treated an anti-Torah Reformist ideology as a normative alternative to Orthodoxy. She explains that, under German law, a Jew could either be a member of the Jewish community or define oneself as “without religion.” By taxing Orthodox Jews for purposes which violate their theological convictions, the German law which required unified communities compromised the conscience of consistent Orthodox adherents. Bleich notes that while R. Hirsch distanced himself and his spiritual charges from an organized Jewish community which rejected Torah principles, he was no spiritual isolationist. Hirsch contended that outreach to the non-believing and non-practicing Jew requires that the Torah perspective not be compromised; he only wanted to avoid “institutional expressions of heresy.” Anticipating the Hazon Ish, R. Hirsch regarded non-observance in modernity to be a consequence of culture, and not an act of willful rebellion against Torah authority. Bleich astutely observes that while there are similarities between 20th Century American and 19th Century German Jewry, “simplistic parallels should not be drawn,” thereby avoiding any implicit prescription for contemporary Orthodox public policy.

In *First Things* (January 1992), the recently deceased Rabbi Jacob J. Petuchowski, Research Professor of Jewish Theology and Liturgy at the [Reform] Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, offers his “Reform Judaism: Undone by Revival.” Petuchowski begins his remarks by noting that in the 1950’s, American religion “was celebrating

a great comeback.” We were invited to pray and America believed that to go to places of worship was the hallmark of good citizenship. The “common American religion was available in three equally recognized editions: a Protestant one, a Catholic one, and a Jewish one.” When American religion enjoyed this main line revival, Jews were moving to the suburbs and building their [non-Orthodox] temples. Secular Jews who in first and second settlements would “not have dreamed of belonging to any Jewish religious congregation” succumbed to peer pressure and joined the new suburban synagogue. The only way in which these Jews could expose their offspring to their “ancestral heritage” was to join a synagogue in order to enroll their children in the afternoon Hebrew school which would prepare their child for the *bar mitzva* ritual.

This growth in membership was, for Petuchowski, misconstrued as a return to the Jewish religion. He then observes that the children of secularists now populate the pews of liberal, suburban congregations, “and not an insignificant number of them have even made it into the rabbinate.” The children of secularists have taken over the religious institutions and remade them in their secular image: “It is the temples and synagogues, not the secularists, that have been captured.” Petuchowski concedes that “the least affected congregations are of the Orthodox persuasion, since, in the fifties, the least number of Jewish secularists would have affiliated with Orthodox synagogues.”

Since Reform Judaism enjoyed the largest influx of secularists in the 1950's, it is no accident, argues Petuchowski that Reform Judaism “is in the forefront of secularism in America, and is, in its pronouncements, very often indistinguishable from the ACLU and the political left. It even maintains a leftist political lobby in Washington, D.C., camouflaging it under the name of ‘*Religious Action Center.*’”

Petuchowski believes that Conservative Judaism “by and large, still manages to hold the religious line; but even here voices are occasionally being heard in support of radical leftism in politics, even here one can come across an occasional argument in favor of homosexual clergy, or a substitution of sociology for theology in the exposition of Judaism.”

As Reconstructionism was founded on the principles of denying both a personal God and the election of Israel, Petuchowski finds it no accident that it competes with Reform Judaism “in the championship of homosexuality and lesbianism in the clergy, in ‘innovative’ and ‘non-sexist’ liturgy, in adopting a definition of personal status that differs radically from the definition accepted by the rest of the world’s religious Jews.” This competition is so friendly that Reconstructionist Judaism has been granted membership in the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Petuchowski also notes that there is an atheistic “Humanistic Judaism” which serviced the objections of those who did not wish to worship God in Reform temples. He also notes that these non-religious synagogues are being considered for membership in the congregational wing of the Reform Movement. Inasmuch as European and Israeli Reform institutions are dependent upon American Reform for their financial support, they are very reticent to voice their objections to American Reform policy, even though it does not reflect their positions.

Finding American Reform Judaism to be an instance of “institutionalized secularism,” Petuchowski bemoans the Pyrrhic victory of those who accepted secularists into the synagogue only to have the “conquered” secularists lay down the law to the “conquerors,” the religious founders of Reform Judaism.