

The Case for Proactive Conversion

By Dr. Gary A. Tobin

Proactive conversion is just the opposite of coercion or rejection. *Proactive conversion* is the positive, accessible, and joyful process of encouraging non-Jews to become Jews. Proactive conversion requires Jews to open the ideological and intellectual gates and help non-Jews walk through them into Jewish life. Being proactive means *encouraging* rather than *discouraging* non-Jews to consider Judaism. It involves constructing a *system* that helps non-Jews become Jews in a positive welcoming way. We must change our ideology, our practices, and our institutional structure to facilitate conversion to Judaism. Synagogues of all denominations, for example, believe that they are much more open than potential converts actually find them.

Proactive conversion is *not* synonymous with the aggressive recruitment that characterizes proselytizing. Jews should not be knocking on doors and trying to *persuade* random strangers to become Jews. We do not need to engage in these tactics.

Some Jews who live with non-Jews will not be candidates for conversion. The institutional structure must be able to accommodate what will be a large and growing number of families of mixed parentage and identity. Community centers, synagogues, day camps, overnight camps, and every other Jewish organization and institution must deal with the reality of the mixed-married population. Currently, the Jewish community has little structure to deal with this population. Expenditures are minuscule and the approaches are confused. Some couples need counseling and therapy, some need advice, and some need direction. Others just need to be left alone.

But specifically dealing with mixed-marriage is very different from the global issue of welcoming converts. Interfaith families are not the only focus, and perhaps should not be the primary focus of proactive conversion efforts. Other groups may be equally vital for Jewish communal attention. For example, there are now millions of individuals of Jewish heritage in the United States. Indeed, within a few years there are likely to be more people of Jewish heritage than individuals actually having two born Jewish parents. Individuals of Jewish heritage may have some inclination toward exploring the Jewish part of their identity. With proper nurturing, many could reclaim their Jewish past and integrate it into their current lives.

Furthermore, studies consistently show that millions of Americans are “unchurched,” and may be candidates for Jewish inclusion. Some in this group do not believe in God or organized religion, and do not want to be part of a faith tradition. Yet others are seeking, but cannot find a faith tradition in which they feel comfortable or motivated. Some may be disengaged from the religion in which they were raised, having decided it was not for them. Others have been brought up with no religion are seeking

religious fulfillment. The thousands of self-help groups, television evangelistic successes, and pop culture fads of all kinds that promise rewarding lives and meaningful existence are testimony to the vast numbers of Americans who are longing for something purposeful in life. Some are looking for spiritual fulfillment, others are looking for community. Judaism can be an attractive alternative for millions of these individuals who are interested in either faith, community, or both.

America is a culture of denominational “switching.” Individuals born into one religious group may choose another, and often do. Judaism needs to be a destination as well as an origin, as are all other religious groups in America. Potential converts also may be individuals who are practicing another religion but are dissatisfied with it. Some individuals follow their current religion because they have not thought of anything else; it is simply the way they were raised. They have not actively sought alternatives even though they may be dissatisfied with the worship services, the theology, or the community their faith tradition provides.

Promoting conversion is the process of positively integrating newcomers into Jewish peoplehood. Some potential converts may be seeking the spiritual or theological aspects of Judaism. Others may be community seekers, wanting to be part of the rich fabric of the Jewish people. They are not mutually exclusive—both gates should be open, and one may lead to the other. Proactive conversion encourages all entryways into Jewish life.

Visioning a healthy proactive conversion strategy also includes imagining a different rabbinate, with very different approaches to conversion. The Jewish community cannot effectively deal with the issues surrounding conversion without a new set of attitudes and behaviors from most rabbis.

Many rabbis still use the language of tests, exams, and job interviews when dealing with potential converts. The obstacles they put in front of converts are very destructive. Rabbis need to be cheerleaders, not prison guards. They need to help unlock the doors and gates, not bar them. They need to welcome potential converts with smiles and challenges, not frowns and declarations of the improbable, difficult, or unattainable. Rather than ask people to prove why they want to be Jewish, they should advocate for Judaism, explaining why it is good to be a Jew, talking about the positive benefits individually, familially, and communally from a belief in Jewish ideals as a practice of Jewish life. Rabbis must overcome a host of personal feelings and institutional constraints to promote conversion. They cannot send mixed messages or equivocate. Some rabbis have achieved this success. Their ranks must grow dramatically if the Jewish community is to flourish.

Actively promoting conversion is a process far beyond the current system of reluctant and grudging acceptance of those who can clear all the hurdles that a hostile institutional and organizational network puts forward for those who might consider being Jews. The focus must be much broader than the non-Jewish spouses of Jews. The models of success must become the norm, rather

than the exception. Millions of potential Jewish lives are now unrealized. This seems an individual and communal shame. Proactive conversion can help revitalize the Jewish community. Rethinking the Jewish future without rethinking the communal approach to conversion is a communal death wish.

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