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Outreach, Inreach Need Not Compete

Rabbi Hayim Herring And Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky

Rabbi Harold Schulweis says that, "Either/or questions are not good for the Jewish community." Some community leaders believe that "outreach" and "inreach" stand as opposing strategies to achieving a vibrant Jewish community. But this shouldn't be an "either/or" proposition. Rather, an enriched Jewish community will be created by a "both/and" approach, helping us reach the achievable goal of creating a more dynamic Jewish community.

Synagogue membership has developed into a lifecycle phenomenon. People join as certain life needs emerge, then drop membership and perhaps later rejoin. Depending upon when a snapshot is taken, that person may be considered an "insider" or "outsider."

New vibrant organizations are having success at making one-time connections to Jews, especially younger ones and others who have felt marginalized by the core institutions of the Jewish community. Yet, they are happy with their Jewish lives, do not feel the need to be "reached" and, indeed, sometimes feel patronized by such terms.

People on the inside of Jewish institutions are often equally open to new forms of Jewish expression and exploration as those on the outside. Just ask many regular synagogue-goers if they would describe their worship experience as inspirational or transcendent. "Both/and" could benefit from spiritual enrichment.

To us, successful outreach means going to those on the periphery of Jewish life and bringing them to the gates of the community. Successful inreach nurtures and roots people's involvement in the community. Institutions that make inreach a part of their culture deliver on the promises of outreach, because their constituents become the best ambassadors for their institutions.

Many people today live outside of the core Jewish communal institutions that together form the organized American Jewish community. It does not mean, however, that these folks are not engaging Judaism nor interested in what Judaism has to offer. In fact, younger generations especially are often highly engaged in Jewish learning, acts of chesed, the creation of new rituals and social justice. They just can't seem to persuade many mainstream institutions, which are looking for new "members," to allow their creativity in.

The time has come for outreach and inreach proponents to work together. Mainstream institutions offer talent, infrastructure and history; new individuals and organizations offer inspiration, energy and new perspectives. One-time connections can provide a strong foundation on which to build future connections—to new organizations or existing ones.

Some people will argue that with limited resources we have to do community triage, saying that there are not enough funds to support everything or that, more bluntly, "Those who have made a decision to leave the community don't deserve our efforts." In other words, why bother with them at all?

But not all the people who live outside of the organized community have made a decision to "leave the community." Either they don't know

the potential for vibrancy that exists within or we haven't provided them with reason to enter or to stay — nor offered a sufficient variety of portals in. Conversely, consider the segment of the community that pays dues to local institutions but has, at the same time, chosen not to participate. We may have their money temporarily, but we certainly don't have their souls.

Then there are those who mistakenly use the word "inreach" synonymously with "prevention of intermarriage." There are too many falsely drawn lines in the sands of the Jewish community. Most glaring is the notion that in-marriage is automatically a success and intermarriage is automatically a failure. Or that outreach is something we do exclusively for the intermarried, while inreach is for the in-married or unmarried.

Outreach and inreach don't define the demographic; they define the location of people on their Jewish journeys, their levels of involvement in Jewish life at different moments in time. The same people will likely need different approaches as they grow older. At all stages and with all individuals, we must use the same underlying methodology: a personal connection, a genuine welcome and programs of meaning that speak to peoples' intellect and spirit. n

Rabbi Hayyim Herring is executive director of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal). Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky is executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute.

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