



## COMMITTED TODAY

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courageous and most dedicated Jews I know are proud "Jews by choice," and the last thing I mean to do is to cast doubt on their sincerity. But the data speaks for itself, and it is alarming.

If unchecked, current trends will lead to what we might call the "denominationalization" of Judaism. Our faith will become just one more option in the smorgasbord of American religion, taken up when it looks inviting and discarded when some alternative faith looks more appealing still. Instead of a population bonded one to another in a familial way, the Jewish population will constantly churn, as eager newcomers convert in and dissatisfied old-timers convert out. The absolute number of Jews in America may remain constant, so long as inflow and outflow keep in balance, but the character of American Jewry will become fluid.

Our Christian neighbors smile knowingly at this picture, for it characterizes the experience of almost all of their denominations. For this reason, they scarcely understand why conversion concerns us. Why not see newcomers as a blessing and converts as a fact of American religious life? Why should a fluid membership bother us?

The reason, of course, is that we, unlike our Christian neighbors, per-

ceive members of our faith as part of a common family known as Klal Yisrael. We see ourselves sharing not only a common faith with fellow Jews but also a common heritage and roots. The ties that link us are, to our mind, primordial, rooted in a tribal past. Even Jews we despise form part of our collective mishpoche. To us, converts are thus not merely "Jews by choice" but also Jews by destiny. They are, henceforward, members of our people, and we expect them to stay that way.

As conversions to Judaism multiply, this traditional understanding of Klal Yisrael becomes more and more difficult to sustain. Increasingly, it is not peoplehood but faith and spirituality that characterize what we believe we have in common. And strong as those ties may be, they do not easily transfer across the generations. Meanwhile, the biological ties that once linked us one to another are dissolving.

What makes this dangerous situation worse is the deep crisis of identity mired in the different standards and rituals for conversion required by each of the three major branches of American Judaism. Hundreds of thousands of identifying Jews — converts along with children of mixed marriages and others — are today recognized as Jewish by

some Jews but not by others. Rabbi Yitzhak Greenberg and others have questioned whether this growing number of "disputed Jews" will call into question the unity of Israel: will there be one Jewish people in America in the twenty-first century or two? The intensive debate and stalled negotiations over Israel's conversion legislation show that a schism over this issue is a real possibility.

It would be ridiculous to say that the unprecedented increase in converts entering the Jewish fold is an unmitigated disaster. From a purely demographic perspective, indeed, it is a great blessing. And though prophecies of gloom and doom have been ever with us, the record of the past suggests that it is wise to treat them with a certain degree of skepticism. However, the significant problems raised by conversion cry out for attention. The future of Klal Yisrael is at stake.

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## PRO-ACTIVE CONVERSION

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Conversion must be advocated as equal, an equivalent and desirable choice for the Jewish people. The prevention strategy implies that Jews by conversion are second best.

Does anyone really believe that the non-Jew, a potential convert, does not hear this message: "First marry a born Jew. If that doesn't work out, then and only then, marry a convert, which is better than the disease of a mixed marriage"? Protestations that this is not the message, that converts are fully part of the Jewish people, that the Jewish community welcomes them, considers them the same as born Jews, are a denial of

the messages that are often sent.

Jews should declare with gusto, pride, enthusiasm, certainty and rigor that it is good for Jews to marry other Jews. There need be no shame, apologies or second-guessing about saying that the formation of the Jewish family is a powerfully positive event and that an unambiguous Jewish household provides a rich framework for life. The Jewish community must, of course, help provide that rich fabric and a meaningful Judaism.

To then say that the preferable entrance to that world is through the bloodline creates an implicit inequality

in the merit of both the marriage and the family. Judaism must open up its psychological and institutional gates for real. Standards should be maintained for ritual conversion. But the suspicion, testing, second-guessing and reluctance need to be discarded now.

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