The Non-Jew in the Synagogue

BY MORDECHAI LIEBLING

Today all congregations face the question of the appropriate roles for the non-Jewish[1] partner of a member of the congregation. This is the hottest and most divisive issue in North American congregational life. The issues are particularly difficult for Reconstructionists, because we have placed peoplehood at the center of Judaism. Reconstructionists have always maintained that belonging is more central than *behaving* and *believing*. We have not wanted to exclude any Jews on the basis of their *beliefs*—Zionists, Socialists, Communists, anarchists, atheists. How than can we exclude someone from certain aspects of communal life on the basis of beliefs—especially someone who has either made, or is willing to make, a commitment of *belonging* by joining the synagogue and agreeing to raise Jewish children?

In the Orthodox and Conservative movements, these questions are not decided by congregations, but by rabbinic authority based on *halakhah*. Through the lens of *halakhah*, the non-Jewish spouse may not be a member, have an *aliyah* or be a leader of the service. There is no halakhic prohibition, however, on the ability of a non-Jew to attend services and say prayers. Within halakhic parameters, it might be possible for a gentile to lead a prayer that is not an obligatory part of the service. For example, the *sheḥeyanu* prayer at a *simḥa* is not a mandatory prayer and might be said by a non-Jew, and responded to by Jews, even in a halakhically governed congregation.[2]

Without being able to depend on the authoritative decisions of *halakhah*, Reconstructionist and Reform congregations are faced with the decisions of which ritual and civic rights they will accord the non-Jewish spouse. I will focus here on how Reconstructionist congregations can come to a decision and what some of the criteria are that need to be considered.

We are a movement of study and process, with guidance and leadership provided by our rabbis. Being a participatory and democratic body, decision-making is not ceded to the rabbi. The Reconstructionist congregation studies *halakhah*, but *halakhah* is not determinative. The paradigmatic Reconstructionist process calls for

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study of traditional sources, a compilation of relevant values, both Jewish and secular, an examination of sociological and/or scientific data, and an analysis of the impact of each of the possible decisions on each of the affected parties. It also calls for a democratic, inclusionary process maximizing the number of people involved. Some congregations, in order to insure an educated decision, have stipulated that in order to take part in a final vote, one has to have attended a certain number of study/discussion sessions.

Emotional Lightning Rod

Intermarriage has affected the immediate families of the vast majority of Jews. Many Jews are disturbed by this trend and feel powerless to prevent it. The only place that many feel they can exercise some control over this issue is in the synagogue. For some who felt that they could not take a "hard line" in their own family or find a way to prevent it, they, "by golly," are going to do something in their synagogue. The particular issue of what the non-Jewish partner may or may not do in the synagogue becomes the symbol of all the problems of intermarriage. And *this time* they do have a voice and a vote. Thus, the synagogue discussions have become an emotional lightning rod and dumping ground for people's feelings about all issues relating to intermarriage.

For the intermarried couple or their supportive friends or family members, the discussions also have symbolic value. They can be acting out anger at a Jewish community, which they feel has rejected them, whether the rejection came from the rabbi who refused to officiate at the wedding, the relatives who refused to attend, or the parents who were less than welcoming. They are often angry at a perceived hypocrisy by a congregation that says you are welcome, but only welcome to come so far in the door, not all the way in—close, but not too close.

For both Jews and non-Jews, the issue has a symbolic as well as a practical significance. Because there is so much pain embedded in these discussions, somewhere in the process this pain needs to be acknowledged and participants need to be given the opportunity to talk about their feelings and relevant experiences. A safe structure is essential if people are to talk about either the pain or fears that impact on their opinions. Paying attention to the emotional valence will make the study and decision-making process less acrimonious.

The challenge is to make the process spiritually uplifting. This can happen only when the humanity of each person is allowed to surface. This spiritual uplift can also take place if this study process becomes an opportunity to reexamine and recommit to our deeper values—to remind ourselves why we belong to the Jewish people.

Criteria of Belonging

Decisions about the role of the non-Jewish spouse ought to be based

on the explicit values of the synagogue community. The mission statement is a good place to start. What are we here for? What are the values of our synagogue? What is the congregation's responsibility as a Jewish community to its members, to the families of its members, to the Jewish people, to the larger society?

There is a continuum of possible participation for non-Jews in both the ritual and the civic areas of synagogue life. The ritually related questions are: can non-Jews be counted in a minyan, lead part of the service, be called to the Torah, or be accorded any honors? In the civic realm, we need to ask if they can be members, serve on the board, serve on or chair a committee, or be president of the congregation.

Any congregation debating these questions needs to realize that the decisions arrived at not only effect the personal lives of the individuals in question, their families and the congregation, but also the future of the Jewish people as a whole. The Jewish people and our traditions therefore have a stake in each congregation's decision.

The Reconstructionist movement has affirmed on several occasions criteria for conversion: a process of serious study of Judaism, *berit milah* (circumcision) or *hatafat dam berit* (a ritual drop of blood) for a man, and *tevilah* (ritual immersion) for both men and women. More than just a study process, conversion is a ritual of mutual acceptance on the part of the Jew by choice and on the part of the Jewish people. Conversion makes one a full member of the Jewish people with all rights and responsibilities.

Can one belong to the Jewish people and not be a Jew? I have been asked,"Can I have a secular conversion?" meaning, "Can I join the Jewish people, but not subscribe to its religion?" I recognize, somewhat paradoxically, that many born Jews do not believe in the religious aspects of Judaism, yet they do not thereby lose their status as Jews. The tradition has always rejected belief as a criterion of belonging for anyone who is the child of a Jewish woman, but has maintained belief as a criterion for conversion. Reconstructionists too insist that accepting some version of Jewish belief—demonstrated through conversion—is necessary to join the Jewish people. Is it not paradoxical, then, that by granting a non-Jew the ability to join a synagogue we have created, in effect, a "secular conversion"?[3]

Every study done about children of intermarriages indicates that if the gentile spouse converts, the children of the marriage are far more likely to be identified as Jewish. Conversion is, in part, a meaningful act because it leads to a change in status. Our challenge is to encourage conversion without exerting pressure, by making becoming Jewish attractive, fulfilling and uplifting. We also must continue to make welcome non-Jewish spouses who are not considering conversion.

Permeable or Fixed Boundaries?

It is a truism in anthropology and sociology that only those groups sur-

vive that maintain clear and strong boundaries. Living in the most open host society in our history and experiencing high rates of intermarriage and assimilation, we need to examine where we draw our boundaries. It is useful to keep in mind that intermarriage among all ethnic groups (except African-Americans) and relgious denominations has shot up sharply in the last twenty years. We are part of a larger social phenomenon. The more permeable our boundaries are, the higher the probability that we will be absorbed by the larger community. Those are the lessons of biology, physics and history. And those same disciplines also teach that permanently fixed and rigid boundaries lead to ossification.

Where do we draw the boundary in civic matters? The Reconstructionist movement has been on record for at least a decade in welcoming the non-Jewish spouse into the community. The results of a FRCH poll in 1992 show that a majority of Reconstructionist congregations consider the non-Jewish spouse a voting member of the congregation, while placing restrictions on the civic roles they can play (e.g.they are restricted from being President, and chair of the ritual and education committees). Inclusivity, being welcoming, concern about feelings and communal ties were the deciding arguments for congregations that voted to include gentile partners in the civic life of the congregation. It was argued that the non-Jewish spouse, tied to the congregation through family ties, has a voice about its future and, by extension, in the future of the Jewish people. It should be noted in this context that many congregations give each household unit one vote.

In congregations where membership was not accorded, even though those congregations were committed to welcoming non-Jews, the prevalent analogy was with citizenship. One can migrate to the United States, pay taxes and enjoy the priviliges of living here, but one cannot vote unless one becomes a citizen and declares allegiance to the country. By extension, one cannot have a vote over the future of the congregation till one declares allegianee to its belief system—by converting.

One might categorize those who accorded voting membership as giving precedence in drawing their boundaries to the value of maintaining relationships and community, and those who did not accord voting membership as giving precedence in drawing their boundaries to the value of maintaining structure and law. Good and well-meaning people differ over the issue of where to draw the lines, but there is agreement that boundaries are needed.

Function of Belief

To draw these boundaries well, we need to be asking large questions: Do we want to maintain the distinctiveness of Judaism and of the Jews as a distinct group in society? What are the implications of easing boundaries? Is groupness necessary to maintain meaning and value in Jewishness? Is groupness a goal or a strategy?

To answer them, let us return to our definition of Judaism—our Reconstructionist mission statement, "Judaism is the evolving *religious civilization* of the Jewish people." It is religion that has given our civilization meaning, and been our glue, our *raison d'etre.* It is particularly in the religious realm that we must pay special attention to our boundaries.

I would argue that *maintenance of groupness is essential,* because it allows everything else to happen. The Jewish religion requires group particpation: one needs ten people, a *minyan,* as the minimum number required for public worship. And certain prayers can only be said in public worship, perhaps the most important of which is the *kaddish,* obligatory while mourning. Judaism is not a religion that promotes the solitary quest. The spiritual life of the Jew requires community.[4]

Given the role that Judaism as a religion plays in our civilization, it is important to be very conscious about how decisions about boundaries are made and who makes them, remembering that boundaries act out our self-definition. In religious matters, we act as representatives of the tradition. Any person leading a required portion of the service represents the community to itself and to God. The *halakhah* is very clear that a non-Jew cannot lead the community in any required prayers.[5] I can find no ethical or functional reasons for a Reconstructionist to argue with this tradition. One function of a *minyan* is the recreation, reaffirmation of the covenant. Reconstructionists have understood that public worship connects us with all Jews who came before us and all those to come after us. It would be difficult to make this connection with a non-Jew as the leader of traditional prayer, or as the giver of a *Devar Torah.* (The role of the gentile in leading additional readings or having a role in acts such as opening the ark is a separate, and certainly debatable point.)

Individual Needs vs. Group Needs

One other reason that the role of the non-Jew in our congregations poses a dilemma for us is that it highlights the tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. Western liberal democratic culture has placed the needs and rights of the individual above the needs of society as a whole. (This is the core critique offered by the contemporary Communitarian movement.) Judaism, and particularly Reconstructionism, understands that there is a tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group. Both sets of needs cannot always be served.

We may understand and respect a particular non-Jew who is a member of our community. We may even have a range of negative feelings and doubts about ourselves by limiting that individual's role—circumscribing his or her freedom. But it is helpful in thinking this matter through to put ourselves in the gentile's place relative to our community. What Jew would expect to go to church and take Com-

munion without being a believing member of that church's faith tradition? Why should a non-Jew have a similar expectation about interacting with our *sancta*?

Wrestling with these boundary questions provides an opportunity for all of us to deepen our understanding of some important Reconstructionist values. The question, "Why be Jewish?" is very much on the minds of many Jews, especially young adults. The desire for a universal connection and for a breaking down of boundaries is very strong, and, in many cases, reflects noble and worthy ideals. But we continually need to revisit the paradox that strengthening group ties does not necessarily lead to chauvinism, but can actually make the sense of universal feelings and connections more attainable. We are not human beings in general, but particular human beings from a particular people, better able therefore to interact with others, who also live in their own particularity.

American life today is faced simultaneously with an increase in "me-first" individualism and a fragmentation into groups concerned primarily about their own well-being. Jews' ability to live with and manage the tensions surrounding the responsibility of the individual to the group and of the group to the individual may therefore hold important lessons and even bring healing to the fissures in our society. How we Jews model our learning in this area may well be the key to our ongoing vitality. ♦

1. I will use the terms "non-Jew" and "gentile" interchangeably. Each of these words elicits visceral responses in us and has its drawbacks.

2. *M. Berakhot* 8:8 reads: "One answers 'Amen' after a Jew who blesses, but one does not answer 'Amen' after a Samaritan [*kuti*] who blesses, unless he hears the entire blessing." *The Mishnah Berurah* of R. Israel Meir Kagan to *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayim* 215:2, notes that when a Gentile mentions God s/he is not referring to an idol or a false God; therefore it is possible to respond with "Amen." This precedent is cited by Rabbi Joan Friedman in an unpublished responsum that served as the basis for the CCAR responsum on non-Jewish participation in the synagogue service.

3. Geela Rayzel Raphael, a student at RRC, has developed a ceremony for non-Jews who want to identify as members of the community, but are not ready to convert, using the biblical category, *ger toshav*, resident alien. In biblical terms, the *ger toshav* is expected to observe Shabbat (Ex. 20:10), fast on Yom Kippur (Lev.16:29), and participate in religious festivals (Deut. 16:11).

4. Gordon Lafer, "Universalism and Particularism in Jewish Law: Making Sense of Political Loyalties," in *Jewish Identity*, David Theo Goldberg and Michael Krausz, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 201-02, writes: "For liberals, the individual is the fundamental, and in some sense the only real, unit of political life. Inevitably, then, liberal formulations of community, tribe, or nation tend to be anemic...collectivities... represent[ing] useful combinations of individual wills, but they can never take on independent moral significance....By contrast, Jewish political thought does not begin from an original sovereignty. Neither the nation, nor its laws, derive their meaning from the alienated authority of individuals; on the contrary, the individual in large ways derives his or her identity from membership in the collectivity. Jews are joined together not by a social contract, but by a covenental relationship that binds each one to the law and to one another."

5. *M. Rosh Hashanah 3:8*, quoted in Joan Friedman, unpublished responsum.