



Jewish Community Studies

A Statement on Jewish Continuity

Responding to the high rates of intermarriage and concerns about eroding Jewish life, the organized Jewish community has initiated a drive to ensure "Jewish continuity" in North America. As Jewish academics and communal professionals, we welcome this initiative, particularly insofar as it promotes greater attention to the importance of Jewish learning and involvement.

Certain initiatives, however, seem to us more likely to undermine North American Judaism than to strengthen it. In a well-intentioned effort at inclusivity, some in the Jewish community seem all-too-willing to sacrifice distinctive Judaic values and teachings. In response, we call upon American Jews to declare the following five values fundamental to any program of Jewish continuity in North America:

1. **Torah**

Judaism rests upon a shared commitment to Jewish **learning and the commanding obligations** that being Jewish entails. These are what give substance and meaning to Jewish life. Jewish continuity depends upon our ability to maintain and strengthen these shared commitments and obligations, and to pass them on to our children.

2. **Am Yisrael (Jewish Peoplehood)**

The bonds of Jewish peoplehood have stood at the heart of Jewish group definition since the days of Abraham and Sarah. *Judaism is more than a religion; it demands identification with the Jewish people as a whole, a familial closeness with Jews of all kinds everywhere.* Jews, whether by birth or by choice, must consider themselves links in a

great chain of Jewish tradition, a *shalsholet* (chain) that stretches across the generation binding Jews across time and into the future. The principle of Am Yisrael is critical to Jewish continuity.

3. **Klal Yisrael (the community of Israel)**

Plural expressions of Judaism have long been a feature of Jewish communal life. Today, Jewish continuity is particularly heavily intertwined with the future of the Reform and Conservative religious movements, with which the overwhelming majority of North American Jews identify. Recognizing this, all Jews, regardless of ideological conviction, and no matter how strongly they may constructively disagree with one another, ought as an expression of klal yisrael to affirm the importance of plurality of religious expression within American Judaism.

4. **Brith (Covenant)**

From the time of Abraham, Jews have seen themselves as bound to one another and to God through a covenant that distinguishes Jews from members of other peoples or faiths. This covenant serves to differentiate Jews from non-Jews and to ensure that Jews remain a people apart. American Jews, integrated into American society and full participants in its activities, are increasingly not a people apart. As boundaries blur, inclusivity runs the risk of degenerating into a vague universalism that is Jewishly incoherent (witness the specter of non-Jews receiving aliyot to the Torah). *No matter how close the personal relationships between Jews and members of other faiths, Jewish continuity demands that strong, visible religious boundaries between Jews and non-Jews be maintained. Leadership roles within the Jewish community and in Jewish religious life must be reserved for those who accept the covenant Jews alone.*

5. **Kiruv (Outreach)**

In recent years, Jewish leaders have initiated programs of outreach-to-Jews in an effort to draw Jews closer to their people and faith and to win back those whose Judaism has eroded. The moderately affiliated are the most promising candidates for kiruv, and given scarce resources outreach programs are most productively directed toward them. Outreach directed toward those who are located furthest from Judaism and toward the non-Jewish marriage partners of Jews may also be valuable; no Jew should ever be written off entirely. *But these efforts must not be allowed to siphon away*

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funds urgently needed to strengthen Jewish life at its core. Nor should outreach give rise to ideological neutrality on core issues such as mixed marriage itself.

In calling upon American Jews to place these five values at the heart of Jewish continuity efforts, *we part company both with those who believe that any kind of Jewish involvement, no matter how superficial, promotes Jewish continuity, and with those who look upon outreach as a panacea and seek to transform Judaism to make it more attractive to potential converts.* Both of these efforts, while well-meaning, are doomed to fail; they promote not continuity but radical discontinuity and are at variance with our tradition. Instead, the only way to ensure the continuity of a meaningful, durable Judaism in North America is to emphasize the fundamentals: Torah, Jewish peoplehood (Am Yisrael), pluralistic community (Klal Yisrael), the sacred covenant (Brith), and a strong program of outreach to moderately affiliated Jews (Kiruv).

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