Denominational Bickering Hurts Outreach Efforts

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JTA: OP-ED

Published: NOVEMBER 12, 2008

NEW YORK (JTA)—There is an old saying, made popular by Hillary Clinton, that it takes a village to raise a child. As people grow, their future is impacted not only by family, but also the society as a whole. This includes teachers, mentors, bosses and the institutions in which they reside. Everyone, the saying implies, has a hand in developing who a person is and what he or she becomes.

The same can be said about raising a Jew – it takes the whole community, the diversity of every aspect of Judaism, to shape a Jew. It can also be said about Judaism itself, from Reform to Orthodox, that we all have a hand in shaping the future of the entire Jewish community. That's why it is up to us, here and now, to make sure the community will grow, will thrive and will become more dynamic as we raise the next generation of Jews. It is our responsibility to lead the way, to come together and work for the sake of the entire Jewish community.

Unfortunately, this is much easier said than done. Fundamental questions must be answered before we can move forward. Can we ever move past our denominational differences? What can we do on an individual level, as either professionals or lay leaders, to help bring together the disparate sects of Judaism? Will we be a more complete community if we open our doors and welcome in everyone who has chosen to affiliate with the Jewish people rather than create barriers that keep them away?

These are not questions with easy answers. Some believe that Judaism is a privilege, and one must work hard to earn that privilege. That means keeping kosher, observing Shabbat and either marrying a Jew or making sure that your spouse will convert. These folks believe Judaism is open to everyone, as long as you follow a few basic ground rules. For its efforts, the Orthodox movement lays claim to the fastest growing segment of the Jewish population.

Others, however, believe that holding people to a rigid set of rules will only push folks away. The Reform movement also claims to be the fastest growing movement in Judaism, in part because it allows people the freedom to celebrate Judaism in a way that is meaningful to them and with those most important to them. With intermarriage rates rising and more adult children of intermarriage than at any point in Jewish history, many families are looking for a home that respects the choices they have made.

We should look at what the Reform and Orthodox movements have in common and apply that to

the entire Jewish community. Both are growing because they are reaching people on an individual level, providing meaningful content and bringing in charismatic leadership. While it's inspiring to see both movements benefit from employing the same basic tactics, it's discouraging to see continued ideological quarreling.

This is not to say aligning oneself with one movement creates division – quite the opposite. In identifying so vigorously with a set of beliefs, each movement in Judaism has the ability to speak to a part of the community and their concerns. Interfaith families raising Jewish children need to know that there is a segment of the community that welcomes them, that will support them as they pursue a Jewish life. While their lifestyle might not be accepted by some, it's the responsibility of the entire Jewish community to encourage these families to explore their Jewish heritage, no matter what their background.

We won't reach that point, though, if we waste our time bickering on what divides us. It would serve us better as a Jewish community to act like a community and not a group of warring factions. Jews, whether born or converted, from an intermarriage or inmarriage, are inextricably linked through a shared history. With the respect each part of the community deserves, we should be asking questions of each other that will help us find and celebrate our common ground. After all, the sum of the parts is greater than the whole.

Judaism is our child. It has survived because we as a community have done our best to ensure continuity and relevance. But there is always the fear that assimilation and integration will lead to our demise. It's time to quash that fear. The Jewish community is much too strong and much too determined to ever let that happen. Halcyon days lie ahead, and as we embark on a new year, let us all think about what we can do to make sure we prosper as a vibrant and meaningful community.

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