

engage constructively with issues relating to conversion, intermarriage, and the changing demography of the North American Jewish community, should be required in our seminaries. While such courses could provide a solid grounding in text and theory, they could also address the real challenges — on the individual and communal level — that students will encounter when they become Jewish professionals: how to guide a Jew-by-Choice through the process of conversion; how to guide the congregation through assessing and developing policies regarding the

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role of the non-Jew in the synagogue or participation of non-Jewish family members in lifecycle ceremonies; how to create an inclusive community while articulating boundaries. These courses must extend beyond the walls of the seminaries into supervised fieldwork.

Above all, Jewish communities must be diligent in their efforts to reach out to those who choose to become Jews and to intermarried families. Federations, community centers, and religious movements can play a role in this sacred task. In the wake of the 1991 National Jewish Population Study, "continuity" became the watchword and communal resources were directed toward outreach programs. Many of these programs no longer exist, supplanted by other, newer concerns. Maybe, on this 30th anniversary of Schindler's visionary speech, it's time to reaffirm our commitment by developing a systems approach to this challenge. Can our leaders collaborate, so that each segment of the community has a task that it is uniquely suited to do, so that there is a road map and a division of labor? Such an approach would create clarity and unity (while respecting diversity), avoid wasteful duplication of efforts and turf wars, and enable the community and those new to it to benefit from all that we've learned thus far.

One of the first tasks articulated some 30 years ago, was to create a way for Jews to engage in constructive discourse about intermarriage and conversion; to find the words and spirit that created light, not heat, about this emotional issue; and to find ways to agree to disagree when necessary, remembering that

our arguments are *l'shem shamayim*, for the sake of heaven. We found ways to address anxieties, concerns, feelings that had never been publicly articulated, some of which caused helpful, powerful, and sometimes painful public conversations: People can convert, but can "the other" really become "us"? Are all these people with no Jewish backgrounds going to "water down" Judaism? Does the outreach program give a *hekhsher* to intermarriage?

I am proud that we found ways to speak honestly about a topic that had been unmentionable; we made it part of the communal dialogue. Now, it's time for the Outreach vs. Inreach debate to cease. It is a false dichotomy and, as such, it is completely unproductive. It is in reaching out to the other that we see ourselves most clearly. It is in knowing the heart of the stranger that we know our own heart most dearly. Our tradition teaches that the converts of each generation serve as witnesses for that generation, so each time a born-Jew asks me why I converted I become that witness through my response — a witness to the beauty and the value of Judaism. Jewsby-Choice remind our communities that being a Jew does not have to be solely an accident of birth; it can also be an act of choice and, moreover, that choice is one that is made by any Jew today who is living a Jewish life. It's just that some of us had Jewish parents and some didn't.

## **Discussion Guide**

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

- 1. How does our understanding of Judaism as a people, an ethnicity, a religion impact the process of conversion?
- 2. Can Judaism be more solicitous of the hyphenated identity of Jews-by-Choice?
- 3. Is the "doorway into Judaism" a welcoming experience? How so, or if not, why not?

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