



Outreach vs. Inreach: An Unnecessary Dichotomy

Rabbi Hayim Herring and Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky

Some community leaders would have us believe that “outreach” and “inreach” stand as opposing strategies to achieving a vibrant Jewish community. But inreach and outreach shouldn’t be an “either/or” proposition. Rather, an enriched Jewish community will be created by a “both/and” approach. Rabbi Harold Schulweis likes to say that “either/or questions are not good for the Jewish community.” Surely, such is the case with the debate over outreach and inreach, one which we would like to see put to rest. Our experience has confirmed that for the Jewish community to grow and prosper, both are indispensable ingredients. In equal measure, they take us to that ultimate goal of a vibrant Jewish community—a goal we believe is within our grasp.

First we must define our terms, as both outreach and inreach have been overused, misused and harshly used. And the landscape itself is complex, as can be illustrated by using “affiliated” and “unaffiliated” synagogue Jews as examples:

1. Best estimates are that only about 10-15% “affiliated” synagogue members participate in a shabbat experience on a weekly basis and that 16%- 24% participate once or more per month. Synagogues still work well for this thin slice of the community, but they are clearly broken even for the vast majority of those who fall in the “affiliated” category. Yet, infrequent, dues-paying participants, and those who do not pay synagogue dues at all, may be active in many other non-“mainstream” aspects of Jewish life and exemplify high ethical standards. What kind of clarity do the words outreach and inreach offer in these circumstances—who needs the inreach and who needs the outreach?
2. Synagogue membership has developed into a lifecycle phenomenon. People join as certain life needs emerge, may then drop membership and perhaps later rejoin. A highly mobile community complicates the picture of synagogue affiliation further and low success at inreach compounds the complexities of outreach. Depending upon when a snapshot of an individual is taken, that person may be considered inside or outside of the community.
3. New vibrant organizations are having success at making one-time connections to Jews, especially younger, secular ones and others who have felt marginalized by the Jewish community (for example, interfaith, gay and lesbian, single and bi-racial Jews). They are happy with their Jewish lives, do not feel the need for outreach and indeed, sometimes feel patronized by terms such as “outreach.”
4. One-time connections can provide a strong foundation on which to build future connections—to new organizations or existing ones. A smooth hand-off between outreach and inreach efforts can be vital at these junctures. Why polarize debates at these moments around the value of inreach verses outreach?

5. People on the inside of Jewish institutions are often equally open to new forms of Jewish expression and exploration as those on the outside. Just ask many regular synagogue-goers if they would describe their worship experience as spiritual, inspirational or transcendent, although they crave those feelings, just as those outside of synagogues often do. Not “either/or,” but “both/and” could benefit from spiritual enrichment.

Looking at the nexus between outreach and inreach, to us, successful *outreach* means bringing newcomers and those on the periphery of Jewish life to the gates of the community. Successful *inreach* nurtures and roots involvement in the institutional community, providing individuals with meaningful, transforming, life-affirming experiences and helping institutions grow with them over time. Institutions which make inreach a part of their culture deliver on the promises of outreach because their constituents become the best ambassadors for their institutions.

An increasing number of people are living outside of the core Jewish communal institutions that together formed the organized American Jewish community—with three cornerstone institutions of synagogue, JCC and Federation. It does not mean, however, that these folks are not engaging Judaism nor interested in what Judaism has to offer. In fact, they are often highly-engaged in Jewish learning, acts of *hesed*, the creation of new rituals and social justice. They just can't seem to get many mainstream institutions, which are actually looking for new “members,” to open up and allow their creativity in.

We have learned too much about younger generations to continue shaping the Jewish community along the needs and wants of their parents and labeling them as “the problem” will certainly not earn their involvement! The time has come to work together—proponents of outreach and inreach—to recognize that our strategies can be mutually enriching. Mainstream institutions offer talent, infrastructure and history; new individuals and organizations offer inspiration, energy and new perspectives. Each can clearly benefit from the other and turn the diversity of the community into a true blessing.

Some people will argue that with limited resources we have to perform triage in our communities. They say that there are not enough funds to support everything or that, more bluntly, “those who have made a decision to leave the community don't deserve our efforts.” In other words, why bother with outreach?

But not all the people who live outside of the organized community have made a decision to “leave the community.” Either they don't know the potential vibrancy that exists within the community or we haven't provided them with reason to enter or to stay—nor a sufficient variety of portals to enter. Conversely, consider the segment of the community which has chosen to join (that is, pay dues to a local institution) but has, at the same time, chosen not to participate. We may have their money for a period of time but we certainly don't have their souls—nor the souls of their children, in cases where they have them. And how does this argument of “limited resources” address many Jews who were active in one community but have moved to another and are not involved at the same level, at

least for a period of time? Do we thank them for their prior involvement by neglecting them for their lack of current involvement?

Then there are those who mistakenly use the word “inreach” synonymously with “prevention of intermarriage.” There are too many falsely drawn lines in the sands of the Jewish community and the most glaring is the notion that in-marriage is automatically a success and intermarriage is automatically a failure. Or that outreach is something we do exclusively for the intermarried, while inreach is for the in-married or unmarried.

Outreach and inreach don’t define the demographic, they define the location of people on their Jewish journeys, their feelings of Jewishness and their levels of involvement in Jewish life at moments in time. Are people already making forays into the organized community, or do we need to go “reach people where they are”? The truth is that the same people will likely need different approaches as they undergo normal human development. At all stages and with all individuals, we must use the same underlying methodology: a personal connection, a genuine welcome, and programs of meaning that speak to peoples’ intellect and spirit.

We live in the wealthiest and most achievement-oriented Jewish community that history has seen. We are not limited by financial resources—but more often, by vision and inspiration. Philanthropists regularly show that they are willing to fund innovative programs and ideas. We must redouble our creative efforts, and move past any lingering divisiveness, to make sure that those on the outside find their way into our communities and, once they are inside, are able to experience Judaism in such a way that makes their journey all the more worthwhile.

As we approach the fall holiday season, now is again the time to think about where we have been and where we are going. It is the time to make life choices that will determine our future, as individuals and as a community. It is also the time of year where more in the Jewish community find their way into the synagogue, but even those numbers are dwindling, especially when we consider those who come late and leave early to holiday worship services. Perhaps this year we can make sure that we lower the barriers to participation in the High Holidays (free tickets, alternative experiences and venues, implicit and explicit messages of welcome), provide meaningful spiritual experiences for all people who come, and consider both those on the “outside” and the “inside” as sources of mutual enrichment so that they that will want to return soon after the last blast of the *shofar* is sounded.

***Rabbi Hayyim Herring** is executive director of STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal). **Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky** is executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute.*