What Happens When Assimilated Jews Start Searching?

Reading Jewish History in the Parsha is a weekly newsletter from 18Forty, where guest writers contribute their insights on Jewish history and its connection to the weekly parsha. Receive this free newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions, comments, or feedback? Email Rivka Bennun Kay at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

God will scatter you among the peoples, and you will remain few in number among the nations to where God will lead you. You will be worshiping their deities there—man's handiwork, wood and stone—that cannot see, hear, eat, or smell. You will eventually seek God, your God, from there, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. (Devarim 4:27-29)

These verses in the midst of Parshat Vaetchanan paint a picture of the diasporic Jewish experience few can disagree with. Outside of Israel, the Jewish people are minorities within countries where assimilation is the rule rather than exception. In his book *Tablets Shattered,* Joshua Leifer explains that American Jews in particular have gone out of our way to "fit Judaism into the mold of … suburban, middle-class lives" and cast aside what does not fit. "Religious practice," Leifer laments, has largely become "just another consumer good" and American Jews have "become such good liberals that they could no longer give themselves compelling reasons for why they should live Jewish lives in terms other than those American liberalism furnished for them."

Despite, or perhaps because of, this reality, American Judaism was shaken to its core by the events of October 7, 2023 and the antisemitic ripple-effect that is still being experienced as of the writing of this essay. Many otherwise liberal and highly assimilated Jews began experiencing, for the first time, significant antisemitism in their lives while being brought face to face with how their own friends and coworkers felt about Jewish sovereignty in our historic homeland. Yet in addition to the pain and heartbreak, many of these Jews also experienced what Conservative Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove has described as nothing short of a "tribal awakening," which he unpacks in his recent book *For Such a Time as This.* In Cosgrove's words,

Our feelings of vulnerability are intermixed with solidarity, our disillusionment with moral clarity. There is a sharpening of our sense of kinship, the feeling that indeed, we are a people who dwell apart. It is a time of profound pain and disorientation, but it also carries with it a sense of discovery and quickening to this existential moment. Even in our dark hour, we are searching and often finding a deep, abiding connection to our community, our culture, and our faith. Fear and courage. Helplessness and a sense of duty to our people. Untethered and yet more connected than ever.

Indeed, according to the Jewish Federations of North America (cited here by the Orthodox Union), "more than four in ten American Jews have either sought out or engaged more with Jewish life" since Hamas' brutal assault on our people. In their contribution to the OU's symposium on the subject, Rabbi Benjamin and Rebbetzin Avital Goldschmidt of Manhattan's Altneu Synagogue suggest that "it's time for the Orthodox community to double down on meaningful outreach, on sharing the blessing of our traditions with others" in a way that utilizes "mind, heart and soul all at once—intelligence, kindness and inspiration—done with the deepest humility."

The Goldschmidts are engaged in this work through the founding and leading of their synagogue, a space which was put together with four guiding ideas in mind:

1. Welcoming Culture
2. Focus on Torah
3. Women Matter
4. Peoplehood is not enough to keep people connected … The answer is found in the challenges of daily observance, in regular practice and in leading lives inspired by the study of text.

There are certainly other synagogues that value these ideas within the Modern Orthodox world, but Modern Orthodox Jews generally seem reluctant to embrace the idea of "doing kiruv." In response to my own writing on the need for Modern Orthodox Kiruv, there have been a few common replies. One of the most passionate came from a successful Modern Orthodox educator who has worked in a number of "inreach" settings. In her words, "the goal of kiruv is to change people. This comes down to whether you think it is any person's responsibility to find people where they are and try to change their observance."

Thus, many see "kiruv" as a dirty word because it implies taking someone with little-to-no initial interest in Orthodoxy and twisting them such that they become, in the timeless self-reflective words of Louis Jacobs from his autobiography, "an insufferable little prig and religious fanatic, driving my poor parents crazy with my absurd demands." I've been open in my 18Forty interview about how manipulative kiruv (by an NCSY professional, in my case) ruined my budding relationship with Orthodoxy for several years.

Having said that, I'd like to share the non-coercive definition of kiruv that I've come to use. Pirkei Avot teaches the value of emulating Aharon HaKohen via "loving peace and chasing peace; loving all people and bringing them closer to Torah" ("אוֹהֵב שָׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שָׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמְקָרְבָן לַתּוֹרָה"). By definition, you cannot have kiruv without genuine love and care for others, no matter how different they are from yourself and without valuing respectful dialogue, shared spaces with them, and the fact that they might not end up the way you think is best for them. Full stop.

Even then, my friend Nathan Kasimer pointed out that it's very hard to escape the negative connotations people have about the word "kiruv." Regardless of intent, the word is interpreted by most who hear it as an attempt, in Nathan's words, "to push people into a religious life in ways that might not be healthy for them." He suggested to me a different framing which, in addition to my alternative definition of kiruv, is also worthwhile to think about:

A better model is to see the entire Jewish world as your constituency. If you believe Orthodoxy is true (which if you're Orthodox you probably do), and either believe specifically that Modern Orthodoxy is the best kind of Orthodoxy, or at the very least that it's the best suited for Jews [in secular environments], you should see all Jews as the people you're trying to serve by building communal infrastructure.

There are certainly synagogues that aim to do this in addition to the Altneu. My personal gold standard will always be Toronto's Village Shul where I had the privilege of working at the beginning of my rabbinic career. Sometimes referred to as "an Orthodox shul for non-Orthodox Jews" by guests, the Village Shul's mission is to "embrace, educate, and empower" all who walk through the doors and it does so masterfully. Philadelphia's Mekor Habracha/Center City Synagogue (where I am currently the Associate Rabbi), Manhattan's Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun and Lincoln Square Synagogue, and Florida's Boca Raton Synagogue come immediately to mind as well along with no shortage of others.

Yet for each of these, our community loses similar opportunities every year. For example, in an open letter responding to the OU shuttering their JLIC program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, students and alumni noted:

Under their leadership, and especially post-Covid, our Orthodox community has tripled in size. They have overseen a growing daily Minyan, robust and varied programming, and Shabbat and Holiday services and meals that serve hundreds of students throughout the school year. They have transformed UMass Amherst from a lonely outpost to a special, holy place for young, frum Jews, where we can learn and grow without compromise.

What made UMass JLIC unique was that a large percentage of that community was people who did not identify with Orthodox Judaism prior to their time on campus. One UMass graduate, with whom I am particularly close, described it like this:

UMass is a very different campus than JLIC serves … particularly in that it does not serve many students who were graduates of day schools. UMass also has many students who are some variety of traditional, keeping Kosher and Shabbat and Tzniut in slightly different ways, perhaps, compared to other places, and I guess our students look slightly different as a result. Many of those students explore Judaism at UMass with the help of the OU-JLIC couple and the community they support, and find their desired level of observance from there…

When I went, there was no eruv, and no daily minyan—we weren't even certain of a minyan on Shabbat. Anyone who has worked in new Jewish communities knows how difficult it is to get the infrastructure in place to support a Jewish community long term. The presence for a daily Minyan indicates how many students they are reaching, that they have enough dedicated students to keep that going. Most need a large Jewish community before that is even a possibility. Why remove the OU-JLIC now, when it has clearly been so successful?

The answer to that particular question is best left to administrators at the Orthodox Union and likely chalks up to the fact that OU-JLIC's mission is to serve the graduates of Jewish day schools, who make up a relatively small percentage of the UMass population. My point in sharing this anecdote is only to demonstrate that our community is not averse to cutting off programs that serve the entire Jewish community—that may well make financial sense given our communal funding structure, but does not provide an easy framework for viewing the entire Jewish community as our constituency in the way that today's reality calls upon us to. Unlike a major metropolitan area, I cannot imagine another non-Chabad Orthodox organization setting up infrastructure in Amherst.

In his response to the infamous 2013 Pew Report, my teacher Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter took our community to task for not better serving broader *Klal Yisrael*:

What happens to Jews across America matters to us because we are connected to them. We are one people. The growing insularity of American Orthodoxy is a tragedy because we carry on as if we are all who matter … We simply have failed to demonstrate the beauty, meaning and warmth of Judaism not only to one in six of our children in the 18 to 29 age category who are not religious (one of the findings of this survey), but to millions and millions of Jews across the country. The reason is not because our "product" is faulty; it is because we have not made this a priority. Shame on us that this disaster is taking place under our own noses. We, partially, need to bear some of the responsibility.

Our current moment is one in which Jews are expressing interest in exploring our teachings and traditions in significant numbers. Modern Orthodox institutions have the unprecedented opportunity to embrace them and introduce our teachings and traditions in healthy, non-coercive ways. The only question is whether or not we are capable of seeing that mission as a communal one that our local synagogues ought to embrace. Parshat Vaetchanan invites us to see that this phenomenon is expected, but we still must choose to act on it.