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In the following article, American Reform rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan describes an initiative to revolutionize contemporary Jewish attitudes to conversion and bring thousands, if not millions, of American gentiles into Judaism. In the Spring 2000 issue of MANNA, we will publish a number of responses from British Jews.

MILLIONS OF CONVERTS?

Dana Evan Kaplan

THE BRITISH REFORM AND Liberal Movements today are facing many of the same challenges as the American Reform Movement. But there is one very important difference. Whereas in Britain, as well as Australia, South Africa, Israel and so forth, the majority of the Jewish community affiliates to Orthodoxy, in the United States the vast majority of Jews are non-Orthodox. This means that American Reform Jews are much less concerned with the implications of their actions on the Orthodox. It is within this context that one has to look at the various initiatives undertaken either by the American Reform Movement or by other representatives of the American Jewish community. One of the most recent initiatives to try to respond to the crisis of assimilation facing the American Jewish community is the proactive conversion proposal made by Dr. Gary Tobin.

In May 1999, Tobin delivered a speech at a private conference held at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. Tobin is the Director of the Institute for

Community and Religion in San Francisco and the Director of the Abramson Programme in Jewish Policy Research at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. The University of Judaism is the West Coast centre for the study of Conservative Judaism. It has recently begun a full rabbinic programme after serving for decades as a feeder school for the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York. Tobin, however, is not a rabbi, but a sociologist and a Jewish communal professional.

Tobin also published a book at about the same time called *Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion can Revitalise the Community*. In his book Tobin argues that the Jewish community should engage in an organized, proselytizing campaign to recruit hundreds of thousands, if not millions of new co-religionists. These new Jews could and should come from all sorts of ethnic backgrounds and can thereby serve to diversify the Jewish ethnic mix, at the same time that it increased the number of Jews in the United States. Tobin writes that he hopes to

establish an institution to be called the National Centre for Jewish Inclusion which will, according to his own comments, start with an endowment of at least fifty million, and as much as one hundred million, dollars. Since Tobin advises a group of Jewish philanthropists known as the Mega group, he may have reason to believe that he can raise substantial sums of money. Others are less sanguine about his prospects.

Tobin argues that the American Jewish community could begin a well-planned and long term proselytizing effort that could increase the size of the American Jewish community substantially. The American community can take advantage of the fact that it is so much larger than the Jewish community in Great Britain and therefore has far greater resources and far more influence. The proselytizing campaign could also help to fuel the “Jewish renaissance” policy analysts such as Jonathan Woocher have been promoting. Thus, according to Tobin, it is a win-win situation.

Tobin's proposal has generated a substantial amount of media coverage, not only in the Jewish press, but in the secular media as well. Some newspapers have linked his specific proposal with a more general look at conversion to Judaism. The *Chicago Jewish News* recently ran a cover story on conversion to Judaism. It featured a forty-year-old woman named Jennifer Peters who had decided to convert from Christianity to Judaism. Inside the newspaper there was a lengthy essay by Peters on how she had gone from being an active member of her church to becoming a Jew. She converted on June 24th 1999 at Congregation Solel and, presumably, the essay was written as a requirement of the conversion programme. On a facing page, a Jewish Telegraphic Agency article on Tobin's proposal is reprinted. In the article, Tobin bluntly states that his proposal is "not a magic bullet to save Judaism" but rather part of a multifaceted strategy for rebuilding the Jewish community. "If Judaism institutionally, communally, ideologically is strong and powerful, others will choose to join. The question is, are we prepared to let them?"

Tobin's proposal did not come completely out of the blue. In 1997, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, the respected liberal Conservative rabbi of Temple Beth Israel in Encino, California wrote an impassioned plea for the promotion of conversion to Judaism. This has been a policy urged by Schulweis for many years. Tobin, a fellow Californian, seems to have been

influenced by Schulweis. There have been many others, particularly since Reform leader Rabbi Alexander Schindler's speech, advocating Jewish proselytizing. As far back as 1979 Schindler argued that Jewish proselytizing had been done extensively in the ancient world but had declined or even stopped as a result of severe pressure from the dominant Christian authorities from the fourth century onward. Now that such pressures no longer existed it was time to renew this more assertive and self-confident approach to conversion to Judaism. Schindler stated "we live in America today. No repressive laws restrain us. The fear of persecution no longer inhibits us. There is no earthly reason now why we cannot resume our ancient vocation and open our arms wide to all newcomers. Why are we so hesitant? Are we ashamed? Must one really be a madman to choose Judaism? Let us shuffle off our insecurities. Let us recapture our self-esteem. Let us demonstrate our confidence in those values which our faith enshrines."

Thus, the current interest in conversion follows earlier Reform thinkers and institutional leaders. There is an extensive record of Reform thinkers advocating Jewish missionary activity in the United States, Great Britain, and even Germany. This record goes back a hundred years or more.

Tobin is not a historian and is not interested in searching out the roots of this idea. He barely mentions ancient Jewish interest in the subject, which is unfortunate because there has been much

excellent research specifically on attitudes toward conversion in the Biblical, Second Temple, and Talmudic periods.

There were two well regarded studies both published during the Second World War and both written by scholarly Reform rabbis. One was Bernard Bamberger's *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period*, which was published by the Hebrew Union College Press in 1939. The other book was William Braude's *Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era: The age of the Tannaim and Amoraim*. Recently a large number of new books as well as articles have been published that generally support the contention that early Judaism encouraged conversion. These include Gary Porton's *The Stranger Within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature*, Louis Feldman's *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian*, and Robert Goldenberg's *The Nations that Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes Toward Other Religions*. Most recent is Shaye Cohen's, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. It is very unsatisfactory that Tobin, as well as most other recent advocates of conversion, make do with fleeting references to the fact that active conversion to Judaism is not a new idea. This ignorance is exhibited not only by those who advocate conversion as a public policy, but also those who write 'how to' books on conversion to Judaism. This latter topic has become a very popular subject for books in recent

years. Yet most of the writers seem to know very little about conversion to Judaism theologically or historically. The books are often very good at describing the psychological factors that go into the consideration of adopting a new religious identity. They can also be useful in describing the complexities of family dynamics, both within the nuclear family, as well as with one's own parents and other relatives on both sides. But, it would be helpful if these 'how to' books could tie the current interest in conversion closer to the historical development of Judaism as an ancient faith with a long and complex history.

It is not accidental that the 'how to' books begin with today. The current American attitude to religion is based on personalism. Philosopher John Lavelly writes that the term "personalism" refers to a perspective where the individual "is the ontological ultimate and for which personality is the fundamental explanatory principle." Israeli sociologist Charles Liebman explains that Personalism is the strong tendency to transform the

tradition into terms which stress its meaning to the individual. Therefore, conversion to a religion – any religion – is going to be evaluated in terms of the worth to the individual. Loyalty to a tradition will be seen as secondary, if it is perceived as a factor at all. Indeed, if loyalty to tradition played a stronger role in the consideration of religious identity, most of these prospective converts to Judaism would have remained deeply attached to the faith of their ancestors. Religious switching – which has become so prevalent – has created the potential for large scale Jewish proselytizing. But it is also a factor which has a strong impact on how one needs to approach and respond to prospective converts, as well as how such proselytes are likely to interact with their new religion and co-religionists.

Many British Reform rabbis, particularly those outside the greater London area, are concerned that a large number of converts from completely non-Jewish backgrounds could "flood our congregations" and diminish the Jewish character of the

congregation. This is not a concern paramount in the minds of most American Reform rabbis or the American Reform lay leadership. The reasons for this are complex but have a lot to do with the fact that, on one hand, the Reform Movement in American is much larger with between 1.2 and 1.5 million members. And on the other hand, there is the strong sense of being at home that American Jews feel. While in earlier generations, American Jews did feel 'ethnic' and 'foreign', today they feel completely American. American Reform Judaism has truly become an American religious denomination in which all are welcome. Gary Tobin's proactive conversion proposal needs to be understood in that context. If such a proselytization campaign is successfully implemented, it could reinvigorate the American Jewish community and would have a substantial impact on the Jews of Great Britain and around the world.

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