

Jewish Leaders Strive to Rouse the Uncommitted

By KENNETH A. BRIGGS

Putting aside a longstanding aversion to winning adherents, Jewish leaders across the spectrum of Judaism have been working to kindle an active interest in the religion among uncommitted Jews.

Jewish leaders in the Reform, Conservative and Orthodox branches said they had been acting in response to what they see as an alarming erosion of Jewish ethnic and religious identity. This erosion has created a climate of crisis over Judaism's future, they said, and has paved the way for dramatically more aggressive approaches.

"In a way, Jews have become evangelicals," said Dr. Irving Greenberg, director of the National Resource Center in Manhattan. In a competitive society like America, he said, "all religions have to broadcast their message — if they don't, they get nowhere."

Move Began Slowly

Jewish leaders say the effort to reach uncommitted Jews started slowly among a few groups about a decade ago and has been accelerating rapidly in recent years, expanding to include all major branches of Judaism. It was prompted by soaring rates of marriage between Jews and non-Jews and a decline in the Jewish birthrate in the United States. Much of the focus is on young Jews.

The efforts to reach the uncommitted, known as the outreach movement, have taken various forms, from special schools for newcomers to Judaism to experimental synagogues and active youth groups. One feature of many synagogues that is credited with appealing to uncommitted Jews is a policy of treating men and women equally.

What the efforts have in common is an easygoing approach to the uncommitted, to give them exposure to the

religion without making it such a heavy dose that they are discouraged.

For example, most outreach workers, aware that younger Jews are prone to be wary of formal religious institutions, often adopt a friendly, informal, noncoercive style designed to welcome the stranger.

One of the more successful outreach workers is Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld, whose home in Far Rockaway, Queens, has earned the reputation of being the place to go for troubled and curious souls seeking guidance on getting involved in Judaism.

Rabbi Freifeld says that newcomers to Judaism must be handled with care. "Just as a plant must grow and mature naturally," he said, "you can't hurry a human being."

One of the more unusual efforts is

that run by Jonathan Omerman, an Israeli-born outreach worker whose counseling in Los Angeles is carried on in a McDonald's. "It's neutral ground," he explains.

In Boston, the staff of the college-oriented Hillel foundation passes out bagels on motorbikes as a way of informally compiling a list of Jewish students.

More Involvement Sought

The outreach effort comes at a time when many Jews who know little about Judaism have been seeking more involvement in their religion.

"Today," said Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, executive vice president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, "we witness the phenomenon of thousands of young Jews, intelligent,

worldly, accomplished, searching and yearning for spirituality, for Torah and for roots, returning to our midst."

For many synagogues, the outreach effort has meant a revival.

Anshe Chesed, a Conservative synagogue at 100th Street and West End Avenue, was transformed from a staid congregation to an innovative one. On Saturday mornings as many as four different worship services suited to different tastes are conducted simultaneously.

Anshe Chesed had been a dwindling, aging Conservative congregation whose ushers wore top hats and where small numbers met for Sabbath services in the cavernous sanctuary. In the

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The New York Times / Nancy Kays

Caitlin and David Kleiman lighting Sabbath candles. Mrs. Kleiman converted to Judaism through a Reform outreach project.



The New York Times / Keith Meyers

A dance being held in Bayside, Queens, to rekindle interest in Judaism among nonpracticing Jews.

The Palace II heading up the Hudson toward

Jewish Leaders Trying to Win Over the Uncommitted

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past few years, the form and style has undergone striking revision. The congregation has placed ads in newspapers, distributed flyers and sponsored community arts festivals to draw new people.

The rejuvenated synagogue appeals to modern tastes in many ways. Women are given roles equal to men, including the leading of prayers and the reading of the Torah. Some women wear a tallit, the traditional prayer shawl, and don a yarmulke.

Worshippers choose among four different kinds of groups with which they can pray. Beginners, intellectuals, social activists and traditionalists can all find something to their liking. All meet on different floors of the four-story education building and, at times, the singing from different minyans fills the stairwell in joyful musical chaos.

'Supermarket of Judaism'

Sharon Dolan, a visitor on one recent Saturday morning, called the synagogue "the supermarket of Judaism." For newcomers, the synagogue has prepared a "Welcome to Anshe Chesed" booklet that explains all elements of the service. Membership and participation have been steadily rising.

A similar rebirth has taken place at Congregation Baith Israel Anshei Emes, a 127-year-old synagogue on Kane Street in Brooklyn led by Rabbi Jonathan Ginsberg. After enjoying a heyday 50 years ago, the congregation fell into decline. So low were its for-

tunes in the 1950's that Jewish members of the Police Department in the neighborhood were sometimes summoned to put together the 10 Jews necessary for a prayer group.

In recent years, the health of the synagogue has been restored through vigorous attempts to attract Jews who have been moving into the Brooklyn Heights neighborhood.

Like many other outreach congregations, it also treats men and women equally. In each of the past two years, the congregation has doubled, the rabbi said.

Atmosphere of Warmth

Rabbi Ginsberg, a recent graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, last year became the synagogue's first full-time rabbi in 25 years. He attributes the growth to an atmosphere of personal concern and congregational warmth. He frequently asks visitors home for a Sabbath meal to make them feel welcome.

Outreach programs have touched a wide variety of people.

Boruch Klar, once an aide to Cesar Chavez in the United Farm Workers, and detached from religion, seven years ago was attracted to full-time religious life through his contact with Lubavitch Hasidic Jews.

He enrolled at the Rabbinical College of America in Morristown, N.J., a school for men run by the growth-minded Lubavitch Hasidic movement. He now works to inspire spirituality among the area's college students.

Caitlin O'Sullivan, a recruiter for a

Manhattan law firm, converted to Judaism through a Reform outreach project at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in New York. She later married David Kleiman, a Jewish man she had been dating before her conversion.

Wendy Weiner, an 18-year-old student from a nonreligious Jewish family in Omaha, Neb., got involved with the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, an Orthodox youth organization.

She began observing the Sabbath, which meant giving up Friday night football games, and became the only member of her family to keep kosher. This fall she hopes to enter Touro College in New York, a Jewish college.

The fruits of outreach endeavors are nowhere more striking than at Rabbi Freifeld's home in Far Rockaway.

Some seekers, including a physicist who examines Jewish law with the rabbi for a short period each dawn, study part time. Others drop everything and give themselves totally for months, even years, to poring over the texts of the Torah and the Talmud.

Dormitories for Students

A busy community has grown out of the rabbi's efforts. Near the center of town stands the synagogue, occupied daily by students, and close by are three buildings converted into dormitories to house them and their families.

Two recent studies have given a focus to the alarm that many Jewish leaders feel about the future of the religion. Jewish population studies by the American Jewish Committee have esti-

mated that nearly one-third of Jews marry outside the faith. And a 1976 projection by Harvard demographers predicted a drop in the American Jewish population from six million to one million over the next century if current marital and birthrate trends continue.

Policy decisions made by the leaders of the Reform movement have helped drive the outreach efforts. Five years ago, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, head of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations called on Reform Jews to be more accepting of the non-Jewish partners of mixed marriages and to invite non-Jews to explore the possibility of conversion.

The national director of the Union's program, Rabbi Sanford Seltzer of Boston, said "tens of thousands of people" had already taken part in its outreach program.

The Reform movement also approved a resolution that qualifies a child as Jewish if either parent is Jewish. By tradition, the child was considered Jewish only if the mother was Jewish. The change in policy greatly expands the number of potential religious adherents. This "patrilineal" decision, reached this spring, has aroused especially strong criticism from Orthodox groups who contend that it violates Talmudic law.

A pioneer in the outreach field is the Lubavitch movement, one of the most prominent ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish groups, which is known for making contact with seekers through its network of Chabad houses at dozens of colleges across the country.

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