

I Seek My Brothers and Sisters

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Every year, tens of thousands of Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies are held for children around the world whose mother is not Jewish. Many Israeli Jews will find this disturbing. “No way,” they may respond, “you can’t have a Bar Mitzvah if your mother isn’t Jewish, or even if you have a single Jewish parent.” But maybe the time has come to rethink this issue, with the goal of drawing large numbers of people closer to the shrinking Jewish world – in Israel and in the Diaspora?

Tens of thousands of families in which only the father is Jewish have chosen to play an active part in the life of Jewish communities in the Diaspora or to immigrate to Israel, the Jewish state. When synagogues refuse to offer Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for children from these families, they are effectively showing the families a “no entry” sign. Instead of welcoming the families and smoothing their path to the Jewish world, the end result is that they feel excluded from Judaism.

These very same families form the backbone of Jewish leadership in North America today. Ask AIPAC or the Jewish federations... look at the leadership of B’nai B’rith or the Anti-Defamation League: this is the face of contemporary North American Jewry.

In Israel, this issue mainly affects Olim who came from the Former Soviet Union or their children. Another group includes Israelis who met their partners during the popular backpacking tours after military service, or during business or pleasure trips abroad. Israeli-Jewish society today is diverse and multicolored, just like the Jewish communities in the Diaspora. Today’s reality encourages interfaith relationships, unlike the “good old days” of the closed Jewish communities in Europe or in the Arab countries (which were often anything but good).

The non-Orthodox movements, and particularly the Reform movement, are the main wings of Judaism that have opened their doors to such families.

Of course, we can always choose to build even higher walls and close ourselves off even more, if we want to. Some people might even recommend the approach taken during the ancient Return to Zion in the period of Ezra the Scribe, when Jewish men divorced their non-Jewish wives. But many others in the Jewish world prefer to enrich our small circle with new wisdom and partners. Jewish demography shows a pattern of shrinking, and those outside insular and isolated Judaism need to think creatively and make a common effort to attract those who are drifting away.

The Jewish sages recognized the possibility that strengthening the bond to Judaism can lead to a deeper sense of a shared fate. Centuries ago, Maimonides ruled that “if

a Noahide wishes to perform a commandment in order to receive its reward, he is not prevented from doing so properly. If he brings a sacrifice, it is admitted. If he offers charity, it is accepted” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings).

The late Rabbi Ovadia Yosef also permitted those of his flock who were not yet Jewish to recite the Kaddish mourners’ prayer for their father, as part of the process of learning about and connecting to Judaism. This generous, sensitive, and inclusive approach can also guide us when we consider the question of Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for children whose mothers are not Jewish. It is a pity that Rabbi Yosef’s followers have not followed his advice.

The late Rabbi Yosef will surely have been familiar with another ruling concerning the circumcision of a child whose father is Jewish, but whose mother is not. Granted by Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer one of the earliest exponents of Orthodox Zionism, this ruling states that “we must open a window of hope for him now, with his father’s consent, so that when he grows up he will be able to perform his father’s will quickly and immerse himself [i.e. convert] properly. If he is not circumcised, then he is rejected from the community of Israel... We are responsible toward each other whenever possible to act in their favor, and not – God forbid – to repel them.” Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer comments are sensitive and full of faith: he assumes that one isolated act can lead to another, thereby multiplying light and hope.

In the post-Holocaust era, such rulings reinforce the inherent Jewish sense that we must seek to expand the Jewish world and make the most of circles of potential newcomers. In this context, the Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony provides a platform for reinforcing the Jewish foundations of the interfaith family. In the future, this may deepen the family’s connection with Judaism and perhaps even lead to full conversion.

In an era when only a minority of Jews in Israel and around the world follow the Halachah in its strict form, Israeli society should open itself up to broader definitions of participation in Jewish culture and nationhood. A Jewish child who goes to a regular public school in Israel, and who grew up in a family with a Jewish father and a mother whose father or grandfather were Jewish, should be included in the broad tent of Jewish society in Israel.

People who would have been sent to the gas chambers as Jews or persecuted as Jews, even if they do not meet the Halachic definition of a Jew, deserve a warm Jewish home. The Talmudic sages taught us that “human dignity is so important that it overrules a negative commandment of the Torah.” A Bar Mitzvah ceremony is not a commandment from the Torah, so it can even more readily be offered to those who seek an experience that will draw them closer to Judaism.

A while back I heard the actor Michael Douglas speak at an event in North America. Douglas is the son of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, and is himself married to a non-Jewish woman. He spoke warmly of the welcome he received at a Jewish community that opened its doors when his son wished to have a Bar Mitzvah ceremony. The ceremony, and the open-minded attitude of the rabbi and the community, have repositioned the family at the heart of the Jewish experience.

I was moved by Douglas's story. It should inspire us to follow in the footsteps of Joseph, when he declared "I seek my brothers." In today's world, this is not only a religious commandment, but also an imperative if we want the Jewish people to survive through the twenty-first century and beyond.