

Attempting to interpret the causes of assimilation poses a challenge; there is no universal understanding of the problem, and in trying to define it, we offend and alienate former, current and potential members. As we desperately attempt to increase our membership by reforming our community's recruitment approaches to new members from alternative Jewish family settings, we are forgetting about the most important feature of community building: community values. The 2008-2009 Strategic Plan outlines the following as our long-term vision for the Calgary Jewish community, "To increase affiliation and increase points of connection for those who are active..." lest we "...see a huge decline in involvement in the community."¹ The Plan suggests more community outreach, especially to intermarried couples and families, and encourages strategic reception and follow-up for these people at community events.² While these approaches are legitimate, they reflect a goal to increase the size of our community, not the desire to build a diverse, pluralistic community that would appeal to the other 90% of Jewish Calgarians who remain anonymous. In order to combat the threat of a dwindling community we must reform our perceptions of our existing community, and meaningfully define what result we wish to attain through our latest expansion project. Our attention should not be focused on size, but rather the quality of our community. Our goal should not be simply to attract new members for the sake of growing the community, but rather *understanding how we can best provide for them*. Without profound introspection and the ability to re-assess our value system, the vast majority of secular Jews will continue to move away from religious affiliation and participation in Jewish cultural practices and community life.

¹ Strategic Plan, page 2.

http://www.jewishcalgary.org/local_includes/downloads/18625.pdf (accessed 21 February 2010).

² Strategic Plan, page 3.

The term “assimilation” is in itself a part of the problem. Assimilation is incorrectly used as a synonym for intermarriage; assimilation is neither synonymous with, nor the direct result of intermarriage. The concept of what constitutes a Jew has been subject to scrutiny and debate throughout history. Matrilineal descent has been called into question and was formally rejected by Reform Judaism³ and many Conservative congregations. In doing so, North American Reform congregations have grown in size, in spite of the national trend that reveals a decrease in religious affiliation for all religions.⁴ This can be explained, in large part by the Reform movement’s receptivity to interfaith couples and its allowance of active participation in community life events for the non-Jewish parent.⁵ While there is a sect of Judaism for everyone, this particular case underscores a lesson from which the wider community may be able to learn. There is an important opportunity to grow our community by becoming more receptive to alternative Jewish families. A study by the Jewish community of Boston reveals exactly this: sixty percent of intermarried families in Boston are raising Jewish children; this is “qualitatively enriching the community” as well as augmenting it quantitatively.⁶ Communities in the United States have invested money, time and effort into creating an informative, compelling campaign that is contributing to

³ Page 5. <http://urj.org/kd/temp/009E1748-9843-23B9-4228C3390A382B28/Intermarried%202008.pdf> (accessed 21 February 2010).

⁴ Census of Population: Income of individuals, families and households; religion. 13 March 2003. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/030513/dq030513a-eng.htm> (accessed 21 February 2010).

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http://www.interfaithfamily.com/news_and_opinion/intermarriage_and_the_conservative_movement/Survey_Shows_Conservative_Judaisms_Numbers_Dropping.shtml (accessed 21 February 2010).

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http://www.interfaithfamily.com/about_us_advocacy/what_iff_does/Mission_&_Activities.shtml (accessed 21 February 2010).

the involvement of interfaith families in Jewish communities. Websites like Interfaithfamily.com provide contact information for congregations and rabbis who support the participation of non-Jewish spouses, articles, personal anecdotes, and detailed instructions on how to celebrate holidays, life-events and raise Jewish children. Its primary purpose is to “educate, connect and advocate,” which shows an approach distinct from our Strategic Plan. The intended outcome, however, is the same; both hope to increase and broaden the membership base of North American Jewish communities in response to the high percentage of intermarriage among secular Jews. Interfaithfamily.com emphasizes advocacy on behalf of intermarried families, and this is paramount. The Calgary Strategic Plan outlines tactics for inviting, receiving and following-up with unaffiliated interfaith and non-interfaith Jewish families. While this is a great start, it does not equip the rest of the active community members with the skills, drive or values required to absorb these newcomers.

Our main objective needs to be the re-assessment our community values and understanding how they manifest in our interpretations of eligible members socially and by religious law. In Calgary we have a strong Jewish community. It offers a lot of potential for the absorption of unaffiliated, non-religious and intermarried Jewish Calgarians. Once settled in the community, there is a strong support network that can and does provide extremely well for its members. The difficulty is that it is challenging to transition from an unaffiliated Jew, into a respected, supported and welcomed member of the community. This is especially challenging among Jewish youth. Differences in family type, upbringing, socioeconomic status and lifestyle preferences are areas of contention in the relationship between “established” Jewish youth and new members.

In spite of my public school education I was instilled with a strong Jewish identity. As a young teenager I attended religious school by choice and proudly wore a *magen david* around my neck. I had Jewish friends and felt as though I was part of a Jewish community, albeit a small part of one sect, but a community nonetheless. At age fifteen I made the switch from the YMCA Camp Chief Hector summer program to Camp BB, Pine Lake. I was shocked to find upon arrival that the campers and staff were already well acquainted, and that I was seen as the new girl. I was eventually taken under the wing of a few cabin mates and had a great summer. Though my experience was a positive one, others were often not so fortunate. I recall one girl saying to me, "You're lucky we like you. Most people don't come back." Over the next few years, I successfully integrated into the community and became an active member of BBYO. As my final year came to an end I became aware of those girls who had appeared out of nowhere, attended a few programs and never returned. One girl in particular stands out in my mind as a strong indication of the challenges faced by outsiders. I had only met her a few times and had a generally good impression of her. At a year-end potluck I noted her absence and decided to inquire as to the reason. The responses I received from the crowd were appalling: "She's weird," "she has family problems," and other similar accounts. I realized then that BBYO would never be capable of accommodating the people that need it most; the only teenagers with trouble at home, or who faced challenges at school that were accepted socially in BBYO were those that already existed as members with an established social position. Sadly I have seen the same trend as an advisor. Last year I watched a quiet, sweet and unfamiliar girl enter the room at a hotel convention. She was given a weak reception but was invited to join a table nonetheless. The conversation continued around her and eventually she left the room in

tears. When asked why she left, her response was simply “loneliness.” She was sitting in a conference room full of other people and yet she felt alone. A small community like ours demonstrates a paradox in that it can provide unparalleled support for those who fit in, and can impose such a strong sense of alienation for those who do not. As such, it is vital that in planning the growth of our community, we take into consideration the objectives of the Strategic Plan, which include stronger outreach programming, and combine them with a focus on how we want to shape our community such that it is possible to succeed at these outreach attempts.

I propose a reformed approach to teaching Jewish values, especially inclusivity, starting with our youth. We currently have a divide between the Jewish traditions and religious belief taught at our Jewish schools and what our kids actually see practiced in their own homes. In school they are taught that Jews do not eat pork, work on *Shabbat*, and that Judaism is passed between generations by matrilineal descent. In reality, many Jews who attend synagogue and enrol their children in Jewish educational programs are the first to deplore intermarriage over a lobster dinner. Much in the same way, Israelis often feel that by living in Israel, they are “Jewish enough” and thus absolved from observing our ancient traditions.⁷ Every single Jew experiences his/her own connection to Judaism differently than the next and this is generally accepted by Calgary’s secular and semi-observant active members. This is a strong and positive feature of our community that needs to be extended to all Jewish people, irrespective of their *halachic* Jewish standing. From personal experience, it is extremely painful and alienating to be one of the few

⁷ Avraham Infeld: Jewish Agency. <http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/Aliyah/Publications/The%2BAliyon/Jews%2B-%2BWho%2BAre%2BWe.htm> (accessed 20 February 2010).

members of a Jewish social circle that obeys the laws of *kashrut*, dates within the community and values Jewish identity all the while being pressured into converting. The double standard is hard to miss; as with the social criteria for acceptance, the “full” Jews are exempt from religious observance and are free to practice selectively, but the outsiders have to meet specific expectations before being granted acceptance into the community. While being Jewish by the paternal side does not necessarily mean exclusion from religious programming or Jewish education, it does automatically pose a social challenge that threatens the self-esteem, inclination to identify as Jewish, and level of involvement in the Jewish community for children of intermarried couples. For Jews who identify with the community and are actively involved but are not *halachicly* Jewish, the only incentive to convert is to be rid of the cumbersome stigma. In reality, I am Jewish enough advise BBYO, program for Hillel and have a *bat mitzvah*, so the threat of having to convert for my future children’s sake is unfounded. Our community is structured such that we do not formally exclude anyone. In spite of this, most Jews from alternative backgrounds are made to feel as though they do not belong socially, and thus reject the notion that they are part of our community. Accordingly, if it is important enough to us to grow our community by reaching out to intermarried couples as is outlined in the Strategic Plan, we have to be prepared for a new interpretation of who is Jewish and instil values of community and inclusivity in our children from an early start. Without this, our plan is bound to fail.

Another important feature is that most unaffiliated Jews find their identities elsewhere. Unaffiliated teenagers have non-Jewish friends from school and extracurricular activities from which their identities derive. As one of a handful of Jews in my high school, I often heard the others say that they had a Jewish parent, but seldom that they themselves

were Jews. Instead they characterized themselves as athletes, musicians, dancers and artists. Unaffiliated Jewish Calgarians do not need the Jewish community and therein lies the biggest challenge for us in the execution of our Strategic Plan. Our plan needs to encompass much more than a call to action inspired by high intermarriage rates and fear of a shrinking community. We need to build a community that has mass appeal and that is capable of, and eager to absorb new members from alternative backgrounds because we want Jews to feel welcomed and encouraged *for their own sake*. In the end, it is not about numbers, it is about values. What is the point of our outreach program if our primary motivation for building a “strong and vibrant community” is fear of “the status quo or, at worst, see(ing) a huge decline in involvement in the community”?⁸ Rather we need to focus on attention on what can offer the masses, especially the unaffiliated because they are the majority. The unaffiliated Jews have the most to gain by joining, and are the least aware of our community’s potential. It is not their responsibility to marry within the faith because religious observance and lifestyle are personal decisions. It is our responsibility, however, to be open, encouraging and offer a receptive community that people can be a part of if they so choose. We Calgary’s Jews understand that our community produces Jewish scholars, Jewish athletes, Jewish artists, et cetera. Jewish Calgarians should be free to explore their identities without having to choose between them.

Statistically speaking, Calgary has a very high potential for new members from intermarried families. According to the Executive Summary, 48.5% of children in intermarried families are described as having no religion, and only 30% are identified as

⁸ Strategic Plan, page 3.

having a religion other than Judaism.⁹ That means that 70% of the intermarried population can be counted as potential members of our community. Rather than feeling threatened by the intermarriage rates, we need to refocus our attention on being productive and proactive by creating an attractive community that can both get, and keep new members. This is attainable through the implementation of the Strategic Plan, only after we have prepared the existing community for substantial change. We have to instil community values in our children through their Jewish educational institutions and at home, so that they come recognize these values as an integral part of our Jewish tradition.

These numbers should be the source of great inspiration for our community and help us establish a well-defined goal for the coming years in terms of increased membership. It is important to note that our community has already proven itself capable in many cases, and we just need to tap into the potential that already exists in order to see our plan succeed. I made a recent enquiry into Akiva Academy's policy on accepting students from intermarried families. Having spoken to the administrative staff about my family's situation, I received a warm and genuine invitation to meet with the rabbi of the House of Jacob and to pursue a connection with the school. I learned that admission of interfaith students varies from case to case but he stressed that were the kids to be accepted, they would find "an inclusive environment," which is actively promoted and strictly enforced at the school. This response could not have come at a better time. My oldest niece will be starting kindergarten in September, which was the reason for my phone call. As the people in my intermarried family grow up, get married and have

⁹ Jewish Calgary: Executive Summary - Statistics.
http://www.jewishcalgary.org/local_includes/downloads/18622.pdf (accessed 20 February 2010).

children, the more these issues have an impact on our connection to the community. There is a new generation of potential members in our city, and four of them from my family alone. Additionally, my sister has received several personal phone calls and even a visit to her house in the N.W. about Jewish education options for her children. Our community outreach program is successfully entering into the homes of our unaffiliated Jews. We should be proud of progress and use it to propel us forward. We have the tools required to build a strong, inclusive community, all we need now is to expand our existing plan so as to ensure its successful implementation so we can develop of the strong, inclusive and attractive community we strive to be.