

Rabbi Sternfield's
News and Views
April 2006

On the front page of the New York Times, Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, recently called for Reform congregations to increase our efforts to convert non-Jewish spouses. By welcoming and accepting gentile spouses, Reform congregations have "perhaps sent the message that we do not care if they convert," Rabbi Yoffie stated at the Union's most recent convention. He went on to state: "The time has come to reverse direction by returning to public conversions and doing all the other things that encourage conversion in our synagogues."

Although I respect Rabbi Yoffie as a capable leader of our Reform movement, I truly regret that he has taken this position, particularly because his views were posted on the front page of America's premiere newspaper. I regard this strategy to be retrogressive, insensitive and almost inevitably counter-productive. Now I will tell you how I really feel!

Interfaith marriage is a trend that shows no signs of reversing. With every passing year, more and more young Jewish men and women marry people from other religious and cultural groups. There is no possibility of turning back the clock to times past where most Jews almost invariably married other Jews. Throughout our society, the obstacles to inter-religious, inter-cultural and inter-racial marriages largely are being removed or minimized, and I am not about to assert that this is a bad thing. As the barriers have come down, human understanding has increased. Through the marriage of their sons and daughters and other family members, many people have broadened their horizons. As a result, society at large is benefiting. For the Jewish people, who have suffered for countless generations from isolation, prejudice and suspicion, this trend has been especially positive.

Of course, we have major concerns regarding the Jewish future. As a small minority, we are justifiably alarmed about our own viability. However, a major campaign to convert non-Jewish spouses is a mistaken strategy. The vast majority of people who identify with any religion are more or less content with that identity. Even if they hardly ever attend religious services or observe the traditions of the faith in which they were raised, most are not inclined to change their core identity. To do so runs the significant risk of that person becoming alienated from his/her family and community of identification. We Jews, of all people, should understand this. Should one of our sons or daughters convert to another religion, this decision can be devastating. It feels like an act of betrayal to the family and to the community itself. So, why is it so difficult for us to recognize how it would feel when others convert to our faith? We may be inclined to feel joy at the addition of yet another Jew-by-choice, but the conversion likely will not be celebrated in the other family and community.

I strongly believe that we should leave well enough alone. We need to accord our respect to the spouses of our young people, and not to say (in effect), "we love you, but we would love you even more if you were to become Jewish." The more we push for conversion, even if we say we are only encouraging, the more likely it is that the non-

Jewish partner will resist. As I have written many times, we have within our community many "Jewish green card holders," i.e. spouses of Jewish people who are fully supportive of raising their children Jewish, and many of which participate enthusiastically in synagogue and communal life, but who never become formally Jewish. I completely endorse this decision. Our objective should be that the couple will raise their children as Jews; that the next generation should grow up feeling positive about their Jewish identity. If we achieve even a 50% success in this goal, we will secure the future of the Jewish community.

I am absolutely convinced that the surest path to this outcome consists of the following:

- to respect the non-Jews in our midst and not to pressure them to convert;
- to express our appreciation of their decision to raise their children as Jews;
- to include them in every possible way; never to set them apart whether consciously or inadvertently from the religious observances of their families, particularly their children.

I know that these essential and sensitive steps result in truly positive results. I say this because of what we are achieving right here at Chicago Sinai Congregation. Our inclusive approach is proving the validity of this philosophy over and over again.