Becoming Jewish:

New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalized World

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

UNOFFICIAL CONVERSIONS: NON-JEWISH PARTICIPANTS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SYNAGOGUES

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In 2009, the leaders of the Reform congregation in Mountainville, North Carolina, approached Janet W., who has been an active member of the community for many years, suggesting that she become the president of the temple. A professional woman with many commitments, Janet declined the offer, making the excuse that she was not technically Jewish. On Rosh Ha-Shana, the Jewish New Year Eve in 2014, Rabbi Jeremiah G. of the Conservative Synagogue Beth Elohim in Tobaccoville, North Carolina, included a novel message in his sermon. Perhaps for the first time in this community, the rabbi purposefully greeted the non-Jewish participants in the audience, inviting them to feel welcome and to take part in the services. In celebrating Hanukah in Beth Abraham, Redsboro, North Carolina, in 2015, one could notice the unprecedented diversity of the ethnic backgrounds of the participants, but only guess at their former or present religious affiliations. Although many of the parents have not been raised Jewish, they took part in a celebration, with which they have become familiar, like veteran members.

These three recent incidents, in three Liberal synagogues in the South East of the United States, in which members and participants who are not halakhically Jewish by traditional norms but have made the synagogue their home, point to a momentous change in contemporary American Judaism, as well as in American religion and society in general. Representing larger cultural developments in America, the growing presence of non-Jews in Jewish synagogue life has changed the culture of Jewish communities, the ethnic-demographic amalgam, the character of
the services, the intellectual discourse, and the moral and social messages. The changes have been so rapid, and have contrasted so sharply with previous experiences, that those who have not participated in the last two decades in synagogue life have often overlooked the developments and have been learning about it from recent surveys and journalists’ reports.¹

While Jewish groups have reacted in diverse ways to the new challenges, they have all been affected by and altered by them. Examining these new realities can shed better light on contemporary Judaism both in America and beyond as well as on developments in spiritual and communal life and choices in the larger culture.

The Changing Faces of the Synagogues

The message welcoming non-Jews in the sanctuary, not to mention the invitation to a non-Jewish person to become a president, would not have been delivered merely a decade or two earlier. The almost unprecedented overtures have acknowledged a new reality in Liberal Jewish houses of worship. Historically, one could find, in certain times and places, non-Jews in the synagogue. Synagogues in the Roman era witnessed the presence of God-Fearers, non-Jews who did not convert and join the Jewish people but attended synagogues and observed some Jewish customs and rites. The presence of non-Jews disappeared almost completely by the Middle-Ages but resurfaced in certain Protestant traditions in the Early Modern Era.² Dutch Reformed theologians in Holland of the seventeenth century occasionally visited synagogues, as did their Huguenot colleagues. Following the rise of the Jewish Reform Movement in the nineteenth century in Europe and America, some Christians would come to hear sermons of charismatic rabbis, such as Emil G. Hirsch, whose message appealed to progressive Protestants.³ These were more the exception rather than the norm. Until recently, both Jews and non-Jews conceived of synagogues as exclusive tribal Jewish territories in which, with rare exceptions, non-Jews took almost no interest. As a phenomenon that reshapes the synagogue and changes the Jewish community at large, the growing interest of non-Jews in synagogue is a new phenomenon in modern times.

Merely a generation ago, Jewish congregants felt that shuls were Jewish cultural territories. With the exception of a small minority of converts, mostly women married to Jewish men, Jews did not expect to encounter non-Jews in their synagogues. Until recently, even Liberal Jewish communities would not allow mixed couples to join in; and for the most part such couples did not consider coming to the synagogue
unofficially. While at times they might have visited in the High Holidays or during relatives' bar-mitzvahs, they accepted the communal verdict that unless the non-Jewish spouse converted, both husband and wife had to live their lives and raise their children outside the fold.

Half a century ago, almost all Jews, whether they were practising their faith or not, were Jews in their ethnic identity, cultural roots and, at least potentially or occasionally, in their religious affiliation. They were Jewish in multiple ways. Almost all Jews were born Jewish. Relatively small numbers converted to the faith. Jews did not appeal to non-Jews to join the synagogue and the conversion process was long and demanding. Jews were a distinct ethnic-social group and wished that converts become part of the tribe. For the most part, Jews lived in their own neighbourhoods and had their own social milieu. Jews could detect fellow Jews by their names, accents, culinary tastes, mannerisms and jokes. This ethnic reality was true about most American religious-ethnic groups. The Irish, for example, were a distinct ethnic, religious, social and political community, serving as the backbone of the Catholic Church and the Democratic Party in urban America. There were ethnic neighbourhoods in most American cities, representing almost all ethnic and religious affiliations. Divided along economic standing as well, there were at times a number of Jewish neighbourhoods in major American cities.

When coming to services, even Jews who showed up only occasionally behaved as if they were attending a tribal gathering, interacting with each other in a heimish, familiar, manner. Many used the opportunity to rehearse their dwindling vocabulary of Yiddish idioms, such as Gut Yontef, happy holiday, with which non-Jews were unfamiliar, and at times recycled Borsch-Belt jokes, leaving non-Jews wondering what, if anything, was funny about them. Rabbis and presidents delivered sermons in which they often spoke about “we the Jews,” and at times recited intra-Jewish jokes as well. In this ethnic-tribal atmosphere Jews were not alone. Italian Catholic religious services also carried Italian ethnic-cultural attributes.

To many Jews it seemed that their ethnic-religious identity and ways, perhaps in more liberalized and acculturated forms, would continue unchallenged for generations to come. However, already in the 1920s, Mordechai Kaplan, founder of the Reconstructionist movement, foresaw the communal and religious consequences of fuller Jewish integration into American society and the crumbling of social barriers and communal cohesion. A student of the social sciences, Kaplan saw social conventions and communal pressures both within and outside the Jewish fold as detrimental to Jewish continuity. He looked up to the Catholic community
as a minority that succeeded in maintaining the loyalty of its members through a network of social and cultural activities and suggested that the Jews follow the Catholic model. But Catholic ethnic-religious cohesion, like its Jewish counterpart, has also not remained intact. A number of developments in the last generation have caused this insular tribal atmosphere to erode.

**Romantic Unions**

One trend has that has received attention and discussion, as well as literary and cinematographic representations, and has influenced synagogue life considerably has been the romantic and matrimonal unions between Jews and members of other ethnic and religious groups. From being almost a taboo in earlier decades, percentages of intermarriages have gone up dramatically. From less than ten percent in the 1960s to about fifty percent in the mid-1980s, growing even further since that time, becoming, in fact, the norm. According to a recent survey of the Pew Research Center, even Jewish children growing up in the synagogue and receiving Jewish education are more than susceptible to marrying “out.”

For example, eighty-two percent of those growing up Reform and fifty-seven percent of those growing up in Conservative homes marry non-Jews. Many Orthodox children also intermarry. This demographic change has transformed the character of Jewish families and the communal atmosphere at large. Amazingly, novelists, such as Philip Roth, noticed and recorded the changes in Jewish patterns of courting and mating long before Jewish community leaders realized the momentous implications of the new realities and began to confront them. The latter had mostly been used to viewing Jewish affiliations in terms of either-or identities. Likewise, demographers have often assessed the percentage of those spouses, intermarried couples, and families, who have joined the Jewish fold and raised their children in the synagogue, in contrast to those who have not and found the results wanting. Many mixed families did not join the Jewish fold and a large percentage of their children had little connection with Jewish rites and texts. Only lately have Jews begun noticing the growing grey borderline zones that marriages and partnerships between Jews and non-Jews have created. In recent years, many of the spouses and partners not joining the Jewish fold officially, have done so informally, often partially, and at times in addition to participating in non-Jewish spiritual or communal venues.

One should relate not merely to intermarriages but to inter-partnerships as well. Recent decades have seen a dramatic growth in the number of
couples who see each other, often cohabitate, but are not married. Many court, cohabitate, and at times marry, considering their spiritual and communal options along the way. A generation or two earlier, Jewish men would often place a condition on marrying their beloved in the latter’s willingness to becoming Jewish. This has become less and less the case. One can find many non-married intercouples in the synagogues today. Interpartnerships have included in recent decades not only heterosexual couples but also many gays and lesbians, some of whom have lately changed their status to that of married. Many non-Jewish partners and spouses accompany their partners to services on holy days. Some also go to synagogues on a regular basis. In spite of a growing number of spiritual seekers, inter-partnerships have remained one of the major venues in recent decades that has brought non-Jews to take an interest in the synagogue.

There are no definite numbers of non-Jews in American synagogues. In general, synagogues do not have clauses in their questionnaires to indicate other religions or ethnicities. Estimates vary, but Jewish community leaders assert that percentages differ considerably in different age groups. Among retirees, the percentages of non-Jews are small, although they too are growing. However, principals of Jewish day schools and religious schools estimate that children growing up in families in which one of the parents is not Jewish might at times make up forty percent of all children attending their schools. Higher percentages are evident in synagogue forums for young adults. In the Young People’s Forum of the temple in Bourbonville, Kentucky, eighty to ninety percent of the people raised Jewish who attend the group’s meetings are romantically attached to non-Jews, who are also part of the forum.

While hitherto it was mostly women who followed their men to the synagogues, men are increasingly present at the synagogue as partners or spouses, in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. For various reasons, women have tended to convert more than men. The process of conversion for men is in some ways more painful as it involves rituals relating to private parts, and men do not convert easily. Many men find coming to the synagogue as non-Jews preferable. In some cases such men have decided to convert after long years of involvement in the community and raising Jewish families. Such conversions sometimes happen after a crisis, perhaps a medical one. Some men, and women too, decide that they want to become Jewish officially because they have been Jewish in practice and it is time to take the next step and synchronize their practical and official identities. Many others do not bother to make changes and undergo the long process of conversion.
Alina Adams has offered an insight into one such mixed marriage where the non-Jewish partner takes part in raising a Jewish family:

Despite not having a Jewish father, all three of my children are being raised Jewish, and they identify as 100 percent Jewish, not “half.” And then there’s my husband. He didn’t convert, and he doesn’t self-identify as Jewish. But he does identify with the Jewish people via his children…My husband sometimes says “us” or “we” or “our” when he’s talking about Jews. I honestly can’t imagine how you can love a person and not feel like a part of their struggle, which is a part of them, which becomes a part of you.¹²

**Spiritual Seekers**

Besides the growing reservoir of mixed partnerships, which brought non-Jews in growing numbers to the synagogues, Jewish houses of worship have come to encounter spiritual seekers, women and men actively searching for spiritual fulfillment, intellectual depth, and welcoming communities. Many non-Jewish seekers have become persistent participants and de facto members in Jewish communities, with many showing a keen interest in the spiritual, intellectual and communal life of the synagogue. The presence of such persons has become an important part of the amalgam of synagogue attendants. Often, the dividing line between the two categories—official converts, or Jews by choice, and non-Jewish members of the synagogue—is blurred.

The changes in the synagogue do not stand on their own and Jewish communities have not been the only ones to undergo transformations in their ethnic amalgams and atmosphere. Matrimonial patterns in America have played a huge role in bringing to an end the either-or understanding of religious, ethnic and communal affiliations. The rise in individual freedom, brought by the countercultural revolution of the 1960s-1970s, has also made religious choices less dependent on ethnicity, loyalty to ancestry or heritage and more based on personal preferences. Since the 1960s and 1970s, with the effect of the counter-culture, Americans became even more than before a nation of spiritual pilgrims.¹³ Historians of religion in America, such as Martin Marty and Wade Roof, have spoken about “pilgrims in their own land” and “a generation of seekers.”¹⁴ The counter-culture of the 1960s-1970s has also worked to individualize religious, spiritual and communal affinities. Such affiliations have become more and more up to the choice and decision of the individual. So much so that they have often become one-generational. Not all spiritual seekers become parents, but even when they do, their choices are often not
continued or inherited by the next generation, and, at times, not shared by partners. America today includes millions of one-generation Buddhists, Catholics, Muslims, Unitarians, as well as Adventists, Witnesses, and evangelicals. Millions of people have shopped around in search of a community of faith, or a spiritual and moral system that would suit their personalities and expectations. Growing up within a community of faith has become only a partial indicator of future affiliation. More than half of all persons in America have moved away from their childhood religions to new faiths or non-faiths. This includes even persons who were raised in conservative environments, such as evangelicals, Pentecostals, Adventists and Witnesses. Religious affiliation in America has become a matter for each person to search and choose for themselves. The Irish attitudes are a good example of the changes. People of Irish descent still march on St. Patrick’s Day and visit Ireland, but many are currently Buddhists or Unitarians, or neo-Pagans, or Jewish. A model for the current generation of Jews and non-Jews, Allen Ginsberg, was a Jew, a Christian, a Hindu, and a Buddhist, without denying or shifting from one affiliation to the other.

The same trends that made hundreds of thousands of Jews in recent decades choose non-Jewish homes for their souls brought comparable numbers of non-Jews to consider Jewish venues as possible spiritual homes. The image and status of Judaism as a detested religion and a pariah social group has changed enormously since the 1960s. Judaism has obtained, in most circles, a measure of respectability. For many spiritual seekers, most of them growing up in white middle-class homes, and searching within the free American market of religion, Judaism has become a viable spiritual and communal option and they have decided to explore it and give it a chance.

Many Christians have taken a new interest in Judaism in recent decades, often starting the journey from a Christian perspective. Some have tried to explore Judaism more closely. Most inquirers are educated people and their new attachment to Judaism is often fuelled by intellectual curiosity. Synagogues have become one of the preferred places for certain types of spiritual and communal seekers. In recent years, Jewish congregations have increasingly attracted people who have come on visits, searching, and inquiring. The background of such individuals is important. Contemporary Liberal Jewish communities are composed mainly of middle-middle and upper-middle-class educated professionals. Those who do not belong to these parts of society, working class or lower middle class people, often do not feel comfortable in Liberal Jewish synagogues. There is thus something of a self-selection in the pursuit of religious
environments, with Liberal Jewish communities appealing to certain kinds of spiritual seekers and not to others. Non-Jews who join in the synagogue tend to parallel the existing membership in their education, socio-economic standing, interests and values. Scholars of conversion point out that people often join new communities of faith which, while different from their original groups, still fit their cultural experiences and social expectations. The move cannot be too extreme, since then there would be little to connect between the old cultural world and the new.\textsuperscript{18}

Non-Jews in the synagogue, however, do not necessarily follow the ethnic components of the Jewish community. Most are Caucasian, but there is a smaller but growing percentage of non-Jews who join in who are Black, Asian, and Latino. The synagogues are literally changing their faces. If one entered a synagogue half a century ago, it was pretty much a community of Eastern and Central European Jews, with Middle-Eastern Jews making the ethnic exception. Nowadays there are mixed couples composed of people of various ethnic backgrounds, from Scandinavian to East Asian and from African to Latin American. Adopted children of multiple ethnic backgrounds have also worked to change the face of the sanctuary, which has become more diverse than before.

**A Community of Faith**

A development that has hugely worked in favour of opening the synagogues to non-Jews has been the moving of Judaism in America into becoming a community of faith, with many of the older secular, ethnic, political and nationalist organizations or movements shrinking or phasing out altogether.\textsuperscript{19} Jewish Communists, Socialists or Labour groups have disappeared almost completely, as have Jewish Landsmanschaften. Secular Jewish youth movements have almost ceased to exist.\textsuperscript{20} The urban landscape has also changed considerably and ethnic-religious divisions have eroded considerably. Among Jews it is currently the Orthodox who tend to live in Jewish neighbourhoods in major American cities most Jews live in.

The decline in the ethnic definition of Judaism has worked in favour of a Jewish environment that is more open to non-Jews. One could hardly have expected non-Jews to join in with an Arbiter-Ring, Yiddish-speaking Jewish socialist gatherings, or with landsmanschaften, groups of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, organized according to cities of origin, or with immigrant synagogues where the rabbis and laypersons spoke and preached in Yiddish. Contemporary American synagogues are by now three or four generations removed from the era of mass Jewish immigration.
of the turn of the twentieth century. Jews are more acculturated and integrated into American life than their parents or grandparents had been, and their attachment to the immigrant culture is more nostalgic than experiential. New movements of spiritual renewal have made attempts, since the 1960s-1970s, to fill the synagogues with more spiritual content. The neo-Hasidic and Renewal movements, alongside outreach programmes, have also worked to open up the synagogue to interested inquirers, often regardless of their backgrounds.

Separating Jewish spiritual, intellectual and communal qualities from distinct Jewish ethnic-cultural attributes seems to have worked towards offering non-Jews a more welcoming feeling in the synagogues. Examining a number of Liberal Jewish communities in the South of the United States, one discovers that synagogues located outside the major Jewish centres have had a somewhat easier time absorbing non-Jewish participants. Jews in the South developed a different culture from Jews in the urban centres north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Unlike in the North Eastern, Mid-Western and even Western cities, white neighbourhoods in the South were not divided according to ethnic or religious affiliations. The social realities of the South, in which the major divisions were between white and black, coupled with the demand to accommodate more swiftly and completely to Southern ways and manners, caused Jews in the South to go through a quicker and more intensive process of acculturation. Often highly motivated to hold to their ancestors’ faith, they did not develop the kind of ethnic components that Jews in the larger Northern or Mid-Western cities created. The South was not represented in the “Borsht Belt” and Jews there were often well absorbed into the culture and manners of the area.21 Jewish congregations there were therefore better suited to welcome friends and spouses of Jewish members who wished to explore and join in, as well as other inquirers or prospective participants knocking on their doors. The percentage in the synagogues of persons not being born and raised Jewish in the South and other areas peripheral to centres of American Jewish culture is therefore often higher than in other areas of the nation.

The Blurring of Boundaries

The blurring of boundaries and the license many baby-boomers have taken in picking and choosing and combining their own religious paths have also affected the presence of non-Jews in the sanctuary. Matters have changed since medieval and modern eras when both Jews and Christians went to great lengths to enforce the dictum that one cannot be a Christian and a Jew at the same time. Unlike some pagan groups that allow multiple
affiliations, the Abrahamic traditions have shunned double loyalties. However, the presence of non-Jews in the synagogue, as well as parallel developments in religion in America, are, at least partially, based on the opposite notion: the ability of people to practise more than one tradition, if not on a regular basis then as visitors, inquirers or partners. Complex, mixed identities have become legitimate, if not normative, in the American religious landscape. Many leaders and congregants of Liberal groups, including within Judaism, no longer follow the idea of a uniformity that derives from an unquestionable authority. The Reform, Reconstructionist and Renewal movements of Judaism have promoted instead the idea of individual autonomy and consciousness, the right of members to make their own choices and decide on their own on the personal courses of their spirituality. The more open and inclusive atmosphere of contemporary synagogues has worked to turn many of the communities into places where people of different backgrounds, opinions, and lifestyles can find a home.

Vague borderlines between religious groups and multiple affiliations have become normative in America of the turn of the twenty-first century. This includes many Jews who have joined non-Jewish communities of faith, such as Zen Buddhism or evangelical Christianity, without turning their backs on their Jewish identities. Some have amalgamated different faiths and affiliations. One noticeable and controversial example is the growing number of Christian Jewish communities that aim at transcending the old boundaries between two, often rival, communities of faith, amalgamating Jewish identity, symbols and cultures with Christian evangelical tenets of faith. Similar hybrid communal constructions include Pentecostal-Catholics, or Neo-Pagan Unitarians. It is little wonder that Jewish synagogues have come to hold tens of thousands of de facto members who have either not given up on previous affiliations or have adopted additional ones. These new possibilities have affected many interfaith couples that have taken upon themselves to raise Jewish families and be active in the synagogue, while one spouse, and at times even both, are also visiting other religious congregations.

A phenomenon that became prevalent in the last decade is a partnership in which both members become in effect Jewish and something else, showing interest in two traditions with no attempt to combine them. They choose to go on Saturday to the synagogue and on Sunday to Episcopal or Presbyterian churches. Those are not arbitrary examples, because many of the non-Jewish partners in the synagogue are affiliated with Liberal Christian groups. Conservative Protestant churches and Orthodox or Middle Eastern churches are much less open to these
kinds of arrangements. Jewish Liberal groups accommodated themselves to the changes. Those who had been certain that there was no such thing as being members of Jewish and non-Jewish communities at the same time are watching new developments and perceptions on this topic.

The Jewish Reaction

In spite of the momentous changes in Jewish and non-Jewish mating and marriage patterns, and the radical move towards individualized understanding of spiritual and communal choices, Jewish communities have been slow to adapt consciously and purposefully to the new realities. Unlike Christian religious groups, Jewish communities had not been oriented towards outreach and evangelism. They have traditionally relied on what was the almost self-understood loyalty of Jews to their tribe and a sense of responsibility towards the preservation of the Jewish heritage. Jews were for the most part a well-defined social, cultural and ethnic group. There have been many ways of being Jewish but the base of Jewish religious life was the women and men born and raised Jewish. For the most part it was up to them to approach the synagogues and not vice versa. Only in recent years have Orthodox Jewish groups begun to evangelize among Jews and Liberal communities to open their doors widely to persons who had not grown up as Jews.

Willy nilly, Jewish religious thinkers, rabbinical authorities and boards of rabbis have had to confront the new realities of non-Jews in the sanctuaries. In theory, the differences are denominational in character and to a certain extent, in practice, this is indeed the case. In spite of the different denominational divisions, there are huge varieties in the manner synagogues actually relate to non-Jews and integrate them into the larger community.

For the most part, Orthodox Jewish rabbinical authorities have not paid much attention to the phenomenon and in theory Orthodox rulings on the matter have not altered. For the Orthodox, the definition of “non-Jews” is different from that adopted by other Jewish movements. For many Orthodox, converts whose conversions were not supervised by Orthodox rabbis are not considered Jewish. Such persons have at times become regulars in Orthodox communities. Some have opted to undergo Orthodox conversions, but many have not. Many Orthodox synagogues have come to recognize the concept of interested inquirers who come on visits, and of people on the way to becoming Jewish. While there are non-Jews present in Orthodox synagogues, demonstrating curiosity and considering the place, there are fewer long-range spiritual seekers than in Liberal ones.
Orthodox communities would not allow non-Jews any role in the services. Inquirers can join in as full members only after their conversion process is completed, but there is no room for a grey area, or informal membership. The Orthodox have not come to recognize borderline situations between Judaism and other faiths.

Other branches of American Judaism, including the Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Renewal movements have on the whole offered more accepting attitudes towards the new situation. The Reform movement probably provided one of the early theoretical frameworks to confront the new realities. Solomon Freehof, an important responsum writer of Reform Judaism in the second part of the twentieth century, was one of the first thinkers to provide a positive theological prospective on non-Jewish members in the synagogue. Freehof, who wrote on the topic in the 1960s-1980s and whose cultural framework reflected an earlier period, was not thinking in terms of spiritual seekers, but rather focusing on mixed couples whose presence in the sanctuary was on the rise. The Reform leader expressed his unequivocal approval of granting non-Jews in mixed marriages membership. “The purpose of such membership,” he stated frankly, “is so that the couple will not be alienated...to make it likely that the children will be raised as Jewish...and perhaps that the Gentile member...would someday...convert to Judaism.”26 Freehof’s response reflected an awareness on the part of Reform leaders at that moment of the dramatically escalating numbers of intermarriages and the fact that many couples wished, if they were given the choice, to join the synagogue and raise their children Jewish. The Reform movement was just moving at that time from the traditional definition of Jews as people born to Jewish mothers or converted formally to Judaism to include children of non-Jewish mothers, whose fathers were Jewish and who were brought up Jewish.27

Conservative attitudes towards non-Jews vary considerably. The denomination as a whole has been slower than other Liberal groups to formally accommodate the wish of non-Jews to take part in synagogue rituals. Non-Jews, as a rule, do not join the liturgy committees or become presidents of congregations. In 2013 the CTLS, the committee on Jewish Law and standards, which sets rules and regulations for the movement at large, allowed for inviting non-Jews to open the Ark.28 By that time the practice had been accepted by many Conservative synagogues. For the most part, Conservative synagogues do not count non-Jews as part of the Minyan. Many Conservative synagogues, but not all, work around these rules. Non-Jews are called to “ascend” to the Torah with their partners,
especially during rites of passage ceremonies, such as bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, or marriage announcement ceremonies.

In Reform Synagogues, in theory, as well as in practice, there are more opportunities for non-Jews to integrate into the life of the community. In reality, there are huge differences between different congregations. Attitudes toward non-Jews are shaped by rabbis, as well as the laypersons in each community. Consequently, Reform communities differ in their regulations and practices regarding non-Jews and the atmosphere they create in absorbing them into the synagogue.

As early as 1991, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (currently: Union for Reform Judaism) conducted a survey that pointed to a process in which the integration of non-Jews into synagogues and Jewish rituals was well under way. Forty-one percent of Reform congregations allowed non-Jews to light Shabbat candles and thirty-two percent allowed them to lead Kiddush, consecration of the wine and bread. Over ninety percent of communities reported that they allowed non-Jews to participate in Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies and ascend to the Bimah. The survey has not been universal. Less than ten percent of the Reform communities responded to the questionnaire and the survey might have given more voice to inclusive synagogues in the Union at the time. Still it pointed to amazing changes that took place in the 1970s-1980s.

Rabbi Dalia Marx has examined the participation of non-Jews in Bar Mitzvah or Bat Mitzvah ceremonies in Reform congregations. She has pointed to the struggles and negotiations that have been involved in incorporating non-Jews into the rituals of the communities. This was not a uniform process and different synagogues have chosen different paths. The Reform movement has witnessed its share of rabbis and leaders sceptical of the place of non-Jews in synagogue life. The Reform rabbi and scholar Dana Kaplan has maintained that at the heart of debates and reservations about the place and role of non-Jews lies unease over a possible breach of the concept of the chosen people who are in covenant with God, which has stood at the centre of collective Jewish self-perception and which had traditionally been abundantly reflected in Jewish liturgy.

Liberal Jewish communities have indeed modified the claims for a Jewish distinctive role in God’s plans for humanity. They have either added words to prayers that have traditionally spoken about peace and prosperity to “all of Israel,” often choosing, “and to all the inhabitants of the Earth.” Instead of “who has chosen us of all nations,” some have opted for “who has chosen us alongside all other nations.” The Reconstructionist and Renewal movements institutionalized such changes a few decades
ago, but Reform and even Conservative congregations have adopted those formulas as well, even if they often recite them orally or read them from printed pages rather than from authorized denominational prayer books. Such communities have clearly responded to the presence of non-Jews in their midst in addition to the ideological commitment to openness to other faiths. Some rabbis have written prayer compilations to accommodate PDFs, Partners of a Different Faith, in the services. Jeffrey Saldin wrote a volume, which was published by Jewish Lights, a publishing house that promotes interest in Jewish spirituality from a liberal perspective. In it he presented, among other suggestions, blessings that have come to offer non-Jewish partners a means of expressing gratitude to God as non-Jews for the giving of the Torah. Published in 1992 and daring for its time, the book does not promote uniform prayers that suit both Jews and non-Jews. By 2007, the Reform prayer book offered, albeit in a moderate manner, such blessings.

The new realities of non-Jews seeking a place and role in the synagogue have forced Jewish thinkers to search and reexamine the Jewish scriptures and to propose such ancient concepts as Ger Toshav, a convert-resident, modifying and bypassing some of the difficult requirements that have accompanied the road to formal conversion in the modern era.

By the 2010s, in many Reform and Reconstructionist congregations, non-Jews can sit in most, if not all, committees. However, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Conservative congregations are more open to people of different backgrounds than those Reform synagogues where rabbis disapprove of the recent, more inclusive tendencies. Such has been the case in Tobaccoville, where a Reconstructionist rabbi and a Conservative synagogue proved more accepting to non-Jews than their Reform counterpart, where the rabbi felt uncomfortable with the participation of non-Jews in the services without having converted. Most non-Jews who obtain positions within the synagogue or are allowed to participate actively in its rituals have Jewish partners, but at times non-Jews too are called to the Torah.

Some synagogues organize special programmes for non-Jewish participants in order to introduce them to Jewish holidays and rites. As a rule, these are not intended towards conversion and persons joining them are not making a commitment towards official conversions. Regulars in the synagogue who do not have Jewish partners are usually not asked to pay dues, but often contribute membership dues.

One congregation and its rabbi decided "to go the whole way," and consider all regular attendants who join in good faith to be entitled to full
participation in the life of the synagogue. Mainstream Jewish community leaders in the 1980s-1990s reacted with alarm to this breach of traditional standards and the Philadelphia Board of Rabbis denied membership to the Rabbi, Meyer Selekman of Temple Sholom in Broomall, Pennsylvania. However, he has persisted in his inclusive approach, enjoying the sympathy and appreciation of a number of rabbis around the country.

Conclusion

The growing participation of non-Jews in Liberal synagogues affected the demographic amalgam and the ethnic backgrounds of the women and men taking part in the services. Perhaps even more significantly, it has affected the cultural atmosphere in the sanctuaries. The presence of non-Jews has helped shape the discourse, the messages and even the interpretations of the tradition and its texts. Such changes are evident in other religious groups in contemporary America, where new members have joined religious groups that until recently have been associated with specific ethnic-cultural traditions, such as Hindu temples. Scholars have described the transformation in terms of mood versus mind. When communities of faith represent well-defined indigenous ethnic cultural groups, its priests, leaders or laypersons perform the traditional rituals in a matter of fact manner. For example, in a marriage ceremony in a Hindu Temple in India, rituals took their course with the audience paying little attention to the details of the ceremony. The priests or parents see no need to offer explanations, let alone expand, on the details, and the people present are not really spectators. They are participants who go about their business, talking, socializing, eating, drinking, and enjoying the music and the festive occasion. Matters are very different in Hindu or Jewish ceremonies in America. Many, if not most, of the invitees have not been raised in the respective traditions. Some are encountering such rituals for the first time in their lives. The organizers, as well as the priests or rabbis, see a need to instruct the crowd as to what traditional or innovative ceremonials are taking place. From “mood” the event turns into “mind.” This time the audience needs to pay attention to details, follow, and take interest. Any other attitude would signify disrespect towards the hosts and their heritage.

The growing presence of non-Jews in the synagogue has thus made Jews relate to their own tradition more seriously. Ironically, on some levels, the non-Jews are more committed or interested than many Jews. They are attracted to what Judaism has to offer spiritually and intellectually. While their decision to maintain their association is based, among other considerations, on social acceptance and what synagogues as
communities have to offer, they do not do so out of a sense of obligation, or in order to connect to their heritage. They vote with their legs, time, and attention in favour of the intellectual, spiritual and communal merits of a tradition, which they have discovered only as adults. Non-Jews in the synagogue have thus worked to strengthen and enrich the spiritual atmosphere and the intellectual and moral messages of the rabbis and other speakers. This has worked to solidify the understanding of Judaism as a religious-spiritual heritage as well as a historical-ethnic one. From ethnic cultural gatherings, Jewish religious events have become more spiritual and intellectual. Synagogues are not intended any more for only one kind of audience and become more universal and inclusive. Jewish jokes cannot be said anymore in synagogues. Mannerisms, which used to be associated with Yiddishkeit, Jewishness, have, for the most part, become extinct. The participants are changing and the synagogues are changing with them.

As the cultural atmosphere in the synagogue is changing, its demographic amalgam is ready to change even further. The decline in the ethnic cultural-tribal atmosphere of Jewish congregations has been enhanced by the presence of non-Jews that in its turn has opened the door for more to join in. This trend opens the way for further reshaping of Jewish life. The presence and voices of non-Jews in the synagogue and the Jewish community at large is, in all likelihood, going to grow in the coming years. This trend, which reflects larger developments in American society and culture is about to alter Jewish piety and intellectual life in meaningful ways. It is posing challenges to American Judaism as well as opportunities.

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Notes

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7 On the survey, which caused much discussion in the Jewish community, see “A Portrait of Jewish Americans,” October 1, 2013, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/1/Jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture/survey
8 For example, Roth, Portnoy’s Complaint.
9 Glaser, Strangers to the Tribe: Portraits of Interfaith Marriages.
10 Rabbi David A. in a letter to Yaakov Ariel, June 21, 2015.
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See Katz Miller, *Being Both: Embracing Two Religions in One Interfaith Family*.


Freehof, “Gentiles’ Part in the Sabbath Service”, 33.

On the demographic changes during the 1970s-1980s, see National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) 1990.


In this volume.

This issue came up in the Q and A period following a presentation Rabbi Dana Kaplan delivered in Tobaccoville on April 19, 2015, where Rabbi Dan F. of the Reform congregation in the city expressed his reservation. The same concern was raised by Solomon Freehof in 1969 in a responsa relating to a “gentile stepfather at Bar Mitzvah.” Freehof modified his view and most Reform thinkers have, in the passing decades, developed more inclusive attitudes.

Sulkin, *Putting God on Your Guest List*.


I owe thanks to Rabbi Dana Kaplan for discussing Temple Sholom with me, as well as the other participants in the seminar.