Creating a Community: Who Can Belong to the Reform Synagogue?

Mara W. Cohen Ioannides

I endorse the approach that says, “Do what you think is best for the Jewish people” and stop worrying about the rest. For me, welcoming interfaith families in any way possible is the best thing for the Jewish people.

—Rabbi Edwin C. Goldberg

It is far more important to have a strong commitment from a smaller group than a vague commitment from a large number who are at the very periphery.

—Rabbi Walter Jacob et al.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Who is a Jew, who is a member of the community, is a question that dates back to the early biblical period. A description or law is usually set in place because of a need. Hence this community must have had problems with membership. In Genesis and Exodus, the Israelites are described as descendants of certain people: Jacob in Genesis 35:9–12 and the descendants of Jacob’s sons in Exodus 3:10, 3:16. Thus, Jews were then defined genetically or through heredity. However, there were non-Jews who were members of the community. The Exodus story tells of a “mixed multitude” who left Egypt with the Israelites (Exod. 12:38). There are times when these members were counted in the community and times when these people were differentiated from the Jews. For example, the son of Shelomith bar Dibri is pointed out as the son of an Israelite and an Egyptian (Lev. 24:10–12). The point here is that Shelomith’s son’s father was not an Israelite, yet Shelomith’s son is counted as one; thus, one could conclude that matriline was the standard of the day. Thus, even in this period one could be a member of the community without necessarily being an Israelite, which at this time was more a tribal or ethnic indicator than a religious one. In fact, Leviticus 19:33–34 commands that “the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself.” Numbers 1:2, many rabbis believe, points out the patrilineal nature of Judaism by requiring that the “census of the whole Israelite community”
should be listed by “names, every male, head by head.” If this is the case, then Sholom’s son is not an Israelite, but is a member of the community.

Later during the postexilic period, Ezra is clear on what defines the community. He laments that “the holy seed has become intermingled with the peoples of the land” (Ezra 9:2). However, the book of Ruth presents us with the first convert, after Abraham and Sarah; the first person to change their belief system and customs to someone else’s. Ruth declares: “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). This shows that by this time, being an Israelite or Jew was not necessarily hereditary, now it could be a belief system. In fact, Isaiah 56:7 reminds us that “my house [the synagogue] shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” regardless of their belief system.

In the Middle Ages, a different concept of membership developed. Maimonides presents the Thirteen Principles of Judaism and declares, “When a man believes in all these fundamental principles... he is then part of that Israel.” Thus, the concept of genetics had morphed into one of faith. However, Maimonides is also clear that “any gentile who joins us unconditionally shares our good fortune, without, however, being quite equal to us.” Thus, there is still a hereditary factor. This isn’t surprising. While converts are accepted by the Talmudic rabbis, they were definitely given a different place in the Jewish hierarchy—as Jews, but not the same as Jews by birth. This is a carryover from the biblical period. Even Ruth, who is so highly respected by the rabbis as a convert, calls herself “a foreigner” (Ruth 2:10). Then again, one has to wonder about the rabbis who question a convert’s place in the hierarchy when Ruth, the quintessential convert, was the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4:17).

While the definition of who is a Jew didn’t really change in the Middle Ages, one’s membership in a congregation was tied to the communities from which one’s ancestors came. Thus, synagogues followed the Italian, Polish, Spanish, or other rite. Rabbis, like Moses di Trani, were asked to determine membership in synagogues from communities far away just as they would issues of kashrut. Thus, congregational membership was not open to just any Jew, but to specific Jews.

MODERN PERIOD
In the modern period, the definition of Jewishness changed from religion to nationhood and back again. Jacob Klatzkin explains this clearly: “in the past . . . Judaism rests on a subjective basis, on the acceptance of a creed . . . the Jewish people [are] a denomination . . . and a community of individuals . . .

a third has now arisen... To be a Jew means the acceptance of neither a religious nor ethical creed,” rather it is a common history. One of the keys to unlocking the question of acceptance as a Jew, membership into “the club,” has to do with the Emancipation. As Jews were accepted into the larger gentile community, self-definition became more important. Until the Emancipation, Jews were often defined by the external community rather than internally. For example, the first law in the Castilian Seven-Part Code defines a Jew as “a party who believes in, and adhere to, the laws of Moses . . . as well as one who is circumcised, and observes the other precepts commended by his religion.” There were also laws all over Europe forcing Jews to wear certain clothes, declare themselves members of a synagogue, live in specific neighborhoods, work in defined careers, and so on. However, other than the ability to prove one’s ancestors’ lineage or seeking a rabbi’s guidance for conversion, a rare occurrence, there were no definitions of Jew instituted.

In the late 1700s, with the growth of assimilation and emancipation, Jews and gentiles started to blend. Theodor Herzl remarked in the 1890s that intermarriage was the greatest impetus towards assimilation. Additionally, the leaders of the early Reform movement realized that there had to be some delineation between themselves and the gentiles, who in many respects they sought to emulate; otherwise, Jews would disappear. Being Jewish had become a private matter, rather than a public or communal one. Some argue that the longer Jews were in contact with Americans, the more they lost touch with Judaism. Jonathan Sarna calls this “the cult of synthesis,” where Jews intermix their Judaism and their Americanism. Therefore, in 1885 the American Reform movement under the auspices of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) created a code of self-description: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community.” This redefinition allowed political nationalists to include Jews as citizens with a different religion rather than as resident aliens (the movement towards emancipation). However, only a decade or so later Theodore Herzl viewed the conflict between the assimilated and unassimilated Jew as a question of nationhood: is the Diasporic Jew part of the nation in which they live or the nation of Judaism? Therefore, despite the statement of the CCAR, the question was still being debated.

Klatzkin, only a quarter of a century later, made an entirely different statement that Jews do not have to have a shared belief system, rather a common history, to make the Jewish community. Jacob Rader Marcus saw the American Jew as a new Jew. He saw Jews as a “religioethic community” where by the end of the twentieth century most of the ethnic differences had
disappeared and the community had created its own American ethnic Judaism. This in itself is controversial, since in the last decade there has been a remarkable growth in the study of the Mizrah, communities of the United States; however, there is something to be said for an icing of commonality over the multilayered cake of American Judaism.

POST-HOLOCAUST PERIOD
In the latter half of the twentieth century, post-Holocaust, Jews around the world came to this realization: even though they had been a minority before, with the majority of the Jewish communities in Europe erased Judaism could disappear entirely. Hinds shows most interesting here because 1940 was the high point of American Judaism; American Jews were at their highest percentage of the American population ever, at 3.68 percent. After that, even though the actual population grew slightly and then leveled off between 5,300,000 and 6,000,000, the percentage of Jews that made up the American population dropped every decade until it returned to the turn of the twentieth century levels of 2.2 percent. (The problem of defining who is a Jew is not particular to North America. However, as North America has the largest Jewish community in the world, it is the leader in creating tradition.) Some of this may be due to the dropping fertility and high intermarriage rates of American Jews.

Interestingly, the 1950s saw "the highest rate of synagogue membership in the twentieth century," The modern American Jew was less concerned with the denomination or theology than with the location of the community. Samuel Heilman suggests that membership in a synagogue, regardless of the denomination, has much to do with the strict separation of church and state in the United States. Without the defining term of "Jew," people lost their sense of community and so returned to the synagogue for a sense of self-definition. In fact, modern "Americans choose a synagogue because it is convenient or because they like the rabbi; because they want a cantor or they don't; because they want more singing or less; because they want two days of religious school or three. They rarely ask about the belief system to which the synagogue subscribes or the philosophy to which it adheres." After all, the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) reminds its member congregations that "a synagogue is a community's precious possession, the most influential institution for the preservation of Judaism. It must be nurtured by the present generation so that it survives, strengthens, flourishes, and provides sustenance to the next."
weddings, because "this concern became particularly acute after the popularization of the concept of the 'vanishing American Jew' in the 1960s, based on evidence from community studies of increasing rates of intermarriage." In 1970, the North American Jewish Data Bank announced that intermarried couples were 9.2 percent of American Jewish married couples, that the rate of intermarriage between 1966 and 1972 had risen to 31.7 percent, and that, significantly, more Jewish men marry out than Jewish women. The rate of the non-Jewish wife converting to Judaism is higher than that of the non-Jewish husband. However, the 1973 statement, while admitting that rabbis can make their own decisions regarding this practice, suggests that it "include a requirement to raise children exclusively within the Jewish faith." Marc Lee Raphael noted in a small study he conducted that "intermarriage jumped dramatically between 1985 and 1995 [and] this trend ... continued in the years 1995-1998." While intermarriage is discouraged by the CCAR, the raising of children of such marriages within Judaism is highly encouraged.

JEWS AT THE CENTRE

By encouraging children of intermarriage to be raised Jewishly, the CCAR had to reevaluate how Jewishness was passed through the generations. The 1947 proposal on Mixed Marriage and Intermarriage states that "the declaration of the parents to raise them [their children] as Jews shall be deemed sufficient for conversion." Therefore, in 1983 the CCAR Committee on Patrilineal Descent declared:

the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people. The performance of these mitzvot (commandments) serves to commit those who participate in them, both parent and child, to Jewish life.

Rabbi David Polish believed that patrilineality was already "the common law of our conference." One could go even further and return to the Bible and say that patriliney has always been the Jewish way. These two factors could have contributed to the latest iteration on community definition.

As Rabbi Daniel Alexander pointed out, the language of the CCAR's 1999 statement is vague. He highlights the importance of the statement's saying 'opening doors,' rather than opening all doors, one is left with the opportunity to leave some doors shut. These "doors" are under discussion here, as is the "Jewish communal integrity" that Alexander also believes is controversial in "The Statement of Principle." Thus each congregation had to figure out what "inclusive" means to its non-Jewish members "who strive to create a Jewish home." This is particularly difficult for small communities who continuously struggle to survive. In fact, more than half of the membership congregations to the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) are small (with fewer than 250 member units). Many of the congregations serve large geographic areas that are underpopulated. Thus, even though the congregation is aligned with the URJ, their members do not necessarily align themselves with the URJ. Most small Jewish communities fall in the Midwest, South, and West of the United States and so include almost 70 percent of the American Jewish population and most of the interfaith couples reside in these regions. Most small Jewish communities, in fact most American Jews, are Reform and most Jews by choice choose Reform Judaism.

The latest CCAR statement has a very broad definition of both Jews and membership in the community. Rabbi Howard Greenstein notes the original Pittsburgh Platform "was unquestionably a statement of exclusivity" while "the present statement rests upon an unqualified reverence for ... inclusivity." What was presented in the CCAR's 1999 Statement is in direct conflict with a number of CCAR responsa written in 1983, when the Responsa Committee wrote "that non-Jews should not become formal members of a congregation ... the membership and the voting rights should be limited to the Jewish spouse" and non-Jews' leadership on committees should be limited. The committee is very clear in this matter that "a non-Jewish partner is welcome to the fellowship of the congregation and is encouraged to participate in all of its activities; however, the non-Jewish spouse may not serve on the board, hold office, become chairman of any committee or have the privilege of voting at congregational or committee meetings." However, by 1990 the Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach admitted that it had to address the issue of the genteile in the synagogue. Especially because it realized what Goldstein pointed out, that by the mid-1980s 45 percent of Jewish weddings were interfaith.

To the CCAR, Jews are a "religious[ly] and cultural[ly]" pluralistic group that is "an inclusive community opening doors to Jewish life to people ... including the intermarried, who strive to create a Jewish home." Rabbi Eric Yoffie strongly believes that drawing boundaries around the Jewish community is "a waste" because it only "keep[s] the maximum number of people out." After all, "the rise in mixed marriage and the embrace of Jews of patrilineal descent (children of one Jewish parent who were raised as Jews) had changed the demographics of the Reform Movement" as the world entered the twenty-first century. This is quite true. The CCAR Committee on Patrilineal Descent believed that "one of the most
pressing human issues for the North American Jewish community is mixed marriage.”

Goldstein points out that in 1990, of the 210,000 persons born Jewish, but currently following another religion, “a majority are offspring of intermarriages.”

In 1990 the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC), the new iteration of the URJ, published *Defining the Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue*, in which Rabbi Alexander Schindler, then president of the UAHC, admitted that “intermarriage will remain a reality of American Jewish life,” so the Jewish community needs to “involve them [the couple] in Jewish life.”

**NON-JEWS IN THE SYNAGOGUE**

At the 1994 CCAR 150th convention, Rabbi Joan S. Friedman spoke on exactly this topic: “The Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue: Challenges and Choices.” She makes two important comments:

1. In a synagogue it matters whether you are a Jew or not. The question is: when does it matter, how does it matter, and why does it matter?
2. We … cannot define the role of the non-Jew in the synagogue until we define the role of the Jew in the synagogue.

I will address the first point and present how others address the second.

*For the Sake of Heaven: Committees in Congregational Life* outlines the roles of the various committees that congregations should have; included in the description of the outreach committee: “Welcome non-Jewish partners of members and interfaith households; plan programs to educate and support outreach issues for interfaith couples, Jews-by-choice and their families, and parents of children who have intermarried,” thereby showing that congregations will have interfaith families.

The URJ has a support network for its member congregations; since it has many small congregations, in 1999 it began a discussion board KolKatan, which later became SmallTalk, where they “share ideas, solve or try to solve problems and find common ground.” In fact, the question of non-Jews being members of congregations and their role in the congregations they belong to was addressed numerous times under various guises.

The discussions covered three distinct, but related topics: (1) Can non-Jews be members of a synagogue? (2) If they can, what role do they play in the governance of the community? (3) If they can, what role do they play in the religious practices of the community? These three questions are of a crucial nature to the continuity of the Jewish community, especially in the United States. Some communities address these issues only at a crisis moment; others as a continuous part of their membership discussions.

**NON-JEWISH MEMBERSHIP**

The question of membership has become so profound for the movement that Rabbi Eric Yoffie, then president of the URJ, discussed it at the 2005 Biennial in his sermon. He labels non-Jewish spouses who are active members in their synagogues as “heroes . . . of Jewish life.” They are often the parent that participates more in synagogue activities and has a stronger influence on the children. Yoffie sees the outreach to non-Jewish spouses as “strengthen[ing] our destiny as a holy people.” Thus, the question of membership of the non-Jewish spouse is supported by the umbrella organizations and the rabbis. In a sense, they must support: non-Jewish spousal membership because almost every congregation has non-Jewish members.

Judy Alexander, Director of Congregational Education at Temple Sinai in Burlington, Vermont, cautions that by being so accommodating “the line is so blurry . . . we don’t know where to draw it any more” when deciding who is a Jew and what non-Jews may do. However, this decision ultimately rests with the governing board of the individual congregation.

One of the early leaders of the American Reform movement, Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, refused interfaith couples membership in his congregation, and he would not allow the Jewish party in such a marriage to belong. He could never get the CCAR to agree to his stance. Rabbi Samuel Cohon (chair of Theology at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, from 1923–1963) in 1945 warned against allowing synagogues to become social clubs; a fear he had that the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation was headed towards by allowing non-Jews to become members. The Hebrew Congregation defined membership as persons who uphold “the principles and purposes” of Judaism, which allowed the congregation to grow to large proportions by 2008.

Some congregations currently decree that a household membership includes non-Jewish spouses, while others do not allow non-Jewish spouses to be members. The occasional ones “have always allowed non-Jews to become members [even] where neither partner is Jewish.” Mandy Van Ostran of Temple Israel in Springfield, Missouri, finds the idea of non-Jews as members “uncomfortable” because “it is like putting the cart before the horse . . . membership implies a public commitment to joining the Jewish people not the building.” Geri Copitch of Temple Beth Israel in Redding, California, suggests that perhaps her congregation is more lenient about membership because they are so small. Some congregations felt that being welcoming and encouraging was sufficient; membership wasn’t necessary. Other congregations waited until 2005 to really address this issue. West End Temple in Neponsit, New York, decided to target interfaith families because of falling membership.
NON-JEWISH MEMBERS’ ROLES

For those congregations who accept non-Jews as members of the congregation, the question of what roles they can play in the governance and religious practice of the congregation has to be addressed. Such issues as voting at congregational meetings, sitting on the board, teaching, or directing activities were each considered separately, as was participating in any portion of the religious service. This was never an easy discussion. Those who participated in the online discussion called the process of writing the policy very emotional because of the multisectarian nature of these small synagogues. One even explained that trying to make policy about non-Jewish roles in the congregation caused a splinter group to “form its own congregation [and] their move [did] reduce conflict.” Another noted that “tempers flared and feelings were hurt” once the policies were created, “a few of the more conservative (small ‘c’) members have not rejoined” and some more liberal members were turned off by the “non-inclusiveness” of the policies.

A few congregations do not allow their non-Jewish members any formal role in governance, though they “are extremely active” in other ways. Some congregations provide each household with two votes at the congregational meeting, regardless of the religion of the adults in the household. There are some congregations that restrict what non-Jews can do. For example, some allow non-Jewish members all roles except sitting on the board. Some extend to any role other than leading the board or other committees. Some allow non-Jews to sit on the board and chair committees, but not have a position on the board. Others put no restrictions at all on what role the non-Jews may play because their “congregation has a large number of interfaith couples and if we didn’t allow this, we would definitely be the losers.” However, the majority of URJ congregations that allow non-Jews to be members do not permit them to hold positions that regulate religious practice because they understand what Rabbi Joseph Glaser, executive vice president of the CCAR, means about non-Jews making policy on religious practice. Rabbi Harvey Fields feels that this makes the service a “playtime.”

NON-JEWISH MEMBERS’ RELIGIOUS ROLES

This is a separate issue from participation in the religious side of the community. Religious practice is a touchy issue because of tradition, law, and family desires. The URJ does have a set of guidelines that some congregations use without alteration. The CCAR response for the issue of a non-Jew participating in a service, especially b’nai mitzvah, are clear. The non-Jewish parent cannot participate in most of the service, they cannot recite any prayer that includes the idea of being part of Judaism, and they cannot pass the Torah when it is taken from the ark. The argument for this is based on the idea that the Torah is “a powerful symbol of the divine covenant with Israel” and allowing a non-Jew to handle the Torah in any way breaks this covenant. However, the responses are also clear that a non-Jewish parent should participate in some way. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman is very supportive of non-Jews participating in religious services. He sees it as “a sign of how far we have come in the grand experiment of pluralism.” Additionally, he makes the point that people interpret liturgy in different ways.

For some congregations this was a multifaceted discussion where members, the ritual committee or board, and finally the rabbi had some say. Some congregations give their rabbis the final say, having almost no real policy in place. For others, the rabbi chose not to be the final say for the community. Communities have been most creative in creating peace among the various factions. Some congregations will not allow non-Jews to lead the service. Beth El Congregation “extend[s] all of the privileges of membership to him/her except recitation alone and aloud from the bimah of prayers that contain language declaring that the speaker is a member of the Jewish people.” Some will not allow the non-Jewish parent of b’nai mitzvah [Jewish children who have reached adulthood] to participate in the Torah service in any way. Rabbi Raquel Kosovske of Bet Ahavah of Northampton, Massachusetts, commented that allowing the non-Jewish spouse to hold the Torah “is often transformative for the families . . . it can be a powerful affirmation of the prior 13+ years or so in which the non-Jewish parent has been dedicated . . . to raising a Jewish child or having a Jewish home.” Others will allow the non-Jewish parent to stand on the bimah [raised platform where the Torah is read] behind the Jewish parent when they are participating in the Torah service during the b’nai mitzvah service. During the new ritual of LaDor V’Dor [passing the Torah from generation to generation] some congregations will allow only Jewish family members to participate; others, like Temple Beth El in Riverside, California, allow both Jewish and non-Jewish family members, but instead of passing the Torah, the rabbi taps each person in line with the Holy Scroll and gives it to the last person, who must be a Jew, who then gives it to the b’nai mitzvah. Still others have no restrictions. Alexander adds another note of caution: if non-Jews are given aliyyot [a blessing to say over the Torah], then Jews by choice will start to question their need to convert. Rabbi Friedman is concerned that the whole idea of what is Judaism and who is a Jew will change. Already,
she notes, congregants rate each other on Jewishness through the definition of practice. Each congregation has chosen according to what it believes the significance of the religious text is, which is what Hoffman suggests.

Victoria Romero of Temple Beth Or in Everett, Washington, believes that acceptance of non-Jewish members has much to do with who was involved in the formation of the congregation. The congregation to which she belongs had non-Jewish founders, among them herself, and so they have always been an important part of the community. Rabbi Friedman is concerned that such a large number of non-Jews would influence, purposely or not, the language of the service—what is to be done with the prayers that refer to “the Jewish people,” for example. There is a feeling in some congregations that if one limits the role non-Jews can play, then they will not participate as fully as they might otherwise. Others suggest that “we only damage our communities if we reject those who would otherwise help to raise the next generation of Jews.”

CONCLUSIONS
Rabbi Victor S. Appel, the small congregations specialist at the URJ, was very pleased by the discussion taking place on line (part of the purpose of the discussion group). He supports “each synagogue[s] . . . endeavor to create guidelines that are uniquely well-suited to its community” and reminds the group that “the Union for Reform Judaism respects the autonomy of each congregation in matters of governance.” Thus, these congregations were approaching the problems appropriately, as best needed by their community, and working through the process, which Appel and Hoffman believe to be equally as important. The process of acceptance must be working because American Jews still rate Jewishness as important in their lives. Rabbi David Frank notes that “how to balance perpetuation of Judaism with perpetuation of the Jewish people themselves” is a serious dilemma that Reform Jews must be aware of. Van Ostran raises interesting questions about defining Jewry: “What about someone born of a Jewish mother or father but who has practiced another religion and now want to be Jewish? And, what about someone born of a parent who was not raised Jewish but is a descended from a Jewish grandparent?” We know that Jewish law stipulates that in the first case the child is a returning Jew; this was addressed in the early 1500s by leading rabbis when dealing with the expelled crypto-Jews. The second is murkier.

Heilman warns that non-Jews in Jewish families are “not going to disappear” and that somehow Jews must find a place for them in the Jewish community. The Reform movement has addressed this issue over time; as its constituents’ attitudes have changed, so has the philosophy of the movement. What seems most evident is exactly what Marcus suggests: “synthesis is the essence of Jewish history.” The American Reform movement is a prime example of this, redefining how one may belong to the community in order for the community to continue to exist. The CCAR has been careful to maintain the essence of Judaism (the idea of community and the religious practices), while making sure that most people can be a part of the community in an effort to encourage continuity. That each community enforces these guidelines according to its wishes is very Jewish and encouraged by the movement. That the Jewish community continues to exist flies in the face of the naysayers of the early to mid-twentieth century. That this is controversial is not surprising.

When we restrict Torah we only lower ourselves.
—Rabbi Irwin Huberman

We may be a small part-time congregation, but we are full-time Jews.
—Rabbi Ellen Jay Lewis

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NOTES
4 Ibid., 47.


13. Ibid.


26. Joffe, “From the Four Corners.”

27. Klatzkin, “Jewish Nationalism.”


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58 Alice Klein, “Policies and Procedures.”
59 Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Rose, “Re: Role of the Non-Jew.”
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65 “Non-Jewish Participation in Bar/Bat Mitzvah Service.”
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68 Kohen, “Re: Role of the Non-Jew.”
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70 Kohen, “Re: Role of the Non-Jew.”
72 Kosovske, “Re: Non Jewish Members.”
75 Faber, “Policies and Procedures.”
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77 Friedman, “The Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue,” 29.
78 Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach.
79 Romero, “Defining the Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue.”
80 Friedman, “The Role of the Non-Jew in the Synagogue.”
85 Frank, “Intermarriage.”
86 Van Ostran, “Non-Jewish members.”
88 Marcus, The American Jew, 382.
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