Intensity of feeling about 'Who's a Jew' is exciting surprise

THE RABBI'S TURN

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Every once in a while, Jews really surprise me. The last time I was caught off guard by the Jewish community was in its reaction in the weeks before the Six-Day War.

Jews one never thought would stand up to be counted began coming out of the woodwork — giving, volunteering, talking about aliyah. Who could have guessed that Jews by the thousands — totally assimilated insofar as any connection to the organized community was concerned — would feel so deeply and personally involved in the fate of Israel?

It's taken more than 20 years for the Jewish community to shock me again. The depth of concern, involvement and outrage expressed by so many Jews over the threatened change in Israel's "Who is a Jew" law has taken this observer and a good many others by surprise.

I find it exciting, inspiring and perhaps just a bit unnerving. I write these lines just after returning from the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations, the annual meeting of federation supporters and executives, held in New Orleans this year. Throughout the G.A., this was the issue on everyone's lips.

Rabbis, of course, have been concerned about this for some time, and we have perceived it chiefly as a rabbinic issue. It is the Israeli manifestation of a broader attempt by the ultra-Orthodox to delegitimize the non-Orthodox rabbinate.

In suggesting that the Israeli Law of Return be amended to include only those born of Jewish mothers or converted *according to halacha*, the Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) parties hope to involve the Knesset in their own condemnation of non-Orthodox Judaism and its leaders.

The non-Orthodox rabbi is no rabbi at all as far as these Jews are concerned, and any status-changing act (conversion, marriage, divorce) performed by them, whether or not traditional forms are followed, has no validity at all.

The tremendous outpouring of concern tells us a good deal about the nature of our Jewish community these days. While the lobbyists for change are trying to tell the Knesset that only a few marginal Jews will be affected by this law, here that feels like anything but the case.

Nearly everyone, it turns out, by now has a daughter-in-law or a niece who became Jewish by choice, an adopted child or grandchild who is Jewish by conversion, a son or a nephew or a cousin married to a non-Jew who is giving his kids a Jewish education and wants them to be seen as Jews.

Add to these the unmarried son or daughter who we fear might fall in love with a non-Jew one of these days, and nearly everyone outside Orthodoxy seems to fit this picture in one way or another. And even though most of these people have not the remotest thought of settling in Israel and claiming citizenship under the Law of Return, they are offended and frightened that someone is telling them that these loved ones and relatives are not Jews at all.

The decision to become Jewish — at least for an adult conversion — is a serious and often wrenching one. It often involves entire families in complex and trying emotional situations, especially when the feelings of parents on both sides have to be considered.

Liberal rabbis who prepare candidates for conversion often report how inspired they are by the seriousness and dedication of these new Jews. And now the entire process of that conversion — sometimes years afterward and long after children have been born and raised — is being called into question.

Take the child of a converted mother as an example. If she was converted by a non-Orthodox rabbi, even if she received lengthy instruction and went to the mikveh, she is now declared a non-Jew. Her son or daughter, raised as a Jew, having gone to Hebrew school and having had Bar/Bat Mitzvah, is now also declared non-Jewish and cannot be converted at all unless he or she agrees to become a practicing Orthodox Jew (or lies to the rabbi at the conversion ceremony). No wonder there is outrage.

Of course, we Jews can always find some good in a bad situation. The "silver lining" this time is particularly gratifying to me. For a long time, we have been told that converts to Judaism feel that they get a mixed and not fully accepting reception within the Jewish community, especially in families into which they marry.

These Jews by choice should now be consoled to show how deeply their in-laws, friends and fellow congregants care for them. Perhaps this opportunity to show concern for those who have chosen Judaism will prove rewarding and reassuring.

The reaction of the Jewish community also shows how deeply Jews continue to identify with their rabbis. The relationship of rabbi and congregant, even for those who are not terribly pious or regular in synagogue attendance, should not be underestimated.

Studies show that synagogue members care greatly about the status of "my rabbi," sometimes not in entirely positive ways. But they do care, and the recent outpouring shows that congregations will stand by their rabbinic leaders when they are attacked.

I also believe that there is a certain degree of hysteria in these reactions. The bearded rabbis of Agudat Israel are not, after all, coming to snatch away those grandchildren. They do not have the power to dissolve anyone's marriage or to force anyone out of our pluralistic and open Jewish community.

If we do not need their approval to buttress our own sense of Jewish identity, they have no power that will affect us or our families except in the most remotely unlikely of circumstances. Let us go on living our own lives as Jews, proudly and positively. Let us increase our own devotion to Jewish learning and Jewish living as we understand them.

Rather than worry about our legitimacy or anyone's attacks on it, let us *be* legitimate in the way we live our lives and in the example we show to our children.

It would be tragic if the strong feelings of Jews, including liberal rabbis, roused by this attempt to delegitimize us, should lead to a hardening of positions on the difficult questions of personal status. I personally believe that there is room for compromise on a number of these questions, and that modern Orthodoxy could serve a particularly important function in working with the rest of Jewry to come to a resolution.

The Haredim still have a lot to learn on how the game of politics is played in a democratic community. The high-handed attitude they have shown in attempting to manipulate the Israeli political process for their own ends has clearly blown up in their faces. Perhaps that, too, will be to everyone's good in the long run. ■

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