

Answer to Assimilation

By HaRav Ariel Bar Tzadok

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Assimilation means being absorbed into something new and a lack of identification and association with one's own past. Within the Jewish context we can define assimilation as people of Jewish ancestry choosing not to identify or associate with their background, culture, people, or ethnicity. Needless to say this also includes a complete divorce from any positive involvements with religious or political causes that maintains the continuity of such a Jewish identity and association for future generations. Being that so many Jewish people today are flocking away from anything even remotely associated with anything authentically Jewish, many view this migration with great alarm.

Is the answer to assimilation merely the re-adoption of cultural associations? Anyone who defines assimilation as being exclusively a cultural phenomenon is serious missing the point. By being so off the mark, those who view Jewish assimilation in such a superficial way will actually assist the deterioration that assimilation brings and further assist the unraveling of the greater Jewish community at large.

Before I present what I believe is a viable solution to assimilation, I must first present what I believe contributes to its underlying causes.

Over centuries we have witnessed many strong supporters of Jewish identity who in no way can be defined as being overtly ethnic. Then on the flipside we find many very ethnically Jewish individuals whose immoral character and offensive behavior actually create assimilation because so many of their fellow Jews are so embarrassed by their behavior that they avoid any association with them and what they represent. Many individuals flee the ethnicity of the people because of the terrible behavior of those who so publically embrace the ethnicity and then degrade it.

When an ethnic identity is something to look up at and be proud of as a role model, then there is never any problem in getting people to identify with it. However, when said ethnicity has become a subject of scorn, then we find that we have a big problem indeed. And the problem is not the ethnic role model per se; but rather the problem is those who identify with it and what they present and represent in the eyes of the greater public.

Jewish assimilation, whether it be in the religious or secular fields are both founded upon a single foundation; there is an animosity and almost a loathing of anything associated with the age-old religion of Judaism. Yes, the foundation of assimilation is not based in culture; it is based in religion. Secular Jews face this prejudice as much as do religious Jews.

So, why should the religion of Judaism create such animosity that people go out of their way to avoid any association with it? The answer to this question does not lie with Jews or Judaism, but rather with how other religions have viewed Jews and Judaism. We must look at this in the context of history to understand it.

For centuries the two dominant world culture/religions Christianity and Islam have always taught terrible things about Jews and Judaism. These issues are very involved historical/theological matters and not relevant to our discussion here. Nonetheless these same hostile theological teachings have laid the foundation of the relationship that Jews have had with their Christian and Muslim neighbors for centuries.

Regardless of any good periods over the centuries, time has proven them to only be temporary. Underlying these great world cultures exists their subtle (and sometimes overt) dislike and mistrust of anyone and anything Jewish. This animosity is so fundamental that for centuries it led to a natural and legally imposed separation between the peoples. Thus, for the most part, Jews were not allowed to become accepted in the greater surrounding cultures.

Granted, throughout the centuries countless Jewish individuals left the ranks of the Jewish community but they did so at the cost of having to completely sever their ties with their past, culturally and religiously. In many cases, they even gave up any further ties with their own families. The surrounding dominant cultures would not have it any other way. In many instances today, this has not changed.

Historically, upon embracing their new cultures, many of these same ex-Jewish compatriots actually became the greatest and most zealous proponents of their newly adopted cultures. These ex-Jewish compatriots often became leaders of movements that sought to force their ex-fellows away from their Jewish roots. The famous founder of the insidious Spanish Inquisition Tomas Torquemada was one of these Jewish converts who felt that he had to zealously convince his old brethren of his new found faith. There are still many like him today who following in his footsteps, reject their Jewish origins and become proponents of anti-Semitism.

We have to be thankful that times have changed. For the last few centuries the racism against Jews in the western world has for the most part abated somewhat. Granted it has never disappeared, but with the exception of Nazi Germany, living as a Jew was tolerated and even to a point accepted throughout western civilization. Although Jews and Judaism have been tolerated, this tolerance did not run very deep into the hearts of everyone.

Even in the United States of America anti-Jewish racism continues to this day in many subtle forms, especially against expressions of the oldest, most traditional forms of Orthodox Judaism. It is sad but true that Orthodox Jews are often victims of prejudice from their assimilated secular fellow Jews, many times more so than from their Christian neighbors.

Although western civilization proclaimed emancipation for all its citizens, those who were different from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority still knew very well that while “all

men are equal," still, some are "more equal than others." Jews for the most part looked and acted "white" in almost every respect. It was easy for many Jews to remove any identifying ethnic differences and to blend into the greater "white" crowd of Anglo-Saxon Protestant America. For as a member of the crowd all types of social and economic doors opened up. Without any ethnic baggage to carry many Jews simply decided to be secular westerners and to leave their Jewishness behind.

This is how assimilation began and this is how it continues. It is not because the Jew has an inherent hatred or loathing of his own race and culture. Rather it is because Jews have been exposed to and taught to hate their own race and culture by those who themselves hated and despised it.

Some individual Jews acted with personal resentment towards those who racially despised them and in response reinforced their Jewish identity and cultural associations. They were proud of their Jewishness in spite of it possibly being secular and thus shallow. Many however were not so proud, emotionally attached or involved. The promise of a good life without hindrances was too much of a temptation for many to resist; all they had to do was to give up something that never meant anything to them in the first place. It was not a hard decision.

Today, assimilation has entered a third and fourth generation. Most Jewish westerners no longer have any connection to their culture or any associations with their own racial, religious and national self interests. For the most part these are all lost and gone souls.

We could merely accept this fact, bid them good riddance and proudly proclaim that we as a race and nation are better off without those of our own who do not wish to be a part of us. But, in doing so, we may actually be creating a greater problem rather than offering a speedy solution.

History has shown us and others that the greatest enemies a race, culture or religion faces most often comes from turncoats from within. Therefore, by ignoring the assimilation problem and wishing all those lost souls good riddance, we may actually be promoting future problems and future problem makers. Unless we rise up and address the assimilation issue, we may soon face the consequences of our collective inaction.

At this last stage of the game where so many western Jews have lost contact with anything it really means to be Jewish, the first step of reversing assimilation is to expose lost Jews to their origins, in a way and in a light that makes it very attractive and desirable. Just as throngs left the Jewish fold for the greener pastures of the tolerating secular western world, so too we can "reverse assimilate" people by presenting to them the now greener and greater pastures of the Jewish culture, race, and religion over and above that which the secular west has to offer.

Ours is an ancient culture, race and religion. We have been around since the days of the Pharaohs in Egypt. We have learned much, seen much and experienced much. We have a long history of written record which over centuries has recorded wisdom, knowledge and beauty. Much of the ancient wisdom has never been translated or publically exposed. Even

so-called community leaders, secular and religious alike are often limited in their education and outlook and only focus on a very narrow framework of definition of what it means to be Jewish. In doing so, they misunderstand Jews and Judaism and do great harm to the nation as a whole.

Therefore, in my opinion, "Step One" in bringing back lost Jewish souls to the Jewish fold is to expose these souls to what our Jewish fold actually is and all the wealth that it actually offers. We must first break the strangleholds of the narrow minded, uneducated who think that they know about Jews and Judaism and show through education just how limited and wrong they are and have always been. Let us start by throwing out our modern trash and at the same time revive the ancient ways of profound wisdom and fulfillment.

Give people something good and they will not reject it. Give them something better than what they have already and they will come running after it. If modern Jews only knew what Judaism had to offer, in truth and beyond the myths embraced by many so-called modern day leaders, we would begin an avalanche of "reverse assimilation" with throngs coming home, maybe for the first time to explore and discover all that they have missed and had never known was always right at home in the first place.

Conclusion

People identify and associate with that which they like, and not with that which they do not. This is simple common sense and it is the reason for assimilation in general and Jewish assimilation in particular. The obvious and simple solution to this pattern is simply to reverse direction. Yet, in order to do this, the Jewish model being presented must be something more desirable and fulfilling than the secular model presently in vogue.

We cannot draw people away from something; we need to draw them towards something.

Unless we revive the Jewish model and make it desirable and valuable, no one will want it and eventually everyone will leave it. Change the model and we will change its attraction. Change its attraction into something more positive and desirable and we will draw many lost souls back to it. This will have an avalanche affect; for once we get the ball rolling, it will take on a life on its own and Jewish identity will be in vogue and sought out by many who have forgotten it in the past.