

Reaching the Assimilated Jewish Person:
Is There Any Difference?

Milt Kohut and I want to share some observations and opinions on "Reaching the assimilated Jewish person: is there any difference?" I say observations and opinions, not because either of us lacks conviction about what we will say, but because there isn't adequate statistical data to confirm or refute our views.

Let me give you a surface answer and then I'll come back with a more detailed explanation later. The answer is yes and no. It is "yes, we need new approaches," because assimilated Jews won't be reached in any significant numbers through an emphasis on Jewish traditions--which is the conventional wisdom. It is "no, they're the same," because I would contend that the emphasis critical to reach them would be more effective with those we now reach.

Initially, I may seem to veer off the subject by not going directly to a discussion of methodology. But here is the reason we must postpone that until we discuss some more foundational questions. Your **methodology** will always be a product of your **philosophy of ministry**, and your philosophy of ministry will be based on your **theology**. The reason we have foggy methods is that we have not clarified the relationship between God, Israel--saved and unsaved, Israeli and Diaspora, and the Church--local and universal.

In all candor, finding truthful answers depends on asking the right questions and Milt and I contend that many of the right questions are not being asked. They are not being asked because, like every other group, we are blinded by our own prejudices and assumptions. Much of what I'm going to suggest tonight could be said to any group working with a specific ethnic or cultural segment of the society. The universal folly is to believe that one's own group is the exception. We face an increased risk of this natural arrogance because the Jews are chosen of God.

The subject implies that the assimilated Jewish person is not the rule--but he is! In fact, there is no such thing as an un-assimilated Jewish person. Another thing, it isn't a matter of size, but of official credibility. If you identify those who are not committed to synagogue life as the assimilated Jewish person, then he represents ninety to ninety-five percent of the community, depending on whose figures you use. He is not the aberration: he is the norm!

The title should automatically bring some questions. The first seems to be, assimilated into what? What is assimilation--and is it a bad thing? If it is unsuitable, is it our job to un-assimilate Jewish believers--and if so, back into what? Does God care about the protection of any culture--including the Rabbinic one developed by his chosen people?

As to the question, "assimilated into what?" we must not accept the Rabbinical definition. They are not assimilated into Christianity. They--like their non-Jewish neighbors--are assimilated into secularism. In fact, "assimilation" is not really the right word. Cultures continually adopt new ways and ideas into their orthodoxy. Americans of the minority cultures clutter their lives with the same material trash that burdens the rest. Instead of the "assimilated" person, we should speak of the "separated" person, because it is their failure to submit to the established structure and authorities that is opposed.

One of the ugliest abuses of a group's opposition to cultural insubordination--that is, to a member not holding his own traditions as superior--is the nurture of that mandate of compliance for personal power. Sadly, plenty of examples exist in today's Balkinized world. David Duke--Louis Farachan--Meir Kahane--the Ayatollah Khomeini. And never forget this, Israel **and** the church have always been tainted by the hues of the world in which they lived. We must be careful, that we not **Balkinize** the body of Christ for our own petty little power-bases.

The concern about assimilation into the majority culture is universal to all minority groups. Your concern does not exceed that of the Chinese, Mexican, Haitian, Armenian or Afghan believer; nor that of the Texan, Hoosier, Brooklinite, or Wisconsin dairy farmer who has moved to a new place and an unfamiliar congregation. We all gravitate to the comfort of the familiar. Where this causes problems is that we all assume everyone else must be comfortable if we are. Many of you were uncomfortable in church--which came as a shock to your non-Jewish brothers and sisters. In turn, we risk creating a climate that is equally foreign to the assimilated Jew--and being equally shocked when it doesn't appeal to him. Let me give you an example of the danger of that common assumption.

The dust-bowl of the '30s and the defense industry of the Second World War sucked thousands of migrants from the South and Southwest into California. There was a Hillbilly song that said it all: "Hey Arky, if you see Okie, tell him Tex's got a job for him out in Californie!"

Southern Baptist churches sprang up and grew, but they grew based on a common cultural heritage. There's even stories of pastors who cruised the shopping-mall parking lots as a part of their outreach strategy, looking for tags from Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma.

Now, churches existed in Los Angeles before they came--even Baptist churches--but they didn't feel like home. Clustering in home Bible studies, each little group called themselves a preacher as soon as they could afford one. They were very careful, however, to call one that would preach correctly--which generally meant with a Texas accent. Even those in the city kept a nostalgia for rural ways. They promoted Fall Round-up, where

everyone dressed like ranch-hands. They kept their rural words, sending out Church-planters who cultivated their fields. On work-days, breakfast always had grits and gravy. After all, any fool knows that's necessary.

They grew. Land was bought for church sites and loans were secured. They knew in their hearts, that God had given them this pagan state to bring into the Kingdom where they could enjoy grits.

Well, what happened? Today, many of those large churches are empty. Why? They got side-tracked.

Because they attracted people who were comfortable with their peculiarities, they assumed **everyone** would be comfortable with them.

Did you hear what I said? Let me say it again. Because they attracted people who were comfortable with their peculiarities, they assumed **everyone** would be comfortable with them. They made plans for reaching the community based on the characteristics of a segment that was not representative of it. They were transplanted Oklahoma, or Arkansas, or Texas islands in a California sea. Their growth was deceptive because it was basically transfer growth and baptism of their children.

Worse yet, the grandchildren of those who sought to maintain their cultural comfort are cultural foreigners, now. They think Texas accents sound uneducated. They want to go with their friends to the church that has a band and worship courses. They think the Baptist hymnal is boring!

Now, I know enough about persuasion to know that some of you were quick to reject the implications of that story. Your justification was that the Jewish people have a special role in God's plans. Well, that's true, but I don't know of any role in the Kingdom for Rabbinics. Any role for the Oral Law--and the traditions developed from it--is purely cultural. It's like grits. You can keep them if you like them, but when they get in the way of attracting those outside of your peculiar tastes, they've got to go!

How assimilated are you willing to become to reach that ninety-percent that are being overlooked? If you thought it would be more effective, would you throw away your yarmulke and shift your services to Sunday? I'm not suggesting that as a strategy, but if you believed more people would be saved, would you do it? You see, it's time for us to review our assignment. Why are we in this business? Is it to save all the individual Jewish souls we can, or to preserve the Jewish culture for some future gray-foggy disagreed-upon conception of God's distant plans for the Jewish people?

Let me say a bit about specifics and then Milt will share some insights. Strategically, I would suggest you think in two categories; those with whom you have some relationship and those with whom you do not. Let me talk about the last group, first.

With those you don't know--street witnessing, door-to-door, and so on--I am a firm believer in confrontive evangelism. In those settings, I believe our role is that of a plow. Our hope should be to break up the hard-ground of comfort in which our contact has planted himself. Confrontation, here, is a good thing.

Remember this, in persuasion, no one changes his mind as long as he is comfortable with his current beliefs. Until someone makes a person uncomfortable with his current solutions to the ultimate problems of his life, he will never consider the claims of the Messiah. That will normally bring you hostility, by the way. Don't worry, though, God can solve that. Don't be stupid or rude, but don't worry about worsening their openness to the gospel. Until they become disturbed, they are not open, anyway.

I'm sure some of you will disagree, but I'm convinced that presence evangelism within the corporate community--that is trying to be accepted within the Jewish institutional life in order to witness--is a waste of time. So is cultivative efforts with individuals we do not know. Worse, it is a safe non-threatening environment in which one may pretend he is evangelistic, when he is not.

When you know the person, however, our emphasis should shift. Here, where we have some relationship, there is a place for a cultivative approach. The difference is this. Developing and attempting to sustain a friendship out of the desire to witness is hopeless because it is insincere. If a relationship exists because of some other factor, it will survive and in time, you can make your points.

There are good models for confrontive outreach to those we do not know, so let me share some suggestions on reaching the assimilated Jewish person with whom we have a relationship. There is a process that people move through unconsciously as the Lord draws them. It's like gates through which one must pass to get home. Like physical gates, we must open the one that has him locked out, not the one up the road where we are.

Now here is a commercial, in a sense. This whole approach is fully explained in the book, "What to Say When They Say, I'm Jewish." Moishe Rosen says "it might be one of the most important books you'll read this decade." There is no way I can give you its content in 20 minutes, so here's what I propose. You can have a copy for \$5.00, which is half-price. I would give you a copy, but people don't read books they don't buy.

Let me summarize the cultivate process for the assimilated Jew, however. The first gate is to believe--based on reason--that there is a Creator God. We must be able to support that view without scripture, because initially, our lost friend will not see scripture as having any authority. Also, we need to show why God is a person--from a philosophical expectation--not a force, or a personification of abstract principles. One of these will be what our contact assumes.

Once he believes that we were created by a personal God, the next question is "So what?" We need to show that we should expect God to care about what he has created, and if so, he must then be both loving and just.

Third, if he is a loving Creator with expectations of his creatures, how can we know of his desires? The answer is that we can't--unless he reveals himself. Expecting a Creator to reveal himself to the object of his love, we can then say we have a record of that Divine Revelation and move our friend into Bible study.

Don't take this step for granted. The secular world assumes and Rabbinic wisdom teaches that scripture is the **discovery of man** rather than the **revelation of God**. The proof of the validity of the Bible over other religious books is its ability to predict the future exactly. On this we establish that it is God's Word. Once our friend believes the Scripture to be God's self-revelation, we can then draw on it as an authority.

Though the book goes on to show how to use Yom Kippur, Pesach, and the Messianic prophecies, evangelistically, you can use almost any of the evangelism tracks, once you get through those first three gates. If you argue from scripture before he sees it as an authority, however, you've shot yourself in the foot.

Again, how do you sort what influences to oppose and which to ignore? Well, deciding by a view's cultural roots is not the answer. Here's why. The cornerstone of every culture is its popular religious beliefs. Notice I said, "popular religious beliefs." You may challenge this, but I would propose to you that in its basic form, **every** popular religious belief is the same, no matter the culture. It is always the lie out of the garden, that is, that you have the capacity within yourself--if you would just live up to your potential--to be right with God. It always elevates man and demotes God. It's the same lie, whether the Rabbinic teaching that keeping the Law saves, or the foolish Christian idea that "God helps those who help themselves," is Biblical.

Our job then becomes the promotion or rejection of views, not based on culture--Rabbinic or Christian--but on their value to the expansion of the Kingdom.