

Adam S. Ferziger

Training American Orthodox Rabbis
to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation:
Programs, Methodologies and Directions



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The Rappaport Center for Assimilation
Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
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to the author and

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

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In Memory of

J.J. Greenberg ז"ל

*His sincerity and genuine love of Judaism
continues to inspire many Jews to explore their heritage*

Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality was founded in Bar Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives open to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America. To dismiss such subjective disaffection with Jewishness as merely a result of poor marketing and amateurish PR for Judaism is an easy way out – which we do not accept. Rather, a concurrent working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is, that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness reflects real flaws and weaknesses existing in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

The first stage of all research projects of our Center is, therefore, to analyze an aspect or institution of Jewish life in order to identify and understand what might be contributing to “turning Jews off”. However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, in the direction of mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

Dr. Adam Ferziger holds a Ph.D. from Bar Ilan University, where he currently teaches at the Department of Jewish History. A resident of Israel, he was born in the United States and holds Orthodox rabbinical ordination (“semicha”) from Yeshiva University. He was therefore eminently suited to undertake for the Rappaport Center a research program devoted to an analysis and critique of American Orthodox rabbinical training from a “counter-assimilationist” perspective. After outlining the difference between classic “kiruv” activities and the type of involvement that could be appropriate for the broad section of Jews verging on assimilation, Dr. Ferziger poses these seminal questions:

How are Orthodox rabbinical candidates currently being trained? Do the Orthodox institutions that train congregational rabbis offer them the skills necessary to deal with contemporary assimilatory trends? Do most young Orthodox rabbis in training learn about the nature of the greater Jewish community? Do they gain abilities to communicate with non-observant Jews? Does their intensive study of classical Jewish texts enable them to locate suitable ones for exposing Jews who have become alienated from Judaism to the beauty of tradition? Do the rabbinical training centers encourage their

graduates to become pulpit rabbis? Based on the answers to these questions, a proposal can be put forward for how to focus future rabbinical training more directly on dealing with assimilation.

The answers to these questions, based on Dr. Ferziger's original research, are herein presented to the reader, under the title *Training American Orthodox Rabbis to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation: Programs, Methodologies and Directions*. His findings are relevant for all Jews concerned with the future of the Jewish people, since Orthodox rabbis, along with rabbis of other denominations and along with Jewish lay leadership in communities around the world, have a joint purpose and mission: countering assimilation and strengthening Jewish vitality.

This paper by Dr. Ferziger is the fourth publication in the series "Research and Position Papers of the Rappaport Center". The three previous publications, in Hebrew, are:

- Asher Cohen, *Israeli Assimilation: The Absorption of Non-Jews into Israeli Society and its Influence on the Collective Identity*.
- Avi Sagi, *A Critique of Jewish Identity Discourse*.
- Ariel Picard, *Halakhic Responses to Assimilation*.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Ferziger for his contribution to the endeavors of the Rappaport center, and to thank all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this paper: Ms. Iris Aharon, organizational co-ordinator of the Rappaport center; Ms. Ruhi Avital (text editor), Mr. Ya'akov Hasson (production), Ben Gassner studio (cover graphics), and Art Plus Press.

After all is said and done, however, all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, take the opportunity presented by the appearance of this publication to acknowledge the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

I. Parallel Growth: Assimilation and Orthodoxy in Contemporary American Jewish Life

Over half the American Jews who get married this year will choose a non-Jewish spouse, recent studies show.¹ Few of the children from those marriages will be brought up as Jews. Most will be given a Christian upbringing, have a dual affiliation to Judaism and Christianity or no religious affiliation at all.² While the

* I would like to thank my research assistant, Avner Landes, for his dedication to the project as well as his astute questions and suggestions at various stages in the preparation of this paper. I am grateful to a number of people who have been kind enough to read earlier drafts or portions of this paper and have shared comments that have enriched this work: Rabbi Herschel Billet, Professor David Ellenson, Professor Charles Liebman, Professor Chaim Milikowsky, Rabbi Ariel Picard, Professor Bernard Susser, Professor Ariel Toaff, Dr. Ari Zivotofsky and in particular, the director of the Rappaport Center, Dr. Zvi Zohar.

1 According to a 1990 demographic study of American Jewry the figure was 52% and rising; see the discussion in Jack Wertheimer, "Surrendering to Inter-marriage," *Commentary* 111, 3 (March, 2001), 26. While some have raised questions regarding the way the 1990 data were collected, Wertheimer maintains that the general consensus is that the intermarriage rate today ranges somewhere between 43% and 52%.

2 Wertheimer, 30, cites the study of Bruce A. Phillips, *Reexamining Inter-marriage: Trends, Textures, Strategies* (American Jewish Committee, William Petschek National Jewish Family Center and the Susan and David

estimated 5.2 million³ to 6 million Jews⁴ in the United States have flourished, they've paid a troubling price. To a great extent due to its own success in blending in with the larger non-Jewish community, American Jewry is actually shrinking.

Parallel to the weakening of roots for most American Jews, the late twentieth century witnessed a strengthened Orthodox Jewish community, with a thriving congregational life throughout the country. Orthodox education is growing from year to year, both on the elementary and high school level, as well as in post-high school yeshiva⁵ programs. As sociologist Paul Ritterband put it, "...Jewish day schools are bursting at the seams, and intermarriage rates are going through the roof."⁶ Kosher food can now be found with relative ease even in far-flung corners of the United States that have few observant Jews. America's biggest food producers

Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, 1997), which concludes that only 18% of "mixed families" bring their children up as Jews, whereas 33% are brought up as Christians and over 25% are given no religious upbringing at all.

- 3 This figure is based on the recently released National Jewish Population Survey from 2000, whose results are presently being published. See Melissa Radler, "U.S. Jewish Population Shrinking, Aging – Survey," *Jerusalem Post* (Oct. 9, 2002), 2; The figure given in the recent American Jewish Identity Study conducted by Barry Kosmin along with Egon Mayer and Ariela Keysar under the auspices of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York is 5.5 million. See Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Jews Turning From Judaism," *The Jewish Week* [World Wide Web edition], November 2, 2001.
- 4 Jim Schwartz and Jeffrey Scheckner, "Jewish Population in the United States, 1999," in *American Jewish Year Book 2000* (New York, 2000), 242, offer the figure of 6 million.
- 5 There is no consistent spelling of the term "yeshiva" in this paper. Rather, the term is presented colloquially as it is normally pronounced in the context being described. For example, the right-wing Orthodox post-high school institutions of higher learning are referred to as *yeshivos*.
- 6 Paul Ritterband, "Modern Times and Jewish Assimilation," in Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen (eds.), *The Americanization of the Jews* (New York, 1995), 378.

now seek *kashrut* supervision for many more products in order to gain entry into this widespread and lucrative market.⁷

Orthodox Jews have become so accepted within secular culture that they no longer have to go through awkward excuses at meals when they attend academic or professional conferences. Indeed, they have come to expect that the organizers will provide “glatt gourmet” cuisine that matches their colleagues’ dinner right down to the menu and silverware. In fact, it is no longer unusual to encounter Orthodox males who display their commitment publicly by donning their *kippot* at work, be it in hospitals, law firms, large corporations or government.⁸

Based on its own recent success at bucking the overall trend, one could argue that efforts should be made to design ways to enlist the resources of Orthodox Jewry to counteract the explosive levels of American Jewish assimilation. The effectiveness of such recruitment is questionable, however, for numerous reasons. First,

7 For a provocative portrayal of the renaissance of American Orthodoxy and its influence on current debates over the nature of American Jewish identity see: Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York, 2001).

8 There is a vast corpus of writing published in the Orthodox press over the last twenty years that can be characterized as “triumphalist” literature. Such articles are sprinkled among most issues of the *Jewish Observer*, which is sponsored by the right-wing Orthodox *Agudath Israel of America*. This theme of triumphalism is also highlighted in many of the entries in a symposium on the future of American Orthodoxy published in *Tradition* 32, 4 (Summer, 1998). For less partisan evaluations of Orthodox success, see for example: Bernard Susser and Charles S. Liebman, *Choosing Survival* (New York and Oxford, 1999), 139–146; Jack Wertheimer, “Recent Trends in American Judaism,” *American Jewish Year Book* 1989 (New York, 1989), 107–124. Indeed, Liebman already highlighted this burgeoning trend over thirty-five years ago in his now classic study “Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life,” *American Jewish Year Book* 66 (New York, 1965), 21–97.

Orthodox success has brought with it increased Orthodox insularity.⁹ Orthodox self-confidence and security has nurtured a belief among its devotees that it is a self-sustaining movement. Thus, the decline in the Orthodox sense of dependence on greater Jewry for its own survival has led to less interaction between Orthodox Jews and others than was previously the case.¹⁰ As such, there may no longer exist even a minimal language of discourse that would allow for Orthodox Jews to play an effective role in the broader community. The Orthodox, one may argue, are a separate entity that is only concerned with its own religious, social and economic welfare – they are no longer active partners in the American Jewish collective. Therefore, they have no interest in involving themselves in the “predictable” problems of those Jews who have distanced themselves from “authentic Judaism.” Moreover, even if the Orthodox were inclined to become active, the gap between their worldview and that of the average American Jew is so great that they simply would be unable to relate to them in a manner that could effectively discourage assimilation or heighten their Jewish commitment.

One can counter that, indeed while Orthodox triumphalism does bring with it a certain degree of self-indulgence, it does not necessarily lead to a denial of responsibility for the religious welfare of other Jews. Orthodox success has also spawned a cottage industry known as the *kiruv* movement.¹¹ Dozens of organizations, youth

9 See Wertheimer, “Recent Trends in American Judaism,” 117–120.

10 For a recent description of the American Orthodox community prior to the 1960s that highlights its formerly higher level of diversity, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, “Twentieth Century American Orthodoxy’s Era of Non-Observance (1900–1960),” *Torah U-Madda Journal* 9 (2000), 87–107.

11 One could argue that American Orthodoxy is torn between its belief that the only way to ensure its continuity is to invest all resources in strengthening

associations, camps, *yeshivot* and study programs have been founded since the 1960s that are dedicated solely to bringing loosely affiliated Jews “closer” to Judaism.¹² The apparent success, then, of this movement would seem to warrant consideration of this model as potentially one of the most effective vehicles for strengthening American Jewry. Perhaps far greater resources should be dedicated towards training Orthodox “case-workers” in the methodologies utilized by these institutions.

There are, however, both substantive and technical reasons to raise doubts regarding whether the current Orthodox-style outreach approach is the most suitable one for presenting an Orthodox model to fight assimilation. On a substantive level, the goal of most *kiruv* groups is not merely to raise the level of Jewish identity of those with whom they come into contact. They seek, rather, to bring those whom they attract to a point where they will identify completely with the Orthodox ideology of the organization and take full-fledged halakhic observance upon themselves.¹³ This may

those already within its ranks, on the one hand, and its sense of responsibility towards non-observant Jews, on the other. This tension can be illustrated through a “Symposium on the Priorities for the Years Ahead” published in the *Jewish Observer* (Tammuz-Av, 5757 – Summer, 1997). Of the seventeen figures who wrote for the issue, twelve raised outreach as a major priority. On the other hand, a contrasting sentiment was expressed by others including R. Yitzchok Sorotzkin who wrote of the need for an “Evolution of an agenda, from emphasis on reaching outward to a focus on strengthening and serving the core constituency.”

12 For studies of the *kiruv* movement see: Janet Aviad, *Return to Judaism* (Chicago, 1983); M. Herbert Danziger, *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven, 1989); Richard H. Greenburg, *Pathways: Jews Who Return* (Northvale, N.J. and London, 1997).

13 See the detailed evaluation, from an Orthodox point of view, of the methodology and goals of *kiruv* work in Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, *Jewish*

even entail the detachment, or at least severe distancing, of an individual from their immediate family and social environment. Such policies are threatening, if not repulsive, to most American Jews. While they may be effective with a certain number of individuals, on a communal level concurrent with those who grow closer to Jewish tradition, an equal or even greater number of people might become more alienated by such efforts.

On a practical level as well, classical *kiruv* programs are limited in their potential for successfully changing the tide of assimilation. The *kiruv* movement generally achieves success when it takes its new adherents out of their natural environment and places them in intensive religious surroundings. This works well with college students on campus or on a trip to Israel when they are searching for answers. It does not, however, offer a window of hope for the vast majority of American Jews who are rooted in their home environments and social milieu. If Orthodox Jewry can, in fact, make a contribution towards strengthening the Jewish identity of greater American Jewry, then vehicles have to be found that are both non-threatening and localized within the various large and small population centers.

If the hard-core *kiruv* approach is inappropriate, what in particular does the Orthodox community offer to other American Jews? Some Orthodox figures and even some non-Orthodox academics would claim that Orthodoxy's greatest contribution to American Jewry is the strengthening of its own spiritual and material subsistence. They assume that since it is unlikely that a

Outreach: Halakhic Perspectives (Hoboken N.J., 1990). This book was published under the auspices of the *Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals*.

significant non-observant Jewish population will survive through the next century, the most important goal is to help Orthodoxy, as the sole remnant of modern Jewry, to withstand the challenges of the 21st century. As an analysis by Ritterband portends, based on current assimilation and fertility rates, by the year 2110, there will still be over 3 million Jews in the United States, but almost all will be Ultra-Orthodox.¹⁴ There is another vantage point, at a polar extreme from that just cited, from which it is implied that direct contact between the Orthodox and non-observant Jewry is not particularly beneficial for dealing with assimilation. A call has come from the Reform movement as well as from studies produced by task forces on the assimilation problem, for a different type of “outreach.” Rather than fighting intermarriage, American Jews should recognize it as a reality of contemporary Jewish life. Instead of expending energies on futile preventative measures, they should seek to make “mixed families” feel more comfortable within the community and the synagogue setting. The assumption, then, is that if offered a positive experience, more of these families will maintain a Jewish connection. This would leave open greater possibilities for their children to choose to identify as Jews.¹⁵ Opponents of this trend have highlighted the statistics discussed above regarding the religious inclinations of most intermarried couples as proof of the counterproductive nature of such

14 Ritterband, “Modern Times and Jewish Assimilation,” 389.

15 For a recent articulation and analysis, see: Debra Dash Moore, “Intermarriage and the Politics of Identity,” *The Reconstructionist* 66, 1 (Fall, 2001), 44–51; Among other expressions of support for this attitude, see Daniel M. Klein and Freke Vuijst, *The Half-Jewish Book: A Celebration* (New York, 2000). A website has also been established entitled www.interfaithfamily.com. This position has been outlined and critiqued by Wertheimer, in “Surrendering to Intermarriage.”

approaches. Clearly such a direction leaves no room for Orthodoxy, which opposes any formal concessions to intermarriage, to be involved in such efforts.

A third option in considering the relationship between Orthodoxy and current trends in assimilation is to learn from the Orthodox recipe for survival without necessarily committing to Orthodox theology or observance. Some of the academics and spokesmen who have promoted this approach are themselves Orthodox, while others would not classify themselves as such, but are highly appreciative of the American Orthodox model.¹⁶ Indeed, they share a consensus on four major points: 1) they reject intermarriage as a viable option for Jewish life, and accept the necessity of placing social boundaries between Jews and gentiles; 2) they find it unrealistic (some even find it morally abhorrent)¹⁷ to expect a large percentage of American Jewry to become fully observant Jews; 3) they believe that rather than being totally accepting of almost any conduct on the part of Jews, the only way to insure Jewish identity is – like the Orthodox – to demand sacrifice and commitment to Jewish behavior and ethos; 4) they feel that in

16 Prominent examples of this approach can be found in: Steven Bayme, “Jewish Organizational Response to Intermarriage,” in Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman (eds.), *Jews in America* (Hanover and London, 1999), 151–162; Susser and Liebman, *Choosing Survival*. On page 88 they write of: “...the minimal requisites of a workable Jewish survival strategy: the justification of boundaries, the sanctioning of communal difference, and the vindication of specifically Jewish cultural content.” In addition, on pages 136–137, they proclaim: “Jewishness must...involve life-informing commitments and affiliations”; Jack Wertheimer, Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, “How to Save American Jews,” *Commentary* 101, 1 (January, 1996), 47–51.

17 See Susser and Liebman, *Choosing Survival*, ch. 10.

addition to observance, it is commitment to Jewish learning that has been the key to Orthodox empowerment.

Assuming that this “placing demands” approach to ensuring Jewish survival is correct, the figures who may be most suited for leading an Orthodox initiative towards fighting assimilation are local Orthodox congregational rabbis. There are currently approximately 600 Orthodox congregations spread throughout the United States.¹⁸ The majority of them are led by graduates of one of the American Orthodox rabbinical seminaries or right-wing *yeshivos*. More recently, a growing number have come from *yeshivot* and training programs set up in Israel. These individuals live within their communities and potentially have ample opportunity to gain exposure within the broader Jewish population. They offer services, particularly overseeing life cycle events, which are in demand even among some of the more loosely affiliated Jews. In addition, their bases of operation are the local synagogues. While synagogue attendance itself is declining, it is still an institution that has great potential for drawing Jews towards it. It does not demand a deep level of initial commitment and certainly synagogue affiliation does not necessarily have to lead to a detachment or distancing from relatives and friends. Moreover, already at mid-century the American synagogue championed the idea that it could be more than a house of prayer,¹⁹ and social and intellectual activity are a staple of American synagogue life. The question remains, however, whether anyone other than fully

18 The figure was conveyed orally by a representative of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America.

19 On the development of the American “synagogue center,” see David Kaufman, *A Shul with a Pool* (Hanover, N.H., 1998).

committed Orthodox Jews will be willing to make use of these facilities. Among the issues that will be raised within the context of the ensuing discussion is whether, indeed, the American Orthodox congregational framework is the most suitable environment for responding to the crisis of assimilation.

Regardless, however, of the formal context within which rabbis are active, their potential to promote greater commitment to Jewish learning and religious behavior in a non-threatening manner is a reflection of the abilities that these individuals bring with them to the job. Other than a limited number of unusually talented and self-taught figures, this depends on the training that is received before entering the rabbinate. The first step, then, towards promoting a new Orthodox initiative for dealing with assimilation is to learn how Orthodox rabbinical candidates are currently being trained. Do the Orthodox institutions that train congregational rabbis offer them the skills necessary to deal with contemporary assimilatory trends? Do most young Orthodox rabbis in training learn about the nature of the greater Jewish community? Do they gain abilities to communicate with non-observant Jews? Does their intensive study of classical Jewish texts enable them to locate suitable ones for exposing Jews who have become alienated from Judaism to the beauty of tradition? Based on the answers to these questions, a proposal can be put forward for how to focus future rabbinical training more directly on dealing with assimilation.