

Synagogue Suicide – What the Pew Report Didn't Tell You

BARBARA AIELLO October 20, 2013, 9:34 am 14

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Barbara Aiello Rabbi Barbara Aiello is the first woman and first non-orthodox rabbi in Italy. She opened the first active synagogue ... [\[More\]](#)

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In late 2006 a young man named Jason telephoned me. He had met the girl of his dreams, an Italian girl named Chiara. His family were pillars of their synagogue in the suburb of a large Midwestern US city. His grandparents were the synagogue's founders who had bought and donated the land on which the synagogue was eventually built. Jason's father had been Board president. Later on his mother held the same position. Jason had become Bar Mitzvah in the sanctuary and confirmed with his synagogue class.

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When Jason approached the rabbi – the same rabbi who, when Jason was born, had officiated at his Brit Milah ceremony and who called him to the Torah as a Bar Mitzvah – Jason was eager to discuss his marriage plans. He wanted to have his wedding in the synagogue, with his rabbi as officiant, because, as Jason put it, “the rabbi was also my mentor and my friend.”

What happened next is something that has occurred thousands of times before. The rabbi smiled and, when he heard that Chiara was not Jewish, politely declined. “We don’t believe in assimilation,” the rabbi said, and then he heaped on one final insult, “You mean to tell me, Jason, that you couldn’t find a nice Jewish girl.”

Jason’s synagogue is part of the Reform Jewish movement, which means that although interfaith marriage is not banned outright, individual rabbis can make the decision to officiate or not. Jason’s rabbi subscribed to the “or not” crowd. His Board of Directors did not approve of interfaith marriages and to keep his job the rabbi had no choice but to go along.

What he did have a choice about was his attitude toward Jason. He could have chosen to congratulate him for finding a wonderful woman to marry. He could have chosen not to use the tired old “code word” - assimilation – which really means that marrying a non-Jew is marrying someone who is just not good enough or that a home with a non-Jewish parent is the death knell for creating a Jewish family, both of which are patently not true.

It was from this “tsuris” that Jason and I found each other. Out of his dismay at being rejected by his birth religion – a religion where he and his family had been dedicated participants for decades, Jason asked me to officiate at his interfaith marriage. I was delighted and Jason and Chiara were married under the chuppah in the garden of a beautiful villa in the Tuscan hills near Florence, Italy.

You might think that this is the end of the story. It’s not. Shortly after Jason and Chiara returned home to the USA, Jason’s rabbi phoned him. Yes, it was the same rabbi who rejected their wedding request. This time the rabbi was friendly and enthusiastic. Jason described their conversation this way.

“The rabbi congratulated me,” Jason said and asked all about the ceremony. He seemed really interested and that made me curious. Why all of a sudden was he so friendly? I found out in a minute. Rabbi told me that the synagogue Board had made a decision – one that I would be real happy about. Then he went on to explain that now interfaith families could be full family members, too.”

Jason was stunned. He listened for a while as the rabbi described the levels and types of memberships that the synagogue offered and what the costs would be. “That’s when I stopped him,” Jason said. “You mean to tell me that when I needed you, when I wanted you to marry me in my home synagogue with all my family around me, you refused. But now you call to invite me to bring my interfaith family, my Catholic wife, whom you disdained, into the synagogue as a member?”

Jason went on. “So let me get this straight. You won’t officiate at my wedding, but you’ll take my money. No thank you.”

Where is Jason now? He and Chiara have two children with whom they regularly celebrate Shabbat and make the Jewish festivals around the family table. They live in Jason's home town but are not interested in connecting formally with a synagogue. "It was such a bad experience," Jason says.

Jason's story is the story of a phenomenon I call "Synagogue Suicide," something the Pew report (October, 2013) did not take into consideration when they concluded that Jews who self-describe as "cultural" or "secular," don't really want to be a part of established Judaism. Had the researchers dug a little deeper, they might have found that many couples like Jason and Chiara would be actively Jewish today if their synagogues and their rabbis hadn't pushed them away.

Recently I was invited to speak at a local Unitarian Universalist church, something I do almost every year. I find the Unitarians to be friendly, warm, and open-minded. I've made friends in the congregation so it wasn't unusual that after the service two women approached me.

They told me about their late husbands and how much they loved their Jewish traditions. One woman said, "When my husband married me he was never again accepted in his synagogue. People whispered at how he had "married out." And when it came time for our son to become a Bar Mitzvah, the rabbi told us that I couldn't participate in the ceremony. I was not permitted to stand at the Torah, because I wasn't Jewish."

She went on. "No matter that I was the one who schlepped him to Sunday school and Hebrew lessons. Well, this really bothered my husband and he left the synagogue. That's when my friend introduced us to the Unitarian Church. There's no talk about Jesus, so that fit my husband pretty well. He wore his Star of David to Church and people were accepting. He missed the synagogue and always felt bad about not going, but we just couldn't get over the hurt."

The second woman chimed in. "My husband loved the synagogue," she said. "We're both Jewish and really wanted to find a synagogue home. But my husband never studied. His parents were secular so he never went to Sunday school, and he never had a Bar Mitzvah. One time we were sitting at services and he held the book upside down. The lady behind us whispered to her friends and they all started laughing. Later on we tried out the Unitarian Church. We never went back to the synagogue again."

Over the years I have learned how important it is that I accept every invitation extended to me by a Unitarian or Unity Church. The Pew Study confirmed that two-thirds of Jews do not belong to a synagogue and that Unitarian and Unity churches hold a particular attraction for disaffected Jews. They find a home there, far away from the synagogue snobs who embarrassed and humiliated them. When a church is more accepting than a Jewish man's own synagogue was, it's time to look beneath the statistics and examine what's really going on. Could it be synagogue suicide?

In my 15 years as a pulpit rabbi I have gathered hundreds of examples of the self-defeating behavior that has led to a Jewish exodus from synagogue life. And I am not alone. Many of my colleagues, the majority of whom are pluralistic, serve in synagogues that are open and welcoming to Jews of all backgrounds and run small congregations that actively encourage Jews who describe themselves as “cultural” or “secular,” to give institutional Judaism another try. If recent statistics paint a dreary picture, there are reasons why Jewish life in America is so bleak. But it’s much too easy to blame assimilation or secularization and leave it at that. If Jews aren’t Jewish anymore, it’s time to find out why.