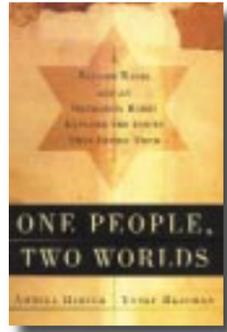


One People, Two Worlds

By Ammiel Hirsch and Yosef Reinman



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311 pages

Reviewed by Yitzchok Adlerstein

One People, Two Worlds could have been the most exciting development in Jewish outreach since the invention of the smile. The storm clouds of controversy that quickly surrounded it, however, have largely eclipsed the book's promise for *kiddush Hashem*.

Rabbi Yaakov Yosef Reinman is a *talmid chacham* of note who has made a life of learning and writing in Lakewood, New Jersey. He has many writing credits to his name; his greatest accomplishment, *Shufra Deshtara*, has become the standard work on the intricacies of Jewish documents for genuine Torah scholars.

A few years ago, a non-observant acquaintance in the publishing industry pitched an idea to him: he would love to see two Jews at opposite ends

Rabbi Adlerstein serves on the editorial board of Jewish Action and directs Project Next Step, an educational outreach effort aimed at young Jews outside the Orthodox community.

of the religious spectrum trade their worldviews. They would correspond by e-mail, which would be collected and published by an established publishing house. Rabbi Reinman was asked to represent the Orthodox point of view. Rabbi Ammiel Hirsch, executive director of the Association of Reform Zionists of America, was chosen to speak for Reform.

Rabbi Reinman was sensitive to a half-century long policy in much of the Orthodox community of shunning official rabbinic contact that seems to confer legitimacy on non-Orthodox clergy. He won assurances from the publisher that he would be presented as a private individual who happens to be a rabbi, rather than as a spokesperson for any rabbinic group. Rabbi Reinman (p. 230) makes explicit reference to the policy and clearly endorses it himself. (Even his book-industry friend told him that he understood why the Orthodox refuse to officially debate others. Moral clarity, he called it.) Rabbi Reinman consulted with major Torah figures in Israel and America, who gave their approval to the project. He and his mentors—and this reviewer—believed that it would be obvious to most thinking people that this endeavor was not the beginning of a slippery slope towards greater recognition. The nature of the contact between them was both non-official and so obviously adversarial (while entirely respectful), that no one would think that the purpose of the venture was to lend credence to heretical views. To the contrary, the book would hold up the inconsistencies and failures of Reform Judaism in sharp relief for at least some open-minded people to see.

Much of the opposition was narrow and ill-informed. An anonymous screed attacking *One People* and circulating on the East Coast says it all. “Reform is not the current issue or threat to the *frum velt* (world),” reads one of the complaints, urging instead that we just ignore the lot of them. Rabbi Reinman and the Torah luminaries who once backed him, however, do see Reform Judaism as a major issue. Reform’s very existence challenges our responsibility to the Jewish people as a whole. What have we done to win back Jewish souls who are slipping through the safety net of Jewish identity into irreversible assimilation? Do we meet that challenge through the hundreds of dedicated men and women devoting themselves to Jewish outreach? Should we not consider them our agents of commitment and concern to the greater part of the Jewish community?

Hardly. Without minimizing their spectacular accomplishments, the word outreach is, for the most part, a misnomer. More accurately, it should be called keep-an-open-door-and-beg-them-to-walk-in.” Virtually no outreach organization reaches out at all. It announces, “We have programs that might stimulate you if you already have interest. Explore a bit. We pledge to make your stay as comfortable as possible.” How many Jews will we reach this way? Can it ever amount, at best, to a small fraction of those who continue to walk out of Jewish history?

Very few people think out of the box, designing programs to appeal to those who do not yet have any interest in returning to Judaism or exploring their legacy. The exceptions are few. The National Jewish Outreach

Program pioneered events like Shabbat Across America, which reach a large cohort of the Jewish world. Aish HaTorah has always employed serious marketing and advertising tools to understand the needs of different sub-groups in the community, and tailormakes messages to reach them. Chabad, of course, has done wonders with the message of unadulterated love. The OU’s National Conference of Synagogue Youth has numerous programs and *Shabbatonim* to attract unaffiliated youth.

For decades, we have been locked out of the minds and hearts of most of our brothers and sisters. The majority of American Jews are neither Reform, nor Conservative, nor Orthodox. They simply do not affiliate. Most of them will never meet an Orthodox Jew. They claim no interest in deepening their understanding of Judaism or exploring their spiritual legacy. They are unlikely to ever meet up with traditional outreach workers, let alone walk into one of their classes or events.

Those who affiliate with other denominations do not substantially increase their chances of meeting up with authentic Jewish expression. Orthodox programs and teachers are hardly ever allowed into non-Orthodox venues. Understandably, most non-Orthodox clergy are only willing to invite Orthodox representatives if they will be invited in return to Orthodox turf. The overwhelming majority of Orthodox rabbis balk at such reciprocity, seeing it as giving respectability to views entirely off the map of authentic Judaism. Panels and symposia, where different denominations present their views, are also shunned. Most Orthodox rabbis have followed the advice of the *roshei yeshivah* who, a half-century ago, forbade rabbis from lending tacit legitimacy to non-Orthodox clergy by sharing panels of a religious nature.

There are excellent reasons for this policy, but we pay a definite price for it. The vast majority of Jews never get a chance to meet us or our beliefs. Many of our rabbis believe that even a

non-reciprocal visit to a non-Orthodox location is too compromising. Thus, even when doors to other Jewish groups open up to us, we are forced to slam them shut. (Many, but apparently not all. According to a letter penned by Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky, *zt”l*, himself, and read two years in succession at the annual convention of the Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals, *kiruv* workers should look for opportunities to teach authentic Torah at Reform and Conservative synagogues, albeit not within one of their religious services.)

One People will pry open some of these doors. The book is novel and, by now, notorious. There is hardly a better recipe for insuring that thousands of curious Jews will pick it up and take it home. Rabbi Reinman will be the first Orthodox Jew to

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speak to these unknowledgeable Jews, at once shattering many of the negative impressions they have been treated to—many carefully and methodically fed to them by their own clergy—and at the same time logically defending Torah positions they had been led to believe were indefensible.

Within days of its publication, however, *One People* was hailed in *Ha’aretz* as a breakthrough event. The Orthodox, they claimed, were beginning to thaw the Big Freeze towards the heterodox. Rabbi Reinman, of course, repeated what he had said in the book. There was no thaw nor even anything especially innovative about what he was doing. The ban was on official recognition of ideology, not against acknowledging the brotherhood of all Jews, even those with whom we disagree. The other movements could claim what they

wanted to about the book, but Rabbi Reinman was prepared to repeat, in press and in person, “Read my lips. You can claim what you will, but there is no change in policy.” (A scheduled book tour, which would have put audiences in fourteen cities in face-to-face contact with Rabbi Reinman was halted but not before one memorable appearance at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan. Rabbi Reinman handled himself with humor and aplomb but was challenged by a very clever question from the moderator. What would you tell a student who advised you that he had one hour in which he could either study Talmud with the Reform Rabbi Hirsch, or watch *The Sopranos*? Without flinching, Rabbi Reinman responded, to the audible gasps of the audience, “Go for *The Sopranos*.” Can you get more morally clear than that?)

Ironically, Rabbi Reinman was in a unique position to shore up the non-recognition policy by taking the sting out of the barbs that have been directed against it. Non-Orthodox clergy have repeatedly cited it to make two devastating points about us, both patently untrue. The first is that we don’t speak with them because we don’t believe they are really Jewish. (Who can forget Billy Crystal’s remark, heard by one billion people at the televising of the Oscars, that he had read the headline in *The Los Angeles Times* that some Orthodox group had formally decided that non-Orthodox Jews were not really Jewish. “Last week I thought I was Jewish. Yesterday I read the *Times*, and learned that I would have to buy retail!” No matter that the rabbinical group had a membership of approximately two people, and had not even made such a statement. The canard stuck because non-Orthodox rabbis had been claiming for decades that the Orthodox believe that.) Rabbi Reinman dramatically belied the claim by very obviously speaking to, and establishing a friendship with, a Jew very far removed from Orthodoxy.

The second charge leveled against us was that we refuse debate because we are fundamentally insecure. Neither our content nor our thinking could stand up to the scrutiny of enlightened critics; our only recourse was to ban the prodding and poking from outsiders. Again, Rabbi Reinman's effort stood this argument on its head. He showed Orthodoxy unafraid to debate, self-assured in its beliefs and fully conversant with the arguments of the competition. Indeed, while some readers will reject many of Rabbi Reinman's arguments, they will not be able to dislodge the image of a supremely confident and articulate Orthodox personage whose knowledge runs rings around his Reform counterpart.

Other objections to the book surfaced. The above-mentioned attack faulted the book's circular organization, which often left the reader waiting for many pages before discovering the rejoinder to a point made by the other side. Would it not have been better to write a book in Q. and A. form so the answers could have been compared, side-by-side? Perhaps, but who would publish it? Controversy mixed with a good fight would be attractive to a publisher. Without such an imprimatur the Jewish Trojan horse would never inch forward.

Some critics faulted Rabbi Reinman for an argument here or there that they thought was not sufficiently watertight or for letting Rabbi Hirsch off too easily when his arguments were weak. If, they said, Rabbi Reinman did not succeed in completely devastating the opposition, it would have been better not to write at all. These people missed the point of the book entirely.

Years ago, talk-show host and author Dennis Prager lured a reluctant young man to his radio show to represent Orthodoxy. Not so long out of yeshivah, my first reaction was to run without looking back. Sensing my discomfort, Prager gave me the confidence to seize such an opportunity with alacrity. "Adlerstein, you don't understand. The general perception of Orthodox is so

negative, you can hardly lose. If you do nothing more than recite the Manhattan White Pages with a bit of humor and a friendly lilt in your voice, you will be erasing negative stereotypes and making friends."

To do a good job, Rabbi Reinman did not have to slam-dunk every question put to him. All he had to do was demonstrate depth, confidence and humanity, and he would burst bubbles of negativity that envelop our image. The book was never intended to be a modern rerun of the medieval church debates in which both sides attempted to bring irrefutable proof to establish the True Religion. It did not have to be perfect. Would some of Rabbi Hirsch's arguments resonate more with some readers? Perhaps, although very

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unlikely, except to those already in his camp. Would this make any difference? Not really. Those who were lost to the other denominations made their move decades ago; there are no more groups of Jews sitting on the fence, waiting to choose between traditional and non-traditional models of Judaism. The project was a classic win-win proposition.

As it turned out, Rabbi Reinman did a wonderful job. For a complete newcomer to the world of *kiruv*, he quickly mastered the approach and contributed sharp wit, wonderful citations from secular sources and the incisive thinking of a *talmid chacham*. The book will be a successful *kiruv* tool for years to come.

Some of the critics sound as if they truly believe that matters of our faith can be reduced to demonstrable syllogisms, and that Rabbi Reinman should be faulted for failing to deliver perfectly persuasive arguments. How mistaken! How quickly they will learn if they

will ply their intellectual wares on real people—and find themselves quickly rebuffed. The complexity of Hakadosh Baruch Hu's Torah cannot be reduced to symbolic logic guaranteed to make true believers out of all but the intellectually obtuse.

We should keep in mind the words of Nachmanides in the introduction to his *Milchemet Hashem*, where he warns that anyone who is at home with Talmud knows that in its study there are no clear proofs of the kind that exist in mathematics. (Rabbi Hirsch did particularly well in the arena of women's issues, where in general we are not very convincing.) We should be prepared to admit that we sometimes use arguments that will always seem weak to the outsider. We believe in the truth of our Torah not because we predict that if we put our best in a ring with their best, our man would score a knockout at every opportunity. The nature of our *emunah* is in knowing the score in advance, not in scoring individual rounds. (Nachmanides asks why the Torah did not record the story of the young Abraham agreeing to be thrown into Nimrod's furnace as a test of our forefather's belief. The Torah was loath to discuss this incident because it would then have had to deal with the arguments of the non-believers. The Chasid Ya'avetz in his commentary to *Avot* answers differently. The Torah was reluctant to record Abraham's arguments. A position of pure faith is superior to the jumping through intellectual hoops we need to do when trying to convince skeptics.)

We believe—as Rabbi Reinman himself stressed in his book—because we feel ourselves part of an unbroken *mesorah* (tradition) leading back to Sinai. We should expect, at times, to be able to show the attractiveness and superiority of our beliefs. Other times, we should be able to at least demonstrate that we are not morons. But can we communicate belief itself to those who have broken with *mesorah*? Writing for the non-believer, Rabbi Reinman does a superb job.

To those who either missed or

rejected these points, the book, and the joint tour that was scheduled to follow, loomed as a dangerous threat to the status quo of dealing with non-traditional elements of Judaism. In time, the Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, the Council of Torah Sages, issued a strong statement against the book, drawing on different arguments than the ones considered above. Rabbi Reinman did exactly what a good Jew ought to do: he quickly abandoned his tour. He did not concede that the book had been conceived in error—given his original backing, he could not do that in good faith—but he did agree that the minority had to accede to the majority. As expected, non-Orthodox writers around the country, especially in cities where Rabbi Reinman and Rabbi Hirsch had been scheduled to appear—used the incident to once again “prove” that the Orthodox rejected all other Jews, and were too primitive to subject their quaint beliefs to the scrutiny of the thinking public.

One of the signatories to the Moetzes document was kind enough to enlarge upon his objections in a personal conversation. For one, the members of the Moetzes felt that the vehicle was inherently flawed. There is no way to combine, under a single cover, Torah-true arguments with those who falsify it, without according some parity or respectability to the lat-

ter. Additionally, while loving other Jews, including the non-observant, is a non-negotiable reality to us (see *Tanya*, chapter 32), we must be careful to balance that love with necessary distance. Would we be so quick to embrace someone who insulted our parents? Should our Heavenly Father be treated any differently?

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Finally, it alluded to another problem, one with practical concern for many of us. The work is invaluable for the non-Orthodox, who can only gain from reading it. Do all the rest of us need to study it though? Does every Jewish family need to learn the details of every heretical doubt? Maimonides records as

a matter of law (*Avodat Kochavim* 2:3) that it is forbidden to study any material that leads one to question important principles of our faith. To be sure, license is granted to those who have enough background and must study heresy in order to answer the questions of the heretics. Many of us who lead lives that fully engage the secular world find ourselves confronted by relatives, friends and co-workers about our beliefs. We need to know how others have been taught and how we can move them closer to the truth. But surely this is not true of all of us, and the halachic objections remain in full force. To be sure, none of us need to communicate the doubts and skepticism of others to our children, especially during their formative years. The reaction to *One People* will hopefully prod many of our own to seek proper halachic counsel about what material we should banish from our homes.

Meanwhile, the book continues to sell. The controversy surrounding it insures that many people outside our community—i.e., those for whom the book was written—who would not have read the book will do so now, and the clear thinking of Rabbi Reinman will still have a chance to fill a void in the hearts and souls of many Jews.

One People, Two Worlds was a great idea whose time was long overdue. Unfortunately, it appears that its time has not yet come. **JA**