

A Different Kiruv Paradigm

Eliyahu Fink - Fall 2012 - <http://finkorswim.com>

Last week, the Fall 2012 issue of Klal Perspectives was released. I noted the excellent article written by Rabbi Ilan Feldman and recommended that everyone read it. (See: [One Excellent Article From Klal Perspectives Fall 2012 on Kiruv](#))

I mentioned at the time that I would attempt to address the issues raised in the journal.

Klal Perspective writers were asked to address three general questions. Some additional background is provided on the Klal Perspectives site. See here: [Klal Perspectives](#). These are the three questions:

1. What are the most significant dimensions of current outreach efforts, and how effective are they?
2. In light of the various alternative objectives that may be pursued in conducting outreach, by what criteria is success measured? Are the prevailing measurements of success the appropriate measurements? Can results be reliably calculated? And how is the donor or volunteer able to ascertain which target demographic and which approach to kiruv enjoys the greatest realization and success?
3. Has kiruv in America runs its course due to the combination of (a) decades of assimilation that has diminished the number of accessible, non-observant Jews who are halachically Jewish, and (b) the rapidly diminishing sense of Jewish identity among younger, secular Jews? Or, do these factors mitigate in favor a more powerful outreach push, since in a decade or two it may be too late? And finally, what are the new frontiers in outreach that may yet be explored?

My response:

Klal Perspectives did not define their terms when they asked for responses to their three questions. The questions are also very vague. As a result it is not easy to simply answer the three questions without making several assumptions. This article will not make any assumptions about definitions nor will it fill in the gaps of the vague questions.

I. Dimensions of Successful Kiruv

I don't know what "the most significant dimensions of current outreach efforts" means so I can't really answer that part of the question. I can't answer how effective they are because I don't know what is being discussed. I think the question might be asking in a roundabout way, what kind of kiruv is most effective. If that is what is being asked, the question is backwards.

In my experience, I have seen that kiruv is not a success or a failure depending on the group or sub-group that a particular kiruv professional is working with. Success is almost always dependent on the individual kiruv professional's drive, talent, and commitment. In other words, focusing on the demographic is a huge error. A great kiruv professional will have success no matter the age, no matter the ethnicity, no matter the circumstances.

This is because kiruv is not about systems, or programs, or even content. Kiruv is about relationships and good sales.

The successful kiruv professional is an outstanding salesperson. An outstanding salesperson can sell to anyone. Put an excellent kiruv professional in any setting and the kiruv professional will be very successful. Therefore, trying to figure out which of our current kiruv efforts is most effective looks at the wrong side of the equation. It's less about the pool of prospective kiruv candidates and much more about the person doing the kiruv.

It's also about the product being sold. Some kiruv professionals sell the version of orthodox Judaism that is the simplest sell. It is often riddled with half-truths and late night television infomercial promises. This might work for a short time, or even a long time, but ultimately it is a dangerous game. We don't want to ensnare people into orthodox Judaism, we want people to be attracted to orthodox Judaism. The good salesperson with the hard sell might be very successful on the surface, but that kind of kiruv is just creating problems that will manifest later on. The best salesperson is honest, straightforward, and passionate. We have a great product. There is no need to puff it up like a used car salesperson. Again, success is less about the group being targeting and more about the sale.

Successful, long term kiruv requires relationships and a good, honest sell.

II. Measuring Success

This is the area of kiruv where I think I am the furthest from the mainstream. Millions of dollars are being poured into kiruv and there is an expectation of quantifiable results and success. This is generally measured as facilitating a move from non-*shmiras mitzvos* to *shmiras mitzvos*. At the very least it has been defined as “preventing an intermarriage.”

Most people who become *shomer mitzvos* do so as a result of many influences in their lives. The initial kiruv professional who introduced them to a nice frum family, the frum family that introduced them to the charismatic pulpit rabbi, the pulpit rabbi who sent them off the *yeshiva*, the rebbeim at the *yeshiva* who worked with them as beginners, the teachers of the more advanced tracks in the *yeshiva*, the family in *Eretz Yisrael* who took them into their home, the rabbi who counseled them after they started *shmiras mitzvos*, and the anonymous person who made a kiddush Hashem through their excellent character and was merely observed, are all people who can take “credit” for helping this person. Donors are likely seeing several parties “claim” each kiruv success story which makes definitive numbers even more elusive.

Further complicating matters, many organizations and communities have segmented their kiruv efforts as a result of applying business principles to kiruv. One group makes initial contact and inspires the potential kiruv candidate. Another group handles the potential kiruv candidate through the first stages of real kiruv. The next group pushes the potential kiruv candidate to study in yeshiva.

The problem is that when one is pushed through a system no one person in that system feels solely responsible for that person. Initially, this is not an issue as the system takes care of its people. But when the kiruv is done and the person returns from yeshiva, the people who placed the person along this exciting path of discovery and change are working on their next potential kiruv candidates. Compounding matters, the group that attracts new people to orthodox Judaism, and the group that cultivates that interest, and the group who push the potential kiruv candidate to yeshiva may be very, very good at what they do, but they may have no idea how to counsel and guide a baal teshuva. Too often, those who have become frum get terrible advice from the people who helped them find their Judaism in the first place. Then it is the community rabbis and others who are left to pick up the pieces. Sometimes the pieces can't be put back together and we are left with a broken home, confused children, and resentment toward orthodox Judaism. Helping baalei teshuva is not necessarily the forte of kiruv workers, and even if it were something they could do, or wanted to do, they are busy finding the next group of potential kiruv candidates. Helping people who are already frum does not help their numbers anymore. The sale has been made. It's time to move on.

It's wrong to think that once someone is frum they won't need a lot of guidance. Everything is new to them. What is second nature to those who are frum from birth has to be learned by those who are not. Family relationships must be managed and complicated questions of loyalty are often raised. Helping people who are already frum does not have the glamour of kiruv, but it is vital to the success of our kiruv efforts.

Using metrics to measure success and as a basis for funding has many advantages. It incentivizes efficiency, it gives kiruv professionals real goals,

and it gives the donors reason to believe that their monies are being used wisely. There is a darker side to the metrics as well. Kiruv professionals run the risk of viewing kiruv candidates as numbers instead of looking at them as human beings. It also can harm efforts to help baalei teshuva once they return from yeshiva. But most importantly I think it has established a standard in kiruv that is simply wrong.

I disagree with the popular definition of kiruv. I don't think that the goal of kiruv to facilitate one's movement from non-*shmiras mitzvos* to *shmiras mitzvos*. I think that in order to foster a real relationship with another person, the foundation of the relationship must be truth. When I worked as a kiruv professional on college campuses students were often suspicious that the only reason I was being nice to them was because I wanted something from them. They reasoned to themselves that I was friendly because I hoped they would adopt my lifestyle. They assumed that the free things I was throwing at them had ulterior motives. Perhaps they thought I received a cash bonus for every Shabbos they kept. My employers, or maybe it was just their donors, wanted people to become frum and that's why I was talking to them. They might have been right. But I did not want them to be right. So I worked very hard to make sure that I was genuinely concerned with their wellbeing. My exclusive interest and explicitly stated goal was to foster friendships. I was not selling anything. I was just making friends. I wanted these friends to become part of my life, my family, my community, and come to Israel with me when I took my college student friends on a trip to the Holy Land.

It was very important to me that I be able to look every single student in the eye and say "I just want to provide you with an opportunity for a relationship with an orthodox rabbi." That's all. That was my goal. It had to be my goal if I was going to be honest with everyone that I met. And I really wanted to be completely honest.

My employers and supporters wanted to see students becoming *shomrei Torah u'mitzvos* and so did I, most of the time. But that was not my goal. It was one of many possible outcomes that would result from a relationship. The relationship was my goal.

That experience has profoundly impacted the way I view kiruv. I think that the stated goal of kiruv should not be *shmiras mitzvos*. In my mind, the goal of kiruv is to **“provide positive Jewish experiences to the maximum number of people possible.”** This way I can be honest. This way I can be proud of providing those experiences. This way I can make my goals based on what I am doing and not the choices of others. I can provide the experience, I can make the experience positive. I cannot control what others will do as a result of those experiences. If one is inspired by the experience and wants to learn more, I am willing, ready, and able to help them along that path.

In my shul, we try to create positive Jewish experiences for the maximum number of people possible. This is our goal. I can say with certainty that we are very successful at achieving this goal. Every year, hundreds of people have positive Jewish experiences in my shul. Some of them are frum people, some of them are not yet frum, some of them will never be frum, but they all have positive Jewish experiences. (Parenthetically, I think this should be the goal of orthodox Jewish education for our own children and communities). Accomplishing this goal requires a community of people who are committed to this goal and an environment that accepts everyone without judgment. We do not allow non-orthodox Jews to step into a shul and feel like fresh kiruv candidate meat. They are not. We make sure that whoever steps into our shul feels the brotherhood of Judaism and that they too can find something special in their Judaism through our shul.

If the positive Jewish experience inspires someone to be a better person, albeit not a frum Jew, that is also a good thing. If the positive Jewish experience challenges a non-affiliated Jew to go to a Reform Temple or a Conservative Synagogue more often, that is also a success. If we make a kiddush Hashem because more people have favorable things to say about frum Jews and commitment to Torah, that is also a success.

We can't tell potential kiruv candidates that they are only a “real” baal teshuva if they go to a certain type of yeshiva and end up wearing a black hat on Shabbos. I have heard too many examples of people involved with kiruv organizations hearing from their kiruv rabbis that modern orthodoxy

is not an option. They hear that modern orthodoxy is just as bad, or as pointless as being Conservative or Reform. This is wrong on several levels. Modern orthodoxy need not be viewed as a compromise or lesser form of orthodox Judaism. It is not. Further, we can't allow ourselves to perpetuate the myth that non-orthodox Jews are devoid of spirituality and commitment. This is simply untrue. There are orthodox Jews who are devoid of spirituality and commitment and there are non-orthodox Jews who are spiritually fulfilled and very committed to their brand of Judaism. Kiruv cannot be an all or nothing proposition. Kiruv is about creating relationships with people and it is about giving people positive Jewish experiences. Right wing orthodox Judaism is not for everyone and we must provide opportunities for people to grow Jewishly in many ways, not only by blossoming into one specific type of orthodox Jew.

Using a very narrow definition of kiruv and focusing on the numbers to determine success can potentially undermine these efforts. Most importantly, by changing our focus to a more holistic approach to kiruv, as a community we will be more conscious of the needs of those who are moving through the kiruv system as kiruv professionals will not be bogged down by pursuing numbers and kiruv won't end after the sale has been made.

III. The Future

Kiruv has not run its course. It is just as important today as it was yesterday. It helps the frum community hone its message, but more importantly, it allows frum Jews and not frum Jews to interact. Interdenominational interaction is still taboo in the frum community. One of the few trapdoors we have into that world is our kiruv efforts. We need more of that, not less. Non-orthodox Jews are our family. There has been too much separation between us. We can no longer afford to cut off our nose to spite our face. Hopefully that will change for the better soon. But if the only way to maintain dialogue with our non-orthodox brothers and sisters is via kiruv, *dayenu*.

I think the future of kiruv is along the lines of the model I have suggested here. The future is providing orthodox Jewish experiences for the masses. These experiences will be without pretense and with no expectation of commitment. But the more people who are exposed to orthodox Judaism, the greater number of people who will find it attractive. There will always be people who want to live the beautiful life of committed, passionate orthodox Judaism. We want those who might find our lifestyle attractive to have the opportunity to discover as much as possible about orthodox Judaism. We want those who want to grow Jewishly through means other than orthodox Judaism to be inspired to do that. In the future, all passionate Jews will participate in this kind of kiruv; the denominational lines will be blurred as we are all partners in the future of the Jewish people.

I see the future of kiruv as a time where we are all working towards expanding our circles of Jewish relationships. It will be a time where positive Jewish experiences are the goal and we can measure success by the experience and not yeshiva enrollments.

There is reason to be hopeful that this model can become the standard. It will take restraint from the donors and careful hiring of the right kind of kiruv professionals. It can be done, it must be done, it will be done, and we will all be better for it.