

Forward.com

Who Isn't a Jew?

Editorial

Published January 26, 2011, issue of [February 04, 2011](#).

Last July, when Chelsea Clinton married Marc Mezvinsky in a wedding that juxtaposed Jewish objects, rituals and traditions with non-Jewish ones, the ensuing conversation was laced with all the ambivalence American Jews feel about intermarriage. But when an assassination attempt nearly took the life of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in early January, ambivalence took a back seat to tribal empathy and now, as she recovers, a certain pride. Those reluctant to acknowledge Giffords's identity as a Jew have largely kept quiet.

This warm embrace is notable because, according to traditional Jewish law, Giffords is no more Jewish than Chelsea Clinton. Both were born of non-Jewish mothers and have never formally converted. (Only through patrilineal descent is Giffords, whose father was Jewish, considered a Jew.) Plus, the congresswoman married a non-Jew, which not too long ago was enough to court excommunication, and still is in a small segment of the community.

The horrific details of the Giffords shooting, of course, make her a sympathetic figure in any context. Even more compelling is the nature of her Jewish identity, one she claimed as an adult, ignited by a transformative trip to Israel and nurtured by a welcoming rabbi and congregation in Tucson. That she chose to live Jewishly, for no apparent political gain, is simply inspirational.

Still, as Rabbi Jason Miller [noted recently](#), synagogues around the country are offering prayers for healing in her name, "yet they would be violating their own religious policy if they ever called her to the Torah for an aliyah honor."

This disconnect between religious standards and actual behavior is deepening across a wide swath of American Jewry. Like the Clinton-Mezvinsky wedding, reaction to the Tucson shooting marks another milestone, and Gabrielle Giffords is rapidly becoming another New Normal in the elastic definition of who is a Jew. Many are not waiting for a rabbinic edict or Knesset legislation to settle the question. An answer is appearing in real time.

There is reason for both cheer and dismay at this development. Our deeply ingrained American impulse leads us to tolerance and inclusion, coupled with a dose of pragmatism. Why wouldn't we want to claim someone like Giffords as our own? Why isn't self-identification enough? Besides, when fears are that the Jewish population is shrinking, why would we turn away anyone who wants to join –this club?

But that laudable impulse must take into account the uncomfortable reality that, so far at least, rising rates of intermarriage and ambiguous identities are leading to *fewer* Jewish families and *weaker* communal ties. For every Gabrielle Giffords, there are many who skip her personal journey, who shrug off their obligation to care for other Jews, who don't believe that Israel is an important part of their identity.

It's also becoming clear that this trend is leading to an even greater division between the Orthodox and, frankly, everyone else. While that may be healthy in a "post-denominational" world, it ought to concern anyone seeking to maintain a Judaism that is steeped in tradition while embracing the egalitarianism and openness of modern life.

For years, traditionalists have warned that opening the tent too wide will cause it to collapse. As we add our prayers for healing for Gabrielle Giffords, the challenge now is also to prove those warnings wrong.