

In My Opinion

The Intermarriage Crisis: It's Time for Realism

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We are now entering the 1990s, a decade when the steadily rising Jewish intermarriage rate, which is now over 40%, will reach 50%. The Jewish community's lay and rabbinic leaders need to address this critical problem with realism. I would like to share with you what I believe true realism requires. I write from the perspective of a layperson who over the past 11 years has been more involved with the issues of Jewish outreach to the intermarried than perhaps any other lay leader in our country.

In 1978, when I was asked to help bring together and head the Reform Movement's Outreach Task Force and Commission, my initial primary concern was the demographic imperative of outreach as it related to Jewish survival. The relatively low Jewish birth rate of approximately 1.7 children per family, coupled with an intermarriage rate of over 40% nationally and over 60% in some communities, such as Denver, led to a very obvious conclusion. Unless large numbers of intermarried couples identified as Jews, within 75 years there would be only 1 or 2 million Jews in North America. We might argue about exactly how long it

would take before the American Jewish population would decline to less than one million, but the inexorable trend was clear.

What would it be like for the remaining remnant of Jews to be such a small minority? What effect would the lack of a significant Jewish minority have on the United States? And what would the impact of these circumstances be on the world Jewish community in general and on Israel in particular?

Today I view outreach not primarily in demographic terms but rather in its humanistic dimensions and its philosophical roots in Jewish tradition.

Whether we like it or not, increasing numbers of Jewish children in our open society are going to be choosing marital partners regardless of religion. To be sure, we Jews are naturally concerned about Jewish survival. Yet, we must be also concerned about helping people. Therefore, if we believe that Judaism has much to contribute to individuals and can offer all of us an infinite amount of wisdom and support for our daily lives, the Jewish community has a humanistic ethical obligation to help bring the intellectual and emotional richness of Judaism to intermarried families and their children.

Outreach has biblical roots, particularly in the prophetic tradition. The prophet Isaiah fervently believed in Israel's mission as a universal faith and spoke of Israel as "a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Isaiah looked to the day when the House of God would be called "a house of prayer for all peoples."

Ancient Judaism taught: "When someone comes to you, draw him near. Do not

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push him away." Moses himself married a non-Jew. Ruth, a Moabite woman, chose Judaism with the words repeated by converts today: "Your people shall be my people, your God, my God." Her legacy was the dynasty of King David.

During the talmudic period, Jewish missionary efforts were so successful that in the first century the world Jewish population increased to between 2 and 5 million. However, in the fourth century the Edict of Constantine established Christianity as the official state religion and made conversion to Judaism a capital offense. This resulted in a dramatic change in Jewish practice, and Jewish conversion efforts substantially ceased.

Today, we are living not in the times of Constantine, not in the times of the ghetto, not in the 1940s and 1950s when many doors were barred to Jews and the intermarriage rate was less than 10%. Rather, we live in an open society with an intermarriage rate approaching 50% that could rise as high as 60% or 70% within the next 15 or 20 years.

Unfortunately, most American lay and rabbinic leaders have failed to address this problem in realistic terms from the perspective of the demographics of Jewish survival, of humanistic values in helping people, and the biblical roots of Jewish outreach. Instead, they look at the intermarriage crisis with blinders that limit the community response to the traditional approach that "we must do everything we can to prevent intermarriage."

That traditional response ignores the reality of today's world, a free society where the walls of discrimination against Jews have come tumbling down. To be sure, no Jewish leader wants to encourage intermarriage. Yet, the irrefutable fact is that in a free society intermarriage is going to occur, no matter what we might otherwise prefer for our children. Therefore, we must go from the negative to the positive. A new perspective must be adopted. It must assert that, although we do not want to encourage intermarriage,

we recognize that in our open society it is going to take place and we American Jews must therefore do everything we can to help ensure that the intermarried couple will identify under the Jewish umbrella and provide a Jewish education for their children.

If such a realistic approach were adopted, it would have a dramatic impact on Jewish survival. Indeed, it could result in an increase in the number of Jews so that the American Jewish community could at least maintain its present percentage of our national population of approximately 2 1/2%. (Fifty years ago, 4% of the American population was Jewish.)

If this goal is to be met, it will require a complete change in approach and a return to the biblical tradition of outreach to intermarried families. Concurrently, there will also have to be a reordering of funding priorities.

At the present time, the national budgets of outreach programs to the intermarried of the Conservative and Orthodox Movements are virtually nil; the budget for outreach efforts of the Reform Movement is only \$500,000. From a humanistic perspective, to place such a low funding priority on outreach is shameful. From a demographic perspective, it defies common sense. Our Jewish community has raised more than \$100 million to memorialize and honor the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust. I would respectfully suggest that if we want to complete our goal of memorializing and honoring those Jews who perished in the Holocaust, the best way to do this would be to raise \$6 million each year for programs of outreach to intermarried families so that Judaism will continue to flourish and survive. Funds are needed for audio-visual material, literature, training of facilitators to lead outreach program for intermarried couples, research, media communication programs directed toward interdating and intermarried couples and children of intermarrieds living in metropolitan areas, and programs on college campuses. What better way would

there be to memorialize the six million than to seek to bring intermarried couples and their children into the Jewish community so that Jewish survival can be assured?

In approximately 25% of intermarriages, the couple identifies as a part of the Jewish community. In another 25% of the families, the couple identifies as a part of the Gentile community. The remaining 50% are in a religious limbo. If Judaism is to survive in the United States, the battle for Jewish survival will center upon this 50%.

Obviously, conversion is the preferred alternative because it creates the greatest family unity and the greatest assurance for Jewish continuity. Yet, many Gentiles, for personal reasons or because they do not want to hurt their parents or other members of their family, are not ready before marriage to make the choice to become Jews; however, they are ready to make a commitment to provide a Jewish education for their children and have their children raised as Jews. The American Jewish community has to be ready to accept this alternative, to be sensitive to these families, and to provide for a way for them to come under the umbrella of Judaism and the Jewish people.

This realistic approach does not require our rabbinic and lay leaders to do anything new. Rather, it requires a return to the universal impulses in the Jewish tradition so that we can seek to bring intermarried families into the peoplehood of Judaism.

We must call upon—indeed demand—that our Jewish federations, working together with our major religious movements, accept as one of their prime responsibilities the provision of at least \$6 million each year for direct funding of

programs of outreach to intermarried couples and their families. If our ultimate goals are to help people and to help ensure Jewish survival, then \$6 million—a most symbolic number—is realistically a bare minimum amount that we must spend annually.

To this I should add the obvious: programs of outreach to intermarried couples and their children have as their natural byproduct a positive effect on born Jews. In a very real sense, outreach to intermarried families can become “inreach” to bring back to Judaism hundreds of thousands of unaffiliated Jews.

As I travel across the country, I am amazed that, in our society of free and open choice, the need for outreach is not the subject of greater public debate and discussion. Is it because there is so much guilt among the tens of thousands of families whose children have married Gentiles? Is it because our rabbis are perceived to have exclusive jurisdiction when it comes to matters of philosophy and theology?

Our daughters and sons are making theological statements with their feet. We cannot afford to stand by any longer. All aspects of these issues must be discussed fully and freely by all involved. We must remember that our tradition has many facets and that one of the most important aspects of our survival has been the ability of our people time and again to adapt our Jewish heritage to the society in which Jews live. We have the opportunity now to make a difference in the course, the direction, and the ultimate survival of Judaism. Let us join together to provide the leadership and understanding for a creative and realistic response to the challenge of intermarriage in America today.