

# Intermarriage and the Politics of Identity

BY DEBORAH DASH MOORE

**F**eminist scholarship teaches us the importance of social location. Where you stand, or in contemporary lingo, where you're coming from, illuminates what you stand for or where you're going. Social location does not predict point of view, but contemplating one's position invites a measure of self-reflection.

Given the currently controversial topic of intermarriage, I think that it is crucial to indicate my own subjective position. I speak about intermarriage as a long-term insider — having made a decision to intermarry more than thirty years ago. As an historian, I am inclined to seek out the unique, to craft narratives that balance change with continuity and to avoid temptations to predict the future based on past patterns. I will argue that intermarriage today occupies center stage as a surrogate for more difficult questions that American Jews are reluctant to face. But first, my own social location.

## A Subjective Position

Having said that I chose to intermarry some thirty-odd years ago, I

should add that I have also elected to live only a few miles from where I grew up. My decision to remain in New York City reflects a subjective commitment to the viability of American Jewish life and undoubtedly influences how I interpret the American ethos. New York offers a peculiar perspective on both the United States and the Jewish world. As a city that has lacked a majority population and included large numbers of immigrants and their children, New York reinforces my historical proclivities to examine qualitative issues.

I should point out as well that the few miles between Manhattan's northern tip and its downtown Chelsea neighborhood that separate my current home from my childhood one do not represent some great psychological or cultural distance. Where I live now differs only slightly from where I was raised. For example, the local Spanish speakers today are more likely to come from the Dominican Republic than from Puerto Rico.

Not only did my husband and I choose to raise our sons in the city,

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we also opted for other markers of continuity with my childhood: public school educations, supplementary Jewish education through high school, public transit for traveling around the city, affiliation with a Reconstructionist congregation, regular Sabbath eve dinners as well as holiday observances and, of course, bar mitzvah.

As an historian who is interested in the past and attuned to the quality of a Jewish life freely chosen, I understandably frame my account of these activities as continuities. Blood is not what counts. There were, of course, discontinuities. An academic gets to live abroad if she wishes, and I did. So my family enjoyed a year of living in Israel, unlike the brief summer visit I knew as a child.

## Intermarriage in Context

I mention these to contextualize the intermarriage: Mine was not a rebellion, a rejection of parental values and mores, an act of conscious assimilation away from Judaism to American society. My husband, on the other hand, experienced radical disjunctions between the life he knew as a boy and the one he lives as a Jewish adult.

Although I am an insider to intermarriage, my biography places me on the outside of most debates on the politics of identity. In fact, some of the leading figures in these debates would bar me from any position of influence as a bad role model for other American Jews. As in all politics, current conflicts over Jewish

identity concern power. At stake, it appears, are sizable sums. Who should allocate these resources and who should receive them has fueled a struggle over how to define the boundaries of the Jewish community.

## Communal Rhetoric

Many of those inside Jewish organizations desire to enhance their power by identifying an enemy. Since American society no longer produces enough influential anti-Semites and anti-Semitic movements (Pat Buchanan and Louis Farrakhan just don't frighten Jews enough, and with good reason), Jewish leaders have trained their rhetorical guns on intermarriage and what they claim are its attendant ills. These include a threat of demographic decline with the corresponding loss of political clout, the destruction of a unified Jewish people who can no longer marry within the group due to divisions over patrilineal descent, and the weakening of Jewish religious traditions and resulting assimilation.

Other substantial changes in American Jewish life don't bother Jewish leaders as much. No one, for example, seems to bemoan the loss of a left-wing, radical, secular, diasporist Jewish community, or the disappearance of a large urban Jewish working class and union movement. The rubric of "continuity" covers much of what leaders worry about, though the real issues of continuity, which involve what we teach our children, get discussed far less often.

## Folk and Elite Norms

More than twenty-five years ago, Charles Liebman wrote about “the ambivalent American Jew”<sup>1</sup> who wanted to assimilate into American society and yet remain distinctively Jewish at the same time. Liebman pointed out that American Jews held onto a Jewish ethnic exclusivism even as they discarded Jewish religious traditionalism. “Why is intermarriage any more horrendous than violation of the Sabbath?” he asked. “In the catalog of ritual Jewish sins, there is hardly anything worse than desecration of the Sabbath. But obviously in the catalog of Jewish communal sins,” he pointed out, “there is nothing worse than intermarriage.”

American Jews thus cheerfully sent their sons and daughters off to college, not with warnings to observe the Sabbath, which Judaism values most highly, but with admonitions not to date and fall in love with gentiles, something much lower down on Judaism’s scale of proper ritual behaviors. The former, Liebman noted, reflected the norms of an elite religious tradition; the latter expressed the concerns of a folk religion.

So here we are, several decades later, focused on American Jewish folk religion’s requirements that Jews not intermarry, now championed less by the folk than by the elite. How did we get to this point?

Common wisdom would propose that rising intermarriage rates brought us to pay so much attention to the widespread violation of this

folk-religious dictum. However, we know that these rates started to increase in the mid-1960s and American Jews did not begin to get visibly exercised about intermarriage until the 1990s. This would suggest that a confluence of other changes encouraged American Jews to pay attention to what was happening before their noses.

## Changing Contexts

Ten years ago, dramatic political events radically altered how we thought about our world. The collapse of the Soviet Union shifted the balance of power in the Middle East even as it sent hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews to Israel. One of the mainstays of Jewish political mobilization on behalf of Jews overseas rapidly disappeared. As Israel benefited from the new world order, its strength and prosperity weakened a second focus of Jewish political activism.

Peace negotiations with the Palestinians, a peace treaty with Jordan, and even the rescinding of the notorious “Zionism is Racism” resolution at the United Nations, all signaled a less-besieged Jewish world. Although the Holocaust remained as a viable forum for Jewish politics, it could not sustain single-handedly American Jews’ commitment to Jewish life.

In this context, intermarriage statistics generated a crisis of conscience, introduced a beleaguered mood with some leaders talking of another “si-

lent holocaust,” and sparked a vigorous politics of identity among American Jews.

## Social Change

In addition, a number of domestic changes contributed to the rise of intermarriage as a cause célèbre. A new generation of leaders ascended to positions of prominence in American Jewish organizations. Schooled in Jewish denominationalism, they rejected consensus politics as part of an outmoded Cold War heritage. Born after the establishment of the State of Israel, they learned its political lessons of partisanship. Too young to have struggled for civil rights and civil liberties in the United States, they came of age during the early movements of identity politics, protest against the Vietnam war and the backlash against liberalism promoted by radicals on the left and right.

Finally, attitudes toward intermarriage in the United States gradually underwent revision following the Supreme Court's 1967 decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. The court held that anti-miscegenation laws were a form of invidious racial discrimination prohibited by the Constitution and that marriage was a fundamental right. Anti-miscegenation statutes in the United States usually prohibited whites from marrying blacks, though occasionally Asian-white marriages were barred.

To this day, the Alabama state constitution contains a clause forbidding the legislature to “pass any law to

authorize or legalize any marriage between any White person and a Negro or a descendant of a Negro.” The Supreme Court noted in *Loving* that because the Virginia statute “prohibits only interracial marriages involving white persons” it was “designed to maintain White Supremacy.”

As American attitudes rejected white supremacy as racist, a new moral consensus emerged. By the 1990s Americans accepted the notion that individuals should be free to marry as a constitutional right and that laws preventing “different” people from marrying were racist and unconstitutional.

## Evolving Attitudes

Jewish attitudes similarly evolved. Although American Jews refused to define Jews as a race, many undoubtedly felt increasingly uncomfortable arguing against the intermarriage of Jews and gentiles in the face of an American consensus that freedom to marry was a constitutional right. By emphasizing that Judaism was a religion to which conversion was possible, opponents of intermarriage could justify their endogamous commitments as democratic. By downplaying the ethnic component of conversion that involves acquiring a new lineage in Abraham and Sarah, literally a new mother and father, Jewish leaders could stress Judaism's western attributes. How different was Judaism, in this comparison, from the Catholic church, which also opposed

interreligious marriage?

The possibility of conversion to Judaism thus provided a convenient loophole around the issue of racial exclusivity. However, the vigorous debate over “outreach” exposes the flimsy construction of this loophole, in actuality a noose. Those most opposed to intermarriage turn out to be those most opposed to “outreach,” to making conversion easy for gentiles (especially those involved in serious relationships with Jews). These same opponents of intermarriage also worry out loud about how converts will dilute Jewish life, weakening its ethnic dimensions. Racial exclusivity thus reappears in religious guise.

As my son Mik Moore has argued in an unpublished paper, “By doubting the sincerity of converts, the Jewish/convert marriage becomes nearly as suspect as the Jewish/Gentile marriage.” Furthermore, “the dearth of conversions to Judaism and current opposition to loosening traditional anti-conversion rules belies the ease with which opponents of intermarriage can point to the option of conversion as a way to differentiate anti-miscegenation” laws from the Jewish ban on intermarriage.

## **Socially Constructed Identity**

The issues can be clarified if we leave for a moment the politics of identity and recognize how Jews are constructed by the societies in which they live. Israel constructs Jews according to several conflicting criteria. The Law of Return contradicts

*halakhab* as interpreted by rabbis who possess political power bestowed by the state. And these social constructions of Jews differ from actual Israeli practice, especially vis-à-vis Jewish immigrants. In the United States today, Jews are considered “white” and “EuroAmerican.”

A century ago, the category of European was split between east and west, with the latter superior to the former. In the years prior to World War II when anti-Semitism thrived and Jews lived largely in semi-segregated urban neighborhoods, endogamy flourished and most Americans thought of Jews as less than white. Neither were Jews EuroAmerican; rather, they were East European, a considerably lower immigrant classification. Some racists considered them “Oriental” and not European at all. On various scales of attractiveness as neighbors, Jews ranked just above blacks and Asians in desirability.

After World War II when Judaism entered the American pantheon of the religions of democracy and Jews joined the middle class and moved out to the suburbs, Jews lost much of the stigma attached to them. They gradually whitened up, their differences becoming less and less visible to their gentile neighbors, especially their children.

## **Debatable Questions**

If what it means to be a Jew has undergone such radical shifts even within the memory of some of us (not to mention what history can tell

us about those developments), then it behooves us to look more closely at what is animating today's intermarriage debate. Why are the Jewishly illiterate offspring of two Jewish atheists logged in as genuine Jews while the semi-practicing offspring of an intermarriage, especially if the father is a Jew and the mother a gentile, are not counted as Jews?

Why do we pay more attention to blood than to behavior? Why do we zealously guard the privileges of ascending the *bimah* or the honor of leadership from Jews who have intermarried or from their gentile partners? Why is such extreme language invoked around intermarriage — I am thinking of the “silent holocaust” terminology — when no one screams about Sabbath observance? In short, why have both Israeli and American Jewish leaders become like those ambivalent American Jews Charles Liebman skewered several decades ago?

Part of the answer lies in the essentialism inherent in identity politics. Plural metaphors of identity politics cannot compete with the demand for a single primary identity. Another part of the answer can be found in a loss of nerve among certain American Jewish leaders vis-à-vis American social and cultural life. My husband, MacDonald Moore, calls them “Neodox,” a coinage I like, and holds that “they act as if they want to consolidate their gains and displace some guilt in the process” (unpublished paper). For the Neodox, genuine Judaism is not elective, and

anything that smacks of choice is suspect. Neodox speak of Jews as a tribe, rather than a nation, race, ethnic group or religion.

## Politics and Polemics

Jewish solidarity in this view derives from kinship and a special relationship to God codified in the God of Israel's covenant with His (always “His” for these leaders) chosen people. An intermarriage crisis can be used to recruit unwary American Jews to facilitate a shift of resources away from a confident liberal agenda that claimed for Jews an equal place at the American civic table all along.

MacDonald Moore argues that the Neodox present intermarriage as an unmitigated evil that results from lack of affiliation with Jewish organizations, inadequate Jewish education and minimal observance of Jewish ritual. The alternative to intermarriage can be seen in the Orthodox, who also appear as paragons of affiliation, commitment, knowledge, responsibility — all of the virtues required for Jewish survival. The answer then for the Neodox is to rebuild American Jewish life around the model of Orthodox community.

## The Fruit of an Open Society

Are there other alternatives? Well, one possibility is to suggest that intermarriage is not an evil, but rather the complex fruit of a relatively free society. Such an interpretation would applaud, not denigrate, the semi-

practicing behavior of self-identifying Jewish children of a Jewish father and gentile mother.

A number of years ago, a Reform rabbi published a modest piece reporting on sixteen years of intermarriages that he had performed in a small Pennsylvania city. He had developed his own criteria of seriousness and commitment to Judaism required from the couple before he participated in their wedding ceremony. What Rabbi Henry Cohen found was, to my mind, impressive: a majority of stable marriages and Jewishly identifying children. This vision of Judaism is the opposite of tribal. It is based not on commandment, but commitment; not on obligation, but choice; not on blood, but values.

## Why Be Jewish?

We can see a version of this type of Judaism in a flyer handed out at the Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (otherwise known as KKBE) Sisterhood Gift Shop, a shop that attracts large numbers of Christian visitors to historic Charleston in South Carolina. “WHY BE JEWISH?” it asks in capital letters — and then queries in smaller type: “Why make the effort to raise children Jewish?”

The sisterhood flyer offers six answers: “First, Jewish life is a wonderful way to transmit strong values . . . Second, Jewish life builds strong families . . . Third, Judaism encourages education and intelligent debate and can help you to bring up thinking children. Fourth, Judaism gives

children roots. . . . Fifth, Judaism can give a wholeness and rhythm to your life.” And the clincher: “Sixth, your help is needed. The Jews are a small people who have given much to the world. You and your partner can help ensure that this rich heritage survives.” The first two answers also cite sacred days, Passover and Hanukkah for the value of freedom, and the Sabbath for its family-enhancing power.

In the face of the American consensus regarding marriage as a fundamental right, Jewish arguments against intermarriage began to shift to concern over “continuity” or what Jews can do to ensure that their grandchildren would be Jewish. Obviously, there is nothing that Jews can do to assure that their grandchildren will be Jewish. Only the truly *hutzpadik* or the *meshuggenah* imagine they can secure that future. Certainly, anyone with even a whiff of knowledge of 20th-century Jewish history should recognize the futility of such a charge.

But if American Jews cannot guarantee that they will have Jewish grandchildren, they can commit to raising Jewish children. This would mark a significant departure for many American Jews, who may need to be convinced that it is worth the effort. The women in the KKBE Sisterhood suggest a pretty good set of reasons for such a commitment. These reasons focus not on Jewish difference or superiority but rather on Jewish otherness. Jewish religious culture offers a coherent value system, favors vibrant family life, encourages education and critical thinking, gives

children a rich heritage that connects them to previous generations. And, yes, Judaism is a minority religious tradition, so that all Jews are precious to the Jewish people. No mention here of prejudice and persecution, of chosenness and commandment.

## The Desire to Live as Jews

Of course, such an approach will not produce Jewish grandchildren, nor will it prevent intermarriage. The question I would want to ask is whether it will build a strong desire in a child to live as a Jew, which involves creating a Jewish home as an adult. Such homes can emerge even out of intermarriage, as my experience testifies, if the Jewish partner to the intermarriage cares deeply about living a Jewish life.

There are gentile Americans who are drawn to Jews and Judaism for some of the reasons cited by the KKBE Sisterhood. They espouse Jewish ethical values, intellectuality, concern for family and community; and they are bold enough to risk minority status. However, among the items missing from the KKBE list that I think is crucial is Israel. The Jewish state, its people and the land, form an integral part of Jewish culture, albeit an aspect not as easily understood and appreciated by gentiles as those elements relating to religion. Israel speaks to the ethnic dimension of Jewish identity as well as its religious aspects.

If we are concerned about continuity not as a slogan or as an adject-

ive modifying the word “crisis,” then we need to pay attention not to identity politics that involves circling the wagons against an external enemy, but to our children, our neighbors, our schools and community centers. For several generations, American Jews have rallied to save threatened communities of Jews overseas. Such efforts gave enormous satisfaction to those who participated in them. I think we can reap similar rewards of self-fulfillment that simultaneously energize our Jewish collective if we seek to live Jewish lives at home and in the street: to work and play as Jews, not just to pray as Jews.

More than fifty years ago, the radical rabbi and founder of Reconstructionism, Mordecai M. Kaplan, argued in the closing pages of *Judaism as a Civilization* that “The Jew will have to save Judaism before Judaism will be in a position to save the Jew.”<sup>2</sup> Kaplan’s call to arms is no less relevant today. It means that Jews will have to abandon the thrill of identity politics for the greater challenge of living a program of maximum Jewishness. It means, too, that Jews as Jews should champion, in Kaplan’s words, “all movements to further social justice and universal peace.” Finally, it means that we should not be afraid of the future but try to create new forms of Jewish life and culture.

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1. Liebman, Charles: *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1973).

2. Kaplan, Mordecai M.: *Judaism as a Civilization* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 521-522.