

## Going Where We're Growing: Including the Multiracial Jewish Community by Yosef Abramowitz

*This article is adapted from a keynote address delivered to the Jewish Multiracial Network Symposium in November 2002.*

I am simply a fellow traveler and am here by virtue of two unlikely accidents of history: my son, Adar, was adopted from Ethiopia, and I am CEO of Jewish Family & Life!, the leading multimedia non-profit in Jewish life. Both of these life turns came about because of my commitment to communal change, as well as my activism on behalf of oppressed Jewry and in aid of the anti-apartheid movement. As a producer, I have been especially mindful to ensure that the images of normative Jews are diverse, especially in BabagaNewz, our children's magazine that is in 800 schools across the country.

I am simply a consumer of the services of the Jewish Multiracial Network (JMN), and I want to thank the great work and efforts of the staff and Steering Committee. While grassroots groups are often small and fragile, the JMN represents big and noble ideas and values. Here are three:

- Reaffirmation of Tzelem Elohim, that we are all created in God's image. The midrashim about this line in the creation story tell that when the first person was created, God used various colored clays so that no one race can lay claim to be exclusively in God's image. Participating in the annual retreats, which is where the JMN comes alive for me, I am consistently reminded how each person, each struggle, is its own world. The community needs to program for and acknowledge the dignity of each person in our community, to enrich each life and family.
- Reinterpretation of Tzelem Yehudi, the image of the Jew. The JMN reminds me that the question of "what is a Jew," and "who is a Jew," is a holy question. With the emergence of the United States as the major superpower worldwide in the past 100 years, U.S. Jewry, which is largely Ashkenazi, also received a major boost. A powerful American-Jewish community defined for the larger culture the image of who is a Jew, but we know that there are many kinds of Jews, both in this country and worldwide.
- Re-examination of Tzelem Kehillah, the image of our community. How do we see ourselves and how do others view us? My own personal mission statement for the community is "to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," mamlekheth kohanim v' goy kadosh, which is a very egalitarian religious concept, since we all have sacred obligations and responsibilities if we are all priests as part of a holy nation.

These three values are important in light of my evaluation of the problems facing Jewish life. There is an epidemic of alienation and judgmentalism in Jewish life, which undermines the three values and threatens the long-term viability of Jewish renaissance. Over the long-term, this also erodes American Jewry's political power, which also affects support for Israel.

### Demographic Dynamics

Let's first look at the demographic dynamics that our community faces.

- The demographers all tell us that the Jewish community is shrinking. While we replenished numbers over the last two decades through immigration, particularly from the Former Soviet Union, we are not going to see a new influx of big numbers. The second way a community regenerates its numbers is with a higher birthrate. But, the latest Jewish population survey says that Jews have an average of 1.8 children, well below the 2.2 needed just for replacement. And let's face it, we all know many Jewish families who have considered having more children, but for whom the high price of Jewish affiliation is an effective form of financial birth control. And that's not going to change soon. If numbers matter -- and they usually do -- then a critical mass is needed to have a vibrant community and to exercise political power. Even as a percentage of the U.S. population, we are shrinking. We now are only about 2% of the American population.
- There are at least 1.5 million non-Jews living in Jewish homes. That's huge, more than the sum of the Jewish communities of Western Europe. The only big surprise of the 2000 U.S. general census is the high level of inter-racial relationships. And, as the country goes, we usually find that the Jews are in step.

Because of the prevalence of interfaith and interracial Jewish families, there are going to be challenges and changes. The fault lines are deep and controversial. One approach is divisive. We are going to see the evolution of concepts like *ger toshav*, the stranger in our midst, and the elevation of Ruth, a convert, as the sole role model for non-traditional Jewish families. But a more healing approach sees Jewish inclusivity as the only reasonable antidote to the shrinking of the community.

- The demographers are battling it out right now about exactly how many Jews there are and where the lines can be drawn regarding who's in and who's out. No matter who wins the demographic battle among scholars and researchers, we do all know that lots of people are not opting in. When I speak to people around the country in person and through the JFL websites, I hear that implicit in the Jewish community's strong preference for white-white, heterosexual, in-marriage is a hint or an echo of racism, of tribalism, of exclusivity. And when their family doesn't meet this ideal, people assume that the community is judging them negatively. That may not always be a fair characterization of Jewish organizations, but it is still usually the assumption of the people who feel outside the community.

A sustained, multi-layered effort to serve multiracial Jewish families and individuals is the clearest, most visible signal of open doors, open minds, and open hearts in Jewish institutional life. You can't always look at an intermarried couple and tell who is Jewish and who isn't, but when it comes to inter-racial inclusively, the visibility dynamic is very real. I am also struck lately that only two generations after the Holocaust -- where the price for being Jewish was horrendous -- so many people are knocking on our door and trying to get in. In the Former Soviet Union, so many people are coming out of the woodwork, trying to claim a lost piece of their ancestry or prove a Jewish grandparent.

The Lemba Tribe in southern Africa, who practice Jewish rituals, and have proven genetically to be of our people, want to be reclaimed by the Jewish people. The Falas Mura in Ethiopia, numbering about 20,000, have returned to the faith fully. Often, it is people on the outside who recognize the value and power of our faith and want in, or back in.

## Ideas, Not Numbers

But for me, Jewish renaissance is not essentially about numbers, but about ideas. If we don't have the vision to sustain creative life, the numbers, even if they are large, will dwindle. I am most inspired by the example in the past 20-30 years of the influence of feminism on Jewish life, which provides for us a model of what is to come. No one disputes the impact of feminism across all the major movements. It has reinvigorated Judaism -- religion, thought and theology.

The integration of multiracial Jews into the mainstream of the community is also going to reinvigorate Judaism itself, as it has for me and my family. All of a sudden, we see in the Purim and Passover stories adoption stories. Tziporah, the Kushite, figures now more prominently. Some Ethiopian Jewish culture, with its rich heritage, has become part of our home and life. I think we'll also see a mainstreaming of Sephardi customs, accelerated for example, during Passover by many vegetarians.

When one kind of ethnicity represents an ideal, it then represents an idol. We are commanded as Jews to smash idols, as did our non-white forefather Abraham. Every institution can participate in idol-smashing by being inclusive. We need to be pro-active, to incentivize creativity. There is not going to be large-scale opposition to this; it's just a matter of taking initiative.

To fulfill the mission of the Jews to be a light unto the nations, we need to reclaim our multiracial heritage. Because of my son Adar, I have a living link to one of the poorest countries in the world. I am unsettled more than I would be if he weren't in my life. It is important for those of us who live in extreme privilege (even with our credit card debt) to sometimes pause to truly count our blessings. This happens more organically when we become more aware, through the faces of some of our children, of how most of the six billion people on earth try to live.

I have recently wondered to myself, what if our children, Jews of color, represented the Jewish community and faith at the United Nations? And what would it be like if the Jewish dialogue with the growing congressional Hispanic Caucus or the Congressional Black Caucus were conducted by our children, these Jews of Color? Wouldn't our collective power as a community increase if our children were the public face of the Conference of Presidents, the major agencies, and rabbinical seminaries? Twenty years from now, when there are two billion people in China, it would be best if some of these sweet faces we see of the girls adopted by Jews in America were on one side of the table undertaking our dialogue with China. This day could and will come, but not by accident. How we raise our children today, as individuals, as Jews, and as leaders, will help bring this about.

## Love is a Jewish Concept

And, finally, the last taboo I would like to touch upon is love. The central Jewish prayer, the sh'ma, is surrounded by love: -- ohev amo Yisrael, "who loves His people Israel," and habocheh b'amo Yisrael b'ahava, "who chooses His people Israel with love." And there is the v'ahavta, "you shall love." We have ceded public and religious talk about love to Christianity, which is an abdication of our responsibility as Jews. Love is very powerful, theologically and personally. To love people, to love all people, to love all Jews of all backgrounds, is a way of honoring tzelem elohim (that we are all created in God's image), tzelem yehudi (that each Jew is created in God's image) and tzelem kehilla (the holiness of a community).

When we see multiracial Jewish family life flourish, we recognize that love broke through societal barriers, through boundaries in Jewish life. We see in this the love of the Jewish notion of God, love of a partner with a different racial background, love of a child whose external image does not mirror our own. The best reasons for Jewish institutions to embrace a multiracial Jewish agenda is because it brings God, the world, people, ideas -- and especially love -- back into Jewish life. May it be so, ken yehi ratzon.

The Jewish Multiracial Network is a national membership organization located at 307 7th Avenue, Suite 900, NY NY 10001. Tel.: 212.242.5598 Website: WWW.jmnetwork.org. E-Mail: jewishmrn@yahoo.com

---

*Yosef Abramowitz is the Chief Executive Officer of Jewish Family and Life! and a member of the Jewish Multiracial Network. He is the co-author -- together with his wife, Rabbi Susan Silverman -- of Jewish Family & Life: Traditions, Holidays and Values for Today's Parents and Children, published by Golden Books.*