

Intermarriage and Jewish Leadership in the United States

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- The question of mixed marriage poses a dilemma to the American Jewish leadership. It would prefer not to choose publicly between integration into the broader society and distinctive Jewish survival. The realities of Jewish life in the United States, however, increasingly compel choices.
- Fifteen years ago, the American Jewish Committee adopted a nuanced statement on mixed marriage. Its preference was for Jewish marriage. For those who married out, conversion of the non-Jewish spouse was the best outcome. When this was not possible, the mixed-married couple should be encouraged to raise their children exclusively as Jews.
- All three messages are countercultural in an American society that values egalitarianism, universalism, and multiculturalism. Preferring endogamy contradicts a universalist ethos of embracing all humanity.
- The ultimate challenge to Jewish leadership is to recognize its responsibility for preserving the collective welfare of the Jewish people, beyond one's personal good.

There is a conflict between personal interests and collective Jewish welfare. As private citizens, we seek the former; as Jewish leaders, however, our primary concern should be the latter.

Jewish leadership is entrusted with strengthening the collective Jewish endeavor. The principle applies both to external questions of Jewish security and to internal questions of the content and meaning of leading a Jewish life.

Countercultural Messages

Some fifteen years ago, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) adopted a "Statement on Mixed Marriage."¹ The statement was reaffirmed in 1997 and continues to represent the AJC's view regarding Jewish communal policy on this difficult and divisive issue. The document, which is nuanced and calls for plural approaches, asserts that Jews prefer to marry other Jews and that efforts at promoting endogamy should be encouraged. Second, when a mixed marriage occurs, the best outcome is the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse, thereby transforming a mixed marriage into an endogamous one. When conversion is not possible, efforts should be directed at encouraging the couple to raise their children exclusively as Jews.

All three messages are countercultural in an American society that values egalitarianism, universalism, and multiculturalism. Preferring endogamy contradicts a universalist ethos of embracing all humanity. Encouraging conversion to Judaism suggests preference for one faith over others. Advocating that children be raised exclusively as Jews goes against multicultural diversity, which proclaims that having two faiths in the home is richer than having a single one.

It is becoming increasingly difficult for Jewish leaders to articulate these messages. Some have already given up. For example, one Reform rabbi in a prominent city dedicated his Rosh Hashanah sermon to the need to honor "members of our community who practice both Judaism and Christianity."² The president of the World Jewish Congress, Edgar Bronfman, went so far as to claim in an interview with the London *Jewish Chronicle* that opposition to intermarriage has become "racist" and "begins to sound a little like Nazism."³

Thus, the American Jewish leadership finds itself in a dilemma. Most Jewish leaders would probably affirm all components of the AJC's 1997 policy statement. However, at a time when public discussion of this issue has become problematic, conveying these messages publicly requires great political courage.

An Enduring Jewish Dilemma

Perhaps this paradigm may not have originated in the United States, but in France in 1806 when Napoleon posed his twelve questions to the Grand Sanhedrin. The third and most difficult question was: do Jews encourage marriage between Jews and Gentiles? Napoleon's intent was obvious: fifteen years after the Jews' emancipation, he was asking how they could genuinely be citizens of France, or integrate in French society, without looking favorably on intermarriage.

The Jewish leadership's response has been much debated for two hundred years. At the very least, they hedged, saying they did not favor mixed marriage, but did not proscribe those who had intermarried from leadership positions in the Jewish community. Yet, in effect, they defied the powerful ruler, who presumably wanted a clear statement that they endorsed intermarriage. Although many have subsequently criticized the French Jewish leaders, their statement was one of wisdom in the political context.⁴

The choice itself has remained the same: between integration in the broader society and distinctive Jewish survival. The American Jewish leadership, similar to the French Jewish leadership back then, would prefer not to choose, to avoid an unequivocal answer. Nevertheless, the current realities of American Jewish life increasingly compel choices, however difficult.⁵

What is known about the American Jewish leadership's attitudes toward mixed marriage? First it is important to acknowledge, though it is often forgotten, that each of the three main religious movements, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, has maintained strictures against intermarriage, unequivocally opposing it in principle. Reconstructionism has taken a more nuanced position, encouraging rabbis to participate in civil ceremonies but not supporting rabbinic officiation at intermarriages per se. Although differences exist on the intermarriage issue among the three major movements, it is notable that the strictures have survived despite the immense growth in the phenomenon itself.

A Growing Acceptance

The greatest change has taken place in the Reform movement. In 1979, less than 10 percent of Reform rabbis were willing to officiate at mixed marriages. By 1996, according to a study by the Jewish Outreach Institute, 46 percent of Reform rabbis, with various stipulations, were willing to do so.⁶ Even among the 54 percent who did not officiate, the prevailing attitude was respect for those colleagues who did. Thus, there has been an undeniable change even as Reform, as a movement, expresses opposition to mixed marriage.

Moreover, the change in Reform Judaism reflects the fraying bonds of Jewish peoplehood due to the incidence of mixed marriage. Ties to the Jewish people are particularly weak among those who choose Gentile spouses. In this regard, the challenge to Jewish leadership in the twenty-first century is to foster a collective Jewish will sufficiently compelling that Jews will affirm membership in that collective.

Some Jewish leaders, however, call for a change in Jewish values to meet current realities. One of the most prominent is Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School. In *The Vanishing American Jew*, he advocates a new attitude toward mixed marriage and favors encouraging rabbis to officiate at such marriages.⁷ Dershowitz is by no means alone; he expresses what many Jewish leaders want to hear - that the old strictures have failed, the traditional policies are bankrupt, and it is time to shift gears. Mixed marriage, then, is viewed as an opportunity rather than a danger.

In a new cultural phenomenon, a small minority of Reform temples go further and grant *aliyot* (going up to read from the Torah) to Gentile spouses or Gentile family members of mixed marriages. There is even a particular formulation for the occasion: instead of the recitation, "Blessed be the Lord Who has given the Torah to the Jewish people," the wording is along the lines, "Blessed is the Lord Who has shared the wisdom of His Torah with all humanity."

Restoring Conversion?

At the most recent conventions of the Conservative and Reform movements, a different development occurred. Both movements affirmed conversion to Judaism as the best leadership response to the mixed-marriage phenomenon. In other words, they sought to restore conversion as the best possible outcome in these situations.⁸ They did so for quite different reasons.

Within the Conservative movement, what drove the decision were demographics. In 1990, the Conservatives were the largest of the three denominations. By 2000 they had experienced a decline, probably from 43 percent to 33 percent of affiliated Jews. The hope now is to recover some of the losses through conversion.

The Reform movement's response was impelled more by self-criticism. The head of Reform, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, observed that in the well-intentioned desire to be welcoming and inclusive, Reform Judaism "perhaps sent the message that we do not care if they convert...but that is not our message."⁹ In other words, Reform's heavy focus on outreach to mixed marriages had created an atmosphere of neutrality on the conversion question.

For example, addressing an AJC meeting in Park City, Utah, several years ago, the local Reform rabbi, invited to explain the nature of Jewish life in the area, commented that no one in Park City raised questions about who is a Jew. Although the synagogue welcomed conversions, it made no distinctions between Jews, whether by birth or choice, and non-Jews in joining synagogue functions. The rabbi, that is, extolled the principle of inclusiveness, ignoring the fact that where there is indifference about conversion, inclusiveness and welcome may be self-defeating. That is the attitude Rabbi Yoffie sought to counter.

Beyond the confines of the religious movements, however, all strictures have fallen. Time-honored Jewish values of in-marriage and conversion have been lost in our era.

Once it was believed in the American Jewish community that leaders of Jewish organizations should be married to Jewish spouses. That is no longer the case. Although only a tiny minority is involved, the principle has been established that marriage between Jew and Jew is not a prerequisite for heading major Jewish organizations. This is found on various levels including even Jewish family service agencies, which sometimes are headed by those who themselves are not married to Jews and not raising a Jewish family.

In a recent announcement in the Sunday Styles section of the *New York Times*, a senior executive with an important Jewish agency announced his marriage to a Hindu woman. Officiating at the wedding were a rabbi and a Hindu priest. This broke new ground in terms of a rabbi's willingness to co-officiate with a Hindu (as opposed to Christian) clergyman. Even more startling was that the bridegroom announced this in such a public forum with such a professional identification.¹⁰

Views on Mixed Marriage

There are distinctions among Jewish leaders who intermarry. Some take the attitude: "I did what was good for me; I don't expect the Jewish community to approve." Others say: "I did whatever I did; given my position in the Jewish community, at minimum I expect the community to refrain from opposition, if not granting endorsement and sanction."

The world of Jewish federations generally has adopted a more delicate approach of saying nothing, one way or the other, about mixed marriages. Some federation leaders state with candor: "Watch what we do, not what we say. If you watch what we do, we are primarily funding programs that lead to marriages between Jews. Don't watch what we say, because we prefer to say nothing lest it prove divisive."

As for American Jewish public opinion, the most recent AJC survey of 2005 finds no change over the past ten years on the issues of anti-Semitism and mixed marriage. In this period American Jews have consistently, by a 2-1 margin, rated anti-Semitism as the greater danger of the two.¹¹ In part, this reflects Jewish forebodings and historical memories. In part, people prefer to locate the problem elsewhere than in themselves. Moreover, anti-Semitism plays a fundamental role today in Jewish identity formation. First articulated by Spinoza, more recently by Sartre, the liberal view of Jewish survival as dependent on anti-Semitism implies that there are no internal reasons to justify it.¹²

The 2000 AJC survey asked the same questions but was the only one to probe more deeply the issue of whether anti-Semitism or mixed marriage poses the greater danger. Here, 50 percent of American Jews said opposition to mixed marriage is racist. It was unprecedented for the time-honored Jewish ideal of endogamy to be seen as fundamentally contradicting American egalitarianism. In other words, half of American Jews regard opposition to mixed marriage as sinful. Only 25 percent responded that conversion to Judaism was the best outcome of a mixed marriage. The late Rabbi Alexander Schindler, in his 1978 presidential address to the Reform movement, stated plainly that conversion is the best result of mixed marriage. Two decades later, only one of four American Jews agreed.¹³

Essentially, then, two core values have fallen: marriage between Jews, with the obligation to encourage it; and conversion of the non-Jewish spouse when a mixed marriage occurs, thereby at least creating a Jewish home. This is a sea change of great consequence that must not be ignored.

If American Jews do not promote endogamy, no one else will do it for them. American culture - television, movies, and the media - portrays mixed marriage as admirable and deeply American. The recent, deplorable film *Meet the Fockers*, which is about a meeting between prospective in-laws to a mixed marriage, has a memorable last scene. After the profound conflict between two sets of in-laws is resolved, the Jewish side of the family arranges the wedding. It appears perfectly normal that a rabbi officiates; that is the message and standard instilled by American culture. Only the Jews can present a distinctive countermessage.

A Lack of Candor

Along with the attitude of the religious movements and the remaining strictures, and the silence that pervades much of the Jewish civil leadership, a third approach has emerged. Perhaps best formulated and given a full-blown institutional apparatus in what is known as the outreach movement, its advocates believe that to do effective outreach, the community must become neutral on mixed marriage. At least they concede that they are calling for a change in values; the federation world says it is not changing values but merely becoming silent about them.

For example, several years ago this author received a greeting card for the High Holy Days requesting that the recipient add a new sin for the confessional Yom Kippur liturgy. Having received such requests before, sometimes referring to sins against the environment or other causes, it was notable that this time the text came from an outreach organization. The liturgical change proposed was to add: "for the sin we have committed against Thee in the exclusion of the mixed marrieds." Historically, intermarriage was the sin and outreach was a way to contain its effects. Now the message is that intermarriage is not a sin at all, and the transgression is insufficient outreach.¹⁴

In the American Jewish community, candid discussion of this subject has become difficult if not impossible. Candor requires acknowledging that there is very little good news about mixed marriage. The facts indicate that it means minimal Jewish identity. Children of mixed marriage report even less affiliation than their parents, and grandchildren almost none at all. Although the efforts of outreach advocates to reverse this trend should be encouraged, as a strategy this is inadequate.

This author and Jack Wertheimer of the Jewish Theological Seminary recently collaborated on an article called "The Real Realism Regarding Mixed Marriage." Although some Jewish leaders claim the traditional positions are outdated, realism and candor mean recognizing that the situation is not good and that confronting it is an uphill task.¹⁵

The Language of Inevitability

Intermarriage is part of the price of living in an open society. Several years ago, a report of the AJC elicited the response from a sociologist that it was pro-mixed marriage, the report having asserted that mixed marriage is an indicator of the low level of anti-Semitism. Yet acknowledging that intermarriage is part of living in a broader society does not require a language of inevitability, which many Jewish leaders are now using. American Jewry is not an undifferentiated mass in which all are equally likely to marry a non-Jew. Factors such as size of the Jewish community, its location, level of Judaic literacy, and level of Jewish education all correlate with lower or greater intermarriage.

One argument for the language of inevitability is that intermarriage is now a foregone conclusion and nothing can be done about it. The second is that it is now so pervasive that parents are powerless to discourage it, leaving no room for personal accountability or guilt. Again, the facts suggest otherwise. In an open society, mixed marriage may always occur, but what is said and done can increase or decrease its likelihood. Shoshana Cardin, one of the best-informed and most articulate Jewish leaders, has repeatedly argued that while one cannot guarantee that one's grandchildren will marry Jews, one can tell them all the reasons one thinks intermarriage is not a good idea, and thereby lower the probability.¹⁶

The language of inevitability, however, conveys powerlessness. Although that suits the needs of many outreach advocates, a more realistic attitude is that few things are inevitable in history, and what Jewish leaders do and say counts.

The public sector's capacity to affect private decision-making is, of course, limited. Leadership can, however, create a climate in which people's decisions are informed by millennia-old Jewish values. The alternative is to cede all influence to the American media, which foster an ambience that is entirely pro-intermarriage.

Jews' Collective Responsibility

As noted, 50 percent of American Jews now view opposition to mixed marriage as racist. The ethos of in-marriage and conversion is especially off-putting to younger American Jews. If they have been told that all people are equal and created in God's image, it is jarring to be told that they should not marry some of them, or that a Gentile spouse should become a Jew.

What, then, should be done? The answer leads away from sociology and toward the specifically Jewish heritage and culture, the Jew's willingness to protest the status quo. As the late Reform theologian Emil Fackenheim observed in his underappreciated book *What Is Judaism?*, Judaic prophecy was less concerned with predicting the future than with conveying a message that challenged society's dominant themes.¹⁷ It takes courage to argue a point that people do not want to hear, and the prophetic metaphor is apt since the prophets were hardly the most popular among Jewish leaders.

Why, as in the *havdalah* ceremony, do Jews end the Sabbath with a statement of distinguishing between sacred and profane? Ultimately, Judaism is a language of distinctions. Just as, on the calendar, Jews define the Jewish week and Jewish time, on the philosophical level it is the questioning of the status quo that makes Jews unique as a people.

Addressing the intermarriage issue, however, is difficult because the Jewish leadership seeks consensus. It is easier to function when there is unity. For example, the emergence of a pro-Israel consensus among Jews after 1948 enabled the Jewish leadership to work for the pro-Israel consensus within American society, which encompassed both liberal and conservative administrations. Similar unity on such issues as Soviet Jewry and anti-Semitism was achieved both among American Jews and in America as a whole.

In the 1990s, Jewish leaders began to see Jewish continuity as the most critical problem. The continuity agenda has had certain successes, such as the Birthright Israel program. The issue of continuity, however, is inherently divisive, with serious disagreements on questions of who is a Jew, what constitutes a Jewish family, and what are the Jewish values.¹⁸

The Jewish leadership's ultimate challenge is to recognize its responsibility for the collective welfare of the Jewish people. That collective welfare is hardly equivalent to the personal good of any individual Jewish leader. When Jewish leaders address the mixed-marriage issue, they are concerned about the reaction of their own daughter-in-law, nephew, or wife. In one case a well-meaning Reform rabbi, toward the end of his career, who apparently had not noticed the changes within his own synagogue, devoted his Yom Kippur sermon to the question of mixed marriage. He was stunned when the daughter-in-law of one of his most prominent contributors stormed out in anger, and the father-in-law took him to task.

The challenge for Jewish leadership regarding mixed marriage, then, is to focus on the collective Jewish interest. One Jewish leader, Charlotte Holstein of Syracuse, New York, captured this in an essay titled "When Commitments Clash" that was cited by Elliot Abrams in his important book *Faith or Fear*⁹ Holstein found herself confronting the out-marriage of her own child precisely at a time when, as a national AJC leader, she was spearheading a policy debate within the AJC about the above-mentioned "Statement on Mixed Marriage." Although personally torn, she concluded that she had far greater responsibility for the general Jewish welfare than for her personal situation. Many other Jewish leaders do not appear to see it that way.

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Notes

* Lecture presented at the [Jerusalem](#) Center for Public Affairs, 9 January 2006.

1. Reprinted in *Responding to Intermarriage: Survey, Analysis, and Policy*, American Jewish Committee, Department of Contemporary Jewish Life, January 2001.

2. Cited in Morris Allen, "The Synagogue of Tomorrow: A Non-Prophetic View," in Zachary Heller, ed., *Re-envisioning the Synagogue* (Hollis, NJ: National Center for Jewish Policy Studies at Hebrew College and STAR [Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal], 2005), 136.

3. Cited in David Singer and Larry Grossman, eds., *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 105 (2005), 206-07.

4. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 114, 117-18.

5. Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of

America, 1973), esp. 196-97.

6. Jewish Outreach Institute, *Survey of the American Rabbinate*, 2003, [www://joi.org/library/research.rabbis.shtml](http://joi.org/library/research.rabbis.shtml).

7. Alan Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew* (Boston and New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 322-23.

8. *Forward*, 25 November 2005, 8; 9 December 2005, 3.

9. *New York Times*, 12 February 2006, 1. See also Steven Bayme and Jack Wertheimer, "Revisiting and Promoting Conversion," *New York Jewish Week*, 6 January 2006.

10. Sunday Styles Section, *New York Times*, 28 March 2004.

11. *2005 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion*, American Jewish Committee, Question #31, www.ajc.org.

12. Benedict Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (New York: Dover, 1951), esp. 54-55; Jean Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1965), esp. 67-69, 134-35.

13. *Responding to Intermarriage: Survey, Analysis, and Policy*, American Jewish Committee, Department of Contemporary Jewish Life, January 2001.

14. Communication, Jewish Outreach Institute, September 2001.

15. Jack Wertheimer and Steven Bayme, "Real Realism about Mixed Marriage," *Forward*, 9 September 2005, 11.

16. Shoshana Cardin serves as chair of the recently established Jewish In-Marriage Initiative. Her statement was made at a founding board meeting of the Initiative. The language of inevitability is most associated with the late Egon Mayer, who argued that being for or against intermarriage "is like being for or against the weather," *Forward*, 16 November 2000, cited in Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Double or Nothing?* (Hanover, NH and London: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 129.

17. Emil Fackenheim, *What Is Judaism?* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), esp. 120-25.

18. Steven Bayme and Alan Silverstein, "Failing to Address Crisis from Within," *New York Jewish Week*, 6 January 1996, reprinted in Steven Bayme, *Jewish Arguments and Counterarguments* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav and the American Jewish Committee, 2002), 234-36. See also Jack Wertheimer, Charles Liebman, and Steven Cohen, "How to Save American Jews," *Commentary*, January 1996, 47-51, and "Letters," *Commentary*, May 1996, 16-21.

19. Charlotte Holstein, "When Commitments Clash: One Leader's Personal Dilemma," in *The Intermarriage Crisis* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991), 36-37; Elliott Abrams, *Faith or Fear* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 106-07.

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