

Seeking a Third Way to Respond to the Challenge of Intermarriage

Delivered at the CCAR convention, Cincinnati, March 31 2008

Steven M. Cohen, Research Professor of Jewish Social Policy, HUC-JIR

Intermarriage as the challenge of our generation

Every generation of Jews confronts its distinctive challenges and in doing so leaves its particular contribution to Jewish life and history. The previous generation struggled for Jewish rights and interests in the public arena. It achieved widespread support for Israel, freedom for Soviet Jewry, the public memorialization of the Holocaust, and a virtual end to American anti-Semitism, winning astounding success in all four domains.

In our times, the key challenge by which history will judge us revolves around how we will respond to the impact of intermarriage upon our individual and collective Jewish futures.

Given the attraction of Reform Judaism to so many intermarried families, both current and in the future, no movement is better positioned to address this critical issue. When intermarried families look for a congregation to join or a rabbi to guide them, they choose Reform temples more often than all others combined. With such a large proportion of North America's Jewish children in our congregations, and the high rates of intermarriage among them, more of tomorrow's intermarried will emerge from Reform temples than from all other denominations. Thus, Reform is not only the primary denominational home of today's intermarried; it is also the point of Jewish origin for most of tomorrow's intermarried.

Marriage and intermarriage are so much the province of the rabbi. So, given the centrality of Reform Judaism on this issue and your pivotal role in this domain, it can safely be said that the actions of those present in this very room, at this very moment, will significantly affect the future of Reform Judaism, and, by extension the future of American and Canadian Judaism as well.

How are we doing?

In this context, it behooves us to assess the current situation, to understand both the challenge of intermarriage and the effectiveness of our response to date.

Anxieties over the impact of intermarriage date back decades. As early as 1964, *Look* magazine ran its widely noticed cover story, "The Vanishing American Jew." Since then, American Jews have survived while *Look* magazine has vanished. The American Jewish population has grown since then, aided primarily by the addition of Russian-speaking and Israeli immigrants, by high Orthodox birthrates, as well as by thousands of very welcome converts to Judaism who, it should be noted, were often prompted to convert by romances and marriages with born-Jews.

In the 1990s, following reports of exploding rates of intermarriage, American Jewry mobilized expressly to address the intermarriage challenge to Jewish continuity. We dramatically increased our investment in Jewish education – including day schools, Israel travel, Jewish studies, Hillels, and most recently Jewish summer camping. And, simultaneously, we dramatically increased our efforts at outreach, seeking to welcome the intermarried and remove both explicit and implicit barriers to engaging them in congregational life. One sign of success is that today, about half of the newly affiliated married couples in Reform temples have at least one member who was not raised Jewish.

Indeed, in thinking of the intermarried, our experiences abound with instances of the Jewishly engaged. We note with hope, pride and gratitude the thousands of non-Jewish parents who raise their children as Jews, as well as the gratifying instances of conversion, albeit relatively less often than in the 80s or 90s.

But, I hasten to remind us, we cannot accurately judge the impact of intermarriage from our personal experience. Given who we are, those we most often encounter are the intermarriage success stories. The intermarrying children we know best derive from families who remain temple members well past their youngest child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah; the intermarried couples we know are the small fraction who join congregations. Among the intermarried, our impressions are shaped by a blessed but biased sub-sample.

Unfortunately, the intermarriage problem is embodied not in those we know and see, but in those we hardly know and almost never see. These are the intermarried with little Jewish connection. They are often themselves the offspring of intermarried parents. They are more likely to live in parts of the country with sparser Jewish settlement, frequently at distant remove from congregations and from informal Jewish social networks.

The only way we can learn about such Jews is through the various Jewish population surveys we conduct, be they national or local. And whenever we compare the results from studies then with those from studies now, we find the same disheartening trends – be it in the National Jewish Population Studies of 1990 and 2000, or in local comparisons such as in the Boston area in 1995 and 2005.

Wherever we turn we find continued growth in intermarriage. For example, in Boston of 1995, 28% of married Jewish households were intermarried. By 2005, just ten years later, that figure grew to 45%. We find more non-Jews in Jewish homes: In Boston, from 1995 to 2005, the rate of growth of non-Jews in Jewish homes was more than four times the rate of growth of Jews in Jewish homes. We find more non-Jewish children in Jewish homes: In Boston of 1995, only 15% of children in Jewish homes were non-Jewish; by 2005 that number grew to 24%. Even of those raised Jewish by intermarried parents, we see overwhelming evidence of very weak levels of Jewish engagement.

For the latter insight, we are indebted to a recent report issued by Boston's Combined Jewish Philanthropies. Drawing upon the excellent data collected by Professor Len Saxe and others in 2005, and by Dr. Sherry Israel and others in 1995, the CJP study compared

the children of in-married Jews with the sub-segment being raised as Jews by intermarried families, that is, those who are the “best” products of intermarriage. But, as we learn, even the best is nowhere good enough. We learn that ...

- The Jewish children of the inter-married are far less likely than the children of the in-married to attend Passover Seders.
- The rate of Brit Milah ceremonies is almost twice as high among the in-married couples’ sons as among their intermarried counterparts.
- Just 3% of the in-married children ever see a Christmas tree in their homes, as compared with fully 82% of the Jewish children of the intermarried so report.
- After Bar Mitzvah, the children of the in-married are almost four times as likely to attend religious school; their families remain temple members almost twice as often as the intermarried families who claim to be raising their children as Jews.
- The in-married are five times more likely than the intermarried to join a JCC.
- In fact, a majority (64%) of the intermarried parents raising Jewish children under age 18 are totally unaffiliated, that is unconnected with ANY Jewish institution, a rate more than four times that among the in-married.
- And, the rate of travel to Israel among the children of the in-married is 20 times – 20 times — that of Jewish children of the intermarried.

Over the course of his or her nominally Jewish childhood, the average Jewish child of the intermarried – even in a community as Jewishly well-endowed as Boston — experiences years with no parental affiliation, no physical contact with Israel, widespread disaffiliation with the temple and Jewish schooling following Bar Mitzvah, and, to top it all off, the warm experiences and lasting memories of opening presents from family and friends on Christmas morning. The study’s authors conclude that these families “are deeply engaged in Jewish practice,” that they “are generally as observant as inmarried Jewish families,” and that “they participate in synagogue life in similar ways to other Jews” – apparently until the moment just before they leave their temples. How the authors arrive at such inferences is baffling to say the least, and derives primarily from a selective focus on attitudes rather than action, and on the pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah years rather than the full span of childhood and adolescence.

As depressing as are these results, scattered pieces of evidence suggest that the Jewish identity gaps between the intermarried and the in-married have widened over the years, and not shrunk. For example, in San Francisco, holiday observance gaps in 2004 were wider than they were in 1986. And in several national data sets, the gaps in Israel attachment between the in-married and intermarried, are greater for younger than for older Jews, suggesting a growing gap as the years elapse.

Intermarriage remains North American Jews principal route of exit during their lifetimes. As HUC-JIR professor Bruce Phillips reports, of those with two Jewish parents, 98% are raised as Jews; of those with one Jewish parent, the figure drops to 39%, albeit with noticeable differences when the mother is Jewish than when the father is Jewish; and of those with one Jewish grandparent, just 4% are raised as Jews, As Professor Len Saxe and colleagues forthrightly report, “Adult children of intermarriage are significantly less

likely to raise their own children as Jews compared with their peers who grew up in inmarried homes. From a continuity perspective, this is an important difference.” In other words, even when Professor Saxe and colleagues controlled for all available background factors, intermarriage remains crucial for predicting one critical consequence: raising Jewish children. And to paraphrase Vince Lombardi, for continuity purposes it’s true that raising Jewish children isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.

The implications of these trends need to be well-understood.

First, we are now in the midst of a non-Orthodox Jewish population meltdown. Its signs are as visible and frightening as is global warming. Among Jews in their 50s, for every 100 Orthodox adults, we have 192 Orthodox children. And for the non-Orthodox, for every 100 adults, we have merely 55 such children. In nearly two generations, in our own lifetime, the Orthodox have embarked on a path to nearly doubling their size. At the same time, the non-Orthodox are en route to nearly half their number. Rising intermarriage rates over the years past are right now engendering sharp declines in the non-Orthodox Jewish population, not in generations yet to be born, but among our own children and grandchildren, those now under 25.

And, as the Boston data tell us, those who emanate from intermarried homes, even if raise Jewish, exhibit far weaker Jewish background, engagement, knowledge, and commitment.

Thus, we are threatened by not only a quantitative decline, but by a clear qualitative challenge to the future of American Jewry, and especially to the future of Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Welcome the Intermarried or Educate the non-Married – or Both?

Since the 1990s, we have devised two major lines of response to the quantitative and qualitative challenges of intermarriage. One camp emphasizes outreach and welcoming, seeking to draw those who are already intermarried closer to Jewish life in general, and to congregational participation in particular. The other camp emphasizes providing intensive Jewish educational experiences to our children, those not yet married, so as to reduce the chances of intermarriage in the first place.

Owing in part to differences in ideology, in part to misunderstanding, and in part to personalities, these two camps have, in the past, engaged in some fairly acrimonious debates.

At the root of the acrimony lies each side’s belief that the other undermines its primary objective. The welcoming camp generally believes that an explicit and up-front emphasis on in-marriage will make many mixed-married families feel unwelcome and end any chance for meaningful involvement. The education camp generally believes that extending a full and hearty welcome to the intermarried undermines the objective of inspiring young Jews that they should seek to marry Jews. They also fear that it

diminishes the perceived value of conversion. For if non-Jewish spouses are permitted almost all honors in Jewish life, then why bother to convert?

Each camp fears that the other operates well within earshot of the very people they are trying most assiduously to influence. The welcoming camp believes that the intermarried will be alienated from Jewish involvement by outspoken normative demands and critical views. The education camp believes that the non-married will find intermarriage more acceptable precisely because the welcoming camp smoothes the full entry of intermarried families into Jewish communities with nary a word of criticism for their having intermarried in the first place, nor an explicit word of encouragement for the non-Jewish spouse to convert to Judaism. In this regard, I hasten to commend the URJ Outreach and Membership Department, along with many rabbis, for their explicit focus upon the desirability of conversion.

But, at the same time, these two conflicting camps actually share some key assumptions and conclusions. Fundamentally, they agree that intermarriage constitutes a significant challenge. They share grave concerns about the future of American Jewry. They agree that in-marriage is preferable, that conversion to Judaism is desirable, that the next generation should be raised as Jews. And, to be clear, those who emphasize welcoming certainly seek more Jewish educational experiences for young and old; while those who stress Jewish education, for the most part, yearn for more intermarried Jews to engage in Jewish life and raise their children exclusively as Jews.

They concur on yet another crucial point: Whatever we have done, it hasn't "worked," at least not yet, at least not on the population level. The manifold efforts in Jewish education, congregational renewal, welcoming, taking Judaism public, and so forth have hardly made a dent in the relevant problem areas. As I noted earlier, the incidence of intermarriage continues to mount. So does the large number of intermarried families leading lives bereft of Jewish practice and meaning. One telling statistic: Of in-married Jews with school-age children, about 82 percent belong to congregations; among the comparable intermarried, about only 18 percent are congregationally affiliated.

Why are we not succeeding? After all, day schools, Israel trips, Jewish camping, youth groups, Hillel involvement, Jewish Studies, and the many self-organized Jewish endeavors on the part of those in their 20s and 30s, all increase the in-marriage rates. The problem is that not enough Jews undergo those experiences. At the same time, efforts at outreach and welcoming have undoubtedly brought thousands of intermarried families into Jewish life and affirmed their decisions to raise their children as Jews. Yet even more remain outside of Jewish life. Even more, especially intermarried Jewish men, raise their children as non-Jews. And far too many those raising Jewish children fail to provide what any of us would regard as an adequate level of Jewish education and socialization.

What is to be done?

In light of the critical challenge posed by intermarriage, and our inadequate measures thus far, it is time we seek to transcend the differences between the outreach camp and

the education camp. Both have important lessons for us to learn, and both have valuable messages for us to deliver.

The outreach camp reminds us not only that we must be attentive to welcoming the intermarried in all their contacts with organized Jewry, but that we need as well to support all manner of Jewish connection and endeavor among the many who will remain unaffiliated with temples for years to come. They say, in effect, if you can't bring them inside, help them build it outside.

The demographic backdrop here is critical. Like the rest of America, Jews have undergone a vast increase in the number of unmarried. Of non-Orthodox Jews between 25 and 39 years old, a majority are neither in-married nor mixed married – they are non-married. As such, very few join temples; but many are open to self-organized efforts by members of their own generation in spirituality, learning, culture, social justice, and the Internet. Most people don't join congregations until they give birth to a seven-year old child. On average, it now takes almost twenty years from college graduation for this blessed event to take place. If we are to engage Jews in their 20s and 30s, we need to support their efforts to promote Jewish engagement outside of congregations.

Paradoxically, it is in the self-interest of congregations and their rabbis to assist in furthering endeavors that may seem competitive, but that serve to grow young Jews connections until such time as they turn to congregations.

From the education camp we need to learn that our responsibility extends not only to the already-intermarried, but equally to non-married Jews, whom we hope to guide on a path toward marrying another Jew, by birth or by choice.

How can we do so? We must recognize the two primary paths to in-marriage: Jewish education and Jewish association. Now, rabbis certainly recognize the value of Jewish education in all its modalities, formal and informal. That said, I suggest that we generally fail to appreciate how Jewish social networks, in-group friendships and residential density work so well to promote in-marriage. For predicting in-marriage, friends are more fateful than faith, and postal codes are more predictive than pedagogy. We need to do far more to guide our young people, if ever-so-subtly, to places and experiences where they are more likely to meet and associate with other Jews.

Synthetic Lessons and Messages: A Third Way

Finally, we need to take actions and draw lessons not just alternately from one camp, or from the other. Rather we need to synthesize two seemingly dissonant messages. One is that Jews should marry Jews; and the other is that Jews who marry non-Jews should be fully welcomed in our communities. Projecting these two dissonant messages simultaneously is inherently difficult. It is a very good thing that some rabbis and movements privilege the education message over the outreach message, while others emphasize the outreach message over the education message. We absolutely need both sorts of rabbis and both sorts of movements.

That said, we can also look to the very creative work of several rabbis who engage their congregations in complex, considerate, and constructive conversations about the sensitive and delicate issues that divide us. I cite with admiration the sermons of rabbis who bless non-Jewish spouses for raising Jewish children. I commend those who, with care and complexity, angst and anxiety, explain their decisions to officiate, or not officiate, at mixed marriages. All these early steps at synthesis offer us instructive models for synthesizing the best of the education camp and the best of the outreach camp.

In this election season, we live in an age where leaders are expressing the yearning of young Americans to transcend long-held antagonisms. The leaders talk openly and candidly about our deepest fears and our most lofty aspirations.

Let us draw instruction and inspiration from this season's spirit of honest reconciliation. May we draw together and learn from one another, even in, and because of, our disagreements. May we do so, so as to assure that no Jew is left behind. May every child of a Jewish parent, or grandchild of a grandparent, enjoy the maximal feasible opportunity to identify as an educated Jew, a committed Jew, and a truly engaged member of the Jewish People.