

# A Clinician's View of Intermarriage\*

Herbert S. Strean, D.S.W.

*Distinguished Professor, Graduate School of Social Work  
Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey*

*Intermarriage is not a disease nor is it a mental health problem. It is a religious and moral problem.*

Any clinician who dares to offer his assessment of the psychological and interpersonal dynamics involved in intermarriage must do so with some humility and several misgivings. The topic appears overwhelming for it involves discoursing on two complex phenomena—love and religion—which for countless decades have pained, anguished, and absorbed poets, philosophers, social scientists, psychoanalysts, and many others. In the literature of both Jews and non-Jews, one finds many statements to the effect that “the way of a man with a maid” is beyond human understanding; rabbis and other clergymen often tell us that marriages are made in heaven.

Despite the fact that marriage counselors of all persuasions are doing a booming business, many individuals believe that only God knows why A marries B and whether the marriage will work out.<sup>1</sup> To ponder the whys and wherefores of how come two people love each other and eventually marry is a difficult enough task. When one adds to that seeming perplexing question still another one, “Why do two people from different religious denominations decide to marry each other?” solving this puzzle can appear onerous.

Yet, intermarriage is a fact of contemporary life and the rising rate of dual-faith wedding ceremonies is confounding reli-

gious leaders. Although only a handful of clergymen of most established faiths will officiate at such weddings, and only a minority will welcome two-faith families into their communities, it is nonetheless clear that today one in three Jewish marriages involves a non-Jew and about half of the Catholic and Protestant marriages involve a non-Catholic or non-Protestant.<sup>2</sup>

In other times and places, the hostility of the surrounding society was a major factor in keeping Jews within their own group; consequently, intermarriage was a rare event when anti-Semitism was so strong. Few of us need to be reminded of the long history of Jewish persecution, highlighted by events ranging from the twelfth-century pogrom in York, England, which led to the banishment of Jews, from that country until Oliver Cromwell readmitted them in the seventeenth century, to the Spanish Inquisition of the fifteenth century, to the pogroms of Russia in the early years of this century. Those of us who lived in the 1940's will never forget the Second World War when Hitler's rise to power in Germany led to the destruction of a thriving and apparently well-assimilated German Jewish community. To Jews steeped in these stories, non-Jews can rarely be seen as people to be trusted—they are goyim or outsiders and often are viewed as potential persecutors, certainly not potential partners in marriage.

Although the fear of the goy still persists in some quarters, in contemporary America the ghetto walls have broken down and

---

\* Presented to an all-day Conference on Intermarriage sponsored by the Jewish Family Agencies of New Jersey of November 19, 1980 at Teaneck, New Jersey.

<sup>1</sup> J. Arlow, “The Psychological Implications of Intermarriage,” *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* Vol XLII, No. 3 (1966).

<sup>2</sup> E. Kaye, *Cross Currents: Children, Families and Religion*. New York: Clarkson, N. Potter, Inc., 1980.

have given way to an openness which makes it virtually impossible to re-create the tightly cohesive Jewish communities of Europe's past. Comparative community studies of middle-sized American cities indicate that there are relatively few areas of economic life from which Jews are excluded. In addition, there has been a growing participation by Jewish leaders in general civic causes and community service activities.<sup>3</sup> In an intensive sociological study, Polsky was able to demonstrate that only a minority of members of Orthodox synagogues carry out—in their personal lives—basic requirements of Jewish law. He further documented the widespread secularization of religious observances that is taking place among Jews all over America. Acceptance, rather than resistance to cultural change is becoming the norm.<sup>4</sup>

In the Eastern European *shtetl* communities, rituals were integrated into everyday religious and secular life. From the moment he arose in the morning the *shtetl* Jew entered into a regimen of ritual practices which did not cease until he closed his eyes in sleep at the end of the day. In the ghetto or *shtetl*, the Jew had been relatively isolated from the influence of scientific rationalism. The Jewish school, which was for most East European Jews the only kind of school they attended, was primarily an institution for the transmission of traditional learning and values; science played no role in the curriculum. Not until the Jew was permitted to move freely in the general society—in Western Europe as early as the eighteenth century, but not until the twentieth century for Eastern Europe—did he feel the full impact of scientific rationalism. This influence has been especially strong in

American society, where the virtues of modern science are daily extolled in the schools and in the mass media. Many Jewish people living in the twentieth century find it difficult to reconcile the teachings of biology, physics, and psychoanalysis with biblical and other religious teachings. Skepticism which results from exposure to scientific rationalism is, of course, not limited to a questioning of the bible's accuracy; it tends to be diffused through other religious beliefs and practices as well.<sup>5</sup>

Living in a twentieth century society that propounds equalitarianism makes it increasingly difficult for many Jews and non-Jews to endorse the concept of God's "Chosen People." As Myrdal has noted in *An American Dilemma* equalitarianism is part of the American Creed.<sup>6</sup> In American society the equality theme stresses the similar intrinsic value of every man and woman and is combined with a resentment of any claim to social distinction or special status not earned or based upon particular merit, a factor which the social psychologist Geoffrey Gorer argues, militates especially against the Jews.<sup>7</sup>

Marshall Sklare<sup>8</sup> has pointed out that perhaps the single most disruptive force to American-Jewish Orthodoxy has been the position of women. Female subordination constitutes an important violation of Western norms and many Jewish women have contended that they should be part of the *minyem*, should be rabbis and cantors, and should not be treated as a discriminated minority. One of the results of these new attitudes toward women in religion together with the growing emphasis on autonomy for women is the growing number

<sup>3</sup> J. Dean, "Jewish Participation in the Life of Middle-Sized American Communities," in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, ed. M. Sklare, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960.

<sup>4</sup> N. Polsky, "A study of Orthodoxy in Milwaukee: Social Characteristics, Beliefs and Observances," in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, ed. M. Sklare, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960.

<sup>5</sup> B. Rosen, "A Minority Group in Transition" in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, ed. M. Sklare, Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> G. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, New York: Harper, 1944.

<sup>7</sup> G. Gorer, *The American People*. New York: Norton, 1948.

<sup>8</sup> M. Sklare, *Op. Cit.*

of interfaith marriages.

While changes in society, in family structure, in traditional religious beliefs and in the role of women have helped to create a trend toward many dual-faith marriages, the move toward intermarriage is rarely without conflict. Despite the fact that in the liberal, ethical, and equalitarian society of today, religion is often dismissed, the influence of traditional religious ideas quietly, often invisibly, permeates many areas of our lives. The majority of Americans have been brought up in one or another of the traditional religions, and the values that they have learned in their churches or synagogues, as well as the customs, rituals and ceremonies, still influence their attitudes and thinking. Americans are among the most religiously aware citizens in the Western world, with more than half of the total population belonging to a church or synagogue. Total church or synagogue membership is estimated at around 131 million people; in a typical week about 40 percent of adults in America attend a church or synagogue, compared to 26 percent in Greece, 20 percent in England, and 18 percent in Uruguay.<sup>9</sup>

From a psychosocial perspective intermarriage immediately poses a conflict between two values that concomitantly exist in all of us. Very few Americans—Jews and non-Jews—will not endorse equalitarianism, enhancement of the role of women, the break-down of ghetto walls, and open communication between all races and creeds. Yet our teachings in childhood and the ideas we have absorbed from family, teachers, and friends about religion instill in most of us a subtle mistrust of those who are not part of our group. Terms like *goy*, *shikseh* or *shaygetz* are rarely used benignly. We know members of our own religious group while the others seem like outsiders. The term *goyim* actually means "other nations."

Judaism is especially strong in instilling

<sup>9</sup> Kaye, *Op. Cit.*

what Bruno Bettelheim has referred to as a "paranoid fear of the goy."<sup>10</sup> The legal definition of a Jew, according to rabbinic authorities, is a child born of a Jewish mother. Converts are frowned upon, and the Orthodox regulations for conversion are designed to deter all but the most persistent.

### Is Intermarriage Neurotic?

Because intermarriage frequently poses a conflict for an individual as he assimilates and therefore moves away from his own religious group, the question is often asked, "Is intermarriage pathological?" As I intend to demonstrate in this paper, intermarriage can be healthy or unhealthy, pathological or mature, or can consist of a combination of mature and neurotic motives. However, in assessing intermarriage, we must distinguish between a psychological assessment and a value judgment. From the point of view of the organized Jewish community, intermarriage is undesirable for it threatens the perpetuation of the group identity which is an important means of sustaining traditional values, folkways, and mores. Because so few newcomers are welcomed into Judaism, it is essential for the preservation and future of Judaism that its young people marry only other Jews. This is why the pressures on young people to marry within the faith, "within the tribe," as it is sometimes expressed, can sometimes be extreme.<sup>11,12</sup>

From the point of view of the mental health of the individual, intermarriage is not necessarily undesirable nor can it always be considered as evidence of pathology. A happy marriage consists of two happy people. It is quite possible for a mature Jew to marry a mature Gentile and have a happy marriage. It is equally possible for two immature members of the same

<sup>10</sup> B. Bettelheim, "The Irrational Fear of the Goy," *Commentary*, (September, 1951).

<sup>11</sup> Arlow, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Kaye, *Op. Cit.*

faith to choose each other as marital partners and be miserable. In effect, intermarriage is a religious and moral problem; it may or may not be a mental health problem.

To understand in more depth the phenomenon of intermarriage from a psychodynamic point of view, we should explore some of the factors in the choice of a mate and some of the unconscious factors in sustaining an identification with a religious group and maintaining a belief in its dogmas and rituals.

### On Choosing a Mate

Marriage in our culture owes much to the notion of romantic or courtly love developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries among the nobility of France and later encouraged throughout Europe by the wave of romantic individualism that swept the continent. Romantic love is characterized by total fealty to and idealization of the beloved. While romantic love is totally antithetical to marriage because it cannot withstand the confrontation with reality that day-to-day married life entails, few people in love can be reasoned out of it, no matter how glaring the obstacles are: When people are deeply in love, they forget about the realities of job, money, family ties, religious differences and other "mundane" matters.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that many of the famous romantic lovers of history never shared a domestic life. Romeo never saw Juliet in curlers and Juliet didn't see Romeo putting out the garbage. Roxanne and Cyrano did not have to quarrel about the family budget, and Tristan and Isolde kept their trysts without being interrupted by a telephone.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, one of the features of romantic love is that the lovers project their "ego ideal," i.e., their concept of the perfect person and what they

wish they themselves could be, on to the loved one. The qualities ascribed to a loved one during the spiritual and aesthetic experience of romantic love are almost always far beyond whatever real qualities the loved one possesses. The dynamically oriented clinician distinguishes between "being in love" which has unrealistic and obsessional characteristics and therefore is a neurotic state, from "loving," which is based on reality and is not egocentric.<sup>14</sup> Anthropologist Ralph Linton<sup>15</sup> has contrasted the mature loving individual with the "ecstasy and madness" of the person in love, which he describes as like an epileptic fit.

Sigmund Freud<sup>16</sup> likened the romantic lover to the fond parent who projects his own ideal on to his child to substitute for the lost narcissism of his own childhood. He pointed out that, what the lover wishes he could have been, he fantasies his beloved as being. To the clinician, the romantic ideal is an irrational, immature, and unrealistic form of love based on the re-awakening of family romances of childhood. The loved one is made into a father or mother figure and becomes the recipient of fantasies that emanate from the lover's childhood.

Although Freud emphasized the importance of the "reality principle," he was unable to practice what he preached in his own courtship with Martha Bernays. His intense overidealization of her is dramatically portrayed in some of his letter to her:

What I meant to convey was how much the magic of your being expresses itself in your countenance and your body, how much there is visible in your appearance that reveals how sweet, generous, and reasonable you are . . .

In your face it is the pure noble beauty of your brow and your eyes that show in almost every picture.

<sup>14</sup> R. Fine, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> R. Linton, *The Study of Man*. New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1936.

<sup>16</sup> S. Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis, Standard Edition*, Vol. 23. London: Hogarth Press.

<sup>13</sup> H. Strean, *The Extramarital Affair*. New York: The Free Press, 1980.

According to his biographer, Freud likened Martha "to the fairy princess from whose lips fell roses and pearls, with, however, the doubt whether kindness or good sense came more often from Martha's lips."<sup>17</sup>

Although most of us like to conceive of marriage as a result of free, rational choice, writers who have investigated the phenomenon note the strong unconscious determinants in the decision.<sup>18,19,20</sup> According to psychoanalytic theory, mate choice is *never* an accident; the prospective marital partners are always influenced by unconscious and frequently irrational motives. When marriages founder it is usually not because the couple has incompatible interests but because they are ignorant of the unconscious purposes that determined their respective choices.

The psychologist Carl Jung believed that the search for a mate was completely unconscious: "You see that girl . . . and instantly you get the seizure; you are caught. And afterward you may discover that it was a mistake."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the philosopher, George Santayana described the process of falling in love and wanting to marry as "that deep and dumb instinctive affinity." The ancient Romans described "falling in love" as a form of madness: "Amare et sapere vis deis conceditar" (the ability to maintain one's sanity when in love is not even conceded to the gods).

In order better to understand mate choice, social workers and other helping professionals have utilized the notion of

"complementarity."<sup>22</sup> Unconsciously, the hyper-independent person is attracted to the compliant and passive person; the sadistic type enjoys a masochistic; and the sexually over-excited man or woman can be drawn to a seemingly inhibited counterpart. What is not always recognized is how each of the partners vicariously enjoys his or her mate's antithetical behavior. The passive husband is unconsciously gratified by his wife's dominance as he identifies with it, while the sexually promiscuous wife can admire her husband's controls. Frequently, a spouse can condemn the partner's overt behavior but on close observation, the critic can be seen unconsciously to appreciate what he or she is criticising. I recall a wife who daily admonished her husband for watching wrestling matches and severely condemned him for his interest in brutality. One day in anger she bellowed, "Anybody who watches wrestling ought to be shot!"

The notion of complementarity helps us understand one of the dynamics of some inter-faith marriages. An inhibited Catholic woman in treatment vicariously enjoyed the humor and wit at the Seder table of her husband's family and commented that she "loved the Cohen's flexibility." Mr. Cohen was very laudatory of his wife's "controls" and "loved the quietness of the Fitzpatricks." A Jewish husband who was frightened of the symbiotic merging quality of his natural family, extolled the virtues of the autonomy he observed in the Protestant family of his wife.

Very few, if any, people who enter marriage are exempt from childish wishes. All of us have some desire to be dependent on a parental figure. Most of us have not completely relinquished old power-struggles with our fathers and mothers, and only a small minority of married people have completely abandoned family romance fantasies, i.e., the wish to compete with the

<sup>17</sup> E. Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. I. New York: Jason Aronson, 1953, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup> R. Blanck, and G. Blanck, *Marriage and Personal Development*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1968.

<sup>19</sup> C. Bolton, "Mate Selection as the Development of a Relationship," *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (1961).

<sup>20</sup> V. Eisenstein, *Neurotic Interaction in Marriage*. New York: Basic Books, 1956.

<sup>21</sup> R. Evans, *Conversations with Carl Jung*. Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, Reinhold, 1964.

<sup>22</sup> N. Ackerman, *The Psychodynamics of Family Life*. New York: Basic Books, 1958.

parent of the same sex for the parent of the opposite sex. In clinically appraising the dynamics of many inter-faith marriages, our knowledge of psychosexual development can help us clarify the unconscious meaning of certain inter-faith marital choices. When a man or woman must defend against strong dependency wishes, he or she might intend, "I do not need and I do not want to be close to my mother or father. To prove my independence I'll marry a cool, detached partner as different as possible from my parents."

Joe Abrams told his therapist that he very much resented his *yiddisheh mommeh*. He spent many hours describing how she "made me fat and dependent." He compared his feelings of powerlessness to Portnoy and consistently envisioned his mother as an ogre. What attracted him to Sally Smith, his Protestant wife, was the fact that she was a vegetarian who "always minded her own business." While Joe resented Sally's frequent withdrawals from him, he needed constantly to protect himself from his childlike but unconscious wish to merge with his *yiddisheh mommeh*.

Childhood quarrels do not die easily. Many adults in their twenties, thirties, or forties are still psychologically engaged in parent-child fracas, sometimes in fantasy and occasionally in reality.

Shirley Bales was the daughter of a Lutheran minister. In treatment she recalled her many battles with her parents who "always stood for law and order." She felt as a child, and as an adolescent as well, that "there was always a noose around my head." To move away from her "uptight" parents, she married Joel Rabinowitz. Joel and his family were described as "loose" people whose "laissez faire" attitude seemed to be such a contrast from her own internalized superego commands. Her inter-faith marriage was a means of escape. While she occasionally resented Joel's "looseness," she needed a marital partner to protect her against the internalized voices of her punitive superego which stood for law and order.

What marriage counselors, social workers and other therapists constantly note is that marriage is frequently used as a means of

resolving long-standing, deepseated, unconscious conflicts. As we have already observed, a marriage may serve as a means for realizing unfulfilled fantasies or forbidden gratifications of childhood. In the last two clinical examples, we see how marriage can be utilized in the service of righting old wrongs, compensating for old deprivations, exacting vengeance, overcoming humiliations and disappointments, aggrandizing one's self-image or elevating one's self-esteem.<sup>23</sup> What is not realized by many marital partners and even by some therapists is that marriage can *never* cure a neurosis. As already mentioned, it takes two happy people to have a happy marriage and marriage never made an unhappy person become happy. The fate of the marriage is long decided before two people exchange marital vows. Consequently, the childhood wishes and defenses of would-be spouses are more important issues in assessing a prospective marriage than age, interests, occupations, or even religious affiliation.<sup>24</sup>

One of the classic explanations for the neurotic evolution of an inter-faith marriage is the incest taboo. Many men and women have not fully resolved their unconscious wishes to have sexual contact with the parent of the opposite sex. However, desires to do so usually create anxiety and these individuals are frequently unable to reconcile the tender aspects of love with the sensual ones. In order to avoid feeling sexual feelings toward a Jewish mother, a man can marry somebody who appears very different from her—a shikseh. I recall a client who said, "If Marjorie weren't a shikseh, I'd never be able to go to bed with her. When she mentioned one day that she wanted to convert to Judaism, I started feeling myself becoming impotent."

The splitting of the maternal image into a sexy shikseh and a noble asexual Jewish mother is not without its attendant conflicts.

<sup>23</sup> Arlow, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Strean, *Op. Cit.*

As a boy, Harry Caplansky had a close, intense, and erotic relationship with his mother. His mother called him her "prince" and to the exclusion of his father, constantly doted over him. When Harry went to college, he dated only gentile girls. Although he was consciously unaware of his motives for this, in treatment he learned that he was afraid of his erotic feelings toward his mother, and to deny them he dated only gentile women. After living with Maggie McCormick for six months, he decided to marry her. The joy of living with Maggie turned into depression when he became a husband and the sexual ecstasy of courtship became routine and boring in marriage. Said Harry after several months of therapy, "I realize that when we got married, I turned Maggie into my Jewish mother. I thought that marrying a shikseh would save me. But, as long as she's a wife, she's a mother and I must turn myself off."

As the clinician relates to marital interaction he observes how all human beings bring their childhood pasts into the interaction. When childhood conflicts around dependency conflicts, power-struggles, and incestuous fantasies are unresolved, the individual will bring his neurotic difficulties into his marital interaction. It is important to reiterate that neurotic conflicts can take many forms in a marriage, e.g. chronic squabbles, avoidance of sexual relations, excessive needs for autonomy and chronic depression, to name just a few. Inter-marriage may be an expression of neurotic conflict as in the vignettes above. But, as already indicated and further demonstrated later in this discussion, intermarriage can take place between two relatively mature individuals. Dynamically oriented clinicians will not make inferences from behavior alone. They must be knowledgeable about their clients' pasts, fantasies, superego injunctions, defenses and much more before they can term any form of behavior mature or immature. This same orientation to people is also operative in assessing how an individual copes with his religious identification, to which we now turn.

### Some Dynamics in Religious Identity

The search for consolation in the face of threatening feelings of inadequacy and helplessness to which religion provides an answer is nothing new in the life of the person, since everyone has found himself or herself in a similar situation of helplessness as a child vis-a-vis his or her parents. When young children recognize that they are not omnipotent and are unable to get everything they want, they unconsciously turn over their omnipotent fantasies to their parents and believe the parents are omnipotent. The wish for an omnipotent parent who will love us, protect us, gratify our wishes, and give us strength is not relinquished very easily. The dynamically oriented clinician views the longing for a strong parent as closely related to the longing for a father who is King of the Universe. The wisdom and goodness which are attributed to the deity reduces our anxiety concerning the dangers of life much like the infant feels protected by the wisdom and goodness of an omnipotent and omniscient parent.<sup>25,26,27</sup>

Just as a child who does not get his wishes gratified may learn to hate his parents, who he believes have it in their power to grant any desire, an individual may learn to hate his God and his religion when his hopes and aspirations are unfulfilled in reality. Some individuals who abandon their deity and their religion do so out of anger, and may be compared to children or teen-agers who run away from home because their desires are not being met. Inter-marriage for these individuals may be viewed as an act of revenge. Just as the obedient child may ragefully turn on his parents because they have not gratified him consistently, and refuse to do his home-

<sup>25</sup> Freud, *Op. Cit.*

<sup>26</sup> E. Frenkel-Brunswick, *Psychological Monographs*, Vol. 31, 1974.

<sup>27</sup> T. Reik, *Dogma and Compulsion*. New York: International Universities Press, 1951.

work and household chores, a disappointed theist may refuse to obey religious rituals and intermarry because his God has not sufficiently indulged him.

Religious adherence emanates, as we know, from more than a wish to depend on an omnipotent parent. Religion is also regarded as a societal institution which propounds certain ethical and moral values and denounces others. Ethical and moral commitments, the dynamically oriented clinician contends, also emerge from the early parent-child relationship. As Freud<sup>28</sup> stated: "In the course of an individual's development a portion of the inhibiting forces in the external world are internalized and an agency is constructed in the ego which confronts the rest of the ego in an observing, criticizing and prohibiting sense. We call this new agency the superego. . . . The superego is the successor and representative of the individual's parents and educators who had supervised his actions in the first period of his life; it carries on their functions almost unchanged."

What is sometimes overlooked about the internal voices of the superego is that they are projected on other individuals and institutions. For example, the teen-ager who is fighting the rules and regulations of school, home, religion and society in general is frequently really fighting the voices of his own superego.

Religious rituals can serve as superego protections against forbidden wishes. Religious rituals can placate guilt as is particularly noted on the Day of Atonement.

When an individual has a strong, punitive superego, he can project its voices on to his or her religion and, feeling coerced and controlled, will take arms against it. Most individuals fail to appreciate the fact that their biggest enemy is themselves and reason that if they get free of religious rituals, they will not feel so coerced. They fail to recognize that the coercion comes from

within themselves and that by renouncing their religion, they will sooner or later find another external force to inhibit them.

Doris Diamond was an obedient child and hard-working adolescent who found that when she started to date boys, she felt inhibited and constricted emotionally and sexually. Rather than recognize that her voices from her own prohibitive superego were inhibiting her, she blamed her sexual guilt on her parents and on her religion. So convinced was Doris about her parents' "uptightness" and her religion's "stupid dogma" that she renounced both of them and joined a commune whose religious tenets consisted of free love and few restraints of any kind. By the time Doris sought out a therapist she was beginning to realize that her inhibitions came from within her and that manipulating her environment could not reduce her discomfort.

The stories of Herman Wouk's *Caine Mutiny* and *Marjorie Morningstar* are excellent examples of superego conflicts. In both of these novels, the main characters spend most of their time and energy fighting authorities, externalized superego figures. As the leading characters' guilt mounts, they best themselves for their rebellious lives and eventually submit compliantly to their parental figures' edicts. It should be noted that this is also the story of Herman Wouk's marital life. An orthodox Jew, Wouk married a gentile woman. After a short period of marriage, he insisted that his wife convert and fervently practice all of the Orthodox Jewish rituals.

When a person marries a partner outside of his religious group, he makes a statement about his sense of identity. No matter what the specific context or the individual's background, under most circumstances, intermarriage represents a first step in the process of assimilation. Accordingly, intermarriage may mean different things to different people. Much depends upon what being Jewish represents to the individual and what role it plays in his sense of identity.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, *Op. Cit.* pp. 116-117.

<sup>29</sup> Arlow, *Op. Cit.*



The attitude of the youngster's parents is, of course, crucial in the development of the child's sense of identity as a Jew. Consciously and unconsciously parents convey to their children how they feel about being Jewish. The growing child quickly learns whether Jewish identity is significant to his parents and what values are attached to the experience of being Jewish. Very often parents subtly encourage their children to abandon Judaism and may even unconsciously encourage them to intermarry. Usually this represents a fulfillment of the parent's adolescent rebellion and they attain a "victory" through their children's intermarriage.

Most individuals view their own religion the way they view themselves. Rarely does a clinician meet a client who likes himself but concomitantly hates his religious identity. Some youngsters grow up with the feeling that being Jewish means that one is not sufficiently masculine. Other youngsters may come to feel that the fact that Jews are often treated as inferiors confirms their feelings of inferiority which they have about themselves.

People can use their religious identity to escape from internalized problems. Clinicians have long recognized that if a man or woman has a low self-image, poor self-esteem, or feels inferior, he may change his Jewish name, alter his "Jewish nose," and intermarry. However, his low self-image and low self-esteem will not disappear when he manipulates his external environment. The story is told of the Jewish man who had a severe stammering problem but nonetheless applied for a job as a radio announcer. When a friend asked if he got the job, he said he hadn't because the prospective employer suffered from a strong case of Anti-Semitism.

Just as a self-hating person will tend to hate his religious identification and may deny it by change of name, religious conversion, or intermarriage, the person with higher self-esteem may enjoy his religious

identification. In a note on "The People of Israel" Freud<sup>30</sup> said in describing Jews:

There is no doubt that they have a particularly high opinion of themselves, that they regard themselves as more distinguished, of higher standing, as superior to other people—from whom they are also distinguished by many of their customs. At the same time they are inspired by a peculiar confidence in life, such as is derived from the secret ownership of some precious possession, a kind of optimism. . . We may assert that it was the man Moses who imprinted this trait upon the Jewish people. He raised their self-esteem by assuring them that they were God's chosen people. . .

Although the self-hating person will be inclined to demean his religious identity and the person with high self-esteem will prize it, people are not that simple. It is quite possible for a person with low self-esteem to use his "superior," religious affiliation to compensate for his sense of inferiority.

Jack Levy acknowledged to his therapist that he always felt very weak next to others when a boy and that his middle name was "loser." He found the synagogue a source of solace and the religious rituals a source of inspiration. "Being Jewish made me feel I was a somebody," Jack pointed out.

In view of the fact that his Jewish identity seemed to elevate his self-esteem, his therapist was surprised when he learned that Jack had intermarried. When this was subjected to examination in his therapy, Jack reflected: "Judaism is the only thing I have that makes me feel superior. If I am with a non-Jew many hours a day like I am with my Catholic wife, Matilda, I can feel superior several hours a day."

People achieve a sense of identity in countless numbers of subtle ways. One way is what Erik Erikson<sup>31</sup> has referred to as a "negative identity." The individual sensitizes himself to what his parents and significant others value and then does the oppo-

<sup>30</sup> S. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, Standard Edition, Vol. 23. London: Hogarth Press, 1964, pp. 105-106.

<sup>31</sup> E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1950.

site. If parents champion liberalism, the young person will endorse conservatism, if authorities are capitalists, the young person might endorse Marxism. It is quite possible that intermarriage can be an expression of a negative identity, i.e. the young person derives solace from being something and somebody if he is very different from his Jewish parents.

Because religious identity is formed early in childhood and can become an important part of our character structure, it is not abandoned very easily. Sigmund Freud is quoted by his biographer, Ernest Jones,<sup>32</sup> as saying:

The announcement of my unpleasant findings had the result that I lost the largest part of my human relations. In this loneliness, there awoke within me the longing for a circle of select, high-minded men who would accept me in friendship in spite of my daring opinions. B'nai B'rith were pointed out to me as the place where such men were to be found. The fact that you were Jews could only be desirable to me, for I myself was a Jew and I had always deemed it not only unworthy, but nonsensical to deny it.

### Intermarriage and Maturity

As consistently reiterated in this discussion, from a dynamically oriented clinical perspective, behavior cannot be accurately assessed unless the person's unconscious motives are exposed and the story of his life is evaluated. Intermarriage can mean different things to different people. We can never say, at first blush, that an inter-faith match is indicative of immaturity. As we have already indicated, it is quite possible for two members of different religious faiths to love each other genuinely in a non-defensive, non-childish, non-egocentric way. They can nourish each other without feeling eaten-up and do not have to protect themselves from old or current power-struggles. A Jew and gentile *can* love each other and marry without having

to ward off incestuous ties or protect themselves from other sexual anxieties. In this day of equality and freer exchange among people from different denominations, an inter-faith marriage does not have to be a neurotic one. As Elizabeth Barrett Browning has advised:

If you must love one another, let it be  
for love's sake only.  
Do not say I love her for her smile—her look—  
Her way of speaking gently—or for trick of  
thought that agrees with me.  
For these things in themselves may be changed  
Or changed for you—and love may be undone.  
Neither love her for pity's sake wiping her  
cheeks dry—  
A creature might forget to weep  
And lose your love thereby.  
But love each other for love's sake, that  
evermore  
You may love on, through an eternity.

To love another human being regardless of racial or religious extraction was deemed correct by the authors of the Bible. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah expressed the hope of bringing people closer together when he declared, "My House shall be called the House of Worship for all the peoples of the earth." The Psalmist has exclaimed, "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." And in the Bible it is supposed to be God's will that men and women "should beat their swords into plowshares, that they should sit unafraid under their vines and fig trees," and that they should be blessed with peace-making.

These aforementioned scriptures were not written to justify intermarriage, but it should be said that it is quite possible to conceive of true and genuine love as the capacity to love the other and respect religious differences as well. In a Jewish-Catholic interfaith marriage service at the United Nations, the clergymen read:

Today, we have standing together at the altar a bride and groom who are of different faiths. They symbolize a lesson in love and brotherhood and harmony, admonishing us to seek and to find the elements that bring us

<sup>32</sup> E. Jones, *Op. Cit.*

closer to one another. They believe that there is nothing in their faiths which prevents their marriage. They see each other as objects of love and worthy of the sacrament of marriage. This is a concrete expression of that spirit of human unity which we are seeing manifested so much in this part of the twentieth century between whites and blacks, Protestants and Catholics, Jews and Christians, Marxists and believers.

In sum, the central issue of the problem of intermarriage is the goal of preserving Jewish identity. Jewish identity is an important vehicle for transmitting to the next generation the values, ideals, and wisdom which the group has distilled from its history. One's identity as a Jew is inevitably drawn into the conflicts typical for the individual. Intermarriage always raises the problem of the fate of the individual's identity with the group. To some this may be unimportant and not particularly conflictful. In others it may arouse conflict. Intermarriage does not necessarily indicate pathology. Intermarriage is not a disease nor is it a mental health problem. It is a religious and moral problem.<sup>33</sup>

As social workers, we have to face the unique meaning of intermarriage to the unique client. We also have to face what messages they transmit to their children as

the family, for example, celebrates both Chanukah and Christmas, Passover and Easter, or ignores these holidays altogether or just observes those of one denomination. Children often use religious differences between parents to disrupt the marital alliance and be part of the scene in which they are not on an equal status. The problem here is not pure religious differences between the parents, but religious differences being used by this child in the service of his or her competition with the parents. If parents from interfaith marriages are confident of their own identities as human beings, interfaith marriages need not be an overwhelming obstacle to the children of mixed marriages.

Interfaith marriages will continue to confront social workers and other helping professionals for some time. Each interfaith marriage is special and the clinical social worker should not be for or against the marriage but try to understand its strengths and limitations, its conflicts and conflictfree areas. It is the clinician's non-judgemental, caring, and accepting attitude that will help all clients cope better with their marriages—Jewish marriages, non-Jewish marriages, and interfaith marriages.

---

<sup>33</sup> Arlow, *Op. Cit.*