

INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

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The story is told of an immigrant rabbi who came to America from Hungary in the 1940s, began to learn English, and prepared to deliver his maiden sermon. He titled it, he thought very cleverly, "The Two I's," and proceeded to describe how these two *i*'s were destroying American Jewry. He went on and on and finally reached his climax. What were these terrible *i*'s that posed so great a danger? They were, he exclaimed proudly, "intermarriage and assimilation."

Many years have passed since that classic sermon, but as we all know the two *i*'s are still with us and still pose a danger. That does not mean that nothing has changed. To the contrary, intermarriage, attitudes toward intermarriage, and studies of intermarriage have all changed dramatically over time -- much more, indeed, than most people realize. *Intermarriage and American Jews Today*, based on data from recent Jewish community surveys, describes some of these changes.¹ My aim here is to suggest that broader social and cultural changes, taking place in the nation as a whole, place these data into a somewhat different perspective.

In Jewish eyes, as we know, an intermarriage is a marriage that takes place between a Jew and a Gentile, and by definition intermarriage is a problem; it is one of those *i*'s that is destroying the Jewish people. That is not, however, the universal view. The American historian Paul Spickard, whose recent history of intermarriage in America entitled *Mixed Blood* I am drawing from here, points out that "the mixing of peoples is one of the great themes of world history . . . [and] is especially prominent in the American past." "America," he continues, "was founded, in one sense, upon a vision of intermarriage" -- meaning, as he defines it, *any* marriage that crosses racial, religious, or ethnic lines. He quotes, for example, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's famous eighteenth-century description of "the American, this new man . . . [a] strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country."²

Crevecoeur's vision is one that we would associate with the old melting-pot idea of America. The idea found expression in a famous 1909 play by the Anglo-Jewish playwright Israel Zangwill entitled *The Melting Pot*, in which love conquers all and the hope is expressed that people from every corner of the world will unite in matrimony "to build the republic of Man and the Kingdom of God." *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922), by Anne Nichols, embodied the same general wish.³

We know, in retrospect, that this dream -- more like a nightmare to those concerned about Jewish continuity -- never came to fruition. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century marital patterns conformed more nearly to the model of cultural pluralism espoused by Horace Kallen.⁴ Marriages across racial lines -- between Whites and Blacks or Asians or American Indians -- were extremely rare and in many states illegal, barred by what were called antimiscegenation laws that threatened interracial couples with jail terms. It was not until 1967 that the Supreme Court, in the case of *Loving v. Virginia*, struck down these laws as unconstitutional.⁵

Interreligious marriages were only slightly more common. Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy's famous studies of interreligious marriages in New Haven over an eighty-year period (1870-1950) showed a high degree of religious endogamy. Catholics, for example, married Catholics in 95.4 percent of cases in 1870, 83.7 percent in 1940, and 72.6 percent in 1950. New Haven is not a microcosm of the

nation as a whole, and Kennedy clearly underestimated the significance of race (Americans, as a rule, have married people of other faiths before they married people of other races).⁶ But given significant religious opposition to intermarriage, especially on the part of the Catholic church, interreligious marriages were comparatively rare into the 1960s. Indeed, this led to the triple-melting-pot model of America made famous by Will Herberg in his *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*: the idea that ethnic differences would disappear, but religious differences would continue to divide Americans into three separate (and unequal) religious groupings.⁷

Herberg, and other students of the subject, found that interethnic marriages were more common in America than interracial or interreligious ones; still, they too were far less common than melting-pot advocates might have expected. Among first-generation immigrants, the number of those intermarrying ranged from 2 percent or less among East European Jews and West Coast Japanese to about 20 percent for immigrants from Sweden and Norway. Second-generation immigrants, who were more acculturated, intermarried at higher rates, but still endogamy remained the norm.⁸ In short -- and notwithstanding all the melting-pot rhetoric -- the majority of Americans continued to marry people of their own kind. The minority that did intermarry -- not a small number but certainly a minority -- was seen as socially deviant. In some cases, such people were shunned and their children suffered.⁹

From a Jewish point of view this had very important implications. It meant that American culture -- the norms and expectations of society -- reinforced Jews' own traditional sense that out-marriage was wrong and in-marriage was right. Jews and Gentiles, sometimes for the same reasons and sometimes for different reasons, promoted the same end: endogamous marriages. This -- in addition to well-known structural factors like the size and density of the Jewish population, the time elapsed since immigration, the strength of Jewish communal institutions, social contact with Gentiles and so forth -- goes far to explain why American Jewish intermarriage rates remained as low as they did through the 1950s. During this period, not more than 6-8 percent of American Jews married out.¹⁰

As everybody knows, a great change in intermarriage rates has taken place over the last three decades. Intermarriage rates have soared to 40 percent, and in many places more. Generally, sociologists explain these changes on the basis of developments internal to the Jewish community: growing assimilation, an imbalance in the sex ratio, geographical dispersal, and "increasing generational distance from the traditional European heritage."¹¹ These are indeed critical factors, but I fear that our exclusive focus on Jewish developments may have caused us to overlook a far broader and, to my mind, more significant influence on intermarriage rooted in American society as a whole. The fact is that American marital patterns have changed dramatically in recent decades, and now operate on the basis of norms that Jews interested in Jewish survival can never accept. Religious differences in America are no longer a socially acceptable barrier to marriage, nor are ethnic differences, nor even racial differences. Where once, as we have seen, Jews and other Americans held congruent views on intermarriage, views strongly supportive of endogamy, *Jews today are all alone in their views, separated from the pro-intermarriage mainstream by a huge cultural chasm.*

The evidence for this is all around us. First, intermarriage statistics themselves bespeak the change. In 1960, a study in Seattle found that 8 percent of native Japanese American men and 7 percent of the women married non-Japanese -- about the same intermarriage rate, in other words, as Jews then experienced. Although anti-Orientalism had by then declined markedly, as had anti-Semitism, intermarriage was still taboo. Yet within fifteen years, in the same Seattle community, 43 percent of Japanese men and 49 percent of women were intermarrying -- a greater rise than Jews experienced. Today, according to Paul Spickard, a substantial majority of Japanese Americans, men and women, intermarry: racial and cultural barriers to such marriages have largely disappeared.¹²

Among America's European ethnic groups (Jews excepted), intermarriage has now become the norm rather than the exception. Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Italians, Irish -- all, according to recently analyzed 1980 census data, experience intermarriage rates in excess of 60 percent.¹³ Nor has the so-called triple-melting-pot theory held up. It is estimated that some 40 percent of Catholics now intermarry, many without converting their spouses. Comparable Protestant data would be meaningless given the movement's size, but it is surely revealing that in a cohort of Protestants married in 1961-75, 69 percent of young Methodists married non-Methodists, 70 percent of young Lutherans married non-Lutherans, and 75 percent of young Presbyterians married non-Presbyterians!¹⁴ While interdenominational marriages are not, strictly speaking, comparable to interfaith ones, the fact that both have simultaneously risen to such a degree bespeaks the extent to which marital patterns have changed in just one generation.

Attitudes toward intermarriage have more than kept pace with these developments. In 1950, 57 percent of those queried in a national survey said that they "definitely would not marry a Jew." In 1962, the figure dropped to 37 percent. By 1983, according to George Gallup, only 23 percent of Gentiles disapproved of marriages with Jews.¹⁵ Tolerance of intermarriages between Protestants and Catholics has risen even more. In 1968, 63 percent of the public said that they approved of such interfaith marriages. By 1983 that figure had risen to 79 percent. Among young people today the percentage is apparently even higher.¹⁶

Such attitudes are not just confined to the general public. According to a recent study:

Apart from Jews, no ethnic group or institution carries out any sort of educational work designed to limit ethnic out-marriage. They accept it as a foregone conclusion. The subject is not even mentioned in the ethnic press or publications. Parents, even if actively involved in the affairs of their ethnic group, rarely show great remorse when their children marry members of other ethnic groups. Religious groups have also, to a very large extent, made peace with religiously-based intermarriage.¹⁷

Indeed, the Catholic church now consecrates intermarriages without any preconditions; it no longer requires that children of intermarriages be raised in the Catholic faith. One archdiocese published specific guidelines on Jewish-Catholic intermarriages, including the requirement that the celebration be "in keeping with both traditions and offensive to neither." A special dispensation is available should the Jewish partner object to the Catholic's promising to "do all in his/her power" to have the children baptized and raised in the church.¹⁸ The United Methodist church places no limitations at all on intermarriages and no obstacles before members who intermarry. In the Lutheran church, according to Thomas A. Prinz, assistant director for ecumenical relations, "marriage outside of the Lutheran tradition has become accepted almost universally." Even the historically conservative Mormons now take a liberal approach to intermarriage. While efforts are made to convert the non-Mormon spouse, those who do marry out face few, if any, restrictions.¹⁹

Robert Wuthnow has argued in an important recent book that these developments are part of a larger restructuring of American religion. Denominational loyalties, he points out, are far less intense than they used to be: one in three Americans today has left the faith he or she was raised in, whereas twenty-five years ago such denominational switching was very rare. Wuthnow believes that denominational differences have been replaced in our day by political differences: liberals vs. conservatives. For this reason, liberal Protestants marry liberal Catholics, but pro-life rarely marry pro-choice.²⁰

If this analysis is correct, then we can understand why many Jews, who are part of contemporary culture, now find it acceptable to marry like-minded individuals of other faiths; for that, today, is the American way. The old arguments against intermarriage -- that it leads to marital unhappiness

and higher rates of divorce -- no longer persuade. Shared social and political interests seem to most young people to be far more important determinants of marital happiness than a common religious faith. Jews who find that they have more in common with Catholics and Protestants than with the Jews they meet make their marital decisions accordingly.

What are the policy implications of all of this? First, I think that Jews have to come to terms with the fact that in opposing intermarriage we are setting ourselves apart from the mainstream of American culture. Orthodox Jews are comfortable doing this -- they have often been critical of contemporary culture -- but other Jews may not be. Unless the majority of American Jews are prepared to become explicit in their dissent; unless we are willing to insist that even if other Americans intermarry with impunity Jews may not; unless we are willing to raise endogamy to the level of a prime religious obligation, to teach it in our schools and to preach it from our pulpits, it seems to me that efforts to combat intermarriage are doomed to fail. Contemporary culture will be too strong, too alluring, for Jews to resist. This is not to say that current efforts to promote endogamy should be abandoned, for in some cases they have proved successful. Programs aimed at strengthening Jewish identity and commitment through a combination of lifelong home, school, and synagogue activities, while no panacea, do show results. But if we expect to impact on the intermarriage rate as a whole, we must take a firmer communal stance than we now do, and insist that on this issue we are prepared to go our own way.

It does not, however, follow -- and this is my second point -- that intermarriage must result in the loss of Jewish identity and the end of the Jewish people. If we look, for example, at the American Indians, where we have excellent census data, intermarriage has now reached a level of 60 percent, yet ethnic pride and consciousness have never been higher, and the number of identifying Indians has practically doubled in a decade.²¹ There are, of course, tangible advantages to identifying oneself as a "Native American," a member of a recognized minority group, that do not apply in the case of Jews. Still, in an era when ethnicity and religion are both increasingly subject to choice,²² it makes sense for Jews somehow to find ways of rejecting intermarriage without rejecting intermarrieds. The aim, as many Jews already recognize, must be to win back Jews who intermarry, to make their non-Jewish spouses love and respect Judaism, and to persuade intermarrieds to raise their children as Jews -- preferably as Jews who will not themselves intermarry. These are no easy tasks.

Finally, given the changes in American religion that I have pointed to, we must redouble our efforts to promote *klal yisrael*, the sense that all Jews, left wing and right wing alike, are part of the totality of Israel and part of our extended family. Ties of peoplehood, for Jews, must transcend politics. We must insist, no matter what American culture preaches, that Jews of all kinds are suitable marriage partners for our children, while members of other faiths, even if they share our political convictions, are not.

On this issue, as on intermarriage as a whole, I believe that we must be prepared to set ourselves apart from other Americans, and apart from contemporary culture. We must insist that our traditional values are indeed better, at least for us. If we don't, and simply acquiesce to the pro-intermarriage mainstream, then the immigrant rabbi will ultimately be vindicated, and the two *i's* will triumph.

Notes

1. Sylvia B. Fishman et al., *Intermarriage and American Jews Today: New Findings and Policy Implications* (Waltham, Mass.: Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 1990).

2. Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 4.
3. Israel Zangwill, *The Melting Pot* (New York, 1923 [1909]), p. 185; see the analysis in Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 66-75, and the earlier discussion in Julius Drachsler, *Democracy and Assimilation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970 [1920]), pp. 93-98. *Abie's Irish Rose* (1922) is reprinted in Bennet Cerf and V. H. Cartmell, comps., *S.R.O.: The Most Successful Plays in the History of the American Stage* (New York, 1946).
4. See Moses Rischin, "The Jews and Pluralism: Toward An American Freedom Symphony," in Gladys Rosen, ed., *Jewish Life in America: Historical Perspectives* (New York: Ktav, 1978), pp. 61-91.
5. Milton L. Barron, *The Blending American: Patterns of Intermarriage* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972), pp. 77-84.
6. Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, "Single or Triple Melting Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940," *American Journal of Sociology* 49 (1944): 331-339; idem, "Single or Triple Melting Pot? Intermarriage in New Haven, 1870-1950," *ibid.* 58 (July 1952): 56-59; for critiques, see Ceri Peach, "Ethnic Segregation and Ethnic Intermarriage: A Reexamination of Kennedy's Triple Melting Pot in New Haven, 1900-1950," in Ceri Peach, Vaughan Robinson, and Susan Smith, eds., *Ethnic Segregation in Cities* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); and Stanley Lieberson and Mary C. Waters, *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1988), pp. 232-235.
7. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960 [1955]); see also *From Marxism to Judaism: Collected Essays of Will Herberg*, ed. David Dalin (New York: Wiener, 1989), pp. xxi-xxiii.
8. Spickard, *Mixed Blood*, p. 344; see Drachsler, *Democracy and Assimilation*, p. 264.
9. For a typical account, see Richard Goldhurst, "Growing Up Between Two Worlds," *Commentary* 16 (July 1953): 30-35, reprinted in Barron, *Blending American*, pp. 328-338.
10. See Drachsler, *Democracy and Assimilation*, pp. 99, 121, 124-128, 264; Marshall Sklare, *America's Jews* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), pp. 180-209; *Intermarriage: Facts for Planning: National Jewish Population Study* (New York, n.d.), pp. 10-11.
11. Steven M. Cohen, *American Modernity and Jewish Identity* (New York: Tavistock, 1983), pp. 122-124.
12. Spickard, *Mixed Blood*, pp. 59ff.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 344; Lieberson and Waters, *From Many Strands*, pp. 173, 225.
14. Calculated from Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 333 n. 58; see also Fran Schumer, "Star-Crossed," *New York Magazine*, April 2, 1990, p. 34.
15. Quoted in Spickard, *Mixed Blood*, pp. 198-199.

16. Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, p. 93.

17. Yisrael Ellman, "Intermarriage in the United States: A Comparative Study of Jews and Other Ethnic Groups," *Jewish Social Studies* 49 (Winter 1987): 15.

18. "Guidelines of Archdiocese Galveston-Houston, 1975," in Helga Croner, ed., *More Stepping Stones to Jewish-Christian Relations: An Unabridged Collection of Christian Documents 1975-1983* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 70-71. For background on Catholic attitudes, see Barron, *Blending American*, pp. 61-70.

19. Ellman, "Intermarriage in the United States," pp. 15-16.

20. Wuthnow, *Restructuring of American Religion*, *passim*; see also idem, *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals and Secularism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989).

21. Ellman, "Intermarriage in the United States," p. 20.

22. On this important theme, which is full of implications for students of contemporary Jewry, see Lieberman and Waters, *From Many Strands*, pp. 254-257; and Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).