ENSURING JEWISH CONTINUITY
Policy Challenges and Implications for Jewish Communal Professionals

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To ensure Jewish continuity, Jewish communal professionals must take up the challenge of formulating a value system within the Jewish community of the worth and desirability of leading a Jewish life. Such a value system must communicate what we are as Jews, what we stand for, and why we merit communal support, even if it is in conflict with American universalist norms. Professionals are challenged to develop strategies to discourage intermarriage, encourage conversion, and conduct outreach initiatives to mixed-marriage couples within the framework of that value system.

Twenty-five years ago the then-Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary criticized American Jewry for devoting more resources and attention to the study of first-century Judaism in Palestine than to the condition of Jews in 20th century America. A generation later it is a point of considerable irony that, although some doubt exists as to what we actually do know of first-century Palestinian Judaism, we clearly have much more knowledge than ever before about contemporary American Jewry.

Much of the credit for accumulating this data and storehouse of information deservedly belongs to the Council of Jewish Federations, which determined that long-range communal planning can only proceed on the basis of up-to-date and reliable information. The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) represents the single most comprehensive study of American Jews ever undertaken. Yet, little consensus exists within the community as to what to do about the information gathered, its implications, and prescribed directions for future action. Some perceive the NJPS as vindication for Orthodoxy as the key to Jewish survival, despite an actual decline in the Orthodox percentage of the total population. Others advocate revitalization of the concept of *aliyah* for American Jews. Still others have issued bold pronouncements to the effect that "the battle against intermarriage is over; now is the time for a new focus on outreach," urging Jewish leaders to cease resisting intermarriage on the grounds that such resistance has been proven futile and may in fact be harmful to future efforts at reaching out to mixed-married couples.

No one of these prescriptions is likely to capture a consensus of Jewish leaders and professionals. American Jews have "voted with their feet" in rejecting both Orthodoxy and *aliyah* as solutions for any but a tiny percentage of American Jewry. Conversely, suggesting that we abandon efforts at intermarriage prevention would constitute a completely unprecedented step for Jewish leaders and would likely become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which Jews intermarry at astronomical rates once all constraints against intermarriage have fallen.

Rather, communal professionals will be forced to grapple with questions of how to ensure the future continuity and quality of American Jewish life in the absence of facile solutions and quick fixes. Rabbis, lay leaders, Jewish intellectuals, and communal professionals alike will confront difficult questions of setting communal

priorities, securing maximum results for communal investments, and developing long-range strategies for Judaic enrichment.

THE CHALLENGE OF PRIORITIES

Much of the news in the NJPS flatly contradicts the prevailing optimism of the 1980s concerning the future of American Jewry. Inspired in part by a series of federation studies suggesting *increased* communal involvement and affiliation, several social scientists and Jewish intellectuals articulated a "transformationist" vision of American Jewish life. In this view, American Jewry was by no means declining—it was merely changing the expression of its Jewish identity. Despite low fertility, high intermarriage, and weak Jewish education, at worst American Jewry would hold its own in the fourth and fifth generations. Moreover, the Jewish community would gain numerically through conversion, rather than suffer losses via intermarriage.

The most important statement of the transformationist approach is provided by Calvin Goldscheider (1986) in *Jewish Continuity and Change,* especially Chapter 2. This view was popularized by Charles Silberman (1985) in *A Certain People.* Steven M. Cohen (1988, 1989) is another proponent of the transformationist approach.

The prognoses of these "optimistic" social scientists have been sharply challenged by the NJPS. Delayed fertility has meant, in fact, decreased fertility as American Jews are clearly not replacing themselves. Conversion rates have plummeted as intermarriage becomes a more acceptable option for American Jews. Moreover, out-marriage in the second and third generations clearly threatens the Jewish future, for, absent conversion, nearly three-quarters of mixed-married couples are raising their children outside the Jewish faith (Kosmin et al., 1991, p. 16).

The mood of American Jewish leadership is changing from self-confidence to one of increased anxiety. Advocates of alternative policy solutions agree on the need to rethink communal priorities so as to undertake new programs and directions designed to ensure Jewish continuity. Now is precisely the time when existing priorities and programs may be challenged. Are we doing all we can to make Jewish life attractive enough so that few will wish to abandon it while others will wish to join it? No doubt, determining a particular direction for the future will prove difficult. However, placing the issues of ensuring Jewish continuity and enriching the quality of Jewish life at the very top of the Jewish communal agenda constitutes an appropriate and significant response to the findings of the NJPS; it serves as a clarion call alerting the community to the need for action.

THE CHALLENGE OF SETTING POLICIES

Policy formulation requires a vision of what the Jewish community can look like and what it should look like. All too often, however, serious policy discussion is inhibited by the personal experiences and "baggage" brought to the table by policymakers. Well-intentioned desires to avoid offense often are poor bases for intelligent policy formulation.

The need to separate respect for personal choices and individual good from the values and self-interest of the community is especially urgent with the most sensitive issue of intermarriage. All of us have been touched by intermarriage in one form or the other. The leadership challenge is to formulate policy that is Jewishly authentic and that will advance communal interests, rather than meet the needs—personal and familial—of individual policymakers.

More specifically, the NJPS findings present a tripartite challenge: how to preserve and enrich those committed to leading a Jewish life, how to bring in those on the margin of the community, and how to continue relations with those outside of the community. Roughly speaking, this challenge translates into a multi-track policy with different nuances and emphases in varied contexts: encouragement of in-

marriage, advocacy of conversion, and continued outreach to mixed-married homes.

It is a mistake to regard intermarriage prevention as futile or harmful. Indeed, if not for the continued resistance to intermarriage, the true intermarriage rate could well exceed 90%, given the tiny percentage of Jews in American society. Moreover, as communal leaders the moral imperative is clear: No generation of Jewish leaders has failed to resist intermarriage. Finally, it is virtually impossible to envision a creative or stable Jewish future if mixed-marriage becomes the primary or dominant expression of Jewish family life. The long-term presence of Gentile partners will, of necessity, attenuate the expression and quality of Jewishness within the home.

Therefore, we need to increase efforts to encourage in-marriage and thereby reduce the overall intermarriage rate. That will require, as Barry Shrage eloquently argues elsewhere in this issue, enriching the quality of Jewish life generally and making universally available intensive Jewish experiences, including family education, trips to Israel, and informal socialization experiences. The importance of Jewish day schools to all three major religious movements should also be emphasized. Indeed, one of the brightest spots in the NJPS is that one-third of all Jewish students receiving any form of Jewish education today are now attending Jewish day schools—the most intensive and successful model available. That represents a fundamental shift over the past generation and holds out the promise of providing core leadership for the future.

Serious efforts at prevention are also affected by the context and meaning of what we say. Here lies the fatal error of those who suggest that prevention is futile. If the Jewish community ceases to regard intermarriage as a problem and a danger to be contained, it by definition facilitates only further intermarriage. Instead, we must proclaim loudly the value of in-marriage so as to create a culture in which Jews understand fully the joys of leading a Jewish life and how those joys are best realized through marriages with Jewish partners. To be sure, such clear and explicit messages will prove painful to some. However, if we are honest with ourselves and with mixed-married couples, we require serious and candid engagement with our values and with our communal priorities. As painful as that may be, it is preferable to the perhaps more pragmatic route suggested by one outreach advocate, who informed me that he refuses to address teenagers lest he appear to be encouraging intermarriage! The alternative is clear: Nurture a language of endogamy, a climate conducive to in-marriage within the Jewish community. Rather than refrain from speaking to teenagers and singles, we ought engage them precisely on the reasons for leading a Jewish life, the joys of Jewish living, and how those joys are best realized through dating and eventually marriage to Jews.

Realistically, however, intermarriage will remain a fact of life for American Jews. Therefore, the importance of conversion to Judaism must be underscored. When a conversion occurs, the home becomes a Jewish home. As the NJPS documented, 99% of the children of converts are raised as Jews. Indeed, the Reform movement deserves great credit for revitalizing the concept of conversion and restoring it to the language of modern Judaism. Rabbi Alexander Schindler (1991) recently reemphasized this point in criticizing the tendency in the Reform movement towards neutrality to conversion in outreach initiatives under Reform auspices.

To be sure, we do have concerns with respect to conversion. Most Jews by choice do not perceive the importance of in-marriage and are reluctant to communicate that value to their children. This, in turn, raises the specter of one-generation converts, whose children may well relapse to Christianity, as recently documented by Brenda Forster and Rabbi Joseph Tabachnik (1991) in a study of Chicago Jews-by-

Choice. Nevertheless, our experience with conversion has generally been positive, and therefore the policy direction is clear: advocacy of conversion as the goal of outreach initiatives and removal of any factors (e.g. lingering hostility to Jews-by-Choice) that inhibit the possibilities of securing a conversion.

Regrettably, most mixed-marriages will *not* result in a conversion to Judaism. That is why outreach initiatives to mixed-married couples are so important. They make possible a continued dialogue so as to preserve Jewishness within the home and transmit Jewish identity components to children, and they maintain personal and human contact in the hope that, in the future, the family may draw closer to Jewish communal concerns and involvements.

In effect, this approach argues for outreach on both human and demographic grounds. On a human level, members of mixed-marriage families are all people created in the image of God. They merit our attention and concern. Jews should be encouraged to reach out to all members of their families as human beings. On a demographic level, mixed-marrieds represent a large population at risk of being lost to the Jewish community. Whether we can retain the Jewishness of the mixed-married homes is, at best, an open question. To date, the findings concerning intermarriage absent conversion suggest that Jewish identity terminates by the third generation (Medding et al., 1992). Nevertheless, we should experiment with some initiatives aimed at retaining Jewish identity in mixed-married homes.

To be successful, however, outreach initiatives must be targeted and designed properly. Targeting outreach means avoiding chasing after people who have expressed no desire to be chased. Many have chosen *not* to lead a Jewish life, and their choices ought to be respected in a free and open society. Failure to target those populations that hold out the greatest promise of leading a creative Jewish life will mean wasting limited and valuable resources. Some tension naturally exists between outreach initiatives and initiatives at intermarriage prevention. Certainly, outreach initiatives ought not come at the expense of efforts to enrich the internal quality of Jewish life and the core Jewish population.

Therefore, appropriate targeting means focusing on the "middles of Jewish life"—those who signal some desire to lead a Jewish life, rather than those who are completely unaffiliated. Generally, these middles are Jews who express a commitment to Jewish continuity—a desire to have Jewish grandchildren—but are unable to express what that means in terms of Jewish content (Cohen, 1991). Outreach to these middles, including large numbers of, but by no means all, mixed-marrieds, can enrich the lives of these people Jewishly and enable them to pursue their aspirations for Jewish continuity.

In addition to specific targeting, outreach efforts require appropriate underpinning—clear statements of Jewish marital values underscoring communal preferences for marriage with other Jews. Failure to state those values clearly, out of a well-intentioned desire to avoid alienating people, will, in fact, create a climate in which it is impossible to discourage interfaith marriage. Will mixed-marrieds be able to hear such a message? We can reasonably expect that they would prefer to hear honest statements of Jewish beliefs, rather than a Jewish tradition "dressed up" so as to be inoffensive to all. Particularly instructive here has been the experience of the Conservative movement, which labeled its program as "kiruv" rather than "outreach" so as to communicate that its objective is to bring mixed-marrieds closer to Judaism, rather than to transform its ideology in an effort to meet mixed-marrieds.

A recent book on children of intermarriage illustrates this tension aptly. In the concluding chapter to *Between Two Worlds: Choices for Grown Children of Jewish-Christian Parents,* the authors criticize a rabbi's High Holy Day address for including intermarriage among the threats to future

Jewish continuity (Goodman-Malamuth & Margolis, 1992). His well-intentioned, but in the authors' view erroneous, charge to the congregation succeeded in making the point but only at the price of alienating mixed-marrieds.

Yet, this tension between resisting intermarriage and encouraging outreach is precisely one that outreach advocates and communal professionals must confront. Failure to resist intermarriage will surely lead to its future growth. Mixed-married couples identify Jewishly much less than in-married couples. Serious outreach to mixed-marrieds cannot gloss over either these realities or Jewish ideological imperatives and preferences for in-marriage.

THE CHALLENGE OF IDEOLOGY

The last question of "kiruv" versus "outreach" suggests a broader point of long-range strategy. Prevention, conversion, and outreach all are policies that enable the community to cope with current realities. Overriding these realities is a more fundamental question of the role of ideology in contemporary Jewish life: To what are we committed when we identify ourselves as Jews? Why, in short, be Jewish in an open society that accepts Jews as human beings?

Formulating an ideology, to be sure, is more difficult than formulating specific programs and strategies, for it raises contrasting and divisive issues of values and commitments. In many ways the community would prefer avoiding ideology so as to preserve consensus or to avoid debate and polarization.

Yet, for Judaism to be taken seriously in the modern world, it must be able to speak persuasively and demonstrate its salience to modern concerns in precisely the language of norms, commitment, values, and expectations that comprises ideology. All forms of Judaism represent ideological formulations of why be Jewish. The community should be empowering its leaders to be able to say meaningful things—to express Judaic distinctiveness. Developing a serious ideology of Jewish life will necessitate honest confrontation with what we can say to mixed-marrieds without abandonment of Judaic ideals and principles.

More broadly, we ought to realize that long-term Jewish survival and continuity rests upon reclaiming the treasures of Jewish heritage and teaching and communicating those treasures to the next generation. We must find ways that Jews can turn to and find meaning within the beauties of Jewish text and tradition. Programs of outreach can serve at best as a coping mechanism. What is needed is an overarching metatheory of contemporary Jewish existence.

Rabbi Daniel Gordis (1991–92) recently expressed well the need for ideology when he challenged non-Orthodox religious movements to take themselves more seriously as modern reformulations of Jewish values, text, and tradition. Gordis argues that the non-Orthodox movements have articulated a message "so pallid that young American Jews find no reason to give it serious consideration when they make decisions about whom to date and whom to marry." Instead, Gordis calls upon the liberal movements to infuse their visions of Jewish life with constancy, so that being Jewish comes to permeate constantly our sense of ourselves and our values. Moreover, our commitments to Jewish life must be intense and passionate. We must demonstrate that the rhythms of our lives are clearly Jewish, rather than operate, as we all too often do, as universal men and women with occasional Jewish window dressing. Finally, Gordis urges that we recognize that being Jewish is a matter of commitments to Jewish life and that certain of those commitments are simply non-negotiable.

Rabbi Gordis's recommendations, however, should by no means be restricted to religious movements. Leaders within Jewish federations, Jewish Community Centers, social services, and human relations agencies alike must ask themselves whether they can speak with seriousness about their Judaism. New coalitions are necessary between religious and communal institutions to address effectively the challenges of

ensuring Jewish continuity. No coalition, however, can be any more effective than the ideas and values it represents. A call to the community to take seriously the heritage and values of Judaism, the treasures of Jewish historical and contemporary experience, and the power of the Jewish idea is the critical and long-range direction for future policy and action.

In short, in addition to strategies and programs, communal professionals must pick up the mantle of formulating a value system within the Jewish community of the worth and desirability of leading a Jewish life. Such a value system must communicate what we are as Jews, what we stand for, and why we should merit communal support, even if it is in conflict with American universalist norms. It, in turn, involves the difficult and sensitive question of professional role modeling in Jewish life. What we say and do as professionals helps define the cultural climate within the Jewish community. Our professional responsibility mandates that we take those imperatives seriously.

What will such a message comprise? Communal professionals ought to be challenging the community to be both realistic and visionary at the same time. Considerations of realism suggest that we cope as best as we can with the behavior patterns of Jews. Considerations of vision suggest that we inspire the community not only to confront what is but also to ask where as a community we should be.

Writing in the pages of the *Journal* almost two decades ago, after the last national population survey in 1970, Gerald Bubis urged new coalitions between rabbis and communal workers, synagogues, federations, and Jewish Centers in pursuit of "a series of strategies which can encourage inmarriage and discourage intermarriage. . . professional concern calls for the encouragement of the development of strategies which encourage the values and behaviors least likely to lead to intermarriage and mixed marriage" (Bubis, 1973, p. 94). In Bubis' view, Jewish communal professionals ought be challenged to take action that would discourage mixed-marriage, encourage conversion (or "mitzva marriages"), and find ways for mixed-married couples to seek out and express some Jewish identification.

Bubis' counsel rings no less true today. The difference is that the hour is later, the problem more severe, and therefore the challenge and urgency are all the greater.

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