

SITTING ON THE SPACE BETWEEN TWO CHAIRS

Marriage Preparation For Interfaith Couples

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Since 1988, over 100 interfaith couples have participated in special groups of the Making Marriage Work program. The program has the explicit goal of lowering divorce rates and the implicit goal of influencing couples to decide to raise their children as Jews. A 1991 follow-up study of graduates of the MMW program found that the interfaith couples had a similar divorce rate to the Jewish couples, primarily because Jewish/Gentile couples broke their engagements at double the rate of Jewish couples.

American Jewry has recently been shocked to learn that about half of all Jews who are getting married these days are marrying non-Jews. Even more alarming, the percentage of these mixed marriages that become "Mitzvah Marriages" as a result of the non-Jewish partner's becoming Jewish is also declining as exogamy becomes more frequent. Finally, there is the devastating fact that only one-quarter of the children in these mixed marriages are being raised as Jews.

In previous decades, when exogamy rates were lower and conversion rates higher, some sociologists argued that the loss factors in the United States would not be as high as they had been in Europe two or three generations ago. Indeed, one or two even thought there might be a net gain from intermarriage. These illusions have not been destroyed totally.

Can anything be done to reduce this hemorrhage in American Jewry? No one program or activity can do the job, but we must not stand by idly while our community bleeds. One step in the right direction has been taken by the Making Marriage Work program of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. Rabbi Aaron Weiss and Dr. Sylvia Weishaus started this premarital counseling program in 1979 because they were alarmed by the rising American divorce rate, which had also affected the Jewish community during the 1970s. I became involved in 1988 when, after several previous attempts had failed, we had our first

group for mixed religious couples. Since that time over 100 mixed couples have taken MMW (for Interfaith couples).

One of the reasons why only one-quarter of the children of mixed marriages are raised as Jews is the very high divorce rate in these marriages. Children remain with their mother in 90% of divorce cases. Non-Jewish divorcees will rarely raise their children as Jews, especially if they remarry a non-Jew as 90% of them will. Divorced Jewish women are much more likely to give their children a Jewish education (if they can afford it or the Jewish community subsidizes it) and their Jewish family of origin will influence their children much more than the family of the Jewish ex-husband will be able to influence his children. This is one of the reasons why Jewish women who marry out are 40 to 50% more likely to have their children identify as Jews than are exogamous Jewish men. Nevertheless, the majority of the children of Jewish women as well as Jewish men will not identify themselves as being Jewish.

The MMW program has the explicit goal of lowering divorce rates and the implicit goal of influencing couples to decide to raise their children as Jews, rather than as Christians or as both/neither. If the couple is unable to agree on such a commitment, it is hoped that they will re-evaluate their decision to marry.

How effective can a 10-week premarital training course be? For Jewish couples MMW is very effective. A 1973 national survey of almost 10,000 ever-married

women found that 14% of Roman Catholic, 15% of Jewish, and 19% of white Protestant women were divorced within 10 years of their first marriage. In contrast, the figure for the Jewish couples who graduated from MMW is only 9%. This is especially impressive because divorce rates are much higher now than in the years preceding 1973, and the divorce rate on the West Coast has always been somewhat higher than the national average. So the Jewish couples who take MMW have more successful marriages. Of course, this is a self-selecting group and their willingness to take the MMW class could indicate a personality better able to stay married. Nevertheless, since many of the people took the class because it was paid for and given to them as a gift, the group is not totally self-selective.

What about the mixed couples? Comparing the 93 mixed couples to the 300 Jewish couples who took MMW during the same time interval, we find a similar divorce rate. This is a major accomplishment for the mixed religious group because many previous studies have indicated that mixed religious couples have a much higher divorce rate than intrafaith couples. An analysis I did of the National Freshman Study (1987) found that the divorce rate for

Jewish/Gentile couples is 133% higher than for Jewish couples. How did MMW accomplish this miracle?

The answer seems to be that Jewish/Gentile couples broke their engagements at double the rate (20% versus 10%) of Jewish couples. Thus, by enabling Jewish/Gentile couples to focus on their potential problems before marriage, MMW significantly lowered the breakup rate after marriage. No doubt, the class has its most dramatic impact during the first few years of a marital relationship. I would expect that as the years go by the divorce rate for the mixed couples will rise significantly above that of the Jewish couples. However, it will never be as high as it would have been had these couples not taken MMW because at least 10% of the marriages that would have failed did not occur. I therefore recommend that the MMW program be offered by Jewish Family Services and rabbis throughout the United States.

REFERENCES

- Maller, Allen S. (1987, Fall). Recent data on religious identity of college freshmen: A note. *Jewish Social Studies*, 49(3/4), p. 320.