

SENSITIZING JEWISH PROFESSIONALS TO INTERMARRIAGE ISSUES IN COUNSELING, GROUP WORK, AND EDUCATION

JUDY PETSONK

Author of The Intermarriage Handbook: A Guide for Jews and Christians

In the long run, the individual goals of counseling and group work offered under Jewish auspices and the communal goals of strengthening the Jewish community should coincide. By assisting interfaith couples to develop strong marriages, professionals and the Jewish community for whom they work become important resources in their lives. Counseling and group work skills can be used most effectively when intermarriage is considered in the context of developmental theory.

Professionals working under Jewish auspices who deal with intermarried families often feel torn and embattled because they sense that they have two conflicting roles. As human service professionals, their first obligation is to serve the needs of their clients. As representatives of the Jewish community, their mission is to promote the survival of the Jewish people. It is not always clear that the needs of the intermarried family and the needs of the Jewish community coincide. However, in the long run, applying good counseling and group work skills to the needs of the intermarried couple should benefit the Jewish community, thereby meeting both individual and communal goals.

Counseling and group work skills can be used most effectively when intermarriage is considered in the context of developmental theory. This article examines that theory and its implications for the role of the professional, whether group worker, therapist, or rabbi. It is based on interviews with 197 members of intermarried families and 173 professionals (therapists, educators, clergy) in preparing my book, *The Intermarriage Handbook: A Guide for Jews and Christians* (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988).

Not only must professionals working with intermarried couples use their full complement of social work and human

skills but we must also take three additional steps before we undertake that work. First, we must recognize that the issue of intermarriage is an emotionally loaded one. We need to identify our own biases, our own particular agendas about how Judaism should be practiced and how the Jewish people should be kept alive. We must ask ourselves these questions: Are our feelings about Judaism and Jewishness going to interfere with our ability to really listen to each member of the family as an individual with his or her own particular history and needs? Are we going to be able to put aside our own agendas so that we can put the couples' needs first? A simple guideline to follow is to try to see the world through the culture in which each family member was raised, particularly if that culture and religion are not our own (McGoldrick et al., 1982; Petsonk & Remsen, 1988).

Second, professionals must become an information resource on issues relevant to the intermarried couple; in particular we must become knowledgeable about Christianity. In my research, I interviewed several Christians who were deeply offended by a Jewish professional who did not know the difference between Protestants and Catholics, or between Presbyterians or Lutherans, or who had no sense of the rituals and beliefs that were of importance

to the Gentile partner. The professional must also know something about current church doctrine. For example, a nonpracticing Catholic struggling with the decision whether to raise his or her children as Jews might find it important to know that the Catholic Church no longer accepts the idea of limbo—that unbaptized infants are forever excluded from heaven. Participating in Jewish-Christian dialogue sessions, attending church with Gentile colleagues, and reading about Christianity are three ways to develop a fuller understanding of Christianity.

Professionals working with intermarried couples should also develop a resource file. Such a file might include suggestions on how to honor the Gentile partner's attachment to Christmas without celebrating the holiday in the home, a list of synagogues that are especially congenial to interfaith couples, reverent readings from Jewish sources that could be incorporated into a civil wedding ceremony, and referrals to rabbis or judges who perform interfaith ceremonies (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988).

Third, it is important to understand developmental theory and to place intermarriage in that context. Erik Erikson (1964) and subsequent theorists have taught us that each person's identity or sense of self develops throughout the life cycle as a result of struggling through issues that surface at different ages and stages of life. Similarly, an individual's spiritual and ethnic identity develops sequentially (Fowler, 1981; Petsonk & Remsen, 1988). The family unit, the marriage itself, and divorce and remarriage can all be conceptualized as evolving sequentially through stages (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980, 1988). Tables 1-3 provide a detailed description of the stages of development along all these dimensions.

Intermarriage—the marriage of people from two different cultures—may be understood in part as the response of two individuals to their own identity struggles. The intermarriage in turn affects the evolution of the family unit, the relationship

to the couples' families of origin, and to the children of that marriage.

Couples most often come for counseling or to an interfaith couples' group when they are struggling with a decision whether to marry, how to raise the children, or what holidays to observe. Underlying these immediate problems are often more subtle issues of individuation/separation from parents, of marital communication and intimacy, and of the balance of power in the marriage. Similarly, such underlying issues are present when professionals work with the parents or children of an intermarried couple.

Developmental issues vary depending on the age and maturity of the couple. The following sections describe issues that commonly surface at different stages and present strategies for dealing with those issues.

YOUNG COUPLES

Couples who marry in their twenties are often in the midst of a separation struggle with their own parents. In fact, as family therapist Rabbi Edwin Friedman (1980) has pointed out, the intermarriage is often a reaction to the separation struggle. Subconsciously, the intermarriee feels that choosing a partner from another ethnic group will help him make the break from his own family.

Individuation is an important issue that often lies just under the surface for young engaged couples, newlyweds, college students, or teenagers. At the high school and college level, programs about interdating can help youngsters examine their own dating patterns and become aware of whether they are using their choice of partners as a way—not always the optimal way—to distance themselves from their parents.

Yet, the way in which programs are planned and carried out is as important as their content. Since the lack of a sense of autonomy can be one of the psychological driving forces that causes a youngster to

choose a partner from a different ethnic group, it is vital to structure both the planning and execution of activities so as to foster young people's sense of autonomy.

Whether in group work or individual counseling, the professional must give top priority to validating the young people. Whatever the activity or topic of discussion, reflect back to them the strengths and potential strengths in their ways of thinking and acting. At the same time, avoid the pitfall of making yourself the authority figure, whether by giving criticism or being the sole source of praise. Instead, elicit feedback from other members of a peer group.

Because the separation issue can be projected onto you, when working with engaged or newly married interfaith couples, strongly encourage them to participate in an interfaith couples' group where the group and not you becomes the source of feedback. Group work does not eliminate projection, but it provides an opportunity to diffuse it and refocus discussion on the members' problems, needs, and feelings.

In working with young people or couples directly embroiled in a difficult separation struggle with their parents, it is often helpful to reframe the issue. Rather than seeing their task at this stage of life as breaking away, a mindset that reinforces their self-image as reacting to the more powerful parent, you may wish to suggest that the parents need help from the young person in making the transition to a new stage of life. Parents must make the difficult adjustment to a stage in which they are no longer needed in a parenting role. Letting go feels to them like losing something important in their life, and they may find it difficult to make this transition without active support from the young person. Communicating sympathetically with the parent should be seen not as knuckling under to the parent's wishes, but as a strategy for helping the parent feel emotionally ready to make this transition.

You can suggest a variety of ways in which the young person can ease the anx-

iety of the parent. Listening actively, reflecting back their understanding of the parents' concerns, communicates subtly that the young person is no longer reactive, but is mature and self-controlled.

Explain that it is vital to avoid a rupture in the family if at all possible. When ruptures occur, families often become frozen at this stage, and making a successful emotional separation can then become a long drawn-out process. If the young people do not persist and work out the relationship with their parents now, they may find that it is still unresolved when they turn 40. In addition, if a healthy separation from parents has not taken place, the couple will continue to play out within their own marriage the struggle to feel like fully autonomous individuals.

Any stable marriage requires both healthy communication and the achievement of a stable balance of power (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980, 1988). Each partner must learn how to clarify individual needs, to communicate in a direct fashion, and to negotiate in a way that leaves both members feeling empowered, rather than competitive. As outlined by Fisher and Ury (1981), a couple must develop these marital negotiating skills:

1. Clarify and state each member's individual needs.
2. Generate a variety of options to meet those needs.
3. Develop criteria for choosing among those options.
4. Reach agreement on which option best meets the needs of both partners.

Many engaged interfaith couples, wanting to maintain the glorious harmony of "being in love" and sensing the potential for conflict if they start discussing such issues as how to raise the children, avoid making decisions altogether or really talking about the meaning of those decisions. They thus fail to develop an effective pattern of negotiation, one of the prerequisites of a healthy marriage. Instead,

Table 1
CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Age/Stage	Identity Issues To Be Resolved (Erikson)	Spiritual Development (Fowler)	Ethnic Identity Development (Petsonk & Remsen)
Infancy	Basic trust through dependable feeding and holding	Undifferentiated faith: world is ok.	Development of a consistent sense of "my world" through regular home rituals (Shabbat candles, bedtime), familiar foods, places; "my world" consists of family, friends, and relatives who share these rituals.
Early childhood	Autonomy versus shame: toilet-training	Transcendental (age 2-7): world is magical; God is magical, everywhere, and all-powerful—like the child's parents.	Identification with parents; children need to feel like part of parents. If one parent is Jewish and one Christian, child will feel he is both; perhaps that half his body is Jewish and half Christian.
Play age	Initiative versus guilt	Child is concrete and literal (If God is in your heart, He's in your chest) and practical (bad is what I get punished for; good is what I get rewarded for).	Religion/culture, associated with concrete symbols (We have a Christmas tree, so we must be Christian). Symbols associated with emotions. (Christmas tree = warmth and fun. Being Christian is fun.)
School age	Industry versus inferiority	Fundamentalist (age 7-12): Children are rule-oriented and rigid, understand religion through its stories, which they accept as true; God is anthropomorphic.	Important to child to acquire competence in skills recognized by his or her group; learning about self (us) and other (them): These are the people with the same label as us (e.g., Jewish) and the same symbols and stories.
Adolescence	Identity versus identity diffusion	Conventional religiosity duplicates parents' ideology: people who think like us are right, others are wrong.	This is the peer group where I belong.

SOURCE: This chart is an adaptation of one by Doris Ullendorf, a New York City therapist who works with intermarried families.

Table 2
ADULT DEVELOPMENT AND MARITAL EVOLUTION

Stage	Identity Issues To Be Resolved (Erikson)	To Be Resolved (Sheehy)	Spiritual Development (Fowler)	Marital Stages and Tasks (Carter and McGoldrick)	Ethnic Identity and Intermarriage Issues (Petsonk and Remsen)
Young adult	Identity versus identity diffusion	"Pull up roots"	Challenge parents' ideology. Rationalist or occultist.	Leaving home: Accept emotional and financial responsibility for self.	Breaking out of "cradle culture": Universalist outlook; learn, stretch. "Outsider" partner subconsciously seen as aid in separating from parents.
	Intimacy versus isolation	"Trying 20s": lifestyle and career choices; women have "Urge to Merge"		Develop intimate peer relationships. Establish self in work. The new couple: Make commitment. Realign relationships with family and friends.	Outward-focused (on career), rather than inner-focused. People anxious to pair and paper over their differences. Adjustment to differences in cultural style: learning to communicate. Dealing with family opposition and expectations of extended family.
	Generativity versus self-absorption	"Catch-30s": Re-evaluate lifestyle choices, goals. Divorce possible. Women—identity submerged in meeting needs of children.	New interest in religion. Awareness of paradox, of limits, inability to live by ideals. New openness to non-rational	Families with young children: Adjust couple relationship to include child. Assume new parenting and grand-parenting roles.	Reconnecting with roots: Coming to terms with ways you are like your parents. Agreeing on religious lifestyle for children, carrying that out through holiday celebrations, education, etc. Find peer group of young families. Cope with children's questions. Become religious leader of family.

Table 2 (continued)
ADULT DEVELOPMENT AND MARITAL EVOLUTION

Stage	Identity Issues To Be Resolved (Erikson)	To Be Resolved (Sheehy)	Spiritual Development (Fowler)	Marital Stages and Tasks (Carter and McGoldrick)	Ethnic Identity and Intermarriage Issues (Petsonk and Remsen)
					Adult raised in mixed marriage may have identity crisis, feel unable to choose religion for own children because it feels like choosing between parents (loyalty conflict).
					Buried in routine: partners feel loss of individuality (organization man and Mommy). Religious affiliation may feel confining. Convert may feel disillusion, doubts.
		"Deadline Decade" (age 35-45): Midlife crisis Search for authenticity. Women — reinvolved in careers. Men: introspective, want family time.		Family with teens: Family boundaries shift to allow teens more independence. Couple refocuses on career or marital issues.	As teens challenge parents' religious choices, couple relives and re-evaluates earlier negotiations. Sometimes, belated determination to have child Bar Mitzvahed.
Mature age	Integrity versus despair	Renewal or rigidity		Launch children. Adjust to being a couple again. Make room for child's spouse and grandchildren. Care of frail parents.	Religion may become more important. If child is intermarried, adjust to "outsider in-law," rethink grandparenting role. Empty nest, then fly the coop: Divorce; remarriage as intermarriage (possibly much younger partner, children).

Table 3
EVOLUTION OF DIVORCED AND REMARRIED FAMILIES

	Emotional Stages and Tasks (Carter and McGoldrick)	Intermarriage Issues (Petsonk and Remsen)
Divorce	Accept one's own part in failure of marriage. Work cooperatively on custody, visitation, finances. Mourn loss of intact family. Realign relationships with extended family. Stay connected with spouse's family. Achieve emotional divorce: overcome anger, guilt, hurt.	Divorcing partners may unconsciously use religion as pawn in negotiations about custody and visitation; may try to maintain control of partner's home by creating rules about children's religion; may use religion to criticize ex-spouse to children. Parents must weigh commitment to child's emotional health versus commitment to push for certain religious upbringing.
Postdivorce	Willingness to continue parental contact with children and ex-spouse. Rebuild financial resources and social network. Find ways to continue effective parenting. (Usually takes at least 2½ years before ready for remarriage).	Divorcee may blame ex-inlaws and cut off from them. Children may commute between Jewish and Christian household. Holiday celebrations are emotionally and logistically difficult. Children should not be cut off from either set of grandparents or from holidays they previously celebrated. Convert or Gentile committed to raise children as Jewish may feel incompetent to do so; may lose social network. Convert to Judaism may revert to Christianity, either because of renewed closeness to family of origin, anger at ex-spouse and family, or need for emotional sustenance of childhood religion.
Remarriage	Struggle with fears of investing in new marriage and family. Deal with reactions of children, extended families, ex-spouse. Concern and guilt about children. Cope with rearousal of attachment (positive or negative) to ex-spouse. Deal with ambiguity of new family structure, roles, relationships.	If first marriage was in-marriage, second is more likely to be intermarriage. Jew may ask Gentile to agree to Jewish home, then block full integration into community because of subconscious reaction to ex-spouse. If first marriage was intermarriage, second may be in-marriage. Children may resent losing Christmas.
Creating stepfamily	Give up on old models of family. Create permeable boundaries to allow shifting household memberships. Work for open communication between all parents, grandparents, and children. Create an integrated stepfamily (generally takes a minimum of 2-3 years).	Children 6 or under will generally identify with and want to be the religion of custodial parent. HOWEVER, children should not be asked to switch religions after they develop a self-identification with one religion (generally age 7 to 9). Children coming into a family of a different religion need to bring traditions from old family and to celebrate holidays with relatives. Involving children in discussion of what old holidays were like and in planning new holidays can be of help. Children may resolve identity issues by rejecting religion.

they maintain a "conspiracy of silence" about their religious differences. Religion becomes a taboo subject, and they fail to develop an important area of intimacy. During our research for *The Intermarriage Handbook*, my co-author and I talked to couples who had been married for years but did not know each other's deepest beliefs. Each did not know whether the other partner prayed or where the other looked for strength in crisis. Many times couples were discussing a topic for the very first time in our presence. One important task of the professional is to provide a safe environment in which partners can talk to each other about their spiritual lives. A good place to begin is by encouraging partners to share memories of their childhood experiences of religion and what these meant to them. From this discussion the professional can then help them clarify their loyalties and needs.

Problems in the marital relationship do not necessarily mean the presence of pathology. An important role of the professional is to search for and reinforce the healthy instincts of the partners. For example, when a couple has trouble arriving at a decision about child rearing, it is often because each partner wants to have a full sense of spiritual ownership of the home and the children. In the long run, the couples who have the best chance of a successful marriage and of raising healthy children are those in which both partners have achieved that sense of ownership.

For the Jewish professional whose sympathies and loyalties lie with bringing the children up as Jews, it is particularly important to be alert to the needs of the Gentile partner. If the couple does decide to bring the children up as Jews, the Gentile partner must feel that his or her needs have been fully considered in making that decision, as well as in implementing it—in choosing the particular style or flavor of Judaism that will be developed in this home. Be aware of the psychological distance that the Gentile partner must travel to have a Jewish home. The distance is

particularly great if the Gentile is the wife who is likely to have the major responsibility for child rearing. Jewish culture is a foreign world to her. She needs to create bridges from the home in which she grew up to the home she is creating. She must be able to incorporate her family of origin's traditions and values and see how they are not only compatible with but enriching to a Jewish home. *She needs to see herself in the Jewish aspects of her home, finding the Judaism that is already in her, that she already owns.* Professionals must have a deep understanding of Christianity in general and of this particular person's background in order to help her make this bridge.

It is vitally important not to rush the Gentile partner into either a conversion or a commitment to a Jewish home. He or she should have an opportunity to practice and live with Jewish rituals and holidays, to visit Jewish relatives and synagogues, and to make this commitment with real understanding and eagerness. In our research, we found a number of converts who regretted their conversions either because they felt they had been pressured into them or because they had made them too eagerly without realizing the loss they would feel at being cut off from their own, still very alive Christian faith (Huberman, 1982).

OLDER COUPLES

When couples marry, they enter into an unconscious contract (Sager, 1976). One "clause" of this contract states that both partners, their values, and their relationship will always remain as they were when the marriage began. However, this clause is bound to be violated as people develop both spiritually and emotionally throughout life (Fowler, 1981).

Many couples marry in their twenties when they are at their greatest distance from religion. Their unconscious contract includes a clause that both partners are citizens of the world, with no need for

religion. They are rationalists and secularists who distance themselves not only from their parents but also from the ideas they were taught and the community in which they were raised. Later in their marriage, when they have children and need to draw on the parenting skills that they derived from their own parents, they may feel a need to re-establish a connection to religion. Or, when illness, death in the family, and other challenges of life tax their emotions, they may experience a new openness to the nonrational, to the rituals or messages of religion (Fowler, 1981). Sometimes, their children may make a demand to bring religion into the home. If only one partner feels the need for a return to religion or both feel it but wish to return to different religions, the relationship may go through a stressful period. Partners may feel betrayed or unfairly constrained as they are forced to renegotiate that unconscious contract.

A professional can help facilitate this renegotiation in several different ways. First, help the couple develop the marital negotiating skills described above (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Second, help the couple see themselves in a larger context; for example, understanding their particular spiritual needs in relationship to their backgrounds and psychological evolution, and not as Truth. Third, you can help work out a new contract in which the partners agree on different areas of commonality and separateness. If the professional is nonreligious, he or she may have to work hard to understand the ways in which the religious partner's new interest in religion is nourishing and fruitful so as to be able to translate this interest in an understandable, nonthreatening way to the secular partner.

REMARRIAGES

Every marriage brings with it the task of establishing communication patterns and a sense of intimacy. In a remarriage, the difficulty in achieving these tasks often lies

not in separating from the parent, but in separating from the first partner and achieving a full emotional divorce (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988; Petsonk & Remsen, 1988). Where this has not been achieved, the person who is remarrying often cannot hear or respond to the needs of the second partner because he or she is still reacting against the first spouse. Thus, in many remarriages of a Gentile woman to a Jewish man, the Gentile partner may be actively interested in raising the child as a Jew. However, her Jewish husband may subtly block her attempts to become integrated into the Jewish community because he feels subconsciously she will then be too much like the first wife. These underlying issues must be worked through.

ETHNIC IDENTITY

Social psychology and ethnotherapy (Klein, 1980) also have insights that can be useful in dealing with interfaith families. First, at a subconscious level, the ethnic group is felt as a reflection of family (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988). Therefore, it is natural that during periods when individuals are struggling to separate from their families, they also distance themselves from their ethnic group. When the separation struggle is resolved, which may not occur until the thirties or forties in members of highly enmeshed families, these individuals often are much more open to reconnecting with their ethnic or religious group.

Second, feelings of inadequacy or lack of self-esteem are often projected outward onto one's own ethnic group (Klein, 1980; Petsonk & Remsen 1988). Often, members of minorities internalize the prejudiced attitudes of the majority culture. For example, when we questioned men who had intermarried about their feelings about the Holocaust, we found many who were deeply ashamed and felt that Jews had been too impotent to resist the Nazis and thus were partly to blame for their own destruction. When people take in such prejudices,

their own self-image is damaged, and they are correspondingly ambivalent toward members of their ethnic group, particularly toward the opposite sex. This can be hard to detect, because the prejudices of a minority toward other group members are not always the same as the majority-group prejudices. For example, whereas Italian men are seen as stereotypically macho by non-Italians, Italian women often see them as immature, demanding babies; although Italian women are often seen as sexy by non-Italians, they are often seen as smothering Mommies by Italian men (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988, citing Sirey). Because stereotypes are psychological projections rather than accurate perceptions of reality, they often contain contradictions. Some Jewish women may stereotype Jewish men as ineffectual wimps, whereas others see them as demanding, self-centered princes. Jewish men may stereotype Jewish women either as frigid, helpless princesses or as overemotional all-powerful mothers. These in-group stereotypes generally work to "de-sexualize" members of one's own group so that only outsiders come to be seen as attractive partners.

Youth workers and Hillel directors must become aware of the danger of internalized prejudices. One useful strategy is to develop workshops to counter these stereotypes while youngsters are still at the dating or even the predating stage. Professionals working with interfaith couples may find that the ambivalent Jewish man, although professing that he wants to raise his children Jewishly (or at least not as Christians), is either unhelpful or downright hostile to his wife's attempts to connect to the Jewish community. An important part of working with such an individual is exploring his internalized prejudices.

Third, different cultures and religions may use the same words with substantially different meanings (McGoldrick et al., Pearce & Giordano, 1980). The partners of an intermarriage often speak different cultural languages without being aware of it. For example, Judaism and Christianity

mean very different things by the word "religion." Bringing a child up as a Christian means bringing him or her up with certain beliefs. In contrast, bringing a child up as a Jew involves a complex intertwining of identity, history, and culture, which may or may not have anything to do with religious institutions, practices, or beliefs. A partner raised as a Christian who is more attracted to the spiritual aspects of Judaism may feel very let down if the Jewish partner wants nothing to do with them. Or the Christian partner may be very mystified about the expectations of a Jewish upbringing if the Jew wants to raise his or her children as Jews but does not want to attend synagogue. Again, the professional is faced with the task of clarifying and translating what each partner says so that each can hear the other's legitimate needs. A nonreligious professional needs to be alert to his or her own biases when doing this translating.

Beyond the spiritual sphere, every culture has very different norms of child discipline, expression of emotions, eating, illness, relationships with extended family, and a host of other issues (Crohn, 1985; McGoldrick et al., Pearce & Giordano, 1980; Petsonk & Remsen, 1988). The divorce rate among intermarried couples is substantially higher than the rate among intermarried Jewish couples (Kosmin et al., 1989). Although divorced interfaith couples generally say that their difficulties had nothing to do with religion, the problems may well stem from this broader communication gap.

One of the tasks of the professional is to help couples become aware of and adjust to their cultural differences and to communicate across their language gap. Negotiating these differences can be quite difficult, because they are linked to deep symbolisms in the psyche and to basic personality patterns. For example, cultures shape peoples' sense of how much emotion to express in crisis, how much physical affection to show in public, and whether to express anger by silent withdrawal or

shouting. These expectations then become integrated into our personalities. In some cultures, food is a symbol of love and an abundance of food is reassurance of affection, whereas in others, it is a symbol of excess and the proper response is thrifty restraint. Not only powerful feelings but also powerful needs come to be associated with food, money, and other cultural symbols. Chapter 5 of *The Intermarriage Handbook* discusses many of these cultural patterns and symbolisms and gives strategies the couples can use for negotiating (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988).

CHILDREN OF INTERMARRIAGE

Different developmental and social issues arise when dealing with children of intermarriage. As mentioned above, ethnic group identity develops sequentially along with other aspects of the personality (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988). One of children's first psychological tasks is to incorporate their parents as part of their identity. When a preschooler says that he or she is both Jewish and Christian, it is important to reinforce the child's positive identification with both parents. Rather than contradict the child directly, the professional can simply say, "You're like your Daddy in some ways and your Mommy in some ways." When the child is aged 9 or older, parents and teachers (working in tandem, not at cross-purposes!) can make a distinction between culture or ethnic group and religion; for example, "You are both Italian and Jewish, because you have an Italian parent and a Jewish parent. But your parents have agreed to raise you in the Jewish religion. That's the set of ideas they agree on."

In the grade-school and junior high school years, just as the child is seeking mastery in cognitive skills, he or she is trying to achieve mastery of the skills for belonging to a religious group. In high school, the two issues working in tandem are belonging to the peer group and individuation—defining one's own identity

vis-a-vis one's friends and family. A youngster whose parents have remained outside the world of religion may join a Jewish youth group as a way of exploring the Jewish components of his identity, but may drop out again if he does not achieve a feeling of belonging. The sense of exclusion could come from two sources: remarks of peers or teachers ("You're not really Jewish because your mother isn't Jewish") or feelings of incompetence (going to a Bar or Bat Mitzvah and not knowing what to do because the youngster has hardly ever been in a synagogue and does not have the mastery of synagogue skills). The youth group leader can help mitigate this sense of exclusion by deflecting the focus from one individual and giving information directed to the whole group: "The Jewish community today has many different rules for who belongs. In Reform synagogues a person with one Jewish parent is considered fully Jewish." Or, "There are so many different ways of having a Bar Mitzvah today. Can anyone tell us what typically goes on, and what it means to you?" Social groups, such as B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, can be important supports to the development of Jewish identity in interfaith children. An American Jewish Committee task force on the formation of Jewish identity led by psychiatrist Samuel Klagsbrun concluded that the most powerful determinant of whether people continued to identify Jewishly as adults was not home style or religious education, but whether they moved in a predominantly Jewish social world (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988, citing Klagsbrun).

Where the youngster's parents are supportive of their child having a Jewish identity, it can be helpful to alert them to these developmental issues and to suggest ways that they can assist the youngster's identity development.

PARENTS OF AN INTERMARRIED COUPLE

Developmental issues are similarly important when counseling the parents of an in-

termarried Jewish young adult. A long-term rupture of the family may be prevented by helping the parents focus on dealing with their grief at the intermarriage, rather than attempting to control their child, and helping them understand and accept the paradox that they have to let go of the child in order to keep him. One of the best ways to do this is to focus on the parents' potential grandparenting role. If they understand what their role is as grandparents and its importance—to serve as a spiritual and emotional model or as an alternative adult during times when the child needs to be separating from the parents—they can work on transforming their family role, rather than losing it entirely. At the same time, they must be urged to respect the boundaries and the household pattern established by their children. They must strike a balance: they can be a role model simply by being themselves, but they should not pressure or intrude.

ROLE OF THE RABBI

One of the most critical turning points for interfaith couples, and potentially one of the most fruitful points for intervention, is when they seek out a rabbi to officiate at the wedding ceremony. Many couples who would not join an interfaith couples group or seek individual counseling come into contact with the Jewish community at this point. Unfortunately, for many couples, this first contact is an extremely negative one. Rabbis may see themselves as simply communicating the official stance of their wing of Judaism. Yet, they are perceived by the couple as gatekeepers to the Jewish community. We have met couples who were still angry 20 years later and had remained outside the Jewish community for a decade or more because of what they perceived as a rejection from a rabbi—or sometimes from a series of five or six rabbis.

Even if the rabbi, because of his or her religious commitments, would have to decline to officiate at an interfaith wed-

ding, it is possible—with some knowledge of developmental theory and family dynamics—to transform this key interview from a potentially alienating experience to a rewarding one that will not only create a stronger foundation for marriage but also draw the couple closer to Judaism. By creating partnerships in our communities between professionals in counseling/group work and rabbis, we can develop a cadre of rabbis aware of the relevant theory and skilled in the dynamics of the interview. Co-facilitating an interfaith couples group with a social worker gives the rabbi a chance to interact with engaged couples around other issues than officiation at the wedding and gives the couples a chance to see the rabbi in a counseling and welcoming role, rather than as a gatekeeper.

During the initial phone call and interview with an interfaith couple, the rabbi's first and most difficult task is to transform the couple's perception of the rabbi from gatekeeper to resource and ally. On a subconscious level, the couple may react in the interview as if the rabbi were a player in the individuation struggle with their parents. The rabbi is, like the parent, an authority figure, with the power to give validation or to withhold it.

To transform this perception, the rabbi needs to go through the same process as in an interfaith couples group: first, drawing out each partner's needs and then helping them (1) communicate their needs to each other, (2) generate a variety of options, and (3) develop criteria for choosing among those options. From the very first telephone call, the rabbi needs to be conscious of the priority of giving support and showing caring. Regardless of whether the rabbi will be able to officiate or not, he or she should ask questions about whether the couple is experiencing difficulties with family or roadblocks in planning the wedding, should find out what options the couple has explored in planning the wedding, and should offer constructive suggestions wherever possible. Obtaining the couple's telephone number

and calling them a few weeks later to see how they are doing can also convey the rabbi's caring.

If at all possible, the rabbi should encourage the couple to come in to the office for further discussion. However, the rabbi should not leave the couple with the false impression that he or she will officiate if this is not a possibility. Rather, the rabbi should suggest that the couple needs to be aware of all the options and possibilities before deciding what is right for them. The rabbi, as a knowledgeable counselor, can help them go through this important process, and can be a valuable resource for them.

When the couple comes in for an interview, the rabbi should again refocus the task on exploring what option would be best for the couple, drawing out their needs, feelings, and histories, rather than simply saying yes or no to officiation. In the process, the rabbi should look for opportunities to validate the couple as individuals. It is very helpful for the rabbi to affirm that he or she recognizes the respect for Judaism that led the couple to seek out a rabbi. The rabbi can also validate them by giving positive feedback on the ideas and insights they come up with as they explore options.

Early in the interview, it is helpful to ask whether the couple is having difficulties with the parents on either side. Then the rabbi can reframe the issue. The parents, rather than putting stumbling blocks in the way of the couple who wish to marry (and thus at the subconscious level to establish their own individual identities), are going through a very difficult developmental stage—letting go of their own children. They need their children's help and understanding in accomplishing this task. The rabbi can then be a double resource: first, by suggesting immediate strategies for easing family tensions, and second, by offering long-term strategies that the young adults can use to help parents cross the hurdle to a new, non-

parenting stage of life (Petsonk & Remsen, 1988).

Rabbis can also develop a file of materials of immediate use to the couple, including referrals to judges who will officiate sensitively at a reverent civil ceremony and readings that the couple can incorporate into a ceremony they design themselves.

CASE STUDY: "STEVE WON'T LET ME HAVE A CHRISTMAS TREE"

Many couples seek the help of the organized Jewish community when the comfort level in their relationship has been disrupted by a troublesome issue, such as whether they should marry, how to raise their children, or what holidays to observe. For many such couples, the first avenue of involvement is participation in an interfaith couples workshop, the purpose of which is to clarify and sharpen issues, not to resolve them fully.

To illustrate the use of developmental theory and the role of the professional in such a workshop, consider a couple, Sally and Steve, who came to a workshop on the Christmas/Chanukah dilemma. Sally, a convert to Judaism, complained tearfully that Steve "won't let me have a Christmas tree."

Two issues are raised by Sally's tearful complaint—the immediate issue of the loss felt at Christmastime by the partner raised as a Christian and the underlying issue of the couple's failure to develop a mutually respectful pattern for negotiating marital issues. The Jewish professional's first reaction might be that because Sally had converted to Judaism, Christmas is no longer her holiday and it is not appropriate for her to have a tree. Yet, Jewish professionals should not underestimate the emotional importance to the Gentile of the Christmas tree and celebration, which often are associated with the most precious memories of family closeness. We have talked to people who converted to Judaism with full commitment, but still have such

a sense of loss at Christmas that they feel they need to have a small tree, particularly if their parents are dead or estranged and there is no possibility of celebrating Christmas with their families. The Gentile partner needs help in expressing and grieving this loss and in finding satisfying emotional substitutes. The Jewish partner needs help in expressing and dealing with discomfort over Christmas symbols and the larger issue of being a minority in a Christian culture.

The clue to the underlying marital and developmental issues lies in Sally's choice of words, "He won't let me." In further discussion, it comes out that the decision to have a Jewish home and the decision to convert were both ones that Sally felt she had made under pressure. Although she had outwardly acquiesced to them, she had been inwardly resentful and had subtly undermined the implementation of those decisions. This pattern of acquiescence/resistance ran throughout their marriage. Steve's discomfort with the tree is magnified by his sense of Sally's lack of commitment to the Jewish lifestyle to which she had agreed.

The professional working with Sally and Steve has several key tasks: first, to validate them as individuals; second, to shift or reframe the interaction so that the leader is seen as a resource and an ally in solving the problem, rather than as an authority; and third, to deal both with the underlying issue and the immediate complaint. If no progress is made on the immediate issue of concern, Sally and Steve may leave the interfaith workshop group.

The group leader can use positive feedback to help validate Sally and Steve as individuals. When they express their needs, praise them for being able to share them. Draw out the loyalties they feel toward their parents, praise them for having these loyalties, and help them brainstorm a variety of ways of expressing those loyalties. When they brainstorm options, reiterate the best of the ideas that they generate,

thereby reinforcing their belief in their ability to negotiate and to make good choices and decisions. To avoid being seen as an authority figure, use the group, their peers, for feedback when they do come up with an unproductive response. Look for and reinforce the healthy instincts of the partners, those instincts that in the long run will strengthen their marriage.

After helping Steve and Sally clarify and express the feelings and needs they have at holiday time, the professional, using the group as a resource for ideas, can help them generate a variety of options for meeting those needs; for example, participating in tree trimming at her parents' house, having a Christmas/winter solstice celebration in the woods, or having a small tree. When they choose among a variety of options, Steve and Sally are making the decision together, rather than getting into a win-lose power-struggle situation where either his way or her way must triumph (Fisher & Ury, 1981). This approach also helps the professional avoid the trap of taking sides with either partner, which would only reinforce their difficulty in achieving a healthy power relationship.

On a long-term basis, Sally and Steve need to achieve a healthy individuation and separation from their own parents. They need to deal with unresolved feelings toward their parents, such as Sally's guilt about converting and the resentment she feels toward Steve's family.

ROLE OF PROFESSIONALS IN PRESERVING THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

Fully 70% of intermarried couples say they intend to give their children a Jewish education (Winer, 1985). Yet, studies in individual Jewish communities show that only 25 to 45% of intermarried families follow through on that intention. For example, a survey in San Francisco in 1987 indicated that 51% of in-married Jewish families, 42% of families in which the Gentile had converted to Judaism, but only

16% of mixed married families belonged to synagogues.

Our interviews for *The Intermarriage Handbook* indicated that much of the drop-off occurred around three critical issues, all of which are discussed above: (1) communication—the couple was afraid to “rock the boat” by discussing the issue of religion; (2) spiritual ownership—the Gentile partner was afraid that if the children were raised Jewishly, he or she would be shut out of the identity-forming and values-forming process; and (3) ambivalence—the Jewish partner, because of ambivalent feelings toward his or her family or people, or because of reactions against his first marriage, blocked his Gentile wife’s attempt to learn about or become part of the Jewish community. To the extent that professionals are able to help couples work through these issues, the level of affiliation should rise. In addition, when parents of the intermarried are helped to accept their children as adults, the likelihood is increased that the intermarried Jewish adult will feel able to reconnect with the Jewish community on his or her own terms.

As professionals we have several important opportunities to increase the level of Jewish identification of children of intermarriage. We can strengthen their integration with Jewish peers in schools and youth groups. We can teach their parents how to shape their Jewish identity more effectively. We can help parents reach a stronger level of agreement and partnership on transmitting identity. But our most important impact comes simply by strengthening the marriage itself. When the marriage and relationships with extended family are harmonious, children develop positive identifications with parents; identification with culture, values, or religion grows out of this initial identification with parents. When interfaith marriages dissolve, children are caught between two conflicting messages regarding religion. Issues of identity that are difficult to resolve when a two-faith marriage is intact become infinitely more difficult when the home is

split. It is likely that many of the children of interfaith divorces will have no religion and no religious identity.

As we move into the decade of the 1990s, it is clear that intermarriage is a reality of Jewish life. Some 40% of Jews who marry today choose a Gentile partner, and the proportion is rising. The Christian converts to Judaism in only 31% of these marriages. (Only 3% of the Jewish partners convert to Christianity). In families where there is no conversion, over 90% of the children are likely to intermarry. Even where there is a conversion, about half of the children of the conversionary family are likely to marry Gentiles who will not convert (Mayer, 1985). When this high proportion of intermarriage is related to the overall picture of Jewish demography—only one-third of Jewish households contain children under age 18—the future of the Jewish community looks bleak indeed unless we can assist intermarried households to develop strong marriages in which there is a shared commitment to pass on a Jewish identity (Kosmin et al., 1989).

As Jewish professionals working with interfaith couples and their families, we thus have a key responsibility and a key opportunity. As we help families resolve their internal problems and communicate with each other, we become an important resource in their lives. As they look to the Jewish community to serve their needs, we should be able to retain more of these families and their children within the Jewish community. This in turn could help American Jewry maintain the critical mass of population needed to remain a viable, vital community in the 21st century.

In the long run, therefore good counseling and good group work with intermarried families will benefit the Jewish community.

REFERENCES

- Carter, Betty, & McGoldrick, Monica (Eds.). (1988). *The changing family life cycle: A framework for family therapy* (2nd ed.). New York: Gardner Press.
- Carter, Elizabeth, & McGoldrick, Monica.

- (Eds.). (1980). *The family life cycle: A framework for family therapy*. New York: Gardner Press.
- Crohn, Joel. (1985). *Ethnic identity and marital conflict: Jews, Italians and WASPs*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Ellman, Yisrael. (1987-88, Winter). Intermarriage in the United States: A comparative study of Jews and other ethnic and religious groups. *Jewish Social Studies*, pp. 1-26.
- Erikson, Erik. (1964). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Fisher, Roger, & Ury, William. (1981). *Getting to yes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Fowler, James. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for faith*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Friedman, Edwin. (1980, October). The myth of the shiksa. *The Family*.
- Huberman, Steven. (1982, Autumn). From Christianity to Judaism: Religion changers in American society. *Conservative Judaism*.
- Klein, Judith Weinstein. (1980). *Jewish identity and self-esteem: Healing wounds through ethnotherapy*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Kosmin, Barry, Lerer, Nava, & Mayer, Egon. (1989). *Intermarriage, divorce and remarriage among American Jews, 1982-87*. Family Research Series No. 1. New York: North American Jewish Data Bank.
- Mayer, Egon. (1983). *Children of intermarriage: A study in patterns of identification and family life*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Mayer, Egon. (1985). *Love and tradition: Marriage between Jews and Christians*. New York: Plenum.
- Mayer, Egon, & Sheingold, Carl. (1979). *Intermarriage and the Jewish future: A national study in summary*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- McGoldrick, Monica, Pearce, John K., & Giordano, Joseph. (1982). *Ethnicity and family therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Petsonk, Judy, & Remsen, Jim. (1988). *The intermarriage handbook: A guide for Jews and Christians*. New York: William Morrow.
- Sager, Clifford J. (1976). *Marriage contracts in couple therapy: Hidden forces in intimate relationships*. New York: Bruner/Mazel.
- Sager, Clifford, & Hunt, Bernice. (1980). *Intimate partners: Hidden patterns in love relationships*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Sheehy, Gail. (1980). *Passages: Predictable crises of adult life*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Winer, Mark. (1985, Summer). Sociological research on Jewish intermarriage. *Journal of Reform Judaism*, pp. 38-57.