

REACHING OUT TO INTERMARRIED FAMILIES: THE BAY AREA EXPERIENCE

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Three outreach programs in the San Francisco area—two held under Reform Jewish auspices and one sponsored by the Jewish Community Center—have demonstrated that intermarried families can be reached by outreach efforts of the Jewish community. These efforts have various components that require different levels of commitment and target separately members of conversionary and interfaith families. Long-term follow-up data are needed on the Jewish identification of children of interfaith and conversionary families.

In the short time since the end of World War II, intermarriage has changed from being a relatively rare and sometimes calamitous event among Jewish families to a practice that Yehuda Rosenman (1984) of the American Jewish Committee describes as “almost normative behavior.” The normalizing of intermarriage has occurred in the context of the murder of one-third of the world’s Jews and in the face of the formerly powerful Jewish norm of endogamy—the enjoining of Jews to marry other Jews.

In reviewing the prevalence of intermarriage among Jews, Egon Mayer (1979, 1985) suggests that old responses of grieving for the intermarrying child and ostracizing the Gentile mate are no longer functional for the Jewish family and community. These negative sanctions seem to do nothing to slow the intermarriage rate, and they alienate the intermarried family from Jewish affiliation and practice. Mayer and other students of intermarriage involving Jews urge a new communal response that says to the Jewish partner in the intermarriage “there is a place for you as a Jew,” and to the Gentile, “Begin with us a process that may lead to your becoming a Jew or to raising your children as Jews.” It is these twin processes—seeking to retain the Jewish partner in the Jewish community and to encourage the raising of children as Jews—that are at the heart of the three outreach projects assessed in this article.

The term “intermarriage” has been used generically to describe any marriage between a born Jew and a born Gentile. According to Mayer (1985), an intermarriage embraces the following three situations: a marriage between a born Jew and one who has converted to Judaism before marriage; between a born Jew and one who has converted to Judaism after marriage; and between a born Jew and a partner who continues to adhere to a non-Jewish status. This widely accepted definition, like much else about intermarriage, is problematic. At what point is the convert to Judaism seen as a legitimate member of the Jewish faith and the Jewish people without carrying the intermarried label?

All three programs described in this article are concerned with reaching out both to those families where the born Gentile had chosen to be Jewish (conversionary families) and to those where only one partner claimed a Jewish identification (mixed marriage). The differences between conversionary and mixed marriages are not merely semantic. Each of the three programs found real differences between these types of families and further found that such family units were often difficult to serve in the same group. As a graphic illustration of these differences, Mayer (1985) reports that conversionary families were from three to eight times more likely than mixed families to celebrate specific Jewish holidays. Conversely, mixed marriage fam-

ilies had sharply higher rates than conversionary families of celebrating Christmas and Easter.

Although some observers quip about the "forever vanishing" Jewish people, few are sanguine about the phenomenon of intermarriage and its potential consequences for Jewish population size. Rates of intermarriage no doubt will continue to rise (but no longer at a geometric rate), and except for certain Orthodox families, it is likely that every extended Jewish family will have some born non-Jews in it. A Gallup poll (1983) reports that the willingness of non-Jews to accept Jews as marriage partners is at an all-time high. These changes in the Jewish and general communities are all likely to contribute to the continued growth of intermarriage.

In 1987, the San Francisco-based Koret Foundation sought to use its resources to further outreach efforts to intermarried families and families including Jews-by-Choice. Although the foundation did not pioneer these outreach efforts in the Bay area, the \$100,000 that it initially made available in 1987 to these programs significantly raised the volume of activity directed to intermarried families. The three funded programs each represented a different type of Jewish sponsoring organization: United Jewish Community Centers, which serves Jews of every persuasion, as well as many non-Jews; a regional Reform Jewish organization, the Northern California Council of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations; and a large Reform congregation in suburban Contra Costa County, Temple Isaiah. (The Center program is described in detail in the articles by Rembaum and Crohn in this issue.)

WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED?

Balance Between Individual and Communal Needs

Successful outreach programs must find a balance between meeting the individual needs of the participants, particularly the Gentile ones, and serving communal goals.

How to minimize the threat to the Gentile partner while making clear that intermarriage itself is a threat to Jewish survival is the challenge faced by these outreach efforts. Karen Robbins, director of the San Francisco JCC, reveals the difficulty of maintaining this balance in this statement: "We try to keep the groups open so that the non-Jewish partner doesn't feel railroaded or pushed. We don't have the conversion goal. We really want people to work out their issues in an open setting."

However, the problem of balance between individual needs and communal well-being is minimized somewhat in these three programs because the participants are not a random selection of intermarried families. Rather, many of the couples had decided to participate in the programs precisely because they were exploring how to work aspects of Jewish practice and affiliation into their lives.

Yet, in many ways the programs, particularly their group components, served to legitimize the intermarried family. The goals of the programs were to retain the Jewish connection of the Jewish partner, indicate to the Gentile partner that he or she was welcome, and increase the likelihood that the children would be raised as Jews. All three programs carefully abstained from any pressure toward conversion; rather they encouraged participants to make Jewish choices that felt right to them. These programs did not challenge the structure of intermarriage itself.

Structure and Function of Outreach Programs

Holiday workshops, single-session programs of Jewish interest, and interfaith couples groups are all different ways to reach intermarried families. Participants can begin anywhere in this mix of programs and eventually participate in all of them.

Participation in outreach programs seems to be most critical at certain times—when marriage is contemplated, when the couple is newly married, at the birth of children, and when children start school. These life-

cycle changes suggest a program and target audience; they form the issues for interfaith couples groups.

December seems to be a difficult time for many intermarried couples, and all three programs developed programs dealing with the December dilemma. One group participant, a born Jew, celebrated both Christmas and Chanukah in her home after her son was born. She expressed the December dilemma in this way: "When we put up the Christmas tree, it's beautiful, but there is always the question of whether to put an angel on top."

Although relationships with the interfaith couple's family of origin are sometimes complicated and difficult in an intermarriage, they do not seem to pose overwhelming problems for most couples. Once the couple has resolved its own direction, it can better cope with extended family issues. However, support groups for parents of interfaith couples were found to be helpful in enabling parents to cope with their confusion, anger, and even grieving over their children's intermarriage.

Charging fees for the programs seems to be a useful way of increasing the commitment of participants; the requirement of participation of both partners is another means of "raising the stakes" of involvement.

Interfaith Couples Groups

All three programs found it important to screen potential participants in the couples groups. Some couples may not be ready to become involved in a group conducted under Jewish auspices, particularly when the Gentile partner is still deeply committed to the practice of his or her faith.

Too, the issues faced by conversionary families are very different from those faced by interfaith couples. In many cases, the conversionary family enjoys a much deeper level of Jewish commitment. These families have already resolved the two central issues with which the intermarried family is still wrestling—the religious status of the Gentile-born partner and the education of their

children. The experience in these programs indicates that these two types of families are not appropriately served in the same couples groups. However, they may find common ground in "how to" holiday workshops and single-session special events.

Harriet Schifftan, director of the Temple Isaiah program, observes that intermarried groups may be "keep away" devices that segregate intermarried from Jewish-Jewish families. Her goal is to mainstream intermarried families. Yet, in each of the three programs, participation in the couples groups was the basis for the development of a social network of intermarried families.

An Emerging Jewish-Christian Family

Although conversion is an option that many group participants consider, there is no evidence that any substantial number of participating Gentiles tend to convert. One can conclude that there are a sizeable number of Gentile partners in interfaith marriages who are accepting of the Jewish involvement of their mates and possibly of their children being raised as Jews but who themselves have no intention of becoming Jews. This type of family unit may be the prototype of an emerging Jewish-Christian family in which Jewish and Christian practices are mixed.

One reason for the conflicts in religious identity experienced by interfaith couples is the partners' differing perceptions of their religious identities. Many Gentiles seem puzzled by the pressures brought on them to adopt Judaism for themselves and their children when their Jewish mates seem to be essentially secular in belief and practice. They have difficulty accepting the notion of Jewish peoplehood and its powerful hold on their Jewish partners.

Role of the Reform Movement

Reform Judaism, for a variety of reasons including its decision on patrilineal descent, seems to be the religious movement toward which many interfaith couples are drawn. In each of the five Reform congregations

involved in the UAHC project, almost 50% of the members were intermarried families. When intermarried families become so dominant in a congregation, the concept of outreach may need to take on a new meaning.

CONCLUSION

What we have learned from these programs is that outreach efforts can reach intermarried families, some of whom are prepared to give serious consideration to the character of their Jewish practice and identification. What we do not yet know is what will happen to the children of these intermarried and conversionary families. Mark Winer, rabbi and sociologist, argues that the crucial generation for intermarriage is the third generation and asks whether children of conversionary marriages can become "affirmative Jewish adults." Long-

term follow-up studies of the children of intermarried and conversionary families involved in these programs are needed to determine whether they will ultimately contribute to the goal of ensuring the survival of the Jewish community.

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