

FORUM I

Intermarriage, Outreach and a New Agenda for Jewish Survival: A Perspective on the Contemporary American Jewish Community

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While parliamentarians in Israel wage political battle over the question of "Who is a Jew?", rabbis in America wage oratorical battle over the question of patrilineal descent, acceptable procedures for conversion, and the permissibility of rabbis officiating in marriages between Jew and Gentile. These debates, which have generated so much heat in the Jewish community in recent years, have two essential features in common. Each represents some effort on the part of the organized Jewish community to come to grips with intermarriage. And, each one seems to be tangential to the daily lives of most American Jews, particularly to the lives of intermarried couples.

Even as these controversies rage among those who are professionally involved in the organized Jewish community, the laity is transforming the character of the Jewish population and Jewish culture by intermarrying in ever-increasing numbers—quite oblivious, for the most part, to these impassioned debates.

Will American Jewry survive the demographic revolution that is now being wrought upon it by intermarriage? Will it retain its organizational strength, its cultural vitality into the twenty-first century despite the transformation of the Jewish family? It must, and I believe it can! But, to do so we must go beyond these debates in responding to the challenges of intermarriage. We must embark

on a strategy of communal survival that differs sharply from the Jewish survival strategies of the past two centuries.

For the past century the central challenges to Jewish group survival have been framed by pogroms, the Holocaust, the rebirth of the State of Israel, and the salvaging of remnant Jewish populations in beleaguered lands. Each of these challenges has been met with the outpouring of extraordinary amounts of political creativity and voluntary group activity on the part of America's Jews. However, the successful meeting of these challenges has conditioned the Jewish community to deal with its problems by means that may not be adequate to the present task at hand.

THE TRADITIONAL SURVIVALIST AGENDA

From the dawn of the liberal era in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe, the majority of Jews chose social, religious, and cultural adaptability as a strategy for group survival. The operative slogan for the Jewish *modus vivendi* was be a Jew in one's home and a citizen on the street. As part of this strategy, liberal Jewish thought argued that Jewish survival is best secured by three factors: *tolerance*, *law*, and *social invisibility*.

1. Tolerance was tacitly understood to mean a sociopolitical climate in which Gentiles did not single out Jews for any special deprivation simply because of their Jewishness. It was perceived as generalized social amiability, or at the very least a benign neglect of those

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aspects of personal belief and religious practice that distinguished Jew from Gentile.

2. Laws that protect civil rights and liberties came to be seen as the best guarantee of tolerance. Consequently, Jews as individuals and Jewish organizations became the foremost champions of civil rights and liberal social legislation.
3. Social invisibility was the Jewish side of this implied social compact. In return for tolerance and even hospitality, most Jews (with the exception of some Orthodox and Hassidic Jews) implicitly agreed not to display publicly their religious beliefs, practices, speech, manner of dress, or anything else that might visibly differentiate them from their Gentile neighbors. This is the strategy of Jewish survival that Norman Podhoretz (1967, p. 27) called the "brutal bargain." It traded the cultural distinctiveness of the *visible* Jew for the entree that the *invisible* Jew might enjoy in the majoritarian society.

Brutal as a bargain or not, there can be little doubt that most Jews believed significant public displays of Jewish religious or cultural distinctiveness would risk the tolerance of their neighbors. Jews would enjoy the benefits of tolerance by "fitting in" with neighbors and restricting their cultural and religious distinctiveness to the home and the synagogue.

The success of this three-part strategy hinged on one very important assumption: that with the social, political, and economic benefits that flowed from tolerance, Jews could better enjoy and express their own culture in the private domain. This assumption further rested directly on the Jewish continuity of the home.

Yet, even as Jews succeeded in protecting their civil rights through liberal laws, and in securing the tolerance and amiability of their Gentile neighbors, they became less and less distinctive either in their religious beliefs or in their lifestyle. Acceptance from the outside, it seems, was

increasingly reciprocated by blending from the inside.

Second- and third-generation children of Jewish immigrant parents understood less and less of the terms of the "brutal bargain." Their own social mobility experiences placed increasing pressure on them to become just like their Gentile peers, and their increasing distance from their immigrant ancestors rapidly attenuated the hold of tradition on their lives. Thus, they came to take for granted that their lack of Jewish distinctiveness in the public domain should also prevail in the private domain. In this process Jewishness has become an identity "brand label" in a pluralistic society, with little more distinctiveness of content than the brands of a multitude of packaged goods. As such, its primary purpose, like the purpose of many brand labels, is to provide a focal point for reference group identification. In a society that values group identification, as America does, most Jews want to be known as "Jews" so that they are not perceived as people without a group identity. On the other hand, they have no desire to limit their choices in social participation as a result of being Jewish.

One consequence of this transformation of Jewish identity is that as young Jews have entered the free-choice American marriage market they have found less and less reason to filter out their Gentile friends as potential marriage partners. Not only are their friends more like themselves in all respects, save identity label, but the families and homes they plan on forming would also not be distinctively Jewish.

If Jewish parents and Jewish leaders have been distressed about the rising rate of intermarriage, surely one reason is that they have seen the unanticipated consequences of their own survival strategy boomerang in the lives of their children and grandchildren. In short, intermarriage has been one of the inescapable costs of the "brutal bargain." For that reason, efforts to stem its tide have proven generally ineffective.

THE INTERMARRIAGE TIDE AND ITS CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE

The proportion of Jews who marry Gentiles has increased without let-up over the past two generations. If one were to survey the Jewish marriage market today to see who is marrying whom, one would find that among those under 40 years of age about 37% of Jewish men and 24% of Jewish women entering first marriages are marrying Gentile partners. These figures increase to about 55% for men and 42% for women in second marriages (whose first marriages were to Jewish partners) (Kosmin et al., 1989)

Largely because of the unrelenting increase in these numbers, intermarriage haunts the psyche of American Jews, even as they make their private peace with the marital choices of their children and grandchildren. It appears like an invisible sword of Damocles over Jewish families whose elders fear that their Jewish line will be cut off because their children are marching toward matrimony in the open society, where the claims of the heart outweigh the claims of tradition or parental authority in the selection of a mate.

The specter looms, too, over professional and lay leaders of the American Jewish community. Their careers and commitments impel them to be concerned about the survival of the group as a whole, not merely with the survival of its individual members.

However, with the virtually limitless opportunities for assimilation in America, group survival is now challenged in a uniquely intractable manner by intermarriage. The private nature of the act, along with the fact that it seems to spring from values—such as love, the desire for personal fulfillment, and egalitarianism—that are deeply cherished by contemporary American Jews, has made intermarriage a far more difficult challenge than some of the historically more familiar ones that Jews have had to face in their struggle for survival. The familiar strategies of securing Jewish survival not only cannot work with

intermarriage but may even do more harm than good.

Until just a few years ago the equation between intermarriage and assimilation had been completely taken for granted, not only by those concerned about Jewish survival but by dispassionate social scientists as well. No one thought it necessary to question whether intermarriage did, in fact, threaten Jewish survival, let alone to question how or why it did so.

The 1979 American Jewish Committee (AJC) publication of my own study of Jewish identity patterns among 450 intermarried couples began to stimulate more discussion about the dynamics of intermarriages as marriages and more probing questions about how family processes relate to identity (Mayer, 1979).

One of the salient findings of that study is that, rather than intermarriage causing assimilation (and thereby threatening to Jewish survival), it is assimilation that causes intermarriage in the first place.

Depending on how assimilated an intermarrying Jew is, intermarriage can result in further assimilation and the ultimate disappearance of the intermarried family from the Jewish community. However, intermarriage can—and does—also result in greater Jewish self-awareness among some intermarriers and in the conversion of their Gentile partners to Judaism. Thus, the cause of assimilation is not to be found in intermarriage alone. Rather, given a weakly grounded Jewish identity, one is more likely to intermarry. When a Jew with a weakly grounded sense of Jewish identity marries a Gentile he or she is less able to create a Jewish home, and the family is thus less able to transmit Jewish identity to their children. It is the cultural handicap of prior assimilation that makes intermarrying Jews vulnerable to loss from the Jewish community.

In other words, one of the key problems with intermarriage is that, for the most part, it is the wrong Jews who are doing most of the intermarrying.

That first AJC study, together with others that followed soon after on the

children of intermarriage (Mayer, 1983) and on conversion (Mayer, 1987), invalidated the wisdom of equating intermarriage with assimilation and an inexorable threat to Jewish survival.

With the hindsight of more than a dozen years of research on intermarriage and such seminal journalistic forays into intermarried life as Paul and Rachel Cowan's *Mixed Blessings* (Doubleday, 1987), and more recently the works of Judy Petsonk, Jim Remsen, and Susan Weidman Schneider, we now know that intermarriage does not erode Jewish identity and family life in the simple linear fashion that figured so prominently in the alarmist literature of earlier decades. At the risk of exaggerating the influence of these studies, it is probably fair to say that they have helped change the climate of Jewish opinion about intermarriage, from *outrage* to *outreach*, in just a few years.

Changes in the perception of intermarriage have gradually led to changes in the Jewish communal response to it as well. In 1979 the Task Force, subsequently to become the Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, was created under the leadership of David Belin, whose vision of outreach is described elsewhere in this issue. Under the continuing professional direction of Lydia Kukoff, that institution served as the first modern attempt to alter the course of what seemed just a decade earlier to be the inexorable force of American Jewish history (see article by Kukoff in this issue). By the mid-1980s a variety of Jewish outreach programs to the intermarried had begun to be developed in such different institutional contexts as Reform temples, Jewish family service agencies, and Jewish community centers.

Even as outrage against intermarriage and intermarriers has gradually begun to give way to greater acceptance and to programs of Jewish inclusion, new questions have arisen about the possible effect of outreach on Jewish survival. For example, does outreach serve as a legitimization of intermarriage, increasing its likelihood because

of the more hospitable attitude of the Jewish community? Does outreach threaten to dilute the Jewish integrity of the community by including Jews-by-Choice whose authenticity as Jews is not universally accepted? Does outreach really extend the hospitality of the Jewish community to those who might otherwise not have come in, or does it simply hold open the door to those who were on their way in anyway?

There are also questions about the proper methods and objectives of Jewish outreach. Should it be undertaken with the explicit goal of converting the Gentile partners in intermarriages? Should it have other goals, such as improving the marital relationship of the couple? Is outreach essentially an educational activity or a missionary one? Or, is it therapy by another name, carried out by Jews who did not go on to become licensed psychotherapists as so many of their brothers and sisters have done? These questions, in turn, touch on further issues about who within the Jewish community is best qualified to deal with the intermarried and from what institutional and ideological premises.

These questions underscore the point that the challenge intermarriage poses for the American Jewish community is not readily resolved by either conversion or outreach. Both of these solutions create further questions and tensions in the community. However, the critical questions that have been raised about outreach and conversion thus far have not addressed what I believe is a more fundamental issue: *even successful outreach and widely accepted conversions challenge the Jewish community's tacit assumptions about group survival.* To the extent that Jewish outreach is successful, it must inevitably challenge the Jewish penchant for social invisibility.

TOWARD A NEW AGENDA OF JEWISH SURVIVAL

As outreach has become an increasingly common response to Jewish intermarriage, it has raised numerous questions of strategy,

practice, purpose, and method. Yet, all its current forms share a number of common features.

The various Jewish outreach efforts that have been undertaken thus far are characterized by their common focus on the Jewish "internal agenda," i.e., a focus on Jewish survival issues and issues of institutional strategy. Regardless of sponsorship or purpose, they have concentrated on issues of program curriculum, such as Jewish life-cycle and calendar celebration and introduction to synagogue practice and etiquette; personnel and methods of instruction; qualities of the setting; and recruitment. None has addressed the broader question of how outreach relates to the long-standing commitment of most Jews to social and cultural invisibility in the public domain.

If outreach is to succeed, it must confront the question of how Jews as individuals and the Jewish community as an organized entity confront the wider society. That question is not about the techniques of programming, or teaching style, or recruitment. It is not simply about making the "stranger" feel more welcome. Ultimately, that question is about how Jews as individuals comport themselves vis-a-vis their Gentile neighbors and how the organized Jewish community represents itself in public.

No community can depend solely on the efforts of its most exemplary members for collective survival. It must also develop institutional strategies that bolster the abilities of its ordinary members. Thus, the challenge that remains for the Jewish outreach enterprise is to articulate a new vision of Jewish survival.

That vision must remain committed to at least two of the three principles of the traditional tripart strategy; that is, to ever broadening the climate of tolerance in society for all cultures and doing so by strong political advocacy for laws that guarantee civil liberties and social justice.

Yet, if Jewish outreach is to have more than episodic relevance to just a few in-

dividuals it must finally reject the posture of Jewish social invisibility that has been the lot of Jewry in the "liberal" modern world. It must take Judaism as a religion and Jewishness as a culture and civilization public and stake its claim to a fair share of the public's attention. How this is to be done is the challenge that lies ahead for effective Jewish outreach.

Some of the ways that Judaism might be taken more public are suggested by the struggles of blacks and Hispanics to improve their image. The pressures brought to bear in recent years on advertising and media executives, the publishers of textbooks, and educational policy makers have clearly borne fruit in changing the public image of those communities. Jews might well consider the following:

- Advocating for more positive, identifiably Jewish characters, themes, and images on the major television networks, particularly in major urban markets where Jews comprise a significant segment of the consumer population
- Advocating for the inclusion of more Jewish cultural content in high school and college textbooks and courses, particularly in the humanities and social sciences
- Advocating for the restoration of Hebrew as a language option in high schools and colleges
- Advocating for the greater inclusion of Judaica in the holdings of local libraries, in the exhibition schedules of museums, and in the programs of community-sponsored theaters and symphonies
- Advocating for greater cultural exchange with Israel and other significant centers of Jewish culture around the world.

What effect these various strategies might have on the actual rate of intermarriage is impossible to predict. They may well have no impact on that issue at all. However, they are likely to enhance the

self-image of Jews in ways that are public and accessible to non-Jews as well. As such, they are quite likely to provide the open door to Jewish civilization through which all who wish to come in may do so.

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