

Towards the Development of a Planned Communal Response to Jewish Inter-marriage *

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THE National Jewish Population Study, sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, is the first comprehensive national study of the Jewish population in the United States, based on a scientifically selected sample purporting to be representative of the total Jewish population in this country.¹ This paper will seek to analyze these findings, place them in their broader sociological context, explicate the challenge this emergent sociological phenomenon poses to the American-Jewish community, and most significantly, attempt to project the contours of a planning process and response by central Jewish communal bodies.

The whole thrust of this paper is that the problem of Jewish intermarriage is not solely one for the individuals who intermarry, their parents, relatives, the local rabbi and other concerned individuals or groups in the community. It is a challenge to the whole fabric of the organized Jewish community, and the only appropriate and effective response must be communal, involving the central agencies of the Jewish community, operating in a concerted, comprehensive and coordinated fashion.

It would be wisest, in my view, before examining Jewish intermarriage directly, and the findings and implications of the National Jewish Population Study, to try first to understand the meaning of

intermarriage generally. What is the sociological significance of intermarriage? What, from a sociological perspective, is its social and cultural impact on groups? To answer these questions, one needs to recognize the primacy of the family as a social institution. It is the most universal social institution because it fills two critical functions for any group. Firstly, procreative—the family reproduces the group; it replaces and repopulates the membership who inevitably pass away, thus assuring the group's physical continuity. Secondly, the socialization function—the family transmits the norms, beliefs, and values of the group; it indoctrinates the new generation into its culture. In sum, the family system of any social group assures its biological and cultural survival.

Intermarriage, the introduction into the kinship unit of one parent who is not a bona-fide member of the group, generates for the group the ominous possibility that both these functions of the family will be subverted. All groups, to the extent that they are committed to maintaining themselves as distinctive groups, strive mightily therefore to reduce the incidence of intermarriage and the conditions that give rise to it.

As people rooted in history, and with a sense of purpose that even transcends history, the survival of Jews, Judaism and the Jewish community has always been a consuming passion for us. Because intermarriage was historically destructive of Jewish communal life, it was therefore traditionally viewed with utmost gravity. Is that acute anxiety still justified? What are the facts as we know them this day?

* Based on a paper given at the General Assembly of the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, New Orleans, Nov. 1973.

¹ For the full details of the National Jewish Population Study relating to intermarriage, see *Intermarriage*, Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, New York, 1973.

The National Jewish Population study found that of all Jewish persons now married, 9.2 percent are intermarried. (Intermarriage was defined in the study as "a marriage in which one or the other partner describes himself or herself as having identified with a non-Jewish religious cultural viewpoint at the time that he or she met his or her future spouse.") This figure, 9.2 percent, can be misleading because it deflates the actual incidence of Jewish intermarriage. Firstly, it includes only extant marriages, not those which were terminated by separation or divorce, and those who intermarry are more likely than those who marry within the faith to become divorced and/or separated. Secondly, when intermarriage was examined over time, the study found that of all Jews marrying between 1900-1920, only 2 percent married outside the Jewish faith; of all Jews marrying between 1956-1960, 5.9 percent chose a non-Jewish spouse; of those marrying between 1961-1965, 17.4 percent chose a non-Jewish spouse; and between 1966-1972, 31.7 percent intermarried.

Thus, it is clear that the rate of intermarriage has very substantially increased among current Jewish marriages. This sharp increase reflects both the very rapid acculturation and assimilation of Jews into American life, and their increased acceptance in American society. The importance of this dynamic becomes highlighted when one looks at generational differences in the rate of intermarriage, which the National Jewish Population Study has not yet done. In analyses done of Jewish intermarriage in another study, one finds that among first generation American Jews, the rate of intermarriage is only 1.4 percent, and this increased to 10.2 percent among the second generation, 17.9 percent among the third, and over 37 percent among the college-educated third generation.² Thus we see with increased

Americanization, a very large correlative increase in the rate of intermarriage. If this pattern is projected among fourth and fifth generation Jews, we can expect that the rate may yet rise further.

Of the two patterns among those intermarrying, the Jewish husband and non-Jewish wife, the more destructive pattern because conversion here of the non-Jewish partner was almost nonexistent, occurred about twice as frequently as the other pattern, the Jewish wife and non-Jewish husband.

What of the "Jewishness" of the people who intermarry? The vast majority of non-Jews who intermarry, the study finds, do not convert (97.5 percent of the non-Jewish husbands and 73.3 percent of the non-Jewish wives). Interestingly, a proportion identify themselves as Jewish without formal conversion, but the depth and quality of their Jewishness are not known.

The antecedents of intermarriage emerge clearest in the data. Not unexpectedly, those who intermarried were more likely to date non-Jews. Perhaps more significant, the less parents are opposed to intermarriage, the more likely their children will not only inter-date but also intermarry. Finally, the chances for intermarriage are higher among those who describe their upbringing as marginally Jewish, and highest still among those who cannot clearly describe their upbringing.

In analyzing the data, I also found that, even among those who marry Jews, 38 percent believed that "it was all right for Jews to marry non-Jews", a significant erosion attitudinally of the norm of in-group marriage, so powerful and pervasive in Jewish life traditionally.

Another unusual finding, that the majority of those intermarried, particularly when the wife was Jewish, intend that

² See Erich Rosenthal, "Jewish Intermarriage in Greater Washington," *American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 64 (1973) pp. 18-19, 22.

their child receive a Jewish education or were raising their child as Jewish, had too few cases in the sample for broad generalization. Furthermore, this finding is problematic in light of another—of the intermarried couples studied, the overwhelming majority were not at all, or only very slightly, active in a temple or synagogue and/or Jewish organizations. Thus, the intermarrieds have only the most minimal ties with the organized Jewish community, which greatly exaggerates the standard problematic gap between intention and behavior.

These are the patterns of Jewish intermarriage. What are their implications? The perspective we are taking here is not macroscopic — the consequences of intermarriage for the persons involved, the stability of these unions and the happiness they can achieve in marriage — but microscopic — the consequences of this type of marriage for K'lal Yisroel, Jewish peoplehood, and our historical continuity as a community.

Salo Baron has said that only in America in the last century has the problem of emancipation finally caught up with the Jews. There have been, of course, glimpses and small parcels of such opportunity in the past in different epochs in different places. But the whole panoply of forces have converged fully only in the U.S., especially in the last quarter century, to make possible near-complete emancipation for Jews. The free, open egalitarian society in which the Jews now live, provides them, for the first time, with the prolonged opportunity to be or not to be Jews as they choose.

Indeed, in our time, a third world, a new society, has emerged between the Jewish and Christian communities. It can be classified as a neutral society — neither Jewish nor Christian, or as Disraeli described it, a blank page between the Old and New Testaments. This society, supra-ethnic and supra-religious, a counter-culture to

the Judeo-Christian heritage, peopled mostly by academicians, professionals and intellectuals, has attracted a disproportionate number of our most gifted and talented Jews who, even denying their Jewishness, can comfortably function there without being required to become Christians either.

This revolutionary transformation of the context of Jewish life has led willy-nilly to the weakening of the social and cultural ties that bind Jews to the Jewish community. Intermarriage, symbolically and substantively, is the culmination of that process. Sociologically, it means the reduction of the number of Jewish family units that reproduce Jews physically. When one parent remains alien to the covenantal community, it also introduces confusion into the status placement of the off-spring of such unions and their effective socialization as Jews.

What can we do to stop this growing procession of Jews marching down the aisle to disappear qualitatively and quantitatively from the annals of our history? There have been divergent responses to the problem of intermarriage in the American Jewish community. There are those cognizant of its threat, who have acquiesced to what they believe are powerful, insurmountable forces; they have passively accepted the new social reality enveloping Jewish life as inevitable. Others, deeply troubled by this phenomenon, have tackled the problem with inflamed and impassioned rhetoric and self-righteous resolutions. *Gevalt*, they intone. Breast-beating may be necessary to make this issue a priority item on the Jewish agenda of communal concerns, but it does certainly not provide constructive approaches to the complexities of this intricate and exceedingly delicate problem.

Both responses are, of course, inadequate. While there are no panaceas, no easy, simple solutions, central communal bodies, especially Federations, cognizant

of the magnitude, dynamics, and implications of the threat of intermarriage for Jewish communal life can plan concerted, comprehensive approaches, mobilize all the relevant communal resources—lay leadership, professional personnel, local agency resources—even create new resources and programs to blunt the continuing advance of intermarriage in Jewish life. Indeed, Federations might be the only instrumentalities capable of launching and funding the massive programming required.

What is doable? Firstly, I would begin by asserting that intervention by communal bodies at the point of, or after, intermarriage is almost futile. What central communal bodies and Federations can do is plan and work toward the prevention of intermarriage. The first effective proximate step might be to attempt to diminish the too docile acquiescence to, and the relative degree of tolerance of, intermarriage in some quarters of our community. The National Jewish Population Study clearly shows the extent to which the norm of in-group marriage, once an axiom of Jewish communal life, has weakened. The increased incidence of intermarriage tends naturally to generate acceptance of intermarriage. Greater acceptance, in turn, creates the climate for more such unions. The Jewish community must, therefore, intervene at both points in the cycle. By publicly articulating its opposition to intermarriage, it can perhaps decelerate this growing tolerance. This must not only take the form of resolutions and policy pronouncements, important as these are. It means encouraging local rabbinical boards to dissuade and even sanction their members from performing at intermarriages without conversion of the non-Jewish spouse; dissuading the local-Anglo-Jewish newspaper from carrying announcements of Jewish-Christian marriages, and perhaps even excluding intermar-

ried persons who have not converted from leadership roles in Jewish communal bodies. These small, discrete acts and others making visible the Jewish community's non-acceptance of intermarriage, will hardly eliminate intermarriage. But they are steps at least aimed at restoring the norm.

Strengthening the norm of Jewish endogamy, however, requires more fundamental and substantive intervention by the Jewish community. Intermarriage, as I indicated, is the most extreme expression of the dissolution of the Jew's social and cultural bonds with the Jewish community. By dealing with the circumstances that give rise to this condition, and indeed, by seeking to strengthen those ties, we can deal more effectively, even if indirectly, not only with intermarriage, but the processes that precede and generate it.

But how does the Jewish community reach those already peripheral to it, or in the process of weakening their ties. Needless to say, it is vital that we reach young people on college campus. But what is especially important is that these programs reach the Jewish student where he is at—not necessarily in the Hillel House, but in the dormitory, student lounge, and student union building. What is needed are more outreach programs, sponsored by Hillel or the central communal body, that have as their special target the previously uninvolved Jewish student. These outreach programs are person, not institution or organization oriented; they should not seek to produce or promote organizational membership or programs; should not be pre-planned, ready-made programs, but rather be geared to stimulate the students themselves to articulate and identify their needs.

Even more crucial than the college campus is that critical juncture in the socio-psycho-cultural development of Jewish youth, the high school years, the

most shamefully neglected period in Jewish education. This is the period when dating and inter-dating commence, which the National Jewish Population Study found so significantly related to intermarriage. Might not our Jewish Centers undertake to create outreach programs, similar to the ones Hillel has sponsored, on the high school-campus, to maintain and perhaps enlarge those tenuous ties the Jewish community has established with them prior to their emancipation by the Bar or Bas Mitzvah rite.

During the high school-years, the problem extends even beyond outreach programs. The adolescent society, which regulates the way young people dress, speak, act and think in modern society is self-contained, with its own norms, values and style of life. To the extent that young Jews become integrated within the general youth culture, their ties with the Jewish community become more problematic. What is needed is the establishment of a Jewish adolescent society. To some extent, this already exists in the synagogue youth movements, Zionist youth groups and some center programs. But it needs to be enlarged and extended beyond the denominational and geographic boundaries of the synagogue and Center, to reach Jewish adolescents not enmeshed in that network.

The cultural as well as the social ties of young Jews need re-enforcement and this requires some fresh thinking and re-evaluation of our educational and cultural programs for youth. I contend that the relationship between various Jewish communal institutions and American society can be assessed by means of the *Integration/Distinctiveness* ratio, i.e., the balance between the agency's thrust for integration of Jews in American life as compared to its emphasis on maintaining and enlarging our Jewish distinctiveness as a community. The emphasis

of most of our communal institutions in the first fifty years of this century has been on integration, providing access and entry for Jews into American life. In recent years, the balance has changed somewhat but in my view, the ratio has still to be re-calculated, with an even greater stress than heretofore on distinctiveness.

Let us examine Jewish education as an example. Ben Halpern once pointed out that Jewish education in the United States represents what the Jewish community wants it to be. The smattering of ritual, Hebrew and Jewish history taught in most afternoon and Sunday schools is an effort to induce some sense of Jewish identification in our youth. But it has failed to make it possible for them, in the words of the Psalmist, "to walk before the Lord in the land of the living", to function maximally as Jews in an open, egalitarian pluralist society. Jewish education, by default, has therefore made possible the unstructured integration of Jews in American society by failing to effectively foster Jewish distinctiveness. Asserting that Jewish education as it is currently operated is the panacea for intermarriage, I feel, is therefore both too general and short-sighted a statement. Jewish education is most certainly the major palliative, but what is needed is a type of Jewish education that will prepare Jews to function as Jews in a pluralist society, an education that, while it recognizes the role demands made by our society of members of all faiths, implants in them a commitment to, and an understanding of, Jewish distinctiveness, wherein we differ and why. Involving both cognitive and affective dimensions, this type of education can aid Jewish youth in developing the knowledge and competence to function maximally as Jews in a secular pluralist world, and to be sufficiently committed emotionally to that formulation so as to withstand the mighty pressures that mitigate

against it. The Jewish day school most closely approximates this model, and therefore, is most deserving of our support. However, I do believe too, that this model can be adapted as well for other forms of Jewish education.

Jewish education, even the model I have proposed, however, is not the only answer. It is within the family that Jewishness is ascribed at birth and it is within the climate of the family that it develops further or is ossified. It is therefore not enough for our agencies to aim to keep the Jewish family together. It is important that it be kept together Jewishly. Regrettably, at present, many Jewish families do not have the capacity or resources to cultivate a family climate for their children in which Jewishness will flourish.

Thus, our communal agencies must tool up in new ways so that they can be supportive of families Jewishly. As a first step, this entails viewing and dealing with the family as a unit. It is of course, a truism that it is necessary to educate parents as well as their children Jewishly. Programmatically, this can take the form of PEP programs—parental educational programs, sponsored by Sunday, afternoon and even day schools in which correlative efforts are made to reach and interpret to parents what is being transmitted to their children in school, and even utilize the contact with the Jewish community that the child's presence in school has for parents, for intensification of their own cultural and religious commitments and their responsibilities as conveyors of the Jewish heritage, or at least supporters of that process by other agencies of the Jewish community. Jewish family agencies engaged in general family education can also undertake programs of Jewish family education, including the problems of inter-dating, the most significant antecedent of intermarriage, and how parents can and should deal with it.

Synagogues likewise must bolster the family as a religious unit. Thus, in its own activities, they should consciously integrate the family qua family as a vehicle for transmitting the faith. Holiday celebrations and other rituals can be fostered in or via the synagogue for families. For example, in addition to the synagogue sponsoring collective *sedarim* for families, each participating as a unit, allowing each in the supportive setting of the synagogue to do his own religious thing, similar programs can be devised with a little programmatic ingenuity for the Sabbath and other festivals, and perhaps other rituals.

These types of programs should, of course, be geared to reaching peripheral synagogue membership, a not insignificant portion of membership of most synagogues. But synagogues can also engage in "outreach" to reach the "un-synagogued," hopefully, in a non-institutional manner. A group of selected families, with the aid of the resources of the synagogue and some professional direction, can do what has been done already in some parts of the country—assemble in a home or homes around a religious service, an Oneg Sabbath, or a religious encounter or discussion group, and involve neighbors and friends from the community who might never enter the portals of a synagogue but can feel comfortable and participate in the more congenial setting of a home, a sort of *chavura* of families.

A refinement of this idea is what I call "people to people" programs, involving not a group of families, but one to one relationships of single families or individuals. Based on the little red schoolhouse principle of American education, that whatever one's level of education, one can transmit what one possesses to those who have less (a principle which incidentally has been validated in some recent studies of education among underprivileged groups in our society),

individual families or Jews could reach out to counterpart families or persons in the same neighborhood, socio-economic bracket, or professional group to explore and share Jewish fellowship and experiences.

The strategy of outreach that we have been discussing is, of course, focused on those Jewish families and individuals whose social and cultural bonds to the Jewish community are weakest. But this approach, it is important to point out, will be effective only in so far as there is a simultaneous effort to strengthen the normative base of our institutions and to deepen the cultural commitments of our core lay and professional leadership. If for the first half of this century the "service" ideology dominated communal Jewish thinking, in our present phase of evolution as a community, the need is for the preservation, and greater expression of, our unique social and cultural identity. Achieving this at the periphery of our community must commence at its core. That is how the dynamic of community regeneration, or to use our term, "outreach", works. So the core must be strengthened and expanded to enable "outreach", first to individuals and families outside, but adjacent to those institutions, and hopefully in the more difficult and second phase, even to those not immediately accessible to our institutions, perhaps ultimately, even those located in the neutral society.

Finally, achieving successful outreach, in my view, also requires an effort to modify the larger context in which our community exists and in which we live as Americans. Ours is a pluralist society. Pluralism asserts that while participating in the dynamics of American life, all groups can and should maintain themselves as groups. However, as the concept of pluralism has worked out, it has been more *structural*, than *cultural*, i.e., it has allowed for groups to create their own network of social institutions,

minimizing the pressures for massive assimilation. But extensive and intensive acculturation has taken place, particularly among Jews.

I am suggesting that the Jewish community opt for what I call *maximum cultural pluralism*, the creation of a true and authentic cultural pluralist society, in which all groups can fully cultivate and foster their own unique norms, values and cultures, the fullest expression of their distinctiveness. I believe America can be opened for such a change, for the expansion of the parameters of expression for all groups in the society. Within this new context, I would advocate what I call, *the celebration of Jewish distinctiveness*.

By this I mean that the Jewish community, in manifold ways, makes use of, and creates appropriate occasions to emphasize joyfully the uniqueness of our faith, culture, and community. Such celebrations can highlight in the most positive and attractive ways our distinctiveness and thereby create a climate and mood conducive to acceptance of, and identification and union with, the Jewish community. I am further asserting that these celebrations of Jewish distinctiveness, important as they may be within the Jewish community, in the home, synagogue, Center, Fédération board room, should not be confined there. Indeed, to be effective for our purposes, they must also take place in the general domain of American culture and life, where the peripheral Jews that we are trying to reach can get the message. Some activities of this type function to legitimate Jewishness. For example, Jewish studies programs in colleges and universities, and even high schools, aside from promoting Jewish scholarship, give status to Jewish studies and indirectly to Jewish life, even for those on the campus who do not attend these programs. On another level, public manifestations of religious and national celebrations, going to the street and/or media, stimu-

late and heighten public Jewish consciousness and enable some Jews to rediscover sparks of their own *pintele Yid*. The use of the public media in dramatic ways around Jewish occasions and personalities for the popularization of Jewish culture undoubtedly strengthens the commitment of the committed, but it can also spill over for those only peripherally associated with Jewish mediums.

Needless to say, Jewish distinctiveness does not come in one model. Thus, congruent with maximum cultural pluralism in the American community, the Jewish community must similarly make room and allow for diversity and pluralism internally.

In essence, because ours is now a voluntary community, membership can no longer be assured by the external constraints that historically forced the Jew to remain in the fold. Jews as Jews are now more than ever before inner, not outer, directed. The set of commitments to keep Jews Jewish must necessarily therefore be internal, based on a heightened awareness of our distinctiveness, and a celebration of it as a priceless and glorious life style.

From a theological perspective, the Jews were destined to survive in all times and in all countries, even the open, egalitarian, free Diaspora society in which we now live. And it is not only we in the United States who are facing such radical and unprecedented challenges to Jewish survival. So are the other Jewries of the western world where intermarriage is also rampant. Thus, our construction of new models for Jewish functioning and reconstruction, and rearrangement of aspects of our communal machinery and programs, if successful, can be exported to serve them, just as we have earlier served them through our huge expenditure of resources for welfare and material assistance.

We in these United States, even as we respond with fantastic generosity and fidelity to Israel, need also to respond to our own number one domestic problem, the subtly dismembering phenomena of Jewish exogamy, Jewish intermarriage. Otherwise, our Jewish community, the arsenal and treasury for international Jewish civilization, may also stumble. The task is indeed formidable, but the stakes are Jewish peoplehood. We dare not falter.