

Closer to Nothing

Double or Nothing: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage by Sylvia Barack Fishman

Reviewed by Shalom Freedman

In this work Sylvia Barack Fishman, professor of contemporary Jewish life and Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University, examines one of the major problems confronting the American Jewish community today, namely, intermarriage.

The study is based on 250 interviews with mixed-married men and women. It also includes the findings obtained from focus-group discussions with their teenage children. In addition, there are results drawn from interviews with other friends and extended-family members of the research subjects. The second part of the book explores how mixed marriage is portrayed in American film, television, fiction, and cultural media in general.

The study begins by stressing how intermarriage is a positive value in American culture. It is seen as evidence that individuals have acted of their own free will, choosing the partner most suitable to them. This also fits the romantic ideal of marriage prevalent in Western society. Intermarriage is also viewed favorably because the individuals are seen as transcending their own narrow ethnic identity and opting for a general American one, a component of which is integration with others.

Barack Fishman makes clear, however, that with the positive emphasis on ethnicity and multiculturalism since the 1960s and 1970s, this does not necessarily mean denying one's connection to one's own original group. It may well mean opting, as many intermarried couples have, for a kind of "both-and" identity in which symbols and customs of both sides are included within the new family's identity.

The book's findings about intermarried Jewish couples are important, some of them bearing on the large question, somewhat misleadingly posed in the book's either/or title, of whether intermarriage is a blessing or a disaster. For example, it turns out that these couples have a divorce rate twice as high as that of in-married Jewish couples. Furthermore, their Jewish education and knowledge are considerably lower than for in-married couples. Orthodox Jews intermarry at a much lower rate than Conservative Jews, who intermarry at a somewhat lower rate than Reform Jews. The children of intermarried couples intermarry much more than those of in-married couples. Where once intermarriage was usually between a Jewish male and a non-Jewish female, now the other kind is equally common. Nevertheless, when the mother is Jewish there is far greater likelihood that the children will receive a Jewish education and identity.

A central and certainly expected finding is the negative correlation between intermarriage and Jewish education. Indeed, the book's main positive conclusion concerns emphasizing Jewish education as a basis for strengthening the Jewish community.

Nevertheless, this study's major news is negative. Today, two out of three children born in mixed marriages are receiving no significant Jewish education, meaning they will most likely be lost to meaningful participation in the Jewish community. A striking finding is that when one parent is Catholic, 66 percent of the children are raised as Catholics. For Pentecostals the number is 65 percent, for Baptists and Presbyterians 63 percent. Only Episcopalians and Anglicans have lower figures than do the Jews. The insistent parent is the major factor in determining the child's religious education and identity.

A Weakening Community

The disturbing implication is an erosion of group loyalty among American Jews. Apparently, two-thirds of intermarrying Jews have no interest in preserving Jewish identity, no motivation - even post-Holocaust - to keep the Jewish people alive. The inescapable inference is that the American Jewish community is disastrously weakened, with intermarriage rarely producing strong Jewish identities. Most intermarried couples affiliate, if at all, with Reform congregations, those with traditionally less learning and commitment. The study also indicates, however, that it is not so much intermarriage that causes declining Jewish identity, but vice versa.

The question many Jewish leaders ask, however - whether these new kinds of identity are positive for the Jewish community as a whole - is explored only superficially in this book. It gives much information about mixed families' attitudes toward holiday celebrations, Christmas trees and Chanukah candles, Easter eggs and Seders. This focuses almost totally, though, on individual preference and convenience, while ignoring issues of the meanings and obligations of Jewishness. The book's underlying assumption is that individual and family satisfaction is the only value in life - an indication of how far the research itself stems from an assimilationist perspective. If the questions asked of intermarried people in this book are a reflection, then it seems even the minority of intermarried Jews who opt for some Jewish connection do so only superficially.

As for those Jews truly committed to Jewish survival and religious life to the point that they might consider making sacrifices for these values, might see an obligation entailed, they seem to constitute an ever-smaller minority most of whom are Orthodox. But here, too, there are serious problems of focusing on one's own world, and the implications for the larger Jewish community are highly problematic. The Jewish people needs more Jews who are both concerned about Jewish history and willing to act for their people's future benefit. This book ominously suggests that there will be increasingly fewer, not more, such individuals among American Jewry. While failing to look more deeply into the meaning of Jewishness for intermarried couples, the book does confirm the widespread impression, also corroborated by other researchers, of a Jewish community that is weakening in the most important regards.

As the American Jewish community is still the largest in the world, and with most Diaspora communities suffering from similar demographic depletion, the answer to the question posed in this book's title seems a good deal closer to "nothing" than to "double." And this even when little Joshua gets Chanukah presents under his Christmas tree.