

## A THREEFOLD RESPONSE TO INTERMARRIAGE

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Jonathan Sarna's "Interreligious Marriage in America" is a major contribution to the assessment of the Jewish communal response to intermarriage. Previous evaluations have viewed the vast growth of the Jewish intermarriage rate -- from 6 percent in the early 1960s to nearly 50 percent today -- as an isolated phenomenon. For the first time, this rapidly increasing trend in American Jewish marital patterns is placed within the larger context of "megatrends" within American society at large. Dr. Sarna demonstrates that, whereas thirty years ago Jews, as well as most other ethnics, routinely married among their own, and Jews as well as Catholics and mainline Protestants (i.e., liberal Christians) generally married persons of the same religious background, American marital patterns of the 1990s are increasingly independent of ethnic or religious considerations. Moreover, Sarna notes that whereas mainline Protestant and white Roman Catholic leaders have accommodated to such trends, Jewish leadership has maintained its vocal opposition.

The conclusions that Dr. Sarna draws in his paper may be obscured in the minds of some readers by his dramatic description of shifting American patterns of intermarriage. For that reason, Sarna's conclusions merit repetition, particularly as an introduction to my response. Jonathan Sarna's assessment of "policy implications" is both forceful and clear:

Unless the majority of American Jews are prepared to become explicit in their dissent [from general American acceptance of intermarriage]; unless we are willing to insist that even if other Americans intermarry with impunity Jews may not; unless we are willing to raise endogamy to the level of a prime religious obligation, to teach it in our schools and to preach it from our pulpits, it seems to me that our efforts to combat intermarriage are doomed to fail.

Having introduced the larger societal context as a proper setting for Jewish policy planning, Sarna opens the door to consideration of the impact that intermarriage has had upon liberal Christian denominations and their memberships, and how this contrasts with the demographic fate of Christian Fundamentalists, whose religious resolve has remained intact. Such an examination of the diverse experiences within American Christendom is most appropriate for Jewish communal policy planners, who are accustomed to choose selectively from among the strengths and weaknesses of American Jewish denominations. We admire Orthodoxy for its passion, Conservative Judaism for its pluralism, and Reform for its openness. Yet similarly we are sympathetic as well to criticisms of these groups, whom Rabbi Shlomo Riskin humorously labels "crazy, hazy, and lazy." With such an open mind toward learning from both the positive and negative consequences of "megatrends" within the American Christian left and right, let us examine some additional considerations which Professor Sarna's invites.

(1) Parallel to the growing indifference, among both clergy and laity, of mainline Protestants and ethnic white Roman Catholics to out-marriage among their own co-religionists has been a noticeable decline in the numerical strength of both groups. While such erosion is not attributable solely to out-marriage, exogamy most certainly is one important indicator of growing rates of religious ambivalence, nonaffiliation, and secularization. From 1965 to 1988.

- Methodists declined from 11 to 9.2 million
- Presbyterians declined from 4 to 3 million
- the Episcopal church declined from 3.4 to 2.5 million
- Roman Catholic numbers have been maintained solely by the immigration of Hispanic and other nonwhite Catholic newcomers

In contrast, Evangelical Protestants have maintained their numbers in part through high rates of endogamy. In other words, ideologically liberal Christian denominations are in decline. Their leaders and followers are increasingly timid about advocating the creation of family units loyal to their doctrines. Yet passionate Fundamentalist Christians are succeeding in retaining the adherence of the next generation.<sup>1</sup>

(2) Predictably, such erosion in the numerical strength of liberal Christian denominations is also reflected in the troubling religious attitudes prevalent among individuals reared in an atmosphere of ambivalence. Recent survey data have confirmed that liberal-minded individuals "in religiously mixed marriages are less active in church life and less [committed] . . . in their beliefs than those in same-faith marriages."<sup>2</sup> Such mixed-marrieds are increasingly secularized, tend to see religion as "less important," are less likely to "believe that involvement with organized religion is necessary," and understandably are more frequently not members of a church and do not provide religious education for their children.<sup>3</sup> In other words, liberal Americans who marry persons of other religious backgrounds are often less committed to organized religion. As liberal Christian denominations are in numerical decline, so liberal Christian individuals intermarrying with Jews and others of different religious background are moving toward a secular-universalist ideology.

As Jews committed to Jewish survival, we should ask ourselves with which "megatrends" regarding marriage we seek to identify -- those of the thriving Christian right or those of the eroding Christian left. Liberals within the American Christian camp look for future growth to "missions" throughout the Third World, thereby compensating for the decline in their current numbers and the diminished loyalties of their adherents resulting from exogamy.

In contrast, American Jewish leaders cannot help but be alarmed by the dire impact of current rates of out-marriage upon our demographic survival. Preliminary results of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey identify:

- a 50+ percent national intermarriage rate
- 210,000 born-Jews who have converted to other religions
- 415,000 born-Jews who no longer consider themselves Jews
- 700,000 children with one born-Jewish parent not being raised as Jews
- 94 percent of intermarriages not involving the conversion to Judaism of the Gentile spouse

Such dire findings should be added to the frightening results of the 1983 American Jewish Committee study by Dr. Egon Mayer surveying attitudes among adult children of intermarried parents. In addition to the expected, virtual total erosion of Jewish observances (Shabbat, kashrut, holidays, etc.), any residual trace of "Jewish identity" often seemed to fade as well: 83 percent of the sample population interviewed perceived "no greater responsibility to fellow Jews than to others in need"; 81 percent deemed as "unimportant" the simple act of "belonging to a Jewish community"; only 18 percent agreed with the statement "Being Jewish is very important to me"; only 26 percent would either "definitely" or "probably" "want to be Jewish" if given the choice of being born once again into this world.

The short- and long-term results of such patterns of erosion are obvious. As Jews we can ill afford projecting a sense of "triumphalism," the luxury of labeling intermarriage "a blessing" or "an

opportunity" in isolation from the stark reality of this peril to long-term American Jewish survival. The facts of interfaith marriage clearly demand a response much more energetic than that of liberal Christian denominations with whom we are often in communal fraternity. We should not passively surrender to the "megatrends" of America's liberal religious denominations. To meet this enormous challenge, we must respond with the type of unabashed passion for Jewish survival evident among our Orthodox brethren yet not limited to Orthodoxy's primary focus upon prevention. Instead, our strategy should be to emulate the successful efforts of the similarly zealous Evangelical Christians, adopting a threefold strategy: prevention, conversion, and *keruv* ("outreach").

1. *Prevention.* Although some readers of the Sarna paper may conclude that the "price of a free and open society" is exogamy by all groups, and that such a pattern is unavoidable, efforts to stem this disastrous tide must be intensified. This will be neither the first nor last time in history that authentic Jewish leadership has articulated an ideology contrary to major societal trends. Just as Christian Fundamentalists have maintained unified "born again" homes in spite of cultural pressures to the contrary, so too should Jews, regardless of ideology, join together in taking a principled stand for our survival as a separate group. We should respond affirmatively to Dr. Sarna's call to "raise endogamy to the level of a prime religious obligation, to teach it in our schools and to preach it from our pulpits."

Now is the time to produce pamphlets and books, curricula and youth-group materials for youngsters and for parents stating the case for marriage within the fold. We owe endogamy to our families, our communities, our ancestors, our future progeny, our fellow Jews throughout the world, to ourselves, and most of all to God. Moreover, we must clarify how Judaism and Christianity can be mutually respectful yet remain theologically incompatible. You cannot believe both that the Messiah has come and that he has not come, that *mitzvot*, are the route to salvation and that they are not, that the Jewish people's covenant with God is still valid and that it has been superseded. In addition, we must stress identifiable traditional Jewish sources opposing out-marriage, as well as sociological data supporting the three-generation disappearance of Jewishness in the vast majority of cases in which intermarriage has occurred.

In addition, it is time for intensifying efforts in Jewish identity formation within Talmud Torahs, Jewish day schools, teen programs, on college campuses, and among single Jewish adults of all ages. We should articulate responses to the question "Why be Jewish?" in an idiom suitable to the diverse communities within our American Jewish collectivity. It is time to set much higher Jewish communal standards for subsidizing post-bar/bat mitzvah education, formal and informal -- classes, trips to Israel, Jewish-content camping experiences, Jewish youth groups, socialization among Jewish peers -- with the same urgency that the previous generation funded elementary-school religious education.

Moreover, Jewish communal dollars should be massively directed toward affecting Jewish dating patterns: workshops in ethnotherapy to undo stereotypic rejection of Jewish males and females by one another; Jewish singles settings for adult education and rap groups; dances and socials, dating and *shadchanut* (matching) services; social-action projects; and support networks for the divorced, widowed, and single parents. While we cannot totally prevent intermarriage, we *can* facilitate the meeting of eligible Jews in an era when single people of all sectors of society find such meeting difficult and frustrating.

2. *Conversion.* Once a born-Jew falls in love with and marries someone of another faith, the most desirable outcome from Jewish communal perspective is the sincere conversion of the non-Jewish partner. Research by Egon Mayer for the AJC has demonstrated that such converts are generally as committed to Jewish religious life as are born-Jews, although greater emphasis is needed on transmitting a sense of Jewish peoplehood, including the commitment to advocate endogamy for their own children.

Although the National Jewish Population Survey indicates that only 6 percent of current interfaith marriages result in conversion to Judaism prior to marriage, anecdotal evidence affirms that many conversions occur after marriage. To encourage this phenomenon, Jewish communal organizations should initiate a broad-based publicity campaign regarding the process of conversion, locations for exploring entry into Jewish religious life, and the receptivity of large sectors of the American synagogue world to such "Jews by choice." Furthermore, the subsequent congregational involvement of such newcomers should be carefully nurtured via such techniques as a close relationship with a sponsoring rabbi, assignment of a "mentor couple" within the synagogue, and networking into a suitable *hevrah*. In other words, following conversion, the Jew by choice should not be left "dripping at the mikvah," lest a major opportunity be lost for forging a meaningfully unified new Jewish family unit.

3. *Keruv*. When neither prevention nor conversion are possible or successful, some Jewish communal dollars should be allocated to try to salvage a residue of Jewish identification via *keruv* (outreach) activities. In this context, a note regarding terminology is warranted. In contrast to the notion of "outreach" in which we change our self-definition in order to count the mixed-married among our numbers, *keruv* connotes the attempt to bring Jews and their non-Jewish spouses closer to us and to our established communal standards. Such a traditionalist form of outreach is desperately needed as a corrective to the pervasiveness of nonjudgmental outreach by the liberal sector of the American Jewish religious community, in which participating families may still opt for two-religion households.

As Rabbi Kassel Abelson has written, "We have to make every effort to save intermarried families for Judaism, and to help these families provide Jewish homes in which the offspring of intermarriage will be raised as Jews. We should also keep in mind that, with the passage of years, the non-Jewish spouse may feel more inclined to commit him/herself to Judaism through formal conversion." Opportunities for Jewish study, prayer, and observances, for grappling with religious issues and for the education of Jewish children should be sensitively provided. Such *keruv* should include clear definitions of the limits beyond which we cannot go. Our institutions must remain thoroughly Jewish in both content and self-definition. A person born a non-Jew must undergo a formal conversion process to become a Jew. Non-Jewish spouses of Jews can pray, study, and socialize with us, but they should not be counted as members of our community and should not be given leadership roles. We can educate children in our schools, but not if they are simultaneously attending church school and are being raised as Christians and/or "both." In the words of Rabbi Stephen Fuchs of Nashville, "We should encourage non-Jews (and their children) to become Jews by choice . . . we must remind them, though, that remaining a non-Jew is also a choice, and all choices have consequences."<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion, Sarna's excellent paper demonstrates that the religiously liberal sectors of American Jewry and American Christendom are experiencing high rates of exogamy, and that earlier ethnic loyalties are no longer a countervailing force. Just as we identify with American Catholic and mainline Protestants when they support our calls for the separation of church and state but distance ourselves from them when they take pro-Palestinian positions, so too we must be selective in following their lead with regard to out-marriage. We can ill afford a strategy that recasts Jewish attitudes advocating endogamy into a lauding of intermarriage as a historic "opportunity" for spreading a new genre of Judaism via nonjudgmental outreach. Such a tactic will have the short-term benefit of gaining the praise of the intermarried and their parents, but it will assure the rapid erosion of American Jewish numbers.

At the other extreme, although acknowledging the impressive success of Orthodox Jewry in transmitting Jewish in-marriage norms to their offspring, at the communal level we cannot limit our focus to prevention. Given the alarming numbers of currently intermarried homes, and the mounting



rates of interfaith marriage, a one-dimensional response is not productive. Worse still, such rigidity limits the public Jewish debate regarding conversion and outreach to the left wing of American Jewry, those most likely to adopt the patterns that we have described among liberal Christian groups. As a more centrist, pluralistic strategy, ironically we can learn from the Fundamentalist Christian right with whom we are so often understandably ill at ease. From the successes of the Evangelicals we can be inspired boldly and openly to advocate in-marriage, to seek sincere converts among the non-Jewish spouses of our co-religionists, and to forcefully advocate the raising of children in mixed-married homes as religiously committed Jews. This threefold program of prevention, conversion, and *keruv* should become a high-priority, communal effort by all branches of American Jewish life. To be a part of the larger society's "megatrends" which Dr. Sarna has introduced to our consideration, let us choose from those models which offer the best chance for Jewish survival and self-preservation.

#### Notes

1. George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan, 1990), pp. 25-28; James Naisbitt and Patricia Auburdene, *Megatrends 2000* (New York: Morrow, 1990), pp. 273-277.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.
4. *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement 1980-1985*, p. 132.
5. *Shma*, Mar. 8, 1991, p. 70.

