

INTERMARRIAGE AND JEWISH EDUCATION

Jonathan Woocher

Probably no subject provokes as much passionate debate among Jewish leadership today as that of nonconversionary intermarriage. For some, the rising rates of intermarriage in recent years represent the most dangerous threat to Jewish survival in America yet encountered -- a threat that must be fought with every means available. For others, intermarriage is a fact of life that must be met with entirely new attitudes and approaches, ones that emphasize not efforts at prevention but outreach to the intermarried in an attempt to keep (or draw) them within the Jewish fold. Still others, perhaps a majority, argue that we must somehow embrace both these options, difficult though this may appear to be.

For Jewish education, intermarriage has emerged as, in effect, the ultimate challenge. Much of the intense concern for Jewish education manifested among community leadership today is premised on the hope that more or better Jewish education can reverse, or at least slow, the tide of intermarriage sweeping through the community. But the question of whether Jewish education can in fact deliver on this hope is not the only one that intermarriage poses for our educational system. Jewish education must deal with intermarriage not merely as a future life decision it seeks to prevent, but as a present reality in the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jewish children and adults. How shall Jewish education respond to the demographic and pedagogic challenges this poses? What shall we say and do with those who are intermarried, or who are the children of intermarrieds? What is their place in our classrooms and programs? What message do we want to deliver to them, and can it be done at the same time as we seek to employ Jewish education as a prophylactic against intermarriage itself?

Beyond these specifics, there is the question of proportion. As noted above, preventing intermarriage and preserving the intermarried for Jewish life have become for some not merely desirable outcomes of Jewish education. They have become virtually its *raison d'être*. Should we be prepared to place intermarriage at the core of our educational agenda, and make it the focus of our human and material investment? Is intermarriage in fact Jewish education's ultimate challenge, its litmus test?

Can Jewish Education Prevent Intermarriage?

These are not, I would suggest, simple questions to answer given the state of our knowledge today, and even less so when we recognize the difficult value choices they embody. For many the most basic question remains whether Jewish education can indeed have any impact on the intermarriage rate. My answer here is a highly qualified yes. There is evidence that better, more intensive, more holistic Jewish education can have a positive impact on the formation of a strong Jewish identity. There is also evidence that the stronger one's Jewish identity, the less likely one is to feel comfortable with a marriage partner who is not Jewish, or who is not prepared to become Jewish.

However, this does not imply that there is some specific educational approach that will prevent intermarriage, nor does it justify making the prevention of intermarriage the litmus test of the effectiveness of Jewish education. As far as we can determine, what is needed is simply better

Jewish education. The recipe for this is not a mystery. It includes: more hours; the linking of formal and informal experiences; attention to developmental needs; developing stronger connections between what is taught and what happens in the home and the community; and highlighting the full range of cognitive, affective, social, and moral dimensions of Jewishness. Simply adding more preaching against intermarriage to an otherwise ineffectual education is a dubious prescription for success. (This does not mean that the issue should never be directly addressed. It is certainly appropriate that teenagers and young adults be encouraged to think seriously about the bases and implications of the life choices they are or will be making. But if a solid Jewish educational foundation is not present, educating against intermarriage per se will probably prove futile.)

Sadly, most Jewish education today does not meet the criteria of quality and quantity that would justify our anticipating its prophylactic value. But even if it did, it would be unlikely that Jewish education alone could have a dramatic impact on intermarriage rates. Education, we know, is only one factor shaping Jewish identity, and not even the most powerful. And Jewish identity, in turn, is only one factor that enters into the choice of a spouse. Thus we should not unfairly burden Jewish education with the responsibility for undoing what successful integration and changing societal values have done. Moreover, making the prevention of intermarriage our primary motivation in seeking educational improvement runs the risk of leading to serious distortion of both the meaning and methods of a good Jewish education. There is more, much more, to living a Jewish life than marrying a Jewish spouse, and it is the former, not just the latter, which must remain at the core and apex of a Jewish educational vision. If we cannot provide persuasive answers to the basic question "Why is it important for me to live Jewishly?" there is no reason to believe that we will be able to persuade young adults to marry Jews.

Dealing with the Intermarried

Regardless of how successful we might hope to be in reducing intermarriage for the future, in the present reality the intermarried are very much a part of Jewish education's world. Indeed, from an educational standpoint intermarriage creates several new populations to deal with: There is, first, the intermarried couple, or more precisely the Jewish and the non-Jewish spouse, considered both separately and together. What are their Jewish educational needs and desires, and, if these are absent, do we wish to seek to instill them? Then there are, of course, the children of intermarried couples. Many such children may already be found in Jewish classrooms; many more are not being educated Jewishly. We can even extend our view to encompass the prior generation, the Jewish parents of an intermarried child. Especially when they are also the grandparents of a child of an intermarriage, they can be an important factor in the Jewish educational equation.

Each of these populations presents distinct challenges and opportunities. Although some work has been done, especially in the Reform movement, on developing educational approaches for working with the intermarried and their children, we are far from having a solid theoretical or practical base on which to build. What are our educational goals in this work? Are we more concerned with helping people feel comfortable with where they are, or getting them to move to a different level of Jewish engagement? Do we target our efforts to the Jewish spouse, the non-Jewish one, the child, the Jewish grandparent? What do we say to each of these about what Judaism asks and offers? What compromises are we prepared to accept (Christmas visits to the non-Jewish relatives), which to oppose (Christmas trees in the home)?

We dare not underestimate the complexity of this work. Precisely because we are dealing with individuals and family units with highly diverse backgrounds, concerns, and commitments, and often doing so in the same contexts where we are dealing with endogamous Jewish families and their offspring, it is nearly impossible to envision *an* approach, *a* method that is adequate for all purposes and all populations. Jewish education is scrambling merely to keep pace with social trends that

appear far beyond its capacity to shape. There has been almost no opportunity for thoughtful research, careful experimentation, dispassionate analysis to help guide institutional and programmatic responses. There is much to be done in reassessing goals, methods, materials, and settings before we can with any confidence say that Jewish education is prepared to deal with the reality of intermarriage today.

What Do We Stand For and What Do We Say?

Looming over any discussion of educational approaches and methods is the question of values. What is it that we wish to say about intermarriage, and to whom? As indicated at the outset, the current stance of much of the Jewish community appears to embrace two separate messages: We oppose intermarriage and seek to prevent it. But we do not reject those who have intermarried, and we wish to reach out to them and their children in order to bring them into the Jewish fold. This is a complex message and a difficult one to convey educationally -- especially in a classroom or sanctuary where the intermarried or their children are present! As a conceptual approach to dealing with intermarriage, this dual message may be the best we can come up with, and the distinction between a priori and post facto judgments (*lehatchilah* and *b'diavad*, in our language) is a reasonable and respectable one. The difficulty from a Jewish educational standpoint, however, is that we are dealing with real people, not rational argumentation. Teaching that intermarriage is wrong without stigmatizing and thereby alienating those who are part of intermarried families is a most delicate task indeed.

In one sense, therefore, there may be virtue in a kind of de facto division of labor, with some voices in the community emphasizing the stance of opposition and others that of accommodation. The contention this invites is surely not to be welcomed, but perhaps we must recognize that, in the final analysis, a mixed message may simply be unavoidable.

Within the educational context, we can try wherever possible to emphasize a positive message that may somewhat mitigate the tension. Placing an emphasis on conversion as a value that all can endorse represents one such option. It is not, unfortunately, a perfect solution, since conversion is still not a sufficiently dominant feature on the map of intermarriage today to enable us simply to ignore the nonconversionary situation. Nevertheless, we might well benefit from greater attention to conversion in our educational work to confirm both its place within historical Judaism and its great value from familial and communal standpoints in the present situation.

There is no doubt that different educational settings may, in keeping with their own ideological character, need or wish to put greater emphasis on one element or the other of the prevention-outreach formula, even to the extent of ignoring or dismissing one term entirely. However, if we recall our premise above that Jewish education must not in any event focus on intermarriage as its central theme or concern, then we can see at least the possibility of devoting most of our educational energies to what *is* a consistent message: that living a Jewish life is a positive, rewarding experience, and that maximizing our motivation and capacity so to live is what all Jewish education is really about.

For the rest, I suspect that we have no choice but to live with the difficult task of articulating today's consensus position regarding intermarriage and its complex but defensible rationale. It will be up to talented and sensitive educators to find the best age-appropriate ways to do this in a variety of diverse settings.

In delivering this message, we must also be cognizant of the fine but critical distinction between educational and quasi-therapeutic approaches. Jewish education cannot be value-neutral. The clarification of feelings and the coming to grips with issues of identity and relationships are certainly

a necessary aspect of the educational process for those involved in intermarriages. The challenge is how to move from such activities to a Jewishly infused educational experience which will have as its goal not merely values clarification but inculcation and expression. This is a task on which Jewish educators and social workers will have to work together.

Setting Our Priorities

Increased attention to the educational implications and challenges of intermarriage should not and need not deflect us from our core task of better educating Jews. If I am correct that our best chance at preventing intermarriage comes from doing what ought to be done anyway to strengthen Jewish education, then at least this aspect of our efforts to come to grips with intermarriage can be reinforcing, not diverting, of our fundamental priorities.

Nevertheless, the question does remain of how much we should invest in special programs directed toward the intermarried and their children. On the one hand, given their numbers, we cannot simply ignore the intermarried as a target population for special educational efforts. (And, as noted above, if we are serious about reaching them, special efforts will be required.) Yet, with so much to be done to improve Jewish education broadly, can we justify expending precious resources on individuals and families who have often chosen to maintain a marginal relationship to the Jewish community?

I suggest that here we must adopt a tough-minded approach that recognizes the limits of our resources, but that does not abandon the many among the intermarried population who do wish to retain or develop a connection with Jewish life. First priority goes to those who evince a serious interest in cultivating and deepening their Jewishness. At least for the present, we should de-emphasize work with the uncertain or ambivalent, while placing greater emphasis on working with those who have already shown an interest in meeting the community at least halfway. We should be prepared to act more as facilitators and less as persuaders. Our goal should be to enable the intermarried and their children who want a Jewish connection to identify more strongly with the Jewish people and to feel more competent as Jews. It is certainly not the task of Jewish educational outreach to help families examine multiple options of religious identity or to develop a Jewish-Christian life-style.

I offer this as a practical approach to maximizing the effectiveness of our work by creating a community of Jewishly fulfilled intermarried families who can serve as models for the undecided and ambivalent.

Jewish education must take intermarriage seriously and respond thoughtfully. Education will not stop intermarriage, nor will it make active, involved Jews out of all the intermarried. It can be an important component of an overall communal strategy for confronting the current reality, and can play an important part in turning a potentially serious liability into a real asset.