

DOES OUTREACH JUSTIFY INVESTMENT? -- ALTERNATIVES TO OUTREACH

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While the freedom to marry whom one chooses is one of the benefits of the open society, on balance intermarriage is not good for the Jews; or to frame it positively, less intermarriage would be better for the Jews than more intermarriage.

Most Gentile partners do not convert. Most children of mixed (nonconversionary) marriages are not raised as Jews; most children of conversionary marriages are. The different definitions of conversion, intermarriage, and who is a Jew clearly create stresses and strains in relations among Jews.

There is no longer any doubt that the rate of intermarriage is increasing; and the differences among age cohorts is real and of deep concern. If we could stabilize the overall rate of intermarriage in the future at the level now typical of young people, we would be doing well. Thus, under the best of circumstances we can expect a profile in which 60 percent of the marriages are between Jews; another 10-15 percent are conversionary marriages (I do not define these as "intermarriages"); and 25-30 percent involve a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew.¹

Since most of the participants in this conference are in agreement that increasing intermarriages is not cause for celebration, I would like to focus my attention on prescriptions.

I begin with the interpretation of the very interesting information compiled and analyzed by Gary Tobin et al. from Brandeis. Their data indicate clearly that conversionary marriages are much more Jewish than mixed marriages and almost as Jewish as in-marriages. Therefore they conclude that we need to advocate for conversion. As part of this process we need to reach out to intermarried couples.

I believe that there is an alternative interpretation of the data which is at least as plausible; if pursued it leads to radically different policy conclusions than that advocated by Tobin et al. In this re-interpretation of the data about intermarriage, I would argue that Jews whose non-Jewish spouses convert are probably more committed Jewishly in the first place than those whose spouses don't convert. It is because of their heightened Jewish commitment that they encourage their spouses to convert. Hence their homes are more Jewish than those who were so uncommitted to Judaism in the first place that they did little or nothing to encourage their spouses to convert.

If one follows this interpretation to its logical conclusion, the appropriate response to intermarriage is not to pursue intermarrieds in the effort to convert them -- this effort is not likely to be very successful, given that such Jewish partners are not likely to be enthusiastic; rather the response to intermarriage should be to invest heavily in strengthening the Jewish commitment of young people, especially those whose families are marginally involved in Judaism. If such young people are encouraged to marry other Jews, intermarriage is avoided; if they do marry non-Jews, the probability of the couple seeking conversion is increased.

In this approach, outreach to intermarried couples should be on the communal agenda, but *such outreach efforts should have very low priority for limited identity-building dollars.*

Most Jews who intermarry have taken a walk away from Judaism. As such they are part of a relatively small group who have chosen to disaffiliate. The oft-repeated assertion that most Jews are unaffiliated and/or do not identify as Jews is simply not correct; most Jews are neither affiliated nor unaffiliated; they are in the middle -- they are somewhat engaged, identified, or affiliated. Most Jews *do* behave Jewishly in some way (and I don't mean lox and bagels Sunday mornings).

How did this misconception come about? If we look at almost any single measure of Jewish involvement -- religious observance (keeping a kosher home or attending a synagogue) or other kinds of Jewish involvement (giving money to the UJA-Federation, travel to Israel, belonging to a Jewish organization) -- those who behave Jewishly *are* in a minority. But if we look at individuals and how many different Jewish things they do, we find that only a small fraction (10-15 percent) don't do anything Jewish; another 10-15 percent are deeply engaged; *everyone else is in the middle*. Thus most Jews are not disengaged or unaffiliated, only a small minority are.

My argument that outreach to the intermarried represents a poor use of scarce communal funds is part of the larger point about outreach to the disaffiliated. Such intervention is likely to be costly and the probability of success, I believe, is not high. A much better use of communal funds is the investment of Jewish identity-building resources in people, especially young people, who are already somewhat connected, but perhaps not deeply so. *I believe that it is more important to send a 13-year-old who has completed supplementary school and attended a Jewish-sponsored day camp to Israel for intensive travel and study than it is to hire outreach workers to work with intermarried couples.*

Everything we know about marriage choice suggests that such choices are based on shared values -- values about life-style and behavior, as well as about social, economic, and political commitments. Intermarriage means that a Jewish person finds that Jewish values -- the Jewish calendar of festivals and celebrations, identification with a Jewish history of tragedy and redemption, a system of Jewish life-cycle events marking birth, rites of passage, and death -- are so unimportant a part of their value system that they are willing to marry someone who doesn't share those values. Outreach to intermarried couples is closing the barn door after the horse is stolen.

If outreach to intermarried couples is not a useful basis for Jewish policy on intermarriage, what is an appropriate Jewish policy and program response to intermarriage?

I envision a five-part response:

1. *The community needs to send a message to the Jewish extended families of intermarried couples: Welcome the non-Jewish partner.* The first imperative of Jewish public policy on intermarriage is not in the communal arena at all; for the drama of intermarriage is played out first and foremost around the dining-room table at Thanksgiving and, yes, Hanukkah and Christmas and Passover. The message needs to be a clear one: We welcome you and love you and respect you because Judaism teaches that all human beings are created in the image of God. At the same time, families need to signal that, yes, we are the last remaining ethnic group in the United States that doesn't approve of mixed marriage.

2. *When and if an intermarried couple or the non-Jewish partner is ready to learn more about Judaism, the community should be ready to share Jewish knowledge and experience.* In the implementation of this policy, the synagogue or temple and the Jewish school should be the central players. Day schools which have been reluctant to admit the children of an intermarried couple (particularly where the mother is non-Jewish) perhaps should reconsider where the interest in Judaism seems genuine. There is a fine line between willingness to share Jewish experience and involvement with an interested non-Jewish partner and the blanket acceptance and validation of a permanent mixed marriage by automatic membership in a Jewish community center or programming

by a Jewish family agency. The former is appropriate, the latter is not.

3. *The community needs to make conversion understandable and accessible, so that when and if an intermarried couple is ready to move beyond learning more about Judaism into a serious personal exploration, they know what to do.* People need clear and objective material outlining the common and disparate elements of different modes of Jewish identification. They need clear and objective material explaining the differences between Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox conversions. They need to know whom to turn to for advice and guidance -- in community-wide institutions as well as within each of the religious movements. It is this stage in an individual's search that family agencies and Jewish community centers can be invaluable -- information, classes, and counseling are badly needed.

4. *Communities should have a unified framework for conversion.* At a maximum, all converts would go through a process acceptable to all religious movements with a result acceptable to all. At a minimum, there would be a common entry point into a three- or four-pronged conversion system. A middle ground would have all potential converts proceed down a common path as long as possible, picking a movement-specific process only after an initial common phase of learning and preparation.

5. *Families and communities need to be educated to total acceptance of converts.* A convert is a valued and treasured member of the community. Both individuals and institutions have a long way to go in believing this ancient Jewish truth and applying it within their families, institutions, and communities.

In conclusion, I do not believe that it is feasible to significantly increase the number of conversions of intermarried partners to Judaism. I do believe that it is feasible to help a Jew to appreciate the richness, majesty, and wonder of Judaism so that they want to join with another Jew in transmitting those values to future generations.

Notes

1. The recently completed national survey of Jews under the auspices of the Council of Jewish Federations suggests that more than half of current marriages involve intermarriage. Whether the compilation of local studies (presented by Brandeis) is correct or the national study is -- either one could be right -- the news is not good.

