

Cohen is splitting the Jewish community

Paul Golin, THE JERUSALEM POST

Feb. 7, 2007

Is there danger in seeing the world in black and white? How about in splitting the Jewish community based solely on one demographic characteristic? Sociologist Steven M. Cohen has spent great effort over the last decade or more separating the Jewish world between in-married and intermarried Jews.

His latest report, *A Tale of Two Jewries: The Inconvenient Truth, For American Jews* - distributed last week to thousands of North American Jewish communal leaders - lays bare his worldview, one that is shared by some influential communal leaders: "The gaps between the in-married and intermarried are so large and persistent that it seems that we are developing into two distinct populations."

Perhaps the choice of marriage partner can be used as a key indicator for sociologists to assume additional sweeping characteristics about various groups. But generalizations are too often wrong when applied to actual individuals, rendering the exercise useless in the real-world programming of Jewish communal institutions. So why bother? Especially when the policy recommendations in Cohen's paper - more day schools, summer camps, Israel trips, student groups, and adult education (i.e., the programs already funded by the organization who sponsored the paper, Michael Steinhardt's philanthropy) - need no further justification. They are already widely supported as effective, and support for all is growing.

But justification is what his paper is about, and that justification can be summed up simply as: intermarriage is bad, these programs can reduce intermarriage, and therefore these programs are good and should be administered with that goal in mind.

THAT'S THE wrong justification on multiple levels, beyond the dubious suggestion that long-existent programs can reduce an intermarriage rate that has only grown over time. Creating and supporting programs based solely on the fear of intermarriage denigrates the inherent value of these programs. Cohen writes that we should support "efforts to increase educational participation as a way of promoting in-marriage (and, of course, for other good reasons as well)" thus reducing three millennia of profound Jewish teachings and spirituality to a parenthetical, in the service of maintaining tribal bloodlines.

In fact, it is all those "other good reasons" that we as a community should be focusing on, and that we still have difficulty articulating to the very people this paper suggests need to increase their educational participation.

More importantly, we should be devising ways to ensure that the already intermarried and children of intermarriage have access to such programming. Cohen provides no strategies for that goal. Page after page of explanation about how weakly intermarried Jews are

connected to Judaism imply that it is not relevant to consider them in our programming. He claims that intermarried families are "responsible for raising only a quarter of today's Jewish children under the age of 18" while ignoring the contradictory NJPS finding that 45% of college-age students who identify as Jews come from intermarried households. Regardless, isn't a quarter enough not to write off?

This has relevance beyond the backroom policy planning of Jewish foundations. Communal professionals who work "on the ground," such as rabbis, JCC programmers and Jewish Family Services social workers rely on funding for their programs from philanthropists who may not share their same front-row view of the community. Those funders in turn rely (perhaps too much) on the handful of sociologists specializing in studying the Jewish community to help them shape their giving. But sociologists can have their own agendas, and because sociology is in many ways more of an art than science, those numbers can be massaged to serve their agendas.

FOR EXAMPLE, in his paper Cohen reiterates the often-quoted statistic that the children of two generations of intermarriage are rarely raised Jewish. But he does so without reminding his readers that this necessarily implies the intermarriage in those families began decades ago, when it really was "marrying out" and there was little to no awareness or support for such couples in the organized Jewish community (in fact, there was outright hostility). Such statistics tell us nothing about how the grandchildren of today's intermarried Jews will be raised.

Equally obscuring of history is his claim that attending Jewish day school "reduces intermarriage by 14 percentage points," without mentioning that the cohort of marriage-age graduates in the 2001 study was disproportionately raised Orthodox, and that the intermarriage rate will likely increase among graduates once additional non-Orthodox day schools are built.

More baffling is the alchemy by which Cohen even deduces the "points" he assigns to various Jewish experiences in lowering the chances of intermarriage, "controlling for sex, age, religion, denomination raised" and so on. While many of his colleagues in sociology are developing more complex models for understanding Jewish behavior, Dr. Cohen seems to be removing as many factors as possible in order to laud the supposed triumph of Jewish education over intermarriage.

This becomes all the more baffling when, after thousands of words disparaging the educational choices of intermarried Jews (or more accurately their parents), he admits, "Zip code may in fact be more predictive of in-marriage than Jewish education in that people still date and marry those they live near."

So it turns out that geography - the fact that Jews make up only 2% of a free and open American society, and that most of us are destined to study, work and socialize with the non-Jewish majority - actually matters more than the supposed educational failing of intermarried Jews. Perhaps instead of seeing the world split between in-married versus

intermarried Jews, we can split it geographically between denser Jewish populations like New York versus, say, Seattle Jews.

Certainly if Cohen wants to run the numbers he'd find much higher levels of "Jewish identity" among New York Jews as a whole. Should we then give up on Seattle's Jews?

Interestingly, Cohen offers no concrete policies to address this geographic reality, declining to suggest outright re-ghettoization and instead vaguely suggests that Jews go where other Jews already live and parents send their kids to more Jewishly-attended colleges.

That's not very helpful to the majority of Jewish communities in North America that are struggling with reaching people in their own ever-expanding suburbs and exurbs. And it's one of the many issues we at the Jewish Outreach Institute address in hands-on work with actual communities.

We define "outreach" as taking the Jewish community out to where people are rather than waiting for them to come to us, and we've been saying for years that bringing mainstream Jewish programming to secular venues can reach those on the periphery, both the geographic and identity periphery. Cohen touches on this issue briefly (attributing the discovery to a paper he wrote last year!), but instead sees programming in secular venues simply as opportunities for young Jews to meet other young Jews and in-marry.

This is despite his admission that many of these young Jews are there precisely because they "want Jewish events where they can... meet and bring their non-Jewish friends, making the objective of providing Jewish social networks that much more challenging and complex."

His policy solution? He doesn't offer one. It's just "challenging and complex."

Here's the answer he can't seem to fathom: get past using in-marriage as the only measurement of success. The policy recommendations missing from Cohen's worldview is that the Jewish community needs to build more and better bridges into its programs at all levels of the life cycle, for all kinds of Jewish families, including the intermarried and their children.

Cohen quotes Dr. Jack Wertheimer in suggesting that communal professionals should do a better job passing off participants from one institution to the next - and of course that is good and logical and has been said before by others - but it's not just about getting kids into Jewish preschools and keeping them on the "inside" for as long as possible. It's about opening doors every step of the way.

Our work takes place in the real world rather than in theoretical constructs, so we know how detrimental Cohen's anti-intermarried approach can be, even as we support (for different reasons) the very programs his paper recommends. The perceived tribalism of institutionally promoting in-marriage pushes away younger generations. And for the huge

and growing cohort of children from intermarried households who consider themselves Jewish, the admonition against intermarriage holds almost no water. They rightly ask, "If my parents intermarried and I'm Jewish, then why can't I too raise Jewish children regardless of who I marry?"

They are also thinking, "And why are you yelling at me about the devastations of intermarriage, aren't I standing right here?"

For their friends and family members - even those who might be single or in-married Jews - the message of *A Tale of Two Jewries* comes across as insulting, insular and out of touch with the needs of Jews today.

The visionary philanthropist behind the organization that issued the paper, Michael Steinhardt, is one of the creative forces behind Birthright Israel and the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education, and is doing as much for the Jewish people as anyone currently alive. Through his work, Steinhardt has made it a point to be inclusive of the children of intermarriage, but he has also made it quite clear that the ultimate goal of all his programming is to increase in-marriage. There is a gaping hole in his philanthropic portfolio directly addressing the intermarried themselves, even though it is an "inconvenient truth" that tens of thousands of Birthright Israel graduates will intermarry.

Are those Jews then considered automatically lost to the community? We hope not. And we are doing everything possible to make sure that it does not happen.

The writer is associate executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute (www.JOI.org) and co-author of 20 Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren to do (and Not Do) to Nurture Jewish Identity in Their Grandchildren.