

## THE ROLE OF THE JEWISH FAMILY AGENCY IN DEALING WITH INTERMARRIAGE \*

by BENJAMIN R. SPRAFKIN

*Executive Director, Jewish Family Service of Philadelphia*

INTERMARRIAGE has been a concern of the Jewish people for generations. In the last decade, anxiety over the threat of assimilation has deepened as the rate of intermarriage has continued to mount in the American Jewish community. The implication of this continued increase is the threat of a slow dissolution of the Jewish community. That the Jewish community, therefore, should look to its organizations and institutions for help with this problem is understandable.

Intermarriage constitutes the major symptom of assimilation, and assimilation today has supplanted anti-semitism as the number one Jewish problem in America. The problem of intermarriage is significant because we live in a democratic society that is open, free and hospitable to Jews in almost every aspect of life, including the choice of friends and marriage partners. There is nothing inevitable about the survival of Jewry as an identifiable people, notwithstanding its survival for over 5000 years under all sorts of adverse circumstances, a phenomenon that has been characterized as a miracle of history. Therefore, to assure survival, continuous efforts both on a mass and individual basis are required.

It follows from the above that the Jewish family agency be expected, and expect itself, to identify the role it can play and the contribution it can make in dealing with intermarriage. The synagogue, the Jewish Center and the Jewish schools have identified their positions. In most organized Jewish Communities the Jewish family agency is recognized as a major institution. *Prima facie*, it has a continuing concern for Jews in need and a primary responsibility to serve these Jews. It must, furthermore, remain alert in its search for new answers to old questions and new methods to meet the increasing complexities of personal and family problems.

As an instrumentality of the Jewish community, the agency has significant personal and emotional meaning beyond the specific service it offers to individuals who identify themselves as Jewish without necessarily understanding the nature of this Jewishness. The community's leadership has developed the conviction that it is right and proper for the troubled and bewildered in the community to have a facility of their own to help them, a facility which the Jewish community has an obligation to support to the fullest possible extent rather than to compel these troubled families to turn to non-sectarian sources.

An interfaith couple is troubled about their prospective marriage; upset

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parents are at a loss at their child's wish to marry a Gentile; a concluded intermarriage is floundering and the interfaith couple is desperately seeking help; an interfaith couple is troubled about the education of their child—these are the kinds of family anxieties and problems that come to the agency. The family stresses and strains are apt to be intensified by religious differences, with the result that there is a definite possibility of individual and family breakdown. The heightened danger of family breakdown in intermarriage is a particular concern of the family agency bound up with its commitment to Jewish continuity.

Family breakdown, a most troubling social problem in America today, is a main concern of all family service agencies. The root source of family breakdown is marital conflict. Family agencies receive more requests for help with this marriage problem than for any other family problem. In the last decade, Jewish agencies have experienced an increase in applications for help by young people and their parents related to a proposed or concluded intermarriage.

The purpose of the Jewish agency is to strengthen and preserve family life in the Jewish community and prevent individual and family breakdown. The healthy family is a cornerstone of a healthy society. The core service of the agency is counseling, which developed in response to a community need for the strengthening of family life, more specifically, for helping troubled families and individuals to cope with social and emotional problems. The agency is concerned with intermarriage because it may be troubling to those involved directly and indirectly: sometimes it troubles the marriage partners, and even more frequently, it troubles their parents. In short, then, the conflicts, the stresses and strains that are apt to be

intensified by religious differences in a proposed or concluded interfaith marriage constitute a vital basis for the family agency concern with the problem of intermarriage, beyond the agency's commitment to Jewish survival.

#### The Role of the Agency

When an engaged, interfaith couple is seeking help with a problem related to their impending marriage, some Jewish communal leaders have argued that the agency should take on a semi-parental, authoritarian role; that the caseworker should definitely oppose the intermarriage; that he should use his skill in "importuning" the Jewish client to marry within his own faith, despite his preference to the contrary. This must be the agency role, they contend, otherwise Jewish intermarriage will continue to mount and ultimately affect the survival of Jews.

Pragmatically, the authoritarian approach thus suggested has not proven effective wherever tried. Moreover it collides with basic casework principles which stress freedom of choice and self-determination. By his focus on the individual person, the caseworker helps a client to think through his difficulties, expand his awareness of implications of his behavior and, with maximum possible maturity, move toward making his own decisions. For a caseworker to impose a decision, no matter how subtly or cleverly it is done, has scarcely ever resulted in a permanent solution. The caseworker does not stand in judgment, nor does he impose on others his own values or point of view. His course of action is shaped by his commitment to the preservation and strengthening of the family and the home, the welfare of the couple and their children, marital happiness and the acceptance of his clients on the basis of individual worth, including the respect of the integrity of

the individual and his right to self-determination.

The following premarital counseling case will illustrate the foregoing:

The couple (he 24, she 22) came to the Jewish Family Service of Philadelphia because of the young man's uncertainty about his imminent interfaith marriage. Mr. B, Jewish, was raised in a family which was observant of Jewish laws and customs, while Miss L was the daughter of a Baptist minister. The couple had met in Philadelphia where he was working in a professional capacity following his graduation from college; she, also a professional, was temporarily unemployed. They had been attracted to each other out of deep personal needs; he perceived her as "a lonely mixed-up gal" and she saw him as "an unpredictable crackpot" who was lonely also. She liked his brightness, his ability to talk, and he liked her readiness to listen. However, as it developed, they talked at, not with, each other; as he said, their marathon talk sessions "never resolved anything." Mr. B was indeed very bright, verbal, but a somewhat unsteady young man still struggling, in many ways, to find his own identity and in this sense still adolescent. He loved classical music, was an omnivorous reader, and dreamed of travelling to distant places. He wanted more education and revealed wishes for himself which did not include a partner. On the other hand, Miss L was quite clear as to what she wanted of marriage; a home with roots, the comforts of being protected by a man. She loved jazz, wasn't especially interested in reading his kind of books, and could happily ignore many of his cultural interests. Over and beyond this, she felt that her home had to be one in which the woman was dominant, in which the man had to lean on the woman, as she had experienced it in the parental home. This ran counter to Mr. B's image of himself, and though it appeared that in his own home the mother had been the decision-maker, he was determined that he would not duplicate his father's passivity. He knew he had trouble in making decisions, and had a way of setting up situations so that decisions became externally imposed. Yet when Miss L acted independently, he said he felt "not needed" by her, and this troubled him deeply.

It seems clear that there were few areas of mutual interest in this relationship, and differences in needs and values were quite

sharp. However, no thoughtful evaluation of the prospects for a marriage planned for 10 days ahead could be made on the basis of one interview. Alternatives were considered; getting married now, with help through counseling later, a solution with great inherent risks; or postponement of the wedding to give a chance to each partner to weigh both positive and negative factors in the relationship as a basis for a solid decision. Mr. B had something to think about after this initial interview.

Before the second interview with Mr. B, he phoned to say he had called the wedding off. He later shared his entanglement in a web of guilt: Miss L, into whose apartment he had moved two weeks after meeting her, had become pregnant and he had insisted on an abortion. He had subsequently broken off the relationship with her on two other occasions, but each time, torn by guilt and need (she was the first woman with whom he had felt sexually adequate) he had returned to her and somehow they had patched things up. Always, his parents had violently opposed the marriage, though her family was only mildly objecting; and this latest "decision" was no more firm than the others, for right after the latest break-up, once again the wedding plans were on. Miss L had cancelled her appointment as she was not desirous of any further contact with the agency. Mr. B kept his appointment and was held to examining his behavior, his strong ambivalence about marriage to Miss L, its meaning in terms of the future for such a relationship. When he realized how little they really had in common, the fact that some of his values were intimately tied up with his Jewish upbringing so very different from hers, and that he had never once said he loved her, he was able to resolve his uncertainty and to conclude he had to make "a clean break." Characteristically, while he did end with Miss L, he simultaneously began a relationship with a Jewish young woman of his educational and cultural level and one with whom he felt he could communicate.

This contemplated interfaith marriage, which augured so poorly for the future, was averted in time. Mr. B is still coming for counseling help of which he is greatly in need.

The critical comment that I anticipate on the part of the rabbi or Jewish educator is that the caseworker did not deal directly enough with the problem of in-

termarriage, and with the aim of reintegrating Mr. B into the Jewish community. The result was simply fortuitous; it could conceivably have been different; Mr. B might have intermarried. This reaction would have merit, if we viewed and approached intermarriage sociologically, unrelated to psychological and emotional factors. The story of Mr. B illustrates how the caseworker was concerned with the whole human being, regarding the client as a troubled person who must believe that the agency is primarily interested in him as a person, and not in a cause. If Mr. B had failed to feel this, if he had felt that our concern was not as much for him as for the prevention of an intermarriage, that is for survival of the Jews as an ethnic group, the likelihood is that he would never have returned.

It should be clear that no social service organization like the family agency can do the primary preventive job, if we hypothesize that acceptance of Jewish tradition and philosophy as a basis for everyday life serves as a protection or deterrent against intermarriage. Rather, the family agency can deal with the problem through secondary prevention, through stimulating, in counseling, a reevaluation of the client's basic values and future goals. Our aim in premarital counseling is not to solve the problem of intermarriage, but to help those concerned and ambivalent about their planned marriage to arrive at the individual decision which is right for them.

While in some cases intermarriage will be prevented, in others, it will be undertaken, notwithstanding the preference of the professional helper. In still other cases, intermarriage may be "just the right decision," a responsible decision rather than an impulse stemming from conflict on the part of either partner. Such a decision may reflect an attitude towards Jewishness which reduces it to

a secondary, rather than a primary, consideration. This may more frequently happen with people of an assimilationist orientation.

There are also happy intermarriages, those free from pathological symptoms. These are not the ones that come to the attention of agencies. There is another group that do not come: the interfaith couple of which one partner is planning to or has already converted to the religion of the other. Other couples may need help but choose to apply to a non-sectarian agency. It may be assumed that those interfaith couples who do choose to apply to the Jewish family agency are expressing not only their wish for help from a Jewish source, but also their Jewish identification. The availability of such a Jewish agency in the Jewish community for this group underscores another important service which can be given only by the sectarian agency.

#### **The Role of Family Life Education**

Family Life Education is a family agency service which is closer to primary prevention. These educational group sessions conducted by a skillful, understanding and competent discussion leader, have within them considerable preventive potential. The results, too, have been found to be much more constructive than, for example, the well-intentioned efforts of interested friends or concerned parents, who so often try so desperately to prevent a son or daughter from intermarriage. Their anxious efforts tend only to induce a little more "rebellion" on the part of their now adult, or almost adult, child. Family life sessions are not sermons or lectures with an expert trying to impose ideas upon the members of the group, but rather are informal group discussions which have as their purpose the achievement of greater understanding about marriage, its problems, each partner's responsibilities and expectations. These educational sessions of

groups afford an experience in which the members actively participate, and develop a deeper understanding of marriage which enables them to arrive at more intelligent decisions. Here are but a few of the questions, particularly related to intermarriage, as they were raised and discussed in some family life sessions:

1. What may happen when a man and a woman of different religions marry?
2. Is love enough to overcome the stresses and strains that are apt to be intensified in an interfaith marriage?
3. What happens to the children? What about their religious education?
4. While it is known that a number of interfaith marriages are successful, are the discussants aware of the fact that there are more that do not endure the test? Do they really feel that love for each other can overcome all obstacles?

Some of the views and suggestions that emerge during group discussions with interfaith couples contemplating marriage are worth mentioning:

1. The desirability of a sufficiently extended period of courtship.
2. The fact that seeking pre-marital counseling is not a sign of inadequacy or weakness, but one of courage and strength.
3. The possibility of "mutual attraction" for a couple out of rebellion, a need to escape, or an unrealistic desire for security.
4. The need for genuine respect for each other's faith.
5. The advisability of sharing a priori plans and hopes, and of anticipating problems which are likely to arise.
6. Encouragement of the couple to work on tentative answers, related to their common goals.

The family agency plays a constructive and preventive role not only in cases of proposed intermarriage, but also in cases of concluded intermarriages. In connection with the latter, I should like to make two observations. First, there is reason to believe that many of the difficulties that develop in an intermarriage do not necessarily come from the religious differences between the partners. When stresses, strain and conflicts occur in these intermarriages, a number of interfaith couples have found their way for help to the family agency. Rarely do they apply expressing their problem specifically as that of a difference of religious belief or origin. The likelihood is that if they saw their religious differences as the major source of their problems, they would go to the Rabbi for help. This does not mean that religious differences are not a frequent source of conflict in these families. It does mean that these families simply do not see the religious differences as a major source of conflict.

A second observation is related to the professionals in the agencies who are inclined to look at intermarriages in the same context that they view all marital unions. While no two persons are alike, having different endowment, backgrounds and rearing, difference becomes accentuated by difference in faiths. These differences are investigated through the individualized approach of counseling. It is not the number or depth of the differences between husband and wife which count, it is *how* these differences are handled. Family breakdown results not so much from the fact of religious differences as from the couple's inability to handle these differences together.

In summary, the family agency, as an instrumentality of the organized Jewish community, is concerned with the problem of intermarriage on an individual-by individual basis as well as on the level of

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Jewish survival. As a social institution, the Jewish family agency can contribute to the understanding and strengthening of Jewish family life as well as to the prevention of individual and family breakdown. It is, further, a symbol of certain Jewish values projected onto it by many clients, who feel not only that these values are important to them personally, but that they tie them securely to a community ready to help when they are in trouble.

In outlining the role of the agency in dealing with intermarriage, I tried to show first that it has a contribution to make in individual cases, during the period when marriage is contemplated by an interfaith couple. In those cases where intermarriage has already occurred, the agency is in a position to

make a contribution on an individual basis in helping the troubled couple learn how to cope with their problems. Hence, through its understanding of the psychodynamics of human behavior, the agency can contribute towards improving the troubled situation, even though there may not be a total solution, intermarriage being a complex phenomenon with problems of its own. In addition, the Jewish family agency has a contribution to make through its family life education program, which has the potential of reaching larger numbers of young persons contemplating interfaith marriages. Through this group educational method, there is the distinct possibility of being effective on a more preventive basis.