

GENDER AND INTERMARRIAGE AMONG AMERICAN JEWISH MEN AND WOMEN

Sylvia Barack Fishman

Recent research on contemporary American Jewish life continues to compile new evidence on the multifaceted problems posed by increased mixed marriage among American Jews.¹ Mixed-married couples, once rare in the Jewish community, now comprise a substantial and growing proportion of all Jewish families.

At mid-century, American Jewish men appeared to be much more likely to marry out of their religious/ethnic group than American Jewish women. The differences between men and women were most pronounced when outmarriage was positively linked to upward socioeconomic mobility before the 1960s. At that time, when intermarriage rates were generally quite low, men with advanced degrees and high-status professions were one of the groups most likely to marry out of the faith; outmarriage during those decades may frequently have been linked with a desire to extricate oneself from the social and professional barriers constructed by overt and implicit anti-Semitism. Thus, in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, Jewish men had an intermarriage rate at least twice that of Jewish women. The apparent gender difference may have been somewhat exaggerated by the fact that women marrying out of the faith acquired Gentile surnames and thus were more difficult to locate in studies that depended heavily on distinctive Jewish surnames; however, other evidence supports the fact that for many years men were more likely than women to intermarry.

During the past two decades, however, the mixed-marriage gender gap has been shrinking. While in certain locales there are still significant differences between intermarriage levels of Jewish men and women, nationally American Jewish women are about as likely as men to marry out: about one-third of born-Jewish men and women are currently mixed-married. Among Jews under age 45 the rates are even higher: more than 40 percent of both men and women are mixed-married.

Many interwoven social and demographic factors have contributed to the elimination of the mixed-marriage gender gap, and factors such as extended singlehood, postponed marriage, and changing expectations are especially important. By far the most significant factor in the rising rate of outmarriage among American Jewish women is surely the enthusiasm for outmarriage among American Jewish men. This outmarriage decreases the pool of available and appropriate Jewish mates, further exacerbating the spiral of outmarriage among women. Negative images of Jewish women as "Jewish American princesses" and "Jewish mothers" continue their amazingly persistent and virulent lives in literature and the popular media. Changing life-styles of Jewish women do not seem to have had much impact on their public image. Negative images are often cited by single and mixed-married Jewish men as barriers to their interest in Jewish women.

Other culture-wide factors come into play as well. American Jewish women almost always say they want to marry and have children, for example, but widespread changes in attitudes due to the mainstreaming of feminist goals have had an impact on Jewish marriage patterns. Among other factors, a cultural emphasis on examining the quality of relationships has spurred women to hold up prospective and current marital partners to close scrutiny. This examination of partners involves a broad spectrum of considerations. Many women have themselves attained high levels of education and career achievement and don't want to marry "down." In addition, women today are more savvy about personal qualities: they want husbands who are responsive, caring people, who seem capable

of sharing many of the burdens of parenting and maintaining familial relationships. Women today are leery of being trapped in unsatisfactory relationships; the desperation which once made a woman accept a suitor's flaws and failings seems to have diminished with women's greater independence.

Many American Jewish women today have high standards for potential husbands. They have thought through clearly the kinds of persons with whom they wish to spend their lives and, if they cannot find Jewish men who fit the bill, are ready to marry non-Jewish men or to stay single. Given their other standards for appropriateness -- levels of education and career achievement, personal qualities such as sensitivity, responsiveness, or fairness -- religious background often takes a backseat in a Jewishly assimilated society, especially as a woman sees the years passing by.

Indeed, one-third of born-Jewish women who married in the 1980s married men who were not born Jewish -- more than twice as many as those who married in the 1960s. Moreover, new research at Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies shows that Jewish women who married non-Jewish men got married three years later, on average, than those who married men who were born Jewish; in a study of eight American cities of diverse sizes and geographical locations, women who inmarried had a mean marriage age of 23.2 years, while women involved in mixed marriages had a mean marriage age of 26 years. This dramatic discrepancy is no doubt produced by many factors, one of which may be feelings of conflict and ambivalence about Jewish and non-Jewish men as appropriate marriage partners.²

Increasing rates of outmarriage among American Jewish men and women directly threaten the qualitative future of the American Jewish community. Although some few Jewish men and women succeed splendidly in maintaining Jewish households and raising Jewishly identified children with the cooperation of a non-Jewish spouse, within most mixed marriages, recent research shows, the religious identity of the household is often ambiguous. Two-thirds of mixed-married couples have Christmas trees in their homes -- compared to fewer than 5 percent of inmarried couples. Only half of them provide their children with any formal Jewish education -- compared to 95 percent of inmarried couples. Most Jewish women who enter mixed marriages do so with the intention that their households will be Jewish and their children will be raised as Jews. However, the success of mixed-married households in transmitting Jewish tradition to the next generation is at best extremely unclear.

Moreover, Jewish women who are married to non-Jewish men have only the most minimal involvement with Jewish communal organizations. For many decades, American Jewish women served as the unpaid backbone of Jewish communal voluntarism. Rising rates of mixed marriage among born-Jewish women have had a dramatic negative impact on Jewish organizational life. Today, only 6 percent of mixed-married Jewish women volunteer time for Jewish organizations -- compared to more than one-third of inmarried women. Only 4 percent of mixed-married women have played a recent leadership role in Jewish organizations -- compared to 30 percent of inmarried women. Fifteen percent of women living in mixed-married households say they are affiliated with synagogues, as opposed to 57 percent of women in inmarried households. About 13 percent of mixed-married women have visited Israel, compared to 39 percent of inmarried women. Thus, from the standpoints of both individual family life and communal activities, rising rates of intermarriage among Jewish women pose a direct challenge to the quality and vitality of American Jewish life in the future.

Notes

1. This discussion draws primarily on two sources: Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Choosing Life: Feminism and Jewish Survival* (New York: Free Press, 1992); and Sylvia Barack Fishman, Mordechai Rimor, Gary A. Tobin, and Peter Medding, *Intermarriage and American Jews Today: New Findings and Policy*

Implications (Waltham, Mass.: The Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, Brandeis University, 1990).

2. Peter Medding, Gary A. Tobin, Sylvia Barack Fishman, and Mordechai Rimor, "Jewish Identity in Conversionary and Mixed Marriages," *American Jewish Year Book 1992* (New York and Philadelphia: American Jewish Committee and the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1992).