FORUM IV
Outreach to the Intermarried: Understanding the Risks and Setting Priorities

RABBI RONALD D. PRICE

Between 1977 and 1980 when I served as Assistant Dean for Academic Affairs of the Jewish Theological Seminary, I was responsible for handling phone calls that would come in from people looking for "a rabbi." I maintained a log of those calls, and one in particular stood out as I wrote this article. A woman called with a question of Jewish law. She needed to know the season during which Jewish weddings should not take place. I explained the various traditions connected to the *omer* between Pesach and Shavuot, as well as the 3 weeks and the 9 days before the Ninth of Av. After giving her this detailed information I asked her why she needed it. She told me that her father was ill and was a very observant man. She did not want to do anything to upset him in planning her wedding because he was already uncomfortable enough with the fact that her fiance was not Jewish!

Today, the irony of this story does not even raise eyebrows. Attempting to make an intermarriage as "Jewish" as possible is not uncommon, despite the fact that an intermarriage can in no way be recognized as legally legitimate by traditional Judaism. Intermarriage has become so widespread that even the most traditional of households cannot escape being touched by it. It may well be that the only way intermarriage can be avoided is through the *shiddukh,* the prearranged marriage, something that in our secular democratic society is not likely to become popular any time soon.

Along with the fact of increased intermarriage has come increased acceptance of it as a fact of life, rather than an embarrassment to be hidden from view. The following quote from a popular newspaper in New Jersey is representative of the reality facing us in the community at large: "The mother of three sons, Joan, says her father would have 'disowned' her if she married out of the faith. . . . But times have changed. If my children are happy, and they have nice wives, that's all that's important, she says" (Bucco & Cohen-Adelizzi, 1989).

Even the invitation to address the forum topic of outreach to the intermarried in this journal reflects the fact that the Jewish community recognizes the challenge posed by intermarriage and its increasing acceptance and is trying to cope with that reality.

Yet, the issue that the Jewish community must address is not only how to cope with the reality of intermarriage but also whether coping is all we want to do. Is our objective to make peace with intermarriage or to take action against it? Do we want to convince the non-Jewish partner to convert to Judaism? Do we simply want to incorporate nonconversionary intermarried couples into the community in the hope that they and their children will ultimately choose a Jewish lifestyle?

Without guidance or clear priorities, communal leaders have difficulty knowing how to respond to intermarried couples. In a newspaper article dealing with intermarried families and their celebrations of Christmas and Chanukah, a rabbi who has many intermarried families in his congregation is quoted as saying that any celebration of Christmas in a Jewish home is "offensive." He states that the observance of both holidays is "confusing to the children" and is "a danger to the survival of Judaism," noting that 50% of Jews today marry outside the faith. Yet, the same

rabbi accepts intermarried couples into his congregation. "It is controversial," he says, "but it is my way of reaching out to them" (Bucco & Cohen-Adelizzi, 1989). It is paradoxical that, although he sees intermarriage as a threat to Jewish survival, the rabbi welcomes intermarried couples as full-fledged members of his community. This kind of outreach is at best self-defeating.

Although I am not opposed to outreach to the intermarried in principle, (indeed, it will be necessary for the foreseeable future), we must think clearly both about the nature of the outreach we want to engage in and the priority for community funding that it will be given. From my perspective as a Traditional Jew who takes Jewish law and theology seriously, outreach must not become an abrogation of the commandment against intermarriage (Deuteronomy 7:3). *Outreach efforts that accept non-Jews as part of the Jewish community represent our resignation to our failure to instill deep Jewish commitment in the modern generation.* They are at best a short cut to keeping population numbers high statistically, but are not likely to result in commitment that is more than one generation thick.

To illustrate the last point, one need look no further than Egon Mayer's study of the children of intermarried couples. Regarding the self-identification of children of "conversionary" marriages, those in which the non-Jewish spouse has converted to Judaism, he writes:

> Jewish group identity is generally defined in terms of both religion and ethnic background. Among the questions the respondents were asked were what religion their parents had designated for them when they were born, and what religious group they most closely identified with at the time of the survey.
>
> Children of conversionary marriages were more than three times as likely to identify as Jews than were children of mixed marriages (Mayer, 1985, p. 253).

When the non-Jewish spouse converts to Judaism, the odds of the child identifying as Jewish increase tremendously. However, even a conversion is not a guarantee of strong Jewish commitment in the second generation. Historic events in the Jewish past are part of our Jewish identity. From the revelation at Sinai, through the Exodus from Egypt, to the return to Israel in the modern day, Jews identify personally with millenia of history. At Pesach we are to feel as though we ourselves were redeemed from Egypt. This sense of personal identification must be kept in mind when we examine more deeply the identity of children of conversionary marriages. In this regard, Mayer writes:

> The figures suggest that the children of conversionary marriages are more prone to see their ethnic identity, but not their religious identity, as an amalgam of two heritages. Thus, although the overwhelming majority (84%) of the respondents whose Christian parent had converted to Judaism affirmed their current religious identity as Jewish, far fewer (only about one-half) identified exclusively with the ethnic ancestry of their Jewish-born parent (Mayer, 1985, p. 255).

In other words, the non-Jewish origins of the converted parent continue to play a role in the self-perception and identity of the child of that marriage. This fact must remind us that, even when outreach to the intermarried achieves conversion of the non-Jewish spouse, we have not necessarily solved the problem of Jewish commitment. The ritual of conversion does not ensure that the convert, the convert's spouse, or his or her children will feel rooted in Judaism and its past and will be committed to its survival.

This analysis is not intended to cast aspersions on the sincerity of the converted spouse. Indeed, it is quite possible that the "amalgam" of ethnic heritages that the child of a conversionary marriage experiences is the equivalent of the "amalgam" of secularism and Jewishness that the child of non-practicing born Jews is likely to experience in America today.

Realistically, however, the best we can hope to achieve with extant outreach pro-

grams, even those that do lead to conversion, is the replication of the average Jewish American family, whose limited religious connection to Judaism makes intermarriage likely in the first place. *This does not negate the value of outreach to the intermarried, but it must make us realize that it alone will not solve the long-range problem of ensuring Jewish survival.*

Lack of priorities within the structure of existing outreach programs poses an additional problem, particularly for the Jewish Community Center worker. Most such programs take place either in the Center or a synagogue. For the traditional rabbi the primary goal is clear—to convert the non-Jewish spouse. Community Center workers who are involved in outreach are trained in social work. A good social worker/counselor is usually noninterventionary. Allowing people to ventilate their feelings and helping them articulate their personal goals are basic elements of counseling. Often, there is a conflict between social work goals and communal goals when dealing with outreach. How does the worker reconcile the communal goal of outreach, which is *keruv* (bringing people into Judaism), with the social work goal of enabling the members of a couple to cope with their different heritages?

Take, for example, the experience of one New York area community. Their outreach program was initiated with a conference on "Outreach to the Intermarried" sponsored by the local federation, in which many rabbis and social workers participated. As an outgrowth of this conference, several synagogues set up programs using teams of rabbis and social workers to meet with groups of intermarried couples and parents of intermarried couples. The following interchange took place between a social work counselor and a participant in one of those groups:

> *Social Worker:* "What brought you here tonight?"
>
> *Participant:* "My husband and his family feel strongly Jewish, and I admire them for their interest in their faith. I felt it was time for me to find out more about it."
>
> *Social Worker:* "That is very nice, but don't you have your own background too? Yes Judaism has many warm aspects, but have you ever investigated your own faith?"

In another session, the following exchange was recorded:

> *Participant:* "Before we had children, these issues [of religion] didn't come up. Now I'm pregnant and we feel we want to raise our child as a Jew from birth."
>
> *Social Worker:* "That is wonderful. But don't you have things that you value from your own traditions that you want to be part of this child rearing?"

After a representative of the synagogue had presented a particularly stirring message on how meaningful a traditional Jewish lifestyle can be to the family, the communal worker chairing the session concluded: "That was a beautiful description of a path that's open to you, but you have to choose. Now, next week we will discuss the unfair demands in-laws make on couples."

These responses would all have been perfectly appropriate had the context been marriage counseling. In that context, people's feelings must be drawn out, and they must be encouraged to express all of their anxieties about decisions that face them. However, an intermarried couples group is made up of intermarried couples who have an implicit interest in Judaism. In the case above, they had come to an event held at a local synagogue. Yet, the communal worker functioned in the counseling mode only.

This scenario is not unique. It is to be expected, in fact, given the background of most communal workers. In their professional training they learn to help people deal with conflict resolution on the family or individual level, without consideration of the communal point of view. This is absolutely as it should be in private counseling. When community funds are

allocated for outreach, however, the situation changes.

Jewish communal workers who participate in community-sponsored outreach programs must realize that, in those contexts, their responsibility is to the community as a whole. Any program that receives funding for outreach must be one that does *keruv,* actively helping the non-Jewish spouse to join our faith, rather than simply helping couples cope with the problems of intermarriage. Jewish community funding for the latter purpose would be counterproductive.

A further difficulty in outreach programs shows up distinctly in support groups for parents of intermarried couples. Unfortunately, these groups often develop characteristics common to support groups for people with problems that are beyond their control. Relatives of the terminally ill or those recently bereaved need groups to console them and to help them accept a painful reality. It is a mistake for parents of intermarried children to think in these terms. If a person is the parent of an intermarried child, does that mean that he or she can no longer make a meaningful contribution to Jewish survival? The answer that our communities give to this question through its community programs tells us whether or not we have resigned ourselves to accepting intermarriage and the slow demise of Jewish identity through assimilation.

Often, the theme of parent support groups becomes, "We are good, we did nothing wrong, our children did nothing wrong. It's just that the inevitable forces of history have affected us. We must accept our children for what they are." Instead, these people should be given an agenda for action and some hope. Parents should be given strategies for bringing back their children to Judaism—not how to influence the non-Jewish spouse per se, but how to demonstrate the value of Judaism to their own children and families. They should be told that at least part of the reason for intermarriage is the loss of a direct personal link to Judaism. One cannot inculcate Judaism in children vicariously through a school or through a synagogue. Children must see their parents "living" their Judaism and loving it. There is no surrogate when it comes to teaching commitment to Judaism, and there is no hope for Jewish survival without that commitment.

Parents of intermarried couples should be encouraged to change their way of life. That is a frightening statement to some, particularly in the democratic, secular, nonideological late twentieth century. We communal workers are afraid of turning people off by demanding too much of them. It is far less threatening if we talk about reaching the next generation. Yet, if we keep pretending that parental example is not the basic factor in the transmission of religious identity and ideals, we are dooming the Jewish community to an unending investment in damage control, rather than development.

Although it may sound somewhat "preachy," here is what we might say to a group of parents of intermarried children:

> You can still influence your children by changing your own way of life, without criticizing your children's lifestyle. Don't say to them, "Look, I've made my home kosher; why don't you"? or "We keep Shabbat and the holidays now; why don't you"? Just do it. Learn Hebrew, add to your Jewish repertoire of observance. Do it for yourself, and its beauty and benefit can enrich your own lives. With time, if you truly enjoy your Jewish lifestyle, your children may come around too. Not only might the non-Jewish spouse convert, both of them may become committed Jews whose children will identify themselves as Jews ethnically, religiously, and historically. *Even if that day never comes, you can be sure that your change in lifestyle has added strength to the Jewish community.* Your actions may well influence others in a similar direction. At worst, you will have recaptured that link to Judaism that you lost earlier in life.

The increase in intermarriage over the last 40 years is not a threat to Jewish values; rather, it is the result of their not having been adequately taught and incul-

cated in the first place. The work of Egon Mayer has shown that even a strong religious upbringing is not proof against intermarriage. Yet, all agree that positively reinforced religious education and experience in youth increase the odds in favor of endogamy or intra-Jewish marriage (Mayer, 1987).

Any conference or workshop on outreach to intermarried families must address the careful planning of ways to bring these new Jews into the Jewish *religious* community. I am referring to no specific movement or community. Bring them into a Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, Traditional, Hassidic, or Reconstructionist community, but make it one committed to more than just an ethnic identity. Make it one that has some passion, one that tells new and born Jews alike that there is a *challenge* in being Jewish, that living Jewishly will make your every breath more meaningful. My personal experience has shown that people will respond to a challenging agenda, rather than to commiseration.

This leads me to the thought that motivates all that I have written thus far. *Outreach to the intermarried should not itself be a high priority on the agenda of the Jewish community. In fact, it should not appear on that agenda at all as an independent issue.* Outreach programs for the intermarried should be nothing more than a version of successful "outreach to the Jew" programs, which are nearly nonexistent today. I suggested above that programs for the intermarried must include strategies for bringing them into the religious community. First, however, we must develop programs that succeed in bringing the average secular Jew into that community.

Outreach to the intermarried must be relegated to the category of "damage control." Intermarriage must continue to be seen as a problem that requires an investment in prevention. Prevention means allocating tremendous sums of communal funding and energy to innovative means of Jewish education. In allocating resources toward the prevention of intermarriage, logic dictates that religious outreach to the Jewishly uneducated but affiliated comes first (including parents of the intermarried), to the unaffiliated Jew next, and only then do we focus on outreach to the already intermarried.

In their study of the Conservative movement in 1979, Drs. Charles Liebman and Saul Shapiro suggested that, although that movement was destined to shrink no matter what action was taken, focusing on the most loyal element of their movement would ultimately lead to the creation of a core group that would rebuild the movement over time. When Jewish communities engage in their funding allocation process, they must think hard about what constitutes their loyal core population. The funding priorities must then be those programs that add to and strengthen that core population. Simply programming for singles to meet at a Jewish Center does not make that program Jewish nor does it instill any special commitment to Judaism. Programs for parents without partners, the group with the highest intermarriage rate, that take place at the local JCC without a religious component will not instill heightened sensitivity to the importance of being Jewish. Jewish Community Centers must be conscious of promoting Jewish religious programming, not just programming for Jews. A good example is a Center in Long Island that, in coordination with local synagogues, is sponsoring *Oneg Shabbat* programs for singles. The content is determined by rabbis of the various congregations in coordination with the community workers at the Center.

Our first priority then, as Jewish community workers, is helping those who are already part of the community become more solidly identified with Judaism. Increased funding must be provided for Jewish family education programs and programming for the single Jew and single Jewish parent. Funds must be made available for innovative programs that catch

the attention of the unaffiliated so that they can be brought closer to their Judaism; these can include anything from toll-free telephone hotlines to media ad campaigns designed to encourage unaffiliated Jews to identify themselves. After we have begun to meet these challenges, successful outreach to the intermarried will become a matter of adapting successful "inreach" strategies for outreach. When outreach programs *are* implemented, it must be with the goal of converting the non-Jewish spouse and incorporating the family into a practicing Jewish community.

If this order of priorities could become normative throughout the Jewish community, our chances for long-range survival as a people will be greatly enhanced. It would indicate that the day of "quick fixes" for such complex problems as intermarriage has passed and that we are prepared now to invest not only funds but our very lifestyles to ensure a viable Jewish community for the next millennium.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Before setting down my thoughts on the subject of outreach to the intermarried based on my own experience and inclinations, I spoke to many colleagues and friends who have first-hand experience in the area. Some are social workers, some are rabbis, some are both. I wish to thank them all for sharing anecdotal experiences upon which many of my observations are based. In particular, I wish to thank Rabbi Bruce Ginsburg of the Bethpage Jewish Community Center and Vice-President of the Union for Traditional Conservative Judaism for sharing his views, experiences, and suggestions for practical programs that can work.

REFERENCES

Bucco, Diana & Cohen-Adalizzi, Lee. (1989, December 17). Interfaith holiday celebrations. *New Jersey Focus Magazine*, p. 16.

Liebman, Charles, & Shapiro, Saul. (1979). The Liebman-Shapiro Report revisited. *Cornerstone, 1*, 15–19.

Mayer, Egon. (1985). *Love and tradition: Marriage between Jews and Christians*. New York: Plenum Books.