

JEWISH COMMUNAL POLICY TOWARD OUTMARRIED FAMILIES

The Question of Outreach

CHARLES S. LIEBMAN, PH.D.

Yehuda Avner Professor of Politics and Religion, Bar Ilan University

and

SYLVIA BARACK FISHMAN, PH.D.

*Associate Professor of Contemporary Jewish Life in the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department
and Co-Director of the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women,
Brandeis University*

The communal debate over outreach to outmarried families focuses on the wrong issue. Intermarriage is not the cause of assimilation but rather a symptom. The values held by many American Jews lead to intermarriage.

Jewish communal policy toward outmarried families is more complicated than it sometimes appears. Having done a great deal of reading, research, and some interviewing over the last six months we have each arrived at conclusions far more complex than our initial expectations.

In light of this we are obliged to begin with a personal observation. We would not want our attention to these complexities to be misunderstood as condoning intermarriage. Every study indicates that outmarriage is associated with lower levels of Jewish identity and involvement. As Steven Cohen (1998, p. 44) points out, this is not only because the "less Jewishly identified individuals are more likely to marry non-Jews," but even holding constant for initial identification, "mixed marriage produces lower levels of Jewish involvement than would otherwise be the case." However, our opposition to intermarriage is not based solely on its measurable impact upon Jewish continuity and survival. We believe that intermarriage (the marriage between a Jew and someone who is not Jewish) is a radical break with historical Jewish communities, Jewish religious belief, and previous generations of Jewish individuals.

The question that we explore, therefore, is not whether mixed marriage can be justified—in our opinion it cannot—but what the orga-

nized Jewish community, whether it is a synagogue, a national synagogue movement, or a Jewish communal agency such as a Jewish Community Center, a Jewish family agency, or a local Jewish federation, should do about it. We conclude that those engaged in the debate over outreach are focusing their attention on the wrong issue.

THE DEBATE OVER OUTREACH

Communal policy to the outmarried is of concern to rabbis, professional leaders of Jewish organizations, lay leaders, and scholars who study contemporary Jewish life. The debate has centered around several issues; including the following: Should the Jewish community employ Jewish professionals and teachers who ostensibly serve as role models and who are married to non-Jews; should non-Jews be encouraged to participate in such religious ceremonies as lighting Shabbat candles in a synagogue or being called to the Torah on the occasion of the Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration of a family member; should a non-Jewish child be allowed to enroll in a Jewish school, and does it make a difference whether that child is simultaneously enrolled in a church program. The most controversial of all topics, at least in terms of the volume of printed material on the topic is what kinds of *outreach* should be extended to intermarried couples.

Today, most synagogue movements, including the Orthodox, have outreach programs. In many respects, the Orthodox have the most successful of all outreach programs. Indeed, the leader of the Reform movement, in a speech to which we subsequently refer, has expressed his envy of Chabad's outreach programs. However, we begin by defining outreach the way opponents to the program imagine it: efforts by the Jewish community—that is by synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, federation agencies, and others—to provide formal and informal programs geared exclusively to the interests and to the “needs” of mixed married couples, as these couples themselves express those needs. Our discussion of outreach does not address programs for Jews who may be synagogue members but know little or nothing about Judaism, or programs for Jews who are unaffiliated with any Jewish institution, or programs for non-Jews leading toward conversion. Rather, it focuses only on programs designed for interfaith couples with the goal of acquainting them with Judaism, so that the intermarried couple will feel more comfortable in a Jewish milieu or introducing aspects of Judaism into their homes.

Rabbi Alan Silverstein (1991) of the Conservative movement usefully suggested that we distinguish between programs that he labels *Keruv* and outreach. *Keruv* comes from the Hebrew word *karov*, meaning close. Silverstein would apply the label *keruv* to programs that “attempt to bring Jews and their non-Jewish spouses closer to us and to our established communal standards” [emphasis not in original]. He would limit the term “outreach” to nonjudgmental programs designed primarily to help the intermarried couple and especially the Gentile spouse feel more at home in the Jewish community or to quote from the Jewish Outreach Institute's definition of its own task: “preserving the Jewish continuity of interdating couples and intermarried families, and promoting their inclusion in the Jewish community” [emphasis not in original].

We initially undertook to study two questions: whether the Jewish community ought to sponsor outreach programs to intermarried

couples and, if they do sponsor such programs, what should be their nature. The two questions are related, but must be distinguished from one another. While we begin with the controversy surrounding the first of these questions, it is the second question that has become far more critical but has been overlooked. We do not focus on the Orthodox-run organizations, such as Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald's National Jewish Outreach program of which we heartily approve, as their “tough” position on intermarriage often excludes them from the communal debate. We also have not focused on the Reconstructionist movement, but our impression is that its position on intermarriage issues is similar to that of Reform.

Arguments in Favor of Outreach

The argument in favor of outreach programs has a variety of nuances, but its general thrust is clear. Mixed marriage, the argument goes, is inevitable in the open society that we enjoy. According to Rabbi Eric Yoffie (1992, p. 2), president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, “Intermarriage, of course, is a product of modernity and not of any religious stream; the only way to stamp it out would be to return the Jews to the medieval ghetto.” This statement is an unfortunate example of how proponents of outreach exaggerate a position in order to undermine it. Nobody thinks it possible or worth attempting to “stamp out” intermarriage. The goal is to contain it.

Outreach advocates argue that intermarriage is likely to increase in the future. Therefore, unless the community commits resources to welcoming interfaith couples and making them aware of Judaism, regardless of whether the non-Jewish party is interested in conversion, we will experience a substantial diminution in the size of the Jewish community in the coming decades, perhaps to the point where the Jewish community in the United States will no longer be able to sustain itself.

It is commonplace to attribute the beginning of serious efforts to reach out to intermarried couples with a speech by the then-presi-

dent of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Rabbi Alexander Schindler in December, 1978 in whose wake the rabbinical and synagogue arms of the Reform movement created a Commission on Reform Jewish Outreach. We return to Rabbi Schindler later in this essay as we discuss the controversy over the nature of outreach programs.

Arguments against Outreach

The argument against outreach programs is much more complex. Leading Jewish professionals, rabbis, or scholars seem loathe to advance the position that no communal effort should be directed to outreach. There probably are Jewish professionals who privately advocate this position, but none do so publicly, perhaps because opposing outreach sounds harsh and insensitive and also quixotic. Does one really want to paint oneself into a corner and oppose programs geared to the special needs of interfaith families anxious to learn more about Judaism? Will this not discourage conversion by the gentile partner? Furthermore, the great majority of Jews, including very wealthy contributors to Jewish federations and synagogue movements, favor these programs. It seems likely that the Jewish community is determined to undertake outreach programs regardless of the merits of the arguments against them.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie is probably correct when, in an allusion to Conservative movement leaders, he says (1992, p. 2):

On no issue is there a greater gap between leadership and membership than on the outreach question. North American Jews of all stripes want energetic outreach to intermarried Jews and Jews-by-choice in order to save them for the Jewish people. They want their Jewish community to be doing vigorously and without apology what we have already been doing for twenty years.

Those against outreach argue that the underlying assumption of the advocates of outreach is inaccurate. This assumption holds

that mixed marriage occurs almost randomly among Jews and there is virtually nothing that can be done to prevent it. This argument is false, as demonstrated by numerous recently published studies.

Bruce Phillips (1996), for example, found four factors associated with reduced rates of intermarriage: the Jewishness of the parental family, the extensiveness of formal Jewish education; participation in informal Jewish education, such as youth groups, camping, and other experiences of this type; and the extent to which high-school dating patterns were primarily with Jewish friends. Phillips notes that even among teenagers who did not remember thinking it was important to marry a Jew, those who dated mostly Jews ended up being far more likely to marry another Jew (79 percent) than those who dated an equal number of non-Jews and Jews (54 percent). While acknowledging that both formal and informal Jewish education and the likelihood of dating Jews in high school are all connected in some ways with the Jewish milieu of the household, Phillips' data demonstrate conclusively that each of these three factors was also significantly associated with reduced mixed marriage, independent of the Jewishness of the family of origin.

Sylvia Barack Fishman and Alice Goldstein make a case that years and intensity of formal Jewish education create a dramatically uneven playing field (Fishman & Goldstein, 1993; Goldstein & Fishman, 1993). As Fishman (2000, pp. 80–81) notes in her new book, *Jewish Life and American Culture*, the effect of substantial formal Jewish education—six or more years of classes at least several times a week—is particularly striking among younger Jewish adults, ages 25 to 44:

Inmarriages are found among 51 percent of Jews ages 25 to 44 who receive six years of supplementary school education, 80 percent of those who receive nine or more years of day school [and] 91 percent of those who receive nine or more years of day school. In contrast, 34 percent of Jews ages 25 to 44 who received no Jewish education married another Jew.

Fishman shows that the impact of Jewish education on this population crosses denominational lines, citing the fact that of recent marriages including a spouse who claimed to have been brought up Orthodox, 20 percent were marriages to non-Jews, while nearly all raised-Orthodox respondents and nine out of ten raised-Conservative respondents with substantial Jewish education were married to another Jew. Significantly, even when a person with substantial formal Jewish education marries a non-Jew, the Jewish partner is most likely to encourage conversion.

Perhaps most importantly, Fishman and Goldstein show that formal Jewish education and the Jewishness of the home in which one is raised are positively related to every behavior measured by the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, including living in a Jewish milieu, ritual observance in the home, membership in Jewish organizations, giving to Jewish philanthropies, and opposing mixed marriage, both in theory and in practice.

In addition, institutional affiliations are also related to rates of outmarriage. Bernard Lazerwitz et al. (1998) note that rates of mixed marriage are much higher among those who are not synagogue members, a finding recorded also within the individual movements.

Thus, outmarriage is not a tidal wave that carries away individuals randomly regardless of their Jewish background or orientation. Jews who have acquired deep connections to and knowledge of Judaism are far less likely to marry non-Jews than those whose connections and knowledge base are shallow. Prevention of outmarriage is not a hopeless—or hopelessly outmoded—strategy.

Second, outreach programs cost money. They are paid for, sometimes indirectly and often directly, from the Jewish communal pocket, from money that can be used elsewhere; for example, in educational programs for children and adults that may promote the formation of committed Jewish homes.

The third argument against outreach relies on the work of Bruce Phillips (1996, p. ix) who points out that “the overwhelming majority of mixed marrieds are not interested” in outreach

programs. In fact, the mixed marrieds who reported the greatest interest in outreach programs were couples where one partner identifies his or her religion as Jewish and the other as Christian rather than “no religion.” Not surprisingly, these couples prefer programs “where our children could learn about both types of the religions in our home” (Phillips, 1996, p. 62). These are the kinds of programs that synagogues eschew. And most surprising of all, some studies suggest that the highest actual participation in outreach programs comes not from couples in which both or even one partner identifies as Jewish but from marriages where both partners identify themselves as Christian, i.e. the born Jew now considers him or herself a Christian (p. 68).

In a study for the American Jewish Committee that is nearing completion, Sylvia Barack Fishman is finding that outmarried couples who are raising some or all of their children as Jews may make family religious decisions fairly early in their marriage (Fishman, in press). The Jewish partners in many of these households are deeply concerned that they be “fair” to their non-Jewish spouses and that they show themselves willing to compromise. It is not uncommon within these households for children of one gender to be raised as Christians while those of the other gender are raised as Jews. Even where all the children are raised as Jews, family festivities may include Christmas trees and Easter hams “to show respect” for the Christian spouse’s background and heritage. Yearly visits to candle-lit church services are sometimes part of this package. Almost universally, couples who have devised these types of double ceremonial observances refer to the Jewish ceremonies as “religious” and to the Christian ceremonies as “not religious, just cultural.” Non-Jewish partners also articulate resentment of the idea that Jews are a distinctive people. While they can accept the concept of Judaism as a religion, they find unpalatable the concept of Jewishness as an ethnicity or a form of national destiny.

Without being drawn in by outreach programs (and in many cases without even being aware of them), mixed marrieds raising Jewish

children investigate the policies of local synagogues toward non-Jewish spouses and tend to join those institutions where all are welcome.

It should surprise no one, therefore, that many religious institutions seem unable to resist the temptation to become more and more user-friendly to outmarried couples, motivated in part by ideology, in part by the natural psychological desire to be liked, and in part by the pressures of membership rosters and financial considerations. In one large suburban Boston Reform temple, for example, all congregants, not only mixed married families, attend a pre-Thanksgiving candlelight ceremony in a local church, as a form of interfaith cooperation.

Carrying this boundary-obliterating behavior even further, outreach programs often paint a false picture of Judaism, our fourth argument against outreach. As the Reform/Reconstructionist Rabbi David Polish pointed out, "Outreach to mixed-marrieds, where successful, will have a transforming effect upon Jewish institutions, possibly diluting Jewish content" (cited by Bayme, 1997, p. 9). Steven Cohen (1998, p. 44) notes with regard to outreach programs that "whether they succeed or not, the impetus to change the presentation of Judaism, if not its nature, to suit the recruitment of Jews married to Gentiles may prove irresistible." As Cohen finds in his national survey of American Jews published in 1998, mixed marriage is associated with diminished religious involvement, but even more so with diminished ethnic involvement. Programs that seek to present Judaism in an attractive light to mixed married couples necessarily downplay the ethnic and particularistic dimensions of Judaism, stressing instead the universalistic, humanistic, ethical dimensions of the tradition. Jewish attachments to the state of Israel, for example, shared by the vast majority of American Jews and closely correlated to Jewish identity, are absent or downplayed in many programs, according to the charge, because they are aspects of Judaism that mixed marrieds find least attractive or comprehensible.

Fifth, the success of any program in trans-

mitting the basics of Judaism to people who know little or nothing about the tradition depends to a great extent on who is conveying the information. This argument is not, to the best of our knowledge, to be found in print, but is of concern to some who are themselves engaged in the funding and planning of outreach programs. Thus, some Jewish Community Centers that sponsor outreach programs have added positions for Jewish educators to supervise those programs, a move that sometimes encounters resistance from existing staff. If the programs are led by individuals who are fairly uninformed about tradition or who, by the standards of the mainstream Jewish community cannot properly serve as role models, then the programs they lead are of little help, regardless of how they are evaluated by their participants. This is often the case where outreach programs under non-synagogue sponsorship are conducted by social workers and include little substantive Jewish content.

As one example, the Reform movement now advertises a five-day course for lay people (affiliated with a Reform synagogue) that will train them to teach conversion classes. In all fairness, the program is designed to prepare applicants to work with a congregational rabbi who presumably will teach the Jewish content courses.

Every study of local and national Jewish populations has shown how powerful peer relationships are in setting standards and maintaining behaviors. Friendship groups, camping and youth groups, and memberships in Jewish organizations have each been shown to play roles in enhancing and reinforcing Jewish identification. Peer group standards can reinforce—or help erode—Jewish identification.

For this reason, among others, Jewish leaders need to carefully consider the wider ramifications of their policy decisions. It may well be that sponsoring outreach programs can be counterproductive, because such programs may send the message that the Jewish community legitimates and supports mixed marriage. Thus, even if such programs are completely funded by outside sources, such as wealthy

philanthropists, outreach programs may do more harm than good by unwittingly reinforcing the idea that outmarriage is normative in the Jewish community.

The Issues That Really Divide the Community

After looking at the question over the last six months and having made the case against outreach programs, we note that much of the fuss is over symbol rather than substance. A good portion of the debate misses the point of what really ails the Jewish community.

We began our exploration on the assumption that outreach programs were designed to reach out into the community to identify intermarried couples. In fact, it is our impression that increasingly outreach programs, at least within synagogues, are designed for intermarried families who are already part of the synagogue community in one form or another. As the authors of a recent study note with regard to outreach (*Planning for Jewish Continuity*, 1996, p. 57),

Originally intended to reach out toward intermarried couples and families, the term "outreach" has been expanded to include programming targeted at virtually any specific unaffiliated or underaffiliated group of people, or identifiable groups that are involved but have unmet special needs. In addition to intermarried couples and families, unaffiliated Jews have become a central target of outreach programs.

These programs simply do not distinguish among intermarried and non-intermarried couples but include all of them in the same program.

That which we have defined as outreach, and what the opponents of outreach have in mind, is more likely to fit the parameters of many programs under non-synagogue auspices, such as those of Jewish Community Centers led by family educators. The situation is far more complex with regard to synagogue-sponsored programs. Many, perhaps most synagogue programs that include interfaith couples are not designed exclusively for them.

Furthermore, unlike many non-synagogue programs they do not incorporate the goal of making the non-Jew comfortable with Judaism, whether he or she decides to convert. However, outreach programs on the ground are not necessarily run in the manner or with the same intentions that their designers had in mind.

Types of Outreach Programs

There are three types of outreach programs. In the first type the goal is to convert the non-Jewish partner. However, this goal is sometimes implicit, rather than explicit. The primary goal of the second type of program is convincing the intermarried couple to raise their children as Jews, even if the non-Jewish partner refused to convert. The goal of the third type of program is to introduce Jewish elements into the lives of intermarried couples, regardless of whether elements of other religions are present as well.

Non-Sectarian Communal Agencies and Outreach

This third type of program is far more likely to be found in non-synagogue settings like Jewish Community Centers. Egon Mayer (1999, p. 2), director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, endorses programs run under non-denominational auspices at Jewish Community Centers and Jewish family service agencies rather than by synagogues because programs for intermarried of the latter group have, in his words, "an ulterior motive or hidden agenda."

For example, the Cleveland Jewish Community Center organizes a program where, according to the local Jewish weekly newspaper (*Cleveland Jewish News*, 1995, p. 15), "interfaith families can discuss such topics as deciding which religion—if any—children will be exposed to" and the co-director is quoted as saying, "We feel it would be a place where people wouldn't be pressured to make a decision one way or another." A recent announcement in *The Forward* (1999, p. 10), a national Jewish weekly, announces a program at the Jewish Community Center on New York's Upper West Side in which a family and couple

therapist “conducts a three-session interfaith workshop that discusses planning a wedding, celebrating holidays, raising children and *maintaining religious and ethnic identities*” [emphasis not in original]. A Jewish Family Service program in New Orleans sponsors “Our Faith or Yours,” which the authors describe as “a program run from both points of view [which] helps couples realize they do need to make a choice about how to raise their children and *hopefully* [emphasis not in original] that choice would be Judaism” (Daube & Frusta, 1996, p. 54). To ensure a non-coercive atmosphere the program deliberately includes both a Jewish and non-Jewish educator as resource persons.

Policy at the National Level and Implementation at the Synagogue Level

Synagogue programs are far more significant from the point of view of Jewish survival. If any outreach programs lead to conversion they are likely to be under synagogue rather than non-synagogue auspices. If Jewish Community Centers are prepared to integrate intermarried couples into their community, the impact on Jewish life in general is slight. If synagogues do so, the impact is much more significant.

Generalizations about outreach programs within Conservative and Reform synagogues must be qualified by distinguishing between the national leadership who design the curriculum from those who conduct the programs “on the ground.” As a rule, the national level is concerned with and designs programs that look toward conversion. At the synagogue level, where programs are actually conducted there are those whose “motive,” explicit or implicit, is to convert the non-Jewish partner and those whose primary goal is to convince the interfaith couple to raise their children as Jews. Advocates of this second type of program argue that this goal can only be achieved if the Jewish community exhibits a warm and hospitable acceptance of the interfaith couple without pressuring the Gentile partner to convert (*Planning for Jewish Continuity*, 1996, p. 57).

One statement supporting this stance has been voiced by the national leadership of the Conservative movement. Its synagogue body, the United Synagogue of America, adopts a tough stance, largely through the efforts of its executive vice-president, Rabbi Jerome Epstein. But this is less true of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), the major rabbinical school of Conservative Judaism. A JTS vice-chancellor was quoted as saying: “Ideally we would prefer conversion as a solution, but we have to be realistic.” According to the vice-chancellor, the position of the Conservative movement is to prevent intermarriage, and if it can’t be prevented then conversion is the next alternative. “But given the fact we can’t do it in all cases, we want the family to feel comfortable in the synagogue and the children to be raised as Jews with a Jewish experience” (*Washington Jewish Week*, 1995, p. 5).

Within the Reform movement, even at the national level, such voices are also heard. As already noted, those responsible for outreach programs at the national level insist that the goal of all such programs, at least implicitly, is really conversion. But at least to one journalist who explored outreach in Reform, the impression is that some programs do seek to accommodate two-faith families. Ellen Jaffee McClain, who married a non-Jew and then wrote a book about her experiences both as a single Jew and a Jew married to a Gentile, praises an outreach program of the Reform movement. “Time and Seasons: A Jewish Perspective for Intermarried Couples,” in her words, “brings small groups of mixed couples together to discuss their religious backgrounds, articulate doctrinal differences between Judaism and Christianity, deal with the religious-cultural dichotomy, and work through issues surrounding extended family, holidays, and child raising. The aim is not to convert the non-Jewish partner but to open the lines of communication between partners” (McClain, 1995, p. 202). A 1989 pamphlet published by the Commission on Jewish Outreach of the Reform movement reminds its readers that “the goal is not to segregate the outreach population by provid-

ing programming for them" but rather to "help the entire community understand and adapt to change" (*Outreach and the Changing Reform Jewish Community*, 1989, p. 15). Lest anyone mistake the intentions of the authors, the booklet includes a poem by a non-Jew married to a Jew that concludes with these words: "God loves our double background with which we nurture our children."

Perhaps it was programs and statements like these that led the Reform movement itself to reevaluate its outreach programs. Rabbi Janet Marder noted in 1993 (p. 7), "We have unintentionally helped to create a climate in which intermarriage is increasingly taken for granted, accepted as normal and inevitable." She then cited an assessment by Rabbi Alexander Schindler, the acknowledged initiator of the outreach program effort within Reform, that "we have neglected to emphasize...the other side of outreach, an unapologetic advocacy of Jewish marriage and of conversion to Judaism.

Furthermore, the Reform movement seems to have responded to the criticism that its outreach programs de-emphasized ethnic and particularistic elements of Judaism. For example, of the roughly 200 pages of text in the 1983 edition of *Introduction to Judaism* published by the Reform movement, only 4 pages are devoted to Israel, only an occasional term in Hebrew is used, and there is no glossary. In the 1999 edition, designed for, among others "interfaith couples desiring a firm foundation on which to make religious decisions for the family" (Eisenstein, 1999), the amount of material devoted to the ethnic and particularistic dimensions of Judaism is substantially increased. In roughly 400 pages, 45 pages are devoted to Israel and Zionism under the rubric of Yom Haatzmaut (Israel's Independence Day), 14 pages to the Holocaust under the rubric of Holocaust Memorial Day, and ten pages to a glossary of Hebrew terms with additional pages of Hebrew terms introduced throughout the sourcebook.

Nevertheless, when one looks at programs as they play themselves out in Reform synagogues, the picture is quite different. As Rabbi

Eric Yoffie (1999, p. 5) notes, where official policy is to seek the conversion of the non-Jewish partner:

In most instances we do not encourage conversion by non-Jewish spouses in our synagogues. Perhaps this bespeaks a natural reluctance to do what we fear will give rise to an awkward or uncomfortable situation. Or perhaps...we have inadvertently sent the message that we neither want nor expect conversion. But whatever the reason...this must be counted at least a partial failure.

The reason, we think, for the disparity between national policy and local implementation has less to do with the autonomy that Reform synagogues enjoy or with open disagreement with national policy and much more to do with two aspects of Jewish life in the United States. First, it has to do with the accommodations that rabbis find themselves making to the demands of constituencies within their congregations and that are described elsewhere (Liebman, 1999). Second, and this is the aspect on which we focus, this disparity is caused by the general orientation not only of the Reform movements but of American Judaism in general.

Intermarriage is not the cause of American Jewry's problems; it is a symptom. Rather, the cause is the value system and assumptions of the American Jewish community as reflected in its attitudes toward outreach.

THE "VALUES" PROBLEM

The vast majority of American Jews, certainly its communal leadership, pays lip service to the idea that intermarriage is bad for the Jewish people. However, little in our basic values and assumptions provides a barrier to intermarriage. Our values and assumptions are not unique to the Jews, but are embedded in the post-modern consumer culture that characterizes contemporary Western culture. And although these values are foreign to historical Judaism, many Jews, in their role as authors, artists, academics, journalists, and educators, play an important role in creating, transmitting,

and reinforcing them. We suspect that the majority of American Jews are more dedicated to these values than they are to Judaism itself.

This is not the place to analyze the malaise of our contemporary culture. Many excellent studies describe it, in some cases with specific regard to the manner in which it has affected religion.¹ In this article we point to four inter-related aspects of our culture that are especially relevant because they undermine opposition to intermarriage.

A Reluctance to Judge

First, there is a grave reluctance to judge the behavior of others. The assertion of the private (private rights, private interest, private privilege) at the expense of public rights or public interests renders even parents reluctant to assert any set of standards or criticize the behavior of their children; communal leaders become even more so. The virtue, instead, becomes listening to what the *other* has to say and responding to the needs of the listener. This reluctance to judge, to assert a language of responsibility and a posture of authority, in other words to lead, has been carried to extremes by American Jewish spokespeople who may not appreciate the hidden messages they convey. Take for example, a recent monograph by Jonathan Woocher (1999), executive vice president of the Jewish Educational Services of North America. According to Woocher, the key problem facing American Jewish organizations is not the absence of standards but rather poor marketing. Effective marketing demands that we determine who our customers are and what they seek. The customers who include a growing population of intermarrieds who are

“not prepared to remain invisible (emphasis in the original)” are to dictate the kinds of services that the Jewish community should provide (Woocher, 1999, p. 14). Here is a taste of what he says:

Looking at institutional life from the perspective of the client has enormous and far-reaching implications. Of all the steps we might take to make Jewish life more attractive, accessible, and affordable, this is probably the most important because it gets to the heart of what the Jewish community must be about on the threshold of a new millennium.

In another example, Dr. David Gordis (1998, p. 57), president of Boston's Hebrew College, responded to a recent study on Jewish identity as follows:

We should be hearing what these people [the moderately affiliated] are saying to us about who they are in order to learn from them, not in order to determine how to make them conform to what we know to be the proper way... Our challenge as a community is not to induce conformity with the traditional norms which may be obsolete, adherence to particularistic notions which may be destructive or allegiance to institutional structures which may have outlived their usefulness... What the “unconventional” Jews have to say to us may be far more important than anything we have to say to them.

Absence of Boundaries

The second principle that animates contemporary culture as it applies to the question of intermarriage is the absence of boundaries. As American Jews increasingly reinterpret Judaism, emphasizing and even exaggerating its universalistic and spiritual characteristics while de-emphasizing and even ignoring its particularistic and ethnic traits, boundaries distinguishing Jew and non-Jew lose all meaning. In his moving speech on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Reform movement's outreach program, Rabbi Eric Yoffie (1999) declared that the Jews are a chosen and a

¹On religion see Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: The Free Press, 1992). On the general topic of contemporary culture and the organization of society see, for example, Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995). Jeane Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995) and the writings of Alisdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. See also Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York: Harper Row, 1966).

special people. He even uses the term *am segula* and urges Jews to distinguish themselves from non-Jews. Hence, he notes, there are certain decisions that the non-Jew, even when married to a Jew, cannot make and certain rituals in which the non-Jew cannot participate. Lines are to be drawn, he says, in accordance with four major principles. But, according to Yoffie, "The fourth principle, and the most important, is that as essential as boundaries are, the power of our outreach work derives from our refusal to be obsessed with them" (1999, p. 5). He concludes with the statement that "while boundaries have their place, bridges are always more important."

Lack of Conflict between Judaism and Contemporary Values

In part because of the present glorious and truly unprecedented condition of Jews in the United States, and in part because they have internalized the dominant values of their culture, Jews are reluctant, indeed close to incapable, of acknowledging any substantive conflict between Judaism, including the requisites of Jewish survival, and contemporary mores and values. On the contrary, Jews are proud of what they consider to be the harmony between them.

Emphasis on the Self

In their recent analysis of American Judaism, Susser and Liebman (1999) note that the last two decades have been characterized by the emergence of personal and privatized Judaism and an accompanying decline of ethnic Judaism. Personalism or privatization, as these terms suggest, focuses religious life on the actual experiences of the individual. Even when the experience takes place in the company of others, indeed, requires others for its consummation, it remains the individual's experience of the group encounter that is central. "Immediacy," "authenticity," the "here and now," the "face-to-face" encounter, the "actually lived moment," the "meaningful experience"—all the verbal insignia of personalism—run against the grain of responsibilities

either to an abstract collectivity or an impersonal code of do's and don'ts. If it is not meaningful, there is little sense in doing it, customary duties notwithstanding.

Hence, the personalist lifestyle is indeed a "style"; that is, a form of life given to sharp fluctuations and not a structure that is stable and continuous. It tends to be constituted out of episodic and exceptional experiences that light up the workaday and lackluster, rather than out of a fixed position that encourages disciplined regularity or patterned coherence. Simply put, personalism and privatization detach individuals from the larger social collectives of which they are a part, release them from the binding duties these collectives impose, and lead them toward self-directed lives that pursue rare moments of meaning and growth.

This emphasis on the self and its realization rather than on obligations transcending the individual person entails a turning away from the kinds of commonplace commitments that lack the special cachet of personal authenticity or inner growth. What are called "traditional family values," for example, suffer accordingly. Once thought to be natural and sacred, these bonds are weakening apace. What seemed mandatory only a generation or two ago—that parents forego their own needs for the sake of their children's, that grown children bear the responsibility for the welfare of their aging parents, that husband and wife renounce and compromise for each other's sake—have become questionable propositions for very many. Accordingly, rates of divorce among Jews are now rapidly approaching the national norm. Considering that Jews are far more understanding of abortion, homosexuality, and extramarital sexuality than other Americans, this tendency seems likely to become even more pronounced in the future.

Much the same can be said in regard to responsibilities toward abstract collectivities such as the Jewish people. From the personalist perspective, true love, the ultimate personal experience, far outweighs that responsibility. Understood in terms of personal meaning, Jewishness becomes—even for Jews—an acquired taste, a take it or leave it affair.

Moreover, experience-based religiosity has no intrinsic justification for exclusion or boundaries; it necessarily includes all who are partner to the inspirational moment. The language of privatized Jewishness speaks in the hushed, soft terms of individual meaning, journeys of discovery, and the search for fulfillment. Its emphases are interpersonal rather than collective. Its favored qualities are authenticity, sincerity, and, most recently, spirituality, rather than achievement or efficiency. Typically it is consoling, non-judgmental, intuitive, and non-obligating.

In this climate of opinion, there are no impediments to intermarriage. From this personalist perspective, true love, the ultimate immediate personal experience, far supercedes the historical weight of ethnic ties. Indeed, to the degree that love needs to overcome obstacles (ethnic or religious) in order to be realized, it is considered the more authentic and marvelous. Jewishness has increasingly become an acquired taste, not an historical obligation.

The assimilation process is not simply a process whereby individuals distance themselves farther and farther from their own roots. It is also a process by which the group increasingly internalizes and coalesces conceptions that prevail in the general culture about itself, about others, and about God. This form of acculturation and coalescence is inevitable in an open society and under certain circumstances may be a source of strength. But it is a mistake to believe that it is invariably a source of strength or that in the last analysis it does not threaten Jewish survival and continuity.

REFERENCES

- Bayme, Steven. (1997). *A statement on the Jewish future*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Cohen, Steven M. (1998). *Religious stability and ethnic decline: Emerging patterns of Jewish identity in the United States*. New York: Jewish Community Centers Association.

- Daube, Susan D., & Frusta, Sidney C. (1996). *Discovering and responding to the needs of intermarried families*. In Egon Mayer (Ed.), *Making Jewish outreach work: Promoting Jewish continuity among the intermarried*. New York: Jewish Outreach Institute.
- Fishman, Sylvia Barack. (2000). *Jewish life and American culture*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Fishman, Sylvia Barack. (In press). *Listening to learn: A comparative study of outmarried Jewish families*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Fishman, Sylvia Barack, & Goldstein, Alice. (1993). *When they are grown they will not depart: Jewish education and the Jewish behavior of American adults*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.
- Goldstein, Alice, & Fishman, Sylvia Barack. (1993). *Teach your children when they are young: Contemporary Jewish education in the United States*. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies.
- Lazerwitz, Bernard, et al. (1998). *Jewish choices: American Jewish denominationalism*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Mayer, Egon. (1999). Why outreach? And how? *Jewish Outreach Institute Newsletter*, 6(2), 2.
- Phillips, Bruce. (1996). *Re-examining intermarriage: Trends, textures, strategies*. Boston: Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies.
- Planning for Jewish continuity: Synagogue-federation collaboration: A handbook*. (1996). New York: JESNA.
- Silverstein, Alan. (1991). A threefold response to intermarriage. In *The intermarriage crisis: Jewish communal perspectives and responses*. New York: American Jewish Committee.
- Susser, Bernard, & Liebman, Charles. (1999). *Choosing survival: Strategies for a Jewish future*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Yoffie, Eric H. (1999). *Remarks from the president: 20th Anniversary Symposium for the William and Lottie Daniel Department of Outreach*. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations.