

THE TREND TO INTERMARRIAGE AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE JEWISH CENTER MOVEMENT

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I. Introduction

It is not by mere chance that the material presented herewith was written. It stems from an agency's interest and desire to concern itself with the question of Jewish values and intermarriage. It involves the professional staff of this agency and its willingness to do considerable soul-searching, spend time and effort to come up with a clear stand and a plan of action on the question of intermarriage.

There were many steps involved in this process. There first were those situations which motivated the agency thoroughly to examine the issues. Secondly, the writer presented a position paper on intermarriage to the professional staff. This material, documented and discussed by staff, was then followed by specific forms of action.

The YM & YWHA of Greater Miami has followed the practice of holding regular semi-monthly professional staff meetings which deal with matters of concern to the agency, the community and the field of social welfare. One such meeting was entitled "Resolving Value Conflicts—The Roles of the Professional and the Agency in Relation to the Membership and the Community." At this session the staff examined a group of selected values around which there was a need to develop some agency direction.

In still another instance the question of intermarriage arose. Each year the agency sponsors a teenage conclave which brings together several hundred youths in the teenage program for a day of workshops on topics of interest to them.

In a workshop entitled "Will Jewish Community Life Survive in America" the subject of intermarriage arose. The following opinions were expressed: Although the teenagers were aware of the increasing trend to intermarriage, they did not personally know too many friends who were involved; while it was possible for a marriage between two faiths to work out if the individuals achieved a good understanding, a large majority of the delegates felt that such a marriage would most likely place a great deal of strain on the children because of divided loyalties in regard to religious identification, and for this reason would be unsound. The teenagers could not come to grips with the meaning of Jewish survival as such, but saw intermarriage primarily in terms of the practical difficulties involved.

As a result of the agency's concern about some trends within the community indicating increased interfaith dating, the writer was asked to present a position paper on this subject. The material which follows includes the highlights of the paper, the professional discussion

that followed, and the steps that were taken to move into the area of action.

II. A Position on Intermarriage

Although the question of intermarriage has been of concern to the Jewish people for generations, it has taken on added significance in the past few years as a result of some studies which were done in a number of communities in this country. The statistical material was drawn primarily from the report dealing with this particular subject entitled "Studies of Jewish Intermarriage in the United States" by Dr. Eric Rosenthal.

We have, in this country, labored under the impression that the rate of Jewish intermarriage in the United States has remained stable at about 7 percent for many decades. Dr. Rosenthal discovers that of the foreign-born Jews 1.4 percent are intermarried; of the native-born of foreign-born parents, who are second generation, 10.2 percent are intermarried; and of the native-born of native-born parents 17.9 percent are intermarried. If these figures are typical for Jews, as a whole, then each succeeding generation has a much higher proportion of intermarriage and if this is to continue the Jewish group is headed for self-extinction. Incidentally, Dr. Rosenthal also maintained that 70 percent of the children of such intermarriages are not raised as Jews.

What might be of particular importance to center workers was the unexpected findings in the Dr. Rosenthal study that in the second generation those who had been exposed to religious school had a higher intermarriage rate than those who did not. Another recent study which investigated the strength of the religious bond on intermarriage has as one of its tentative conclusions that in the case of the Jews, it may be the ethnic, rather than the religious bond, which prevents intermarriage. It

appears that ethnic, cultural and social bonds, expressed in a common language, through voluntary organizations and dedicated to common values and ideals, are much stronger and broader than the solely religious ones. It would then seem that intermarriage is now and will continue to be a factor affecting the survival of the Jewish community. There is nothing inevitable about the survival of Jewry as an identifiable people. Massive continuous efforts are required to assure survival.

It is appropriate to examine the desirable position for a Jewish center on intermarriage and to examine into the attitudes of professional workers, as they are and should be. Professional social workers have the responsibility to help individuals come to decisions against a background of information, discussion and a full awareness of all the issues and areas concerned. Workers do not attempt to make these types of decisions for people, nor to impose their feelings upon them, although, at times, it would be important for people to know how workers stand in relation to many of these issues. But in the final analysis, social workers believe that the individual has the potential, in the proper circumstances and with necessary information, to make the most meaningful decision in his or her life. And so, were the question of intermarriage to arise with a client or a member, it would be the responsibility of any social worker, regardless of religious identification, to make sure that the individual was aware of the effects of such marriages upon children, of the feelings invoked between in-laws, of the feelings the community has about such marriage, of the potential for success or failure of this type of union, and so on. It would also be important to discuss with the individual his feelings about the marriage, his willingness to go into a union which might bring conflict to him

and his future mate and to see whether the individual possesses the strength and conviction to endure a union of this nature. If, in the final analysis, after the process has been completed and the individual was aware and still willing and desirous of venturing into such a marriage, then the social worker would have to feel that this was a decision which he had reached quite independently with all of the material at hand and would accept this type of decision.

However, a Jewish center must take a different stand on this issue: namely, that of opposition to intermarriage. As an agency concerned with the survival of the Jewish people, there is no other alternative position. Whenever the issue arises, the opportunity must be taken for voicing opposition and discussing the reasons for this opposition. However, the center has a far more creative role in this area than merely the decision relative to whether it does or does not support this trend. As a voluntary agency serving the needs of young people who are in contact with both Jews and non-Jews, the center has the responsibility to instill in its members respect, acceptance, understanding and a feeling for themselves as Jews and a willingness to continue their lives as Jews. Obviously, Jewish people are surrounded by a sea of non-Jewishness. Jewish youth and adults constantly come into contact with people of non-Jewish beliefs and the desire to continue relationships with them, is indeed very great. The role of the center can best be spelled out with the continuation and expansion of an understanding and recognition of the values of the Jews as a culture and as a people, rather than only as a religion. The center's role can best be seen as helping people to achieve acceptance of themselves and an appreciation of what their cultural background is, and what it has contributed

to the world and the nation in which they live, and how it is presently, in this day and age, continuing to contribute and be a part of the American stream of life. The key, perhaps, lies in the respect for one's heritage and a belief and understanding of what this heritage entails.

Part of the responsibility of Jewish social workers includes the survival of Judaism and the Judaistic concepts. In material presented at an earlier staff meeting dealing with "Resolving Value Conflicts" one of the questions in the study was "would it be considered acceptable for teens and adults to engage in interfaith dating and/or marriage?" For the most part the staff felt personally that it would be acceptable but were conflicted on the issue in their role as workers in the agency. It is this type of uncertainty which makes it difficult for workers to perform the role which can be most helpful to the people with whom they deal. Staff will tend to steer away from those areas in which they are conflicted or uncertain. The agency has a responsibility to define clearly for staff its position in relation to intermarriage and to establish a program which will help to fulfill its obligations and responsibilities to the community.

The center does not stand alone in its inability to cope with this particular problem. Even the rabbinate has had its own internal differences about the conditions under which an intermarriage ceremony should take place. In fact, the Synagogue Council of America will be convening a national conference of religious leaders from all the branches of Judaism on means of combating the rise of intermarriage. The truth is that not many national Jewish organizations have adapted a clear position on this subject.

John Deans, in a paper entitled "Jewish Participation in Middle-sized

Communities" discussed the concept of social separation and noted that there was a high correlation between social association with non-Jews and attitudes towards intermarriage; that is, those who are more likely to associate socially with non-Jews are likely to react with less resistance to the prospect of the intermarriage of their children. It is not known whether this means that those who react favorably to associating socially with non-Jews are already less concerned about intermarriage and therefore do not avoid non-Jews, or whether their association with non-Jews lessens their fears.

It would seem that the methods utilized by parents to prevent intermarriage do not actually work, at least not in this society. The family can avoid contact with non-Jews; they can make sure that their teenagers associate with Jewish teenagers in a Jewish community center. But, sooner or later an overwhelming majority of teenagers go off to college and then, what? Is it possible that the non-Jew there will appear even more attractive, precisely because he or she will represent something new and different? Is it possible that the Jewish college student will be the readiest to say "what difference does religion make, after all we are all human beings?" If the typical separation does not work, what will? It would seem likely that in the vast majority of cases, the degree to which being Jewish is a significant, positive element in the life and consciousness of Jewish youth would have a substantial bearing on the choice of a life partner. There seems to be a large unmet need for greater informal experiences for Jewish youth, which will broaden their contacts with the widest variety of cultural expressions in the history of Jews and Judaism. Separation obviously cannot be the answer. Opportunities for exposure to non-Jews

in each community are varied and plentiful, and separation, at this point, would serve no possible end, and, in fact, would raise new kinds of questions.

A Jewish agency should take every opportunity to interpret to its members and the participants in its programs, that it is a Jewish agency. This can be done through the teenage program by means of various aspects of Jewish culture, Jewish art, Jewish music, Jewish literature, discussions on contemporary Jewish problems, discussion on intermarriage, dating, values as they relate to Jews and to Americans. It might be worth examining whether this problem could further be relieved by concentrating on jointly sponsored events with other Jewish youth organizations so as to increase the exposure with other Jews.

In the center setting, it is not the Jew who is in the minority as he is in the general community but it is the non-Jew. In agency's intake non-Jews will be accepted if they in turn accept the fact that it is a Jewish organization with a program geared along Jewish lines and if they will feel comfortable to participate and continue in a program of this nature. Since this is the case, the center must provide opportunities for youth, young adults, adults, and senior citizens constantly to test their association with their Jewish heritage, to examine their feelings about being Jewish, to work out the problems they may have around relating in a non-Jewish community, to accept themselves as Jews and to help them to accept living in a non-Jewish community. This can be done if a conscious continuing effort is made to initiate and develop those programs which are meaningful on various levels of program in the agency and which are geared toward a better appreciation of one's self as a Jew and a better appreciation of one's heritage and culture.

There is no one simple or evident solution to the problem of intermarriage. As a matter of fact its ever present possibility can, and should elicit, a creative response causing us to look to the quality of our family relationships, our communal enterprises, our cultural concern. It is possible that in the long run the answer to intermarriage will be the quality of Jewish life.

III. Discussion and Action

In the discussion that followed this position paper, there was general acceptance of its approach by the agency staff. It was felt that the center movement could not be neutral on intermarriage because it took a stand on Jewish survival. In view of the current statistical information on intermarriage it would appear that if the present trend continued it would lead to the extinction of Jewish community life in America.

It was noted that the agency positively and explicitly affirmed values such as those inhering in democracy, respect for law, and so on, in dealing with teenagers. Thus the agency was distinctly not neutral on all issues. If a value position was taken on some issues it would certainly appear to be in keeping to take a position on the issue of intermarriage.

This did not mean that the agency could actually "forbid" any individual to take such a step since it did not have any control over the lives of individuals outside of center activities. Its role would rather be to express its concern about survival, to help others to think about it, and to help individuals recognize the difficult implications of the eventual departure from their religious and ethnic group.

The main need was for better communication, discussion and enlightenment in the areas of information, attitudes and values with both teenagers

and parents. Recognizing that the objectives of the Jewish community relations agencies aimed at greater integration of the Jew in the society at large, the staff noted that a conflict appeared to exist between the goals of community relations and the goals of survival; or if not conflict in goals, then issue conflicts which have not been fully resolved. Along these lines it was agreed by staff that membership, activities and groups should be open to all in the community regardless of religious background.

It was further noted that the center movement nationally had not taken any position on intermarriage and it was not clear whether there was a position taken by the community relations field and the Jewish education field.

Shortly following this staff meeting, a sub-committee of staff met to further implement these discussions. The committee grappled with the problem of how it could answer the questions directed to them by youth on the need for Jewish survival. Why is there a need? What would occur if there were no Jewish survival? It was recognized that Judaism had left its impact on the quality of American life. It had added its own special tone and quality to this life, through literature, through music and through other cultural pursuits. Without a Jewish entity, a void would be created which staff felt would greatly weaken American life. It was admitted that although they were not always aware of the presence of Judaism and the impact of its contributions upon them, that its loss would be sorely missed and would be a negative factor in the history of mankind. For the first time staff attempted to come to grips with the prospects of not having an organized Jewish people. They felt that they would have to help youth see that each person's actions carried an awesome responsibility for the possible dis-

appearance of what all felt and held dear.

This committee arrived at the following conclusions:

- A. There was enough actual or potential interest in the subject of interfaith dating and interfaith marriage on the part of teenagers to make it possible for staff to interest some groups in a few experimental discussions on this subject in a very natural way.
- B. Since this was one of the questions discussed at the teenage conclave, it would also flow more freely as an item to be introduced.
- C. Staff might have some difficulty in handling all of the implications of these discussions because more knowledge and understanding might be needed to cope with many questions that might arise.
- D. At those two center branches where teen presidents' councils existed it would be possible to institute discussions of this subject with each council in the hope that the stimulation might carry over to individual groups. If some clubs then had successful meetings on this matter, other groups might want to follow suit.
- E. After club meetings it would be worthwhile to attempt a few parent meetings, possibly utilizing the model meeting that each club had for its parents.
- F. It was agreed that this procedure would be attempted as soon as possible at the end of which time there would be a staff review of the progress and results to decide on next steps.

With the direction received from this meeting, staff stimulated the interest of teenagers to arrange a meeting of the presidents' council in one of the branches. Four club representatives were chosen by the council to present material on four questions. These questions are as follows:

1. Would you like to have more close friendships with non-Jews?
2. Do you believe in interfaith dating?
3. Do you believe in interfaith marriage?
4. How do you feel about non-Jews participating in "Y" activities?

In this discussion, which was handled by a member of the professional staff, a

number of interesting items emerged. The meeting started out with considerable uncertainty and resistance. The youths were conflicted in their desires both for identification with other Jews and for strong associations with non-Jews. The group's suspicion of staff in the early part of the meeting was apparent in hints that the center was questioning the value of associations with non-Jews.

Some of the resistance was overcome as the group became more involved in the discussion and discovered that it had to face the issues. As far as interfaith dating went, the youths initially did not see this as a problem. After some discussion it was felt by the group that as teenagers moved toward their senior year, and when they began to seriously think of marriage, interfaith dating was over. At this point parents usually began to place limitations on dating patterns which teens apparently accepted. The major problem in intermarriage, as seen at this point by the youths, concerned the raising of children and the conflict of identification caused in their lives.

On the question of non-Jews participating at the center, the first reactions were "what's wrong with it?" "don't we believe in democracy?" There was the implication that the question was somehow improper to raise. The tone continued in this defensive manner until the staff person asked what would happen if suddenly, tomorrow, there were no longer any Jewish-sponsored youth groups in the community. The group was taken aback and had to think carefully before responding. One person said that they would form new clubs on their own. When asked from whom they would draw their membership, others said most likely from Jewish teens, because they would feel most comfortable that way. The staff member then helped

them to see that they would, in effect, recreate the center approach. It was then pointed out to them that the center, while opening its doors to all (a non-sectarian intake) was organized primarily to serve Jewish people and therefore did have a clearly sectarian purpose. As the group accepted this new (to them) concept, they began to describe some experiences in accepting non-Jewish members. Two clubs had brought in non-Jews, who later felt uncomfortable and dropped out. Some other clubs had a few non-Jewish members who were making a good adjustment. The understanding that developed from this was that certain kinds of non-Jews were more comfortable in a Jewish setting than in a non-Jewish setting, but that the average non-Jew would not have a strong need to join a Jewish group.

The concept of the continued existence of Jewish life was hard for the group to comprehend. For them (mostly third-generation Jews) they were concerned with themselves and their peers,

having taken for granted the continuity of the Jewish people and having given very little thought to this issue. Most significant was the beginnings of an exploration with them on the meaning of their Jewishness, how it affects their choice of friends and mates, how they feel about being Jewish and how their feelings are expressed.

Recognizing the importance of this material, one of the members of the staff is embarking upon a research project which will concern itself with the feelings of teenage members about their being Jewish.

This is only a beginning. Future plans call for further discussions with individual groups and follow-ups with groups of parents. The agency is concerned and has given high priority to the problem of intermarriage. We can only hope that with the continuing efforts on the part of the center and of the community, that we will find some of the answers to the problems which perplex us all.