

On Advocating For Endogamy

[2 VIEWS]

AFTER SEVERAL DECADES of intermarriage, American Jewish families have become much more diverse than they once were. In light of this, we asked two experts whether the community has the right — morally, communally and even pragmatically — to send the message to parents and children that Jews must marry other Jews. In the long run, has the community's policy of promoting endogamy been effective in nourishing a strong Jewish family life? Has this approach come to repel the large numbers of Jews who are intermarried or who are the children of intermarried families? Is there a way that the community can emphasize endogamy without alienating large numbers of American Jews?



Optimism for the Jewish Future

by RABBI KERRY M. OLITZKY

While I would have perhaps preferred a historical Jewish journey for our people that did not include intermarriage, especially at the rates we are now experiencing in North America and elsewhere, I recognize that the phenomenon is not new to us (or any community in this generation) and, in fact, is reflected—and celebrated—in various episodes in the Torah and throughout the *Tanach*, as well as in all stages of Jewish history.

As a rabbi, this phenomenon and the tension that it has created have always been a challenge to me. I think that my struggle is emblematic of those of my colleagues who likewise confront the reality of the American Jewish demographic every day. How can we celebrate and affirm a loving relationship between someone who is not Jewish with someone who is, while at the same time encourage those who have not yet made a decision to marry, to marry someone who is Jewish? In working with families comprised of a Jewish and a non-Jewish parent, I have come to realize that we have established a false dichotomy in our message to people, and especially to our children, about whom they seek out as a life partner. There are many among us who have placed the message to “marry Jewish” above all else. No other demands are being made, nor is anything required to back up such a directive. As part of this message, an endogamous marriage is seen as a success in the commu-

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Cultivating Jewish Roots: Why American Judaism Should Advocate for Endogamy

by SYLVIA BARACK FISHMAN

Inclusiveness is a compelling concept for many American Jews. Outreach activists urge synagogues and Jewish institutions to lower or obliterate boundaries between Jews and non-Jews in intermarried households and to welcome non-Jews into Jewish congregational and communal life with or without conversion. Correctly asserting that intermarried households comprise an increasingly large proportion of American Jewish households, some argue that urging endogamy or conversion into Judaism will needlessly alienate intermarried parents—and their children—and thus further diminish an already challenged Jewish community. This policy advice, often passionately expressed, is articulated in the name of pluralism, tolerance, and the universalistic elements of biblical and historical Judaism.

Research unequivocally shows, however, that having one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent literally reverses the likelihood that children will identify as Jews and create Jewish homes of their own. When American Jews ages 25 to 49 have two Jewish parents, 72 percent are married to Jews. When they have one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent, 79 percent are married to non-Jews. Moreover, having a Jewish mother is critical. Although the great majority of affiliated intermarried Jews join the Reform movement, which recognizes Jewish fatherhood as equal to Jewish motherhood since the Patrilineal Descent Decision, a study of Jewish college

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nity, while an exogamous marriage is seen as a failure. Yet, in most cases, both kinds of marriages are more reflective of local demographics than they are driven by any “successes” or “failures” in Jewish identity formation. And they certainly do not represent success or failure in child-rearing or Jewish education or the role modeling that emerges from Jewish communal leadership.

Moreover, the community has already tried advocating for Jewish endogamy and it hasn't worked. So what happened? Were our parents and grandparents not yelling loudly enough? Were they not sitting *shiva* dramatically enough? Those who advocate for a “return” to such a strategy never offer concrete programmatic plans as to how to do it, because they suggest it while sitting in an ivory tower rather than while working in the “trenches.” They use statistics to suggest causal relationships that are not provable while ignoring myriad other factors. They see reality through their own clouded lenses and then present it as “scientific fact” in order, for example, to discount a family's Jewish identity simply because the children eat Christmas dinner at the home of their non-Jewish grandparents.

If there are other core values in Judaism, especially those which are manifest in forms of ritual practice, why don't we advocate for them more strongly? Why don't we hear pulpit exhortations about Shabbat (especially if Ahad Ha'am is correct that “Shabbat has kept the Jewish people”)? Or about *kashrut* (since so many of its laws kept us separate from others throughout our Diaspora travels)? Instead, we are consumed by an emphasis on endogamy that seems to eclipse everything else that

is dear to us. As more Jews marry those who are not Jewish, such an emphasis tends to alienate an ever-growing number of people. Even more so, it sends a message of exclusion to their children and often to their parents—driving them away from the community, something that we cannot afford. And it causes us to miss opportunities for engagement.

While our communal obsession over interfaith marriage has driven countless children of intermarriage away from the organized community, it has not necessarily driven them away from Jewish *identity*. That may explain why the NJPS found that a huge percentage of Jewishly identifying college students hail from so-called interfaith families (45 percent), as compared to the much more oft-quoted NJPS statistic about interfaith families raising Jewish children (33 percent). To us it says that the potential spark of Judaism remains within, waiting to be rekindled. But these kids will never join the community if our ultimate measure of their identity continues to hinge on whom they marry (or whom their parents married). Marriage is not the end game. It reminds me of what has happened with the functional reality of *b'nai mitzvah*; they have become the end of a process of Jewish education rather than the beginning. Similarly, an emphasis on in-marriage, if it is to come, should organically evolve at the end of a process of adopting Jewish personal practice rather than at its beginning through communal proclamations.

Our emphasis should be on what it takes to create a Jewish household and raise Jewish children, or on what it takes to live a Jewish life, irrespective of the choices we have made with regard to a

partner. After all, interfaith marriage is not the end of Jewish continuity. Not raising Jewish children is the end of Jewish continuity.

There is no denying the fact that statistics do not paint an optimistic picture with regard to the Jewish future and the results of interfaith relationships. But I refuse to allow the past to determine what the future will look like. If we don't open our institutions and ourselves to interfaith families, then we will have no one to blame but ourselves. And we know that there are literally hundreds of thousands of intermarried families already rising to the task, with perhaps hundreds of thousands more who would join them if they were welcomed and encouraged. One of our pilot programs in Atlanta, thanks to the generous support of the Marcus Foundation, is called the Mothers Circle. It includes, among other things, an educational course for women from other backgrounds committed to raising Jewish children. It is a free program, a “thank you” from the Jewish community for accepting the challenge of creating a Jewish household. In speaking to these women, we know it is one of the most powerful statements of support they have ever felt from the Jewish community.

Finally, this conversation belongs in the midst of a relationship, not as a diatribe from the pulpit (where few people are there to listen in any case) nor in op-eds or propaganda pamphlets. I would welcome the opportunity to sit with colleagues, including those with whom I disagree, so that we might fashion a Jewish community where in-marriage is encouraged but not at the expense of those who have already intermarried. And similarly, I would like to imagine that we might work together toward the creation of a community where those who have intermarried are welcomed without judgment or distinction. I pray that the day may come where in the midst of such a dialogue, our leaders might be able to echo the words of the Talmud and declare, “*Elu v'elu . . .* both are for the sake of Heaven.” 🌸