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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freshmen with only one Jewish parent showed that 40 percent of students who grew up with a Jewish mother considered themselves to be Jewish, while only 15 percent of those with a Jewish father considered themselves to be Jewish.

Children growing up in households with mixed religious traditions are strikingly less likely to identify as Jews because Christian and Jewish holiday and life cycle celebrations are celebrated side by side: December brings both Christmas trees and Chanuka candles, April brings Easter dinners and Passover Seders. The 2000-01 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) showed that intermarried families who say they are raising Jewish children have almost identical rates of Jewish behaviors and affiliations, as measured by the NJPS, as those saying they are raising children in two religions. Dual religion households, however, have more Christian observances, and they are more likely to attend church and to send children to both church schools and Jewish Sunday schools or supplementary religious schools than those defining themselves as raising Jewish children. Families with mixed religious celebrations are not environments that succeed at raising Jewish children.

Inclusiveness advocates counter statistical data and systematically collected interview data with anecdotal evidence, such as essay contests or email surveys they have conducted among families that subscribe to their specialized chat groups. They quote stories of warm connections with Judaism forged by outreach programs. They suggest that Christian celebrations in intermarried households do not necessarily interfere with Jewish identity, and they accuse those who worry about mixed messages as lacking confidence in Judaism as a product.

Religious identification is like the marketplace, they suggest. If Judaism is sufficiently attractive and compelling, Judaism will win a bigger market share even in households where Christianity gets equal billing. They assert that if Judaism is not winning out in these households, the Jewish community is failing in marketing Judaism to this potential population. Indeed, some suggest that the marketing failure is due to a deficit of Jewish communal inclusiveness for interfaith families.

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The marketing analogy is familiar but misleading, because potential "customers" for religion are not choosing between "superior" or "inferior" products, where a superior product will naturally rise to the top and claim an increasingly large market share. The personal attractiveness of particular ethno-religious lifestyles is dependent on many factors, including social networks, family background, education, activities and experiences, not on the innate superiority of one religion over another.

Ecological or agricultural models are more useful than marketing models in thinking about religious choices in an open society. History shows repeatedly that connections to a minority religion must be nurtured in order for that religious group to transmit its culture to the next generation. The cultivation of a minority religion is enhanced by (1) creating conditions that nurture that religion and by (2) maintaining a certain number of boundaries. Gardeners often create a specific environment for particular plants to thrive. They know that if current conditions favor another species and if boundaries are not in place, the desired plant can falter and become an endangered species.

In New England, for example, the acid soil favors acid-loving plants. Gardeners who want diversity in their plantings, including green grass and the many other plants that cannot tolerate acidic soil, must apply lime frequently. Similarly, along New England waterways, brown cattails are increasingly pushed out by plants with tall purple spires called loosestrife, because loosestrife is a pervasive plant that has an easier time of multiplying. Ecologists are willing to intervene to protect endangered species like cattails, precisely because they believe that diversity is precious.

Similarly, religious diversity is precious, but all recent systematic research shows that it thrives only with cultivation. Jewish culture is most effectively transmitted under certain conditions, including: (1) having two Jewish parents, especially having a Jewish mother; (2) having Jewish social networks, such as neighborhood and friendship groups, during the teen years; (3) receiving formal (classroom) Jewish education during both elementary and high school years; (4) growing up in a family that includes regular involvement with Jewish religious rituals and cultural celebrations, and does not include the celebration of any other religion. We can call them the three Ps—Parents, Peer group, and Pedagogy.

Nurturing Jewish cultural transmission requires effort, because American Jews are a tiny minority, 2.5 percent, among a large Christian majority, 84 percent. Despite the attractiveness of Robert Frost's poem, "something there is that doesn't love a fence," many living things, including minority religious groups, require interventions and yes, even some fences. Without boundaries, minority groups, like cattails along the water, can easily be overrun by the Christian largest common denominator.

Today, American Jewish leaders and religious and communal institutions are pressured to abandon advocacy for the creation of unambiguously Jewish homes. To some extent, communal norms have already changed in the direction of an unthinking espousal of inclusiveness as the highest goal. American Jewish denominations and movements will best succeed in their effort to transmit their living heritage by taking the countercultural stand of advocating for in-marriages whenever possible, conversion into Judaism where intermarriage has taken place, and exclusively Jewish religious traditions in homes where the goal is the raising of Jewish children.