

Responding to Inter-marriage

A Review of

Introducing My Faith and My Community: The Jewish Outreach Institute Guide for the Christian in a Jewish Interfaith Relationship,

by Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky

(Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004)

and *Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Inter-marriage,*

by Jane Kaplan

(Praeger, 2004)

BY NINA MANDEL

My grandmother, *zihrona livraha*, was not stingy with her opinions. She was vehemently and articulately opposed to the concept of inter-marriage and she let us know it. She was, in fact, typical of generations of grandmothers, grandfathers, parents, siblings, rabbis and community leaders who felt (and in some cases still do feel) a sense of peril for the continuity of the Jewish people posed by inter-marriage.

In fairness, my grandmother spoke just as eloquently and memorably about the importance of *klal Yisrael*—the entirety of the Jewish people. She would invoke the message of unity inherent in the *Shema* prayer to explain the ineffable connection between Jewish people that had allowed for their survival. And she applied that message to her family, presiding fiercely, if somewhat ineffectively, over us as the unquestionable matriarch, protecting her kin from the temptations of the outside world. She firmly believed that

inter-marriage would lead to the abandonment not just of Judaism, but an abandonment of the Jewish people. In theory, she supported conversion to Judaism by the non-Jewish spouse to be the lesser of two evils. However, the *shonde*, the shame, came from even dating “out” in the first place. Inevitably, her diligence and that of Jewish grandmothers everywhere failed to keep inter-marriages from happening.

A Growing Challenge

The most recent National Jewish Population Survey, 2000-01, reports that since 1996, the inter-marriage rate for newly-married Jews is 47 percent. This is a slight increase since 1985, but a much lower rate than that of the 1970s and early 1980s. These are not shockingly new statistics, nor are the ones that indicate that inter-married families are less likely to engage in Jewish life or raise Jewish children than “in-marrieds.” For the last several decades,

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Jewish communal life across the denominational spectrum has been addressing the implications of intermarriage programmatically, institutionally and theoretically.

What has shifted in recent years is the approach to the “intermarriage question.” Up until recently, the two predominant Jewish “antidotes” to intermarriage were to invest time, effort and resources in keeping Jewish adults from marrying non-Jews; and to encourage non-Jewish partners to convert to Judaism. Increasingly, we now find Jewish institutions turning their attention to making intermarried families feel more welcome as a means of keeping Jews, and the people who love them, involved in Jewish life (see, for example, the 1998 Reconstructionist report *Boundaries and Opportunities: The Role of Non-Jews in Reconstructionist Congregations*). Instead of believing, like my grandmother, that the most effective course was to keep Jews from marrying “out,” we now find the inclusivity approach entering the mainstream. In October 2003, Paul Golin wrote in *Moment* magazine that: “For the first time in U.S. history, the number of Jews is declining. Welcoming intermarried couples can reverse the trend.”

Giving Voice to Intermarried People

This viewpoint is explored in complementary ways by the two books under review. Neither is a how-to for conversion, nor do they even try to make the case for it, or for the abandonment of an interreligious relationship. What the authors do, in very dif-

ferent ways, is to give a voice to many of the different players in these relationships. One book effectively explains why “marrying Jewish” might matter so much to the Jewish partner’s family, even in cases where they are seemingly without any other connection to Jewish life. The other exposes the impact on families when aversions to, and stereotypes about, intermarriage are aired insensitively and explores how couples work to develop strategies for their interfaith relationships.

Introducing My Faith and Community is directed to a specific audience. Though the title suggests a guidebook for the Jewish partner, “. . . this book is primarily designed for people whose quest to learn more about Judaism emerges mainly from a special relationship with someone who is Jewish” (xi). It is written primarily for the Christian reader, with the history and rituals of Judaism often being explained in contrast to a Christian experience.

Using four broad chapters titled “Faith,” “Foundational Values,” “Culture,” and “Community,” Kerry Olitzky gives a comprehensive and accessible rundown on Jewish history, practice, ritual and communal life. He frames his discussions in both traditional Jewish teachings, like Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith, and more contemporary vocabulary and values, using subheadings such as “welcoming environments” and “spiritual practice.” Each chapter ends with a section entitled “Next Steps,” encouraging the reader to engage further in an aspect of Jewish thought or practice as a way of deepening his or her understanding.

If the book were to be judged solely by its cover, it would be described accurately as welcoming, with a picture of an open door with a *mezuzah* on the doorpost and a “Shalom” mat on the landing. One would not expect to find a disapproving grandmother in this house, and this is the success of the book. The underlying message in the teaching about Judaism is to explain why it means so much to Grandma.

Contradiction and Confusion

Olitzky admits to the non-Jewish reader that the Jewish family that may be giving him or her such a hard time often seems contradictory, or even hypocritical. “How could being Jewish be so important to you if you never celebrate the holidays?” “Why should I convert if you don’t even keep a kosher home?” “Why is Judaism so important to my partner, who has not set foot in a synagogue since age thirteen?”

Rather than invoking tragic history, fear of extinction or religious prescriptions, Olitzky focuses on the values that make Jewish peoplehood so important. He explains that, unlike examples from Christianity, Jewish faith does not require ritual practice, and that synagogue membership is not a requirement for Jewish identity. He also explains how Jewish identity is maintained through everything from food to art to ritual practice.

He also tackles head-on, if not sometimes apologetically, stereotypes about Jews that might arise. Using the values frame of *tzedakah*, mixed with some medieval history, he addresses the roots

of stereotypes about Jews and money. “If Jews appear to be overrepresented in the sphere of philanthropic giving, this may be viewed as a desire to sublimate the urge toward conspicuous consumption. But it’s important to recognize that giving money and donating time have an ancient basis in Jewish values” (44).

Plus and Minus

Where the author is less successful is in taking on the task of describing the distinctions among the different movements within Judaism. While it is helpful to have a chapter entitled, “The Four Major Movements in American Judaism,” it is less helpful to try to offer, as Olitzky does, a guideline of what individual rabbis may require for things like conversion or synagogue participation. For instance, his assertion that “Not all Reconstructionist and Reform rabbis require circumcision for adult males” does not adequately prepare the reader to expect a range of opinions in these matters.

Introducing My Faith and My Community is successful because of its candor. The book does not hesitate to present the ways in which coming into a Jewish family can be unsettling to a non-Jewish partner. Olitzky tries to shift the discomfort to understanding, by explaining how and why many Jews have come to be invested in the concept of “Jewishness” beyond the realm of religious practice. This approach allows the non-Jewish reader to feel understood and the Jewish reader to feel well represented.

Personal Narratives

Interfaith Families: Personal Stories of Jewish-Christian Intermarriage is a collection of personal stories that are as revelatory as Olitzky's book is informative. The author offers an intimate look into the "back-stories" of interfaith marriages in an effort to share the many ways couples successfully, and unsuccessfully, deal with the kinds of challenges Olitzky presents. The stories were gathered by author Jane Kaplan through a systematic interview process. They are meant to offer a cross-section of experiences, using couples from across the country, of all different ages and at different points in their marriages, including several divorced couples.

The stories are grouped into five chapters, each representing an approach to intermarriage taken by the family: "Choosing a Jewish Family Life"; "Choosing a Christian Family Life"; "Finding a Way to Have Both"; "Looking for Alternatives"; and "Deciding to Convert." Although Kaplan has chosen not to present any analysis of the interviews, she does start each chapter with a brief comment on her findings and each interview, told in the first person, begins with a summary about the circumstances of the subject.

What Kaplan's choice of narratives reveals is an overall frustration among the partners, Jewish and non-Jewish, about how issues of religion are dealt with in the relationship between the partners. In many of the cases, one partner reports feeling unsupported in following her or his own religious path, or pressured into conversion. Even in

the cases where the couple considered the impact of religious differences carefully before marriage, it is instructive to read how unexpected challenges arose over time.

It is provocative, and also sometimes difficult, to read how many of the non-Jewish partners report being treated critically by Jewish families. In most of the cases Kaplan offers, the Christian family and partner have a much easier time accepting the relationship, marriage, conversion or decision about raising the children, than the Jewish side. The issue arises repeatedly that the non-Jewish partner does not understand the visceral attachment to Judaism, and I found myself at times wishing that these couples had read Olitzky's book.

Identity of Children

The question of what to do about raising children seems to be the most challenging, and the stories present some interesting and thought-provoking ideas for addressing this issue. Kaplan offers examples of how families have managed by choosing either Judaism or Christianity as the religion in which the children will be raised, regardless of whether the parents share a faith tradition.

Kaplan also offers stories of ways in which families have blended traditions. In some cases, they found or created similar communities in which to teach and celebrate both faith traditions; in others, no firm decision was made, and the children were encouraged to find their own way. These stories often read more joyfully than do the ones in which

a decision was made and the partners struggled to support one another. (An interesting addendum to the book would be stories from the children in all these families, to see how these choices played out for them.)

Ultimately, it is the candor of the stories that make this an important resource for discussing intermarriage and conversion issues. This is not a book put together to show us how well things worked out once a decision was made to convert to Judaism or to create a Jewish household. It is obvious that conflicts often arise in interfaith marriages, even when one or both partners define themselves as “non-religious.” It is also obvious that the pressure put on couples in these situations by their own families and clergy can be hurtful. Though in most cases the extended families came to accept the choices made by the couples involved, harm was done. This book makes us consider exactly what it is we mean when we talk about creating welcoming

communities for interfaith families.

Changing Attitudes

Taken together, these books show a changing attitude about intermarriage in liberal Jewish communities. The focus is no longer so much on prevention as on respect and understanding. My grandmother may not have been happy when some of her grandchildren married outside of their faith, but in the end she did her best to accept everyone. Had she had insight into the impact her stance had on those couples before they married, or had those non-Jewish partners of her grandchildren had more insight into why the investment for her was so high, perhaps feelings could have been spared all around.

Olitzky and Kaplan have helped us to see alternative, and, it is hoped, more effective and more welcoming, ways of responding to the challenges of intermarriage.