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Jewish Communal Policy Toward Intermarried Couples

My topic is Jewish communal policy. By intermarriage I mean a marriage in which one of the partners is a non-Jew. The technically correct term is “mixed marriage” or “outmarriage” and I will use these term interchangeably.

Let me begin with a personal statement. I would not want anything I say to be misunderstood as condoning intermarriage. Every study we have, and we have many of them, point to the fact that intermarriage is associated with lower levels of Jewish identity and involvement. As Professor Steven Cohen points out, even holding constant for initial identification, “mixed marriage produces lower levels of Jewish involvement than would otherwise be the case”. My own opposition to intermarriage is not based on its impact on Jewish continuity and survival any more than my support for Jewish education is based on its positive impact on Jewish continuity and survival. I believe that intermarriage (by which, I repeat, I mean the marriage between a Jew and someone who currently non Jewish) is a betrayal of Judaism, of Jewish history, and of previous generations of Jews. The question that I address, therefore, is not about whether intermarriage can be justified – in my opinion it cannot -- but what the organized Jewish community, whether it is a synagogue, or a national synagogue movement, or a Jewish communal agency such as a Jewish Community Center, or a Jewish Family Agency, or a local Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, should do about it. I am not concerned in this paper with how an individual Jew or a Jewish family should respond to the mixed marriage of a family member or a good friend .

The debate has centered around a number of issues. Among these issues are: should the Jewish community employ Jewish professionals and teachers, individuals who ostensibly serve as role models if they are intermarried; should a non-Jewish partner or a non-Jewish family member be allowed or encouraged to participate in religious ceremonials such as lighting shabbat candles in a synagogue or being called to the Torah on the occasion of, for example, the bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah celebration of a family member; should a child of an intermarried couple be permitted to enroll in a Jewish school; does it make a difference if the child is Jewish or non-Jewish and does it make a difference if that child is simultaneously enrolled in a church program;. All these have occupied the attention of the Jewish community but the program that has evoked the most vigorous public debate has been the controversy over Outreach. For purposes of this paper I define Outreach as the efforts by synagogues, Jewish community centers, or Federation agencies, to provide formal and informal programs geared exclusively to the interests and to the “needs” of mixed married couples. Hence, when I talk about Outreach I am not speaking of 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. I am referring to programs designed for interfaith couples.

I undertook to study two aspects of the issue. First, to look at the arguments for and against Jewish communal sponsorship of Outreach programs and secondly, to ask about the nature of these programs. I excluded the Orthodox because their relatively tough position on intermarriage means that their outreach programs are of a very different nature than those of the rest of the community.

The argument in favor of Outreach programs has a variety of nuances but its general thrust is so clear that I think it fair to accord it rather brief treatment. Intermarriage, the argument goes, is inevitable in the kind of open society which we enjoy. According to Eric Yoffie, President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, “intermarriage 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” (As an aside, this statement is an unfortunate example of how proponents of Outreach exaggerate a position in order to undermine it. I haven[t encountered a single expression among Outreach opponents of the notion that it is possible or even worthy of attempting to “stamp out“ intermarriage. The goal is to contain it.) Intermarriage, the supporters of Outreach contend, is likely to increase in the future. And unless we devote at least some of the communities’ resources to welcoming interfaith couples and making them aware of Judaism, regardless of whether the non-Jewish party is or is not interested in conversion, we are going to see a substantial diminution in the size of the Jewish community, perhaps to the point where the Jewish community in the United States will no longer be able to sustain itself.

The argument against Outreach programs is much more complex. In the interest of brevity I am going to rephrase the opposition to Outreach programs in terms that are more blunt than one will actually find in print.

To begin with, it is argued, the center piece of the case in favor of Outreach is incorrect. This argument is based on the assumption that mixed marriage occurs almost randomly amongst Jews and there is virtually nothing that can be done to prevent it. This argument is false and there is ample documentation to demonstrate this. Intermarriage rates vary by level of Jewish education, home observance, trips to Israel, and even by the degree of

opposition expressed by parents. I assume you can all cite anecdotal material of how children of deeply committed Jews nevertheless intermarried. But these are the exceptions. The rule holds – the more Jewishly committed the home, the more that parents convey to their children that they oppose intermarriage, the more likely that the children will marry other Jews.

Secondly, there is the argument I find least persuasive. Outreach programs cost money and they are paid for, sometimes indirectly and often directly, from the Jewish communal pocket, from money that can be used elsewhere.

The third argument against Outreach relies on the work of Bruce Phillips, who points out that “the overwhelming majority of mixed marriages are not interested” in Outreach programs. In fact, the type of mixed marriages 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. I want to stress this point. The non-Jewish partners in the last national survey of Jews was able to identify him or herself as Christian or as having no religion. The intermarried couples with the greatest interest in outreach programs are those where the non-Jewish partner is a Christian. Not surprisingly, when asked about the kind of program they want they indicated one “where our children could learn about both types of the religions in our home”. But these are precisely the kinds of programs which synagogues eschew. According to Phillips, the highest actual participation in Outreach programs is 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. This point merits careful consideration. The recent emphasis on outreach programs especially in the Reform

movement, may or may not be effective in encouraging conversion or influencing the family to raise their child as a Jew. But I would argue that they do have the effect of erasing boundaries between the Jewish and the Christian religion. I think that we are experiencing a serious erosion of the boundaries or border line between what is Jewish and what is Christian, recent Reform resolutions to the contrary notwithstanding. This has a Christian as well as a Jewish side. But I am not at all concerned with whether liberal Christian denominations neutralize their own Christian symbols out of their vision of a pluralist or multicultural society. When you constitute the dominant religion in a society you can afford to do so. I am very concerned about the neutralizing of Jewish elements by synagogue groups and by Jewish Community Centers in their pursuit of a pluralist or multiculturalist vision.

Fourthly, and related to my previous point, outreach programs, are more likely than not to paint a false image of Judaism. The Reform/Reconstructionist rabbi David Polish writes about his fear that Outreach to mixed-marrieds, where successful, will have a transforming effect upon Jewish institutions and dilute their Jewish content.” Steven Cohen 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 it is especially associated 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, attachments that are shared by the vast majority of American Jews and which every study we have demonstrates is a correlate of Jewish identity, requires special emphasis in any honest program designed to explain Judaism to mixed marriages. They are absent or downplayed, according to the charge, because they are aspects of Judaism that mixed marriages find least attractive or comprehensible. I take little comfort from the fact that these programs are ineffective anyway in reaching the intermarried because, as we will see, they have become the bread and butter of introduction to Judaism courses intended for inmarried as well as intermarried Jews.

Fifthly, the success of any program in transmitting 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 or leading the group. If the programs are led by individuals who are fairly uninformed about the tradition or who, by the standards of the mainstream Jewish community cannot properly serve as role models, then the programs they lead do little good from a Jewish perspective regardless of how the participants may evaluate the program. This is often the case

Finally, Outreach serves to weaken the resolve of parents, rabbis and educators in proposing measures that reduce levels of intermarriage. Sponsoring Outreach programs by Jewish communal agencies sends a message legitimizing mixed marriage. "Well," the Jewish community seems to be saying, "we may not really approve of mixed marriage but once undertaken we will sponsor Outreach programs to obviate the threat to Jewish continuity and survival". Given the present "therapeutic" mentality which not only pervades our personal lives but Jewish institutional life, any kind of Outreach program to

outmarrieds becomes a kind of slippery slope. In order to make the program attractive to outmarrieds, the ultimate purpose of converting the non-Jewish partner, even when it exists, disappears under layers of good will and the Outmarried couple is accepted for who they are rather than for what they might become.

Having made the case against Outreach programs, I must confess that after looking at the question over the last six months, I have come to the conclusion that much of the fuss about the issue is over symbol rather than substance and is improperly targeted.

First of all, when I began the study I assumed that Outreach programs were designed to reach out into the community to identify intermarried couples. In fact, most Outreach programs within the synagogues are designed for intermarried families who are already part of the synagogue community in one form or another. These programs don't distinguish between intermarried and non-intermarried couples but include all of them in the same program.

The term Outreach is, I've discovered used very loosely. When designed specifically for intermarried families we may distinguish three types of programs in accordance with their primary goals. In the first type of program the goal is to convert the non-Jewish partner. Such programs are more common in the conservative movement. The primary goal of the second type of program is convincing the intermarried couple to raise their children as Jews even when the non-Jewish partner refuses to convert. This type of program is more common among Reform synagogues. 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. This third type of program is far more likely to be found in non-synagogue settings like Jewish Community Centers.

For example, the Cleveland Jewish Community Center organizes a program where according to the local Jewish weekly, “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”. At the Jewish Community Center on New York’s Upper West Side, 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.

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, and there are exceptions to the 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 it 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. But at least to one journalist who explored Outreach in Reform, the impression is that some of their 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 found in many synagogues which small groups of mixed couples together to discuss their religious backgrounds with the



aim of opening lines of communication between partners, not of converting the non-Jewish partner. A 1989 pamphlet published by the Commission on Jewish Outreach of the Reform includes the following poem by a non-Jew married to a Jew which concludes with the words, "God loves our double background with which we nurture our children" Perhaps it was programs and statements like these which led the Reform movement itself to reevaluate its Outreach programs. In 1993, Rabbi Janet Marder noted that "we have unintentionally helped to create a climate in which intermarriage is increasingly taken for granted, accepted as normal and inevitable. Reform leaders continue to suggest that Outreach activity within Reform synagogues continues to convey attitudes contrary to the nominal policies of the movement. As Eric Yoffie notes, whereas 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 ...we have inadvertently sent the message that we neither want nor expect conversion"

The reason I think, that the kinds of changes which the leaders of the Reform movement urge but are not always found in their constituent synagogues has less to do with the autonomy which 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 which rabbis find themselves forced to make to the demands of constituencies within their congregations. I have described this problem elsewhere. Secondly, and this is the aspect on which I will focus, it has to do with general orientation or outlook which lies not only at the heart of the Reform movements dilemma but with the condition of American Judaism in general.

Intermarriage is not the cause of American Jewry's problems but is a symptom. The

problem is the basic value system and assumptions of the American Jewish community. The vast majority of American Jews, certainly its communal leadership pays lip service to the idea that intermarriage is bad for the Jewish people. But there is nothing, I want to argue, in our basic values and assumptions which provides a barrier to intermarriage. These values and assumptions are not unique to the Jews, they are imbedded in the modern or post modern consumer culture which characterizes so much of contemporary western culture. And although these values are foreign to the Jewish tradition many Jews, in their role as authors, artists, academics, journalists and educators play an important role in transmitting and reinforcing them, perhaps even in their germination. I 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, as I see it, of our contemporary culture. There are many excellent studies that describe it, in some cases with specific regard to the manner in which it has affected religion. For purposes of this study I would point to four aspects of our culture which are especially relevant because they undermine opposition to intermarriage. These aspects are interrelated and a purist may reduce them to three or two or even one aspect.

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 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 so called American Jewish leaders themselves who, to give them the benefit of the doubt, don't appreciate the hidden messages they convey. Take for example, a recent monograph by Jonathan Woocher. Woocher is executive vice president of the Jewish Educational Services of North America, funded by the national and local Jewish communities. I would have thought that anyone socialized to the world of education would find it natural to affirm certain standards and the necessity to judge oneself and others in accordance with those standards. But according to Woocher, the key problem facing American Jewish organizations is not the absence of standards but "poor marketing". Effective marketing according to Woocher demands that we determine who our customers are and what they seek. By implication, he argues against the community or its leaders determining its own standards. "Looking at institutional life from the perspective of the client", he says, "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 millenium. According to Rabbi David Gordis, President of Boston's Hebrew College it is wrong to suggest how a Jewish community can move from a lower to a higher level of belief and behavior. Instead we should listen to the "unconventional" voices, those who favor unconventional rather than traditional modes of behavior since what they say may be more important anything we have to say to them.

The second principle which 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, Eric Yoffie noted how the Jews are a chosen and a special people, he even uses the term *am segula* and how they must distinguish themselves from the non-Jew. 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." He concludes with the statement that "while boundaries have their place bridges are always more important" To which I would add a question: whereas no one ought to be obsessed with anything including boundaries, is that really the problem in the Reform movement? What kind of message is Yoffie sending when everything we know about Reform's Outreach efforts, including that which we learn from Yoffie's own comments cited above, suggest that insufficient rather than too much attention is paid to boundaries?

Thirdly, 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 incapable of acknowledging any 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. Common sense might suggest that even were there no real conflict, emphasis on the harmony between a minority religion and the dominant culture trivializes the minority

religion. But common sense has not prevailed, least of all among the those who seek to transform the structure and meaning of traditional Judaism. Developments in the last two decades are characterized by the emergence of personal and privatized Judaism and an accompanying decline of ethnic Judaism. Personalism or privatization, as these terms suggests, focuses religious life on the actual experiences of the individual person. The verbal insignia of personalism, concepts such as “immediacy”, “authenticity” the “here and now”, the ”face-to-face” encounter, the “actually lived moment”, the “meaningful experience” -- all run against the grain of responsibilities to either an abstract collectivity or to an impersonal codex of do's and don'ts. If it is not meaningful, there is little sense in doing it -- customary duties notwithstanding.

Personalism and privatization detach individuals from the larger social collectives of which they are a part, releases them from the binding duties these collectives impose, and leads them toward self-directed lives that pursue rare moments of meaning and growth. From the personalist perspectives, true love, the ultimate personal experience, far outweighs any collective or even familial 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 is consoling, non-judgmental, intuitive, and non-obligating. In this climate of opinion, there are no impediments to intermarriage. From this personalist perspectives, true love, the ultimate personal experience, far outweighs one's 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 an individual distances himself further and further from his own roots. It is also a process in which the group increasingly internalizes conceptions which prevail in the general culture about itself, about others and about God . This form of acculturation 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.