

TOMER DEVORAH

By Deborah Lipstadt *

The Ties That No Longer Bind

Though my topic is a contemporary one, unhappily I do not fear that it will be out of date by the time this issue is in readers' hands. This problem will plague us for a long time, unless we as a community choose not to do anything about it. Then the problem may remain, but we will disappear. The scourge of which I speak is intermarriage. Generally when I speak of this topic I tread very lightly lest any one be offended. But the results of the recent population study indicate that many of us have been treading too lightly. And tragically it may be too late to get tough.

There are few Jews in America — and certainly none who read this magazine — who are unaware that the recent population study conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations reveals that the current rate of intermarriage is fifty-two percent with a very small percentage of conversion into Judaism. The staggering implications of this figure become even more evident when we realize that as recently as the early 1960s the rate was nine percent. The vast majority of non-Jewish mates of intermarried couples do not convert. Today of the children born in homes where one parent is a non-Jew just twenty-eight percent are being raised as Jews. Moreover, the intermarriage rate for these children of mixed marriages is ninety percent. The intermarriage rate for children of conversionary Jews is the same as that of born Jews. Obviously, Charles Silberman's upbeat conclusion in *A Certain People* (1985) that intermarriage was not a danger because it brought people into the Jewish community is wrong. Silberman overestimated the ability of mixed households to transmit Jewish heritage to the next generation.

What are the policy implications of these findings? What, if anything, can we as a community do about the rate of mixed marriage? Is there anything individuals can do?

Some, on the far right, throw up their hands in defeat and circle the wagons. They argue that the high intermarriage rate is a sign that the non-Jewish world is too much with us. They say, "We should worry about quality not quantity. Write off those who have intermarried and reject as much of the outside world as possible." Unless the Jewish community is prepared to move en masse to B'nai Brak or Crown Heights this idea bears no relationship to reality.

At the other end of the spectrum, on the far left, there are those who also argue that the fight is lost. Consequently we should no longer even say that intermarriage is wrong. We

should simply "stop the angst and...devote ourselves to outreach." They are convinced that saying intermarriage is wrong further alienates those who have intermarried and prevents them from affiliating with the community.

Neither of these suggestions makes much sense, though I fear that the second will gain a certain panache and acceptance in the Jewish community because it solves our problem by saying it is no longer a problem. The problem becomes a new opportunity that offers a feel good panacea: outreach. Now we have something to *do* and that relieves our anger.

What could be bad about it? First of all, if you are interested in maintaining a Jewish community that is more than a shadowy reflection of what it once was, then *untargeted* outreach is no answer. The data demonstrates that. The 1990 study shows that the vast majority of the intermarried have no interest in affiliation. Yes, it is true that sixty-two percent of them attend a Passover Seder — or what they call a Seder — and fifty-nine percent light Hanukkah candles. Just observing these customs, important as they may be, is far from leading a committed Jewish life. As Egon Mayer has shown in *Love and Tradition* and as the current study validates, "most children who are raised in mixed marriages...are minimally exposed to their Jewish heritage."

One need not to be too creative to imagine the situation in future generations. The children will be like Marranos. They will know that on a certain night sometime in April they sit down to a very long meal and eat crackers instead of bread and sing a song or two about freedom. Next to their Christmas tree they light eight (or is it nine?) candles in a row. They do it but are not quite sure why.

What about the children of those in mixed marriages, particularly the close to seventy-five percent who are being raised as non-Jews? We will probably have to bid farewell to many of them on a communal level, though we will still welcome them into our homes. We will love them, but their parents have made a decision not to be part of the Jewish community and the children will have been raised as non-Jews. As Rela Geffen Monson of Gratz College, a leading expert on the Jewish family argues, "at some point we have to draw boundaries at the edge of the Jewish community in order for Jewish identity to be effectively transmitted. In the open society we have to respect the decisions of a person

who chooses not to be a Jew." If people call themselves members of another faith, act like members of another faith and have no interest in affiliating, should the limited resources of the community be expended on enticing those people back into the fold? If they or their children want to come back in we *must* welcome them with open arms.

But not all those who are mixed married are raising their children as non-Jews. These families are the ones most likely to be responsive to outreach. They are the ones on whom we should expend community resources. We should especially target those who have expressed interest in conversion. The curriculum for outreach should place an emphasis on Jewish peoplehood. Converts should be made to feel that they are part of *Klal Yisrael*. We should joyously welcome converts to our community and let them know that they are an integral part of the community and not peripheral to it.

Most importantly, we must work on those who have, to borrow a concept of Franz Rosenzweig, "not yet" decided to intermarry. We must say to young people "intermarriage is something that poses a dire threat to the future of the Jewish community." Most of us have been afraid to say that.

A very brave Conservative rabbi in Virginia, Jack Moline, in his August interview in the *Wall Street Journal*, spoke of his intention to speak about the ten things Jewish parents don't say to their kids. Number one on his list was: *I expect you to marry Jews*. He gives that message to the teenagers in his congregation. He tells them if they don't they will separate themselves from the Jewish community. It's a heavy message to give a young person. But it is no heavier than "we don't care if your friends are doing drugs we expect you not to do them." Drugs are to young people what intermarriage is to the Jewish community. Will that totally stop intermarriage? I doubt it. Then why say it? Because I believe it will give a clear message to a lot of young people who increasingly think intermarriage is okay, that it's not. If it's not okay, then we must say so — no holds barred.

Our greatest efforts should be directed to everyone who is not-yet married. Trips to Israel for teenagers, college students and young singles should be subsidized. Synagogue membership should be gratis for the first five years. Parents who are pulling their children out of day school because the tuition is too high should be helped. As Monson proposes, free loan societies for tuition to Jewish educational institutions should be available to middle class parents. Parents who observe "drop off" Judaism (drop your child off at the synagogue on your way to shopping) must be made to reevaluate the message they are transmitting and stop delegating responsibility for their children's Jewish identity to others. Jewish camps, youth groups, Shabbat celebration in the home on a *consistent* basis and regular synagogue attendance are all significant steps.

As Lydia Kukoff, a stellar example of what a gift to the community "Jews by choice" can be, says "We must not only give our children an unambiguous message that we expect them to marry Jews but we must stack the deck to try to make sure they do so." Of course there is no infallible

insurance policy. *Above all we should live Jewish lives and strengthen the core institutions of the Jewish community which exemplify what we are trying to nurture and enhance.* Fighting intermarriage, like fighting anti-Semitism, cannot become the be all and end all of our efforts.

We should also reevaluate some of the outreach strategies that are employed to make intermarrieds feel accepted. For instance, Egon Mayer has demonstrated that rabbinic officiation at a mixed marriage has no impact on the degree to which a couple is involved in Jewish life a number of years after the marriage. Yet the pressure on congregational rabbis to officiate at intermarriages is intense. Often when candidates are being considered for a job this is one of the *first* questions they are asked. As Mayer has shown, officiation doesn't bring the couple closer to the Jewish community. It may make the parents feel better. The benefit to the parents is to be weighed against the public imprimatur transmitted to the community by the officiating rabbis.

There are many unresolved issues. Steve Bayme, one of the more perceptive thinkers on this topic, contends we have to differentiate between personal decisions we respect and communal norms we uphold. I will not *personally* condemn someone because of a decision they have made. But I do think a clear message has to be given. We must say: What you are doing is something which not only threatens the survival of the Jewish people but threatens your spiritual well being. The chances that your children will be committed Jews or any kind of Jews have plummeted because of it. As Rabbi Moline says to the teens, "You will be lonely at some level and unable to share God."

Many will dismiss this as naive or impossible to achieve. That's the same thing people said a little more than a decade ago when Mothers Against Drunk Driving was formed and its founders decided to label having "one for the road" an anti-social act. Public behavior has been changed by a small group determined to change it. The same thing is happening with public acceptance of smoking. An attitude has been changed in a brief time. *Public norms can be changed.*

Jewish public behaviors can also be changed. Who would have dreamt that in the 1990s the majority of Jewish communal events would be kosher? Or who would have thought that Jewish day schools would be funded by Federations? Support of public schools used to be a cardinal precept of good Americanism. Day schools were once considered almost anti-American. Norms can change.

Intermarriage is a tough issue. It's a painful issue, but it is part of our current effort to survive as a people so it must be confronted. As Hillel taught us, if not now, when? Later will be too late.

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Deborah Lipstadt, Ph.D., Senior Contributing Editor of *Jewish Spectator*, teaches modern Jewish History at Occidental College in Los Angeles. She is Director of Research of the Skirball Institute on American Values.

*Professor Lipstadt is also a member of Temple Beth Am.