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INTERRELIGIOUS MARRIAGE IN AMERICA

The story is told of an immigrant rabbi who came to America from Hungary in the 1940s, began to learn English, and prepared to deliver his maiden sermon. He titled it, he thought very cleverly, the two "i"s, and he proceeded to describe how these two eyes - ey-ey=ey-ey -- were destroying American Jewry. He went on and on and finally reached his crescendo. What were these terrible i's that posed so great a danger: they were, he exclaimed proudly, "intermarriage and issimilation."

Now many years have passed since that classic sermon, but as we all know the two "i"s are still with us, and still a danger. That does not mean, however, that nothing has changed and the problem is as it always was. Indeed, in the study of intermarriage, at least, it seems to me that a tremendous amount has changed over time -- more perhaps than we realize. The Cohen center study describes some of these changes based on data from its up-to-the-minute survey of Jewish communities. My aim this afternoon is to suggest that broader social and cultural changes are simultaneously taking place in the nation as a whole, that may place this data into a somewhat different perspective.

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Now in Jewish eyes, as we know, an intermarriage is a marriage that takes place between a Jew and a Gentile, and by definition intermarriage is a problem; it is one of those "i"s that

is destroying the Jewish people. That is not, however, the universal view. The American historian, Paul Spickard, whose recent history of intermarriage in America entitled Mixed Blood I am drawing from here, points out that "the mixing of peoples is one of the great themes of world history.. .[and] is especially prominent in the American past." "America," he continues, "was founded, in one sense, upon a vision of intermarriage" -- meaning, as he defines it, any marriage that crosses racial, religious, or ethnic lines. He quotes, for example, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's famous 18th century description of "the American, this new man.... [a] strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country."

Crevecoeur's vision is one that we would associate with the old melting pot idea of America -- an idea that found expression in a famous 1909 play by the Anglo-Jewish playwright Israel Zangwill, entitled "The Melting Pot," in which love conquers all, and the hope is expressed that people from every corner of the world will unite in matrimonial union "to build the republic of Man and the Kingdom of God."

We know, in retrospect, that that dream (thank God) never came to fulfillment. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century marital patterns conformed more nearly to the model of cultural pluralism espoused by Horace Kallen. Marriage across racial lines -- between Whites and Blacks or Asians, or American Indians -- were extremely rare, and in many states illegal, barred by what were called anti-miscegenation laws that threatened interracial couples with jail terms. It was not until 1967 that these laws were declared unconstitutional (Loving v. Virginia). Interreli-

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gious marriages were not much more common. Ruby Jo Kennedy's famous studies of interreligious marriages in New Haven over a seventy year period (1870-1940) showed a high degree of religious endogamy (in-marriage) over the entire period: Catholics, for example, married Catholics in 95.35% of cases in 1870 and 83.71% in 1940. New Haven is not a microcosm of the nation as a whole and it is also clear that Kennedy in her analysis underestimated the significance of race (Americans, as a rule, have married people of other faiths before they marry people of other races). But given significant religious opposition to intermarriage, especially on the part of the Catholic church, interreligious marriages were comparatively rare into the 1960s. Indeed, this led to the triple melting pot model of America, made famous by Will Herberg in his Protestant-Catholic-Jew: the idea that ethnic differences would disappear, but religious differences would continue to divide Americans into three separate (and unequal) religious groupings.

Herberg, and other students of the subject found that interethnic marriages were more common in America than inter-racial or inter-religious ones; still, they too were far less common than melting pot advocates might have expected. Among first generation immigrants, the number of those intermarrying ranged from 2% or less among East European Jews and Japanese on the West Coast, to about 20% for immigrants from Sweden and Norway. [Spickard,344] Second generation immigrants, who were more acculturated, intermarried at a higher rate, but again endogamy remained the norm. In short -- and notwithstanding all of the

melting pot rhetoric -- the majority of Americans continued to marry people of their own kind. The minority that did intermarry -- not a small number but a certainly a minority -- was seen as socially deviant. In <sup>some</sup> many cases, such people were shunned and their children suffered.

From a Jewish point of view this had very important implications. It meant that American culture -- the norms and expectations of society -- reinforced Jews' own traditional sense that out-marriage was wrong and in-marriage was right. Jews and gentiles -- sometimes for the same reasons, and sometimes for different reasons promoted the same end: endogamous marriages. This -- in addition to well known structural factors like the size and density of the Jewish population, the time elapsed since immigration, the strength of Jewish communal institutions, social contact with gentiles and so forth -- go far to explain why American Jewish intermarriage rates remained as low as they did through the 1950s. During this period, not more than 6-8% of American Jews married out [NJPS, Sklare]

Now, as everybody here knows a great change in intermarriage rates has taken place over the last three decades. Intermarriage rates have soared to 40%, and in many places more. Generally, sociologists explain these changes, as Gary Tobin did today, on the basis of developments internal to the Jewish community: growing assimilation, an imbalance in the sex ratio, geographical dispersal, and "increasing generational distance from the traditional European heritage." [Cohen, AM MOD & J.IDENT, 124] These are indeed critical factors, but I fear that our exclusive focus on Jewish developments may have caused us to overlook a far broader,

and to my mind more significant influence on intermarriage rooted in American society as a whole. The fact is that American marital patterns have changed dramatically in recent decades, and now operate on the basis of norms that Jews interested in Jewish survival can never accept. Religious differences in America are no longer a socially acceptable barrier to marriage, nor are ethnic differences, nor even racial differences. Where once, as we have seen, Jews and other Americans held congruent views on intermarriage, views strongly supportive of endogamy, Jews today are all alone in their views, separated from the pro-intermarriage mainstream by a huge cultural chasm.

The evidence for this is all around us. First of all, intermarriage statistics themselves bespeak the change. In 1960, a study in Seattle found that 8% of native Japanese American men and 7% of the women married non-Japanese -- about the same intermarriage rate, in other words, as Jews then experienced. Although anti-Orientalism had by then declined markedly, as had anti-Semitism, intermarriage was still taboo. Yet, within fifteen years, in the same Seattle community, 43% of Japanese men and 49% of women were intermarrying -- a greater rise than Jews experienced. Today, according to Paul Spickard, a substantial majority of Japanese-Americans, men & women, intermarry: racial and cultural barriers to such marriages have largely disappeared. [Spickard, 59 etc.]

Among America's European ethnic groups (Jews excepted) intermarriage has also now become the norm rather than the exception. Swedes, Norwegians, Germans, Italians, Irish -- all re-

portedly experience intermarriage rates in excess of 60% [ibid,344] Nor has the so-called triple melting pot theory held up. It is estimated that some 40% of Catholics now intermarry, many without converting their spouses. Comparable Protestant data would be meaningless given the movement's size, but it is surely revealing that in a cohort of Protestants married from 1961-1975, 69% of young Methodists married non-Methodists, 70% of young Lutherans married non-Lutherans, and 75% of young Presbyterians married non-Presbyterians! [calc. from Wuthnow, p.333 n.58] ~~One has the sense that endogamous marriages~~ need to be added to the government's list of endangered species.

Attitudes toward intermarriage have more than kept pace with these developments. In 1950, 57% of those queried in a national survey said that they "definitely would not marry a Jew." In 1962, the figure dropped to 37%. By 1983, according to George Gallup, only 23% of Gentiles disapproved of marriages with Jews [Spickard, 198-199]. Tolerance of intermarriages between Protestants and Catholics have risen even more. In 1968, 63% of the public said that they approved of such interfaith marriages; by 1983 that figure had risen to 79%; and among young people the percentage is apparently now even higher. [Wuthnow, 93]

Nor are such attitudes confined just to the general public. According to a recent study:

*"Apart from Jews, no ethnic group or institution carries out any sort of educational work designed to limit ethnic out-marriage. They accept it as a foregone conclusion. The subject is not even mentioned in the ethnic press or publications. Parents, even if actively involved in the affairs of their ethnic*

group, rarely show great remorse when their children marry members of other ethnic groups. Religious groups have also, to a very large extent, made peace with religiously-based intermarriage." [Ellman in JSS 49, 1987, p.15]

Indeed, the Catholic church now consecrates intermarriages without any preconditions; it no longer requires that children of intermarriages be raised in the Catholic faith. The United Methodist Church likewise puts no limitations on intermarriage and no obstacles before members who do intermarry. In the Lutheran church, "marriage outside of the Lutheran tradition has become accepted almost universally." Even the Mormons now take a liberal approach to intermarriage: there are "hardly any restrictions" on Mormons who marry out. [ibid, 15-16]

Robert Wuthnow has argued in a recent very important book that these developments are part of a larger restructuring of American religion. Denominational loyalties, he points out, are far less intense than they used to be: One in three Americans today has switched out of the faith that he or she was raised in, whereas 25 years ago such denominational switching was very rare. Wuthnow believes that denominational differences have been replaced in our day by political differences: liberals vs. conservatives. For this reason, Liberal Protestants marry Liberal Catholics, but pro-life rarely marry pro-choice.

If this analysis is correct, and I think it is, then we can understand why many Jews, who are part of contemporary culture, think nothing of marrying like-minded individuals of other faiths, for that, today, is the American way. One may hypothe-





identifying Indians has practically doubled in a decade [Ellman, p.20] The lesson is clear: we must, somehow find ways of rejecting intermarriage without rejecting intermarrieds. Our aim must be to win back Jews who intermarry, to make their non-Jewish spouses love and respect Judaism, and to persuade intermarrieds to raise their children as Jews-- preferably as Jews who will not themselves intermarry. I know that this will not be an easy task.

Finally, given the changes in American religion that I have pointed to, we must redouble our efforts to promote klal yisrael, the sense that all Jews, left wing and right wing alike, are part of the totality of Israel and part of our extended family. Despite what American culture preaches, we must insist that Jews of all kinds are suitable marriage partners for our children, while members of other faiths, even if they share our political convictions, are not.

On this issue, as on intermarriage as a whole, I think that we must be prepared to set ourselves apart from other Americans, and apart from contemporary culture. We must insist that our traditional values are better, at least for us. If we don't, the immigrant rabbi will be vindicated, and we will fall victim to the two "i"s. I hope that this conference can help us to see more clearly the dangers that we face and the options open to us.

Thank you very much.