

Reform Jewish Leaders, Intermarriage, and Conversion*

Jonathan D. Sarna

Introduction

Back in 1818, Attorney General William Wirt, one of the finest attorneys general in America's history, wondered in a private letter whether persecutions of the Jews, for all of their unhappy effects, perhaps held the key to Jewish unity. "I believe," he wrote to John Myers of Norfolk, Virginia, "that if those persecutions had never existed the Jews would have melted down into the general mass of the people of the world." He went on to suggest that if persecutions came to an end, the "children of Israel" might even then cease to exist as a separate nation. Within 150 years he was sure that they would be indistinguishable from the rest of mankind.¹

Now, more than 150 years later, we know that Wirt was wrong: the Jewish people lives on. The relationship that Wirt posited between persecutions and Jewish identity may not be wrong, but to date, we have never had the opportunity to find out. Meanwhile, prophecies of doom have continued unabated. *Look* magazine some years ago featured a cover story on the "Vanishing American Jew." *Look* itself has since vanished, not just once but twice, and the Jewish people lives on. A volume entitled *The End of the Jewish People*, by the French sociologist George Friedman, has also come and gone. Again, the Jewish people lives on. Indeed, somebody once pointed out that prediction is very difficult, especially about the future. This may be particularly worth remembering today.²

In speaking about the future, most of us, when we are honest, speak about contemporary trends and extrapolate (usually quite

JONATHAN D. SARNA is Professor of American Jewish History at HUC-JIR in Cincinnati.

wrongly) that they will continue *ad infinitum*. So it is that a task force examining the future of Reform Judaism sensibly began with a study of contemporary Reform Jewish leaders. We cannot begin to think about where we are going in the Reform movement until we know where we are now.

To my mind, this study, entitled *Leaders of Reform Judaism*,³ offers us some very important information. It is an honest study, it is methodologically sophisticated, and it makes available a wealth of interesting data. Like all such studies, it must be used with discernment: the data base is necessarily small; women seem to be overrepresented (60 percent to 40 percent); East Coast Jews are underrepresented; and over 80 percent of the respondents are over the age of 40. Obviously, the leadership of the Reform movement is neither a microcosm of American Jewry nor a microcosm of the Reform movement as a whole. But this study can nevertheless teach us a great deal, especially about the complex question of intermarriage — the central focus, we are told, of the research task force's mandate.

Jewish Knowledge

Before turning to this issue, however, I do want to lament that one subject was largely overlooked in this study, and that is the (to my mind) critical question of what Reform Jewish leaders know about Judaism in general and about Reform Judaism in particular. We are, to be sure, given the discouraging information that only about one in five Reform Jewish leaders knows modern Hebrew more than slightly, and that 44 percent have either little or no ability at all even to read prayerbook Hebrew. But what about knowledge of Judaism? How many leaders could pass a minimal test in Jewish cultural literacy? Do they read Jewish books, study Jewish texts in translation, look back into Jewish history? I think that it would be important to know, and I furthermore think that if the answer is embarrassing we ought to do something about it. Leadership seminars, summer institutes, serious programs of continuing adult studies, scholarships for those who want to take Jewish studies courses at neighborhood universities — these and similar programs should, in my opinion, all be part of the agenda for the future of Reform Judaism. I believe that such programs would improve the caliber of Reform leaders and the quality of Reform Jewish life itself; and yes, in their own way, I think that such educational programs would also help to counteract intermarriage. I realize that educated Jews, too, meet and fall in love with non-Jews, but if they do, it is some comfort to know

that they are at least able to explain why Judaism means so much to them, and why (we hope) they also want it to become the religion of their children.

Intermarriage

Intermarriage is, as I mentioned, the central focus of this overall study, and it deserves special comment. For just as Attorney General Wirt predicted, the decline of persecution and the rise of interfaith intimacy have made it harder and harder to maintain Jewish distinctiveness. Intermarriage, in other words, is the price we pay for living in a highly tolerant society where Jews and Christians interact freely. Most people today do not, as they once did, intermarry in order to escape Judaism; instead, they intermarry because they happen to meet and fall in love with a non-Jew.⁴ Increasingly, for this reason, the intermarriage rates for men and women have converged. It is no longer the case that many more Jewish men intermarry than Jewish women. Bruce Phillips found that in Los Angeles, among under-thirty Jews, the opposite was true; more Jewish women intermarried than men. The conversion rate is similarly far more balanced today than in the past. Whereas among Reform leaders surveyed here 90 percent of the converts were women, today according to Phillips, men are converting at an even higher rate than women.⁵ Clearly, then, neither intermarriage nor conversion should be seen as a sex-linked phenomenon. Relevant programs must be directed to men and women alike.

What can we do about intermarriage? The leadership study is pessimistic: "Given the cultural realities of contemporary North America," it concludes, "there is no necessary connection between the degree of one's Jewish religious background, activity and practice and the decision to marry a born non-Jew (p. 90)." Strictly speaking that is correct: there is no "necessary" connection; even ultra-Orthodox Jews occasionally marry born non-Jews. But there certainly is a *statistically significant* connection. This study, Steven M. Cohen's studies, and simple common sense all indicate that, generally speaking, the more intense one's Jewish commitment, the less likely one is to intermarry. Even if one does marry a born non-Jew, one is more likely, given a strong Jewish commitment, to insist that the non-Jewish partner convert.

There is no reason for us to hide or dispute these facts. Instead, I think that we should publicize them widely and use them to make the strongest possible case for encouraging worried Reform Jewish parents to begin nurturing Jewish consciousness early and to continue Jewish education and identity training long past Bar/

Bat Mitzvah and Confirmation. This may not guarantee marriage to a nice Jewish boy or girl, but it does at least improve the odds.

Other ways of improving the odds need to be encouraged also. Clearly one of the most effective means of promoting in-group marriage is to place Jews in situations where they are most likely, just in the normal course of events, to meet other Jews. One of the reasons New York City has a lower intermarriage rate than most other Jewish communities in America is precisely this: in New York the odds of meeting a suitable mate who happens to be Jewish are relatively high. Some of our synagogues, temples, Jewish centers, and Hillel houses around the country achieve this same goal through extraordinarily successful Jewish singles activities. But a great many Jewish singles are not being reached by Jewish organizations. What we need for them, I believe, is a concerted nationwide outreach program (or to use Leonard Fein's term, an "in-reach program") designed to help single Jews meet other Jews wherever they are. Such a program, if sensibly and sensitively carried out and backed by sociological research and adequate funding, could go a long way in mitigating some of the problems of our singles, and keeping them within our community.

I want to say a word at this point about the chapter in the leadership study dealing with rabbinic officiation at intermarriages. I for one found it illuminating to learn that lay leaders today are as divided on this subject as rabbis are. Perhaps understandably, those whose own children have intermarried often feel differently from those whose children have not. What we lack, however, is any adequate measure of the impact that rabbinic decisions (on whether or not to officiate) have actually made on the intermarrying couples themselves. I know from Mark Winer and Egon Mayer that such surveys are now underway, and I want to use this opportunity to sound a note of caution. The key question is not just mechanically quantitative, as these surveys would have us believe, but also elusively qualitative. In other words, before we can measure impact effectively we need to know not just whether a rabbi agreed to officiate, but also how the rabbi explained his or her decision and then related to the couple beforehand and afterwards. There are rabbis who have a remarkable ability to say "no" graciously without losing their influence, and there are rabbis who, even if they do perform intermarriages, are more likely to drive people away from our faith than draw them near to it. I know of no current research that takes account of these qualitative aspects of rabbinic work, and I am, therefore, leery of drawing any meaningful conclusions at this time, much less of making policy recommendations for the future.

“Jews by Choice”

This brings me to what I consider to be the most innovative and compelling sections of this report, those that deal with converts to Judaism, or “Jews by Choice.” Nobody knows how many converts have entered the Jewish fold, but estimating conservatively at two percent of America’s 5.7 million Jews yields a population of over 115,000 men and women. If all of them lived in one community, it would be the ninth largest Jewish community in America, with more Jews than St. Louis, Minneapolis, and Cincinnati combined. This is an unprecedented situation not only in America but in all of modern Jewish history. It deserves a great deal more scholarly attention than it receives.

Only a small number of converts are actually included in this survey (41 converts, 51 born Jews married to converts). The conclusions drawn, however, correlate well with other surveys, notably those of Egon Mayer and Steven Huberman,⁶ and are also supported by impressionistic evidence. Here I want to discuss three interrelated trends that to my mind hold especially important implications for the future.

First of all, all surveys agree that converts tend to emphasize religious and spiritual aspects of Judaism: they attend synagogue more often than born Jews do, they observe basic home rituals, and they look to the synagogue as their spiritual center. What Harold Kushner found in Conservative synagogues applies to Reform temples as well:

[Converts] define their Jewishness in terms familiar to them from their Christian upbringing: prayer and ritual observance. By their numbers and sincerity, they are reshaping American Judaism into a less ethnic, more spiritual community.”⁷

The implications of these changes are not yet altogether clear; they may prove, despite my skepticism, to be wholly positive. Certainly, rabbis and congregational leaders need to be alert to what is going on, so that they may set appropriate priorities for the coming decades.

The second and more troubling trend that I see is the tendency of converts to subordinate the ethnic aspects of their Judaism. They score far below born Jews in the Jewish communalism index that Mark Winer describes. They are more diffident about *Kelal Yisrael* in general, particularly the idea that Jews should extend special help to fellow Jews in need. And their support of Israel is, statistically speaking, much lower than that of born Jews. These

findings are not surprising; Egon Mayer found similar attitudes in his study. Nor are these findings hard to understand, since most Introduction to Judaism courses emphasize religion over ethnicity, and most converts come to Judaism from a religion that considers universalism more important than peoplehood. But if not surprising, these findings are deeply troubling, especially since even among born Reform Jews the values that have been traditionally associated with Jewish peoplehood seem to be eroding. *Kelal Yisrael* and *Ahavat Yisrael* — the fraternal feelings of love that bind Jews one to another even when they disagree — have weakened their hold on many of our leaders today. We are fast losing our ability to view the Jewish people in familial terms as one big *mishpoche*. Obviously, this problem is not unique to Reform Jews: the principles of *Kelal Yisrael* and *Ahavat Yisrael* are spurned by far too many Orthodox Jews as well, especially in Israel. But while this magnifies our challenge, it does not absolve us from the obligation to uphold these principles no matter who violates them. Bitter experience should have taught us that these principles are sacred; whenever Jews have not been responsible for one another, tragedy has resulted. So while others preach intra-Jewish hatred, we must learn to practice what Israel's great chief rabbi, Rav Kook, called *ahavat chinam*, boundless love. This means love for converts, love for Conservative and Orthodox Jews, yes, even love for Jews who don't love us. That is what the family of Israel is all about.

We are a long way from meeting this goal. Leaders of Reform Judaism score low on communalism, leaders who are converts score lower, and impressionistic evidence suggests that many ordinary Jews score lower still. There is thus an urgent need for a vigorous new emphasis on Jewish communalism throughout the Reform movement (indeed, throughout all branches of Judaism) paying special attention to what *Kelal Yisrael* and *Ahavat Yisrael* mean, and how both can be turned into working principles that govern our lives. No priority is more important in terms of safeguarding Jews everywhere and the future of the Jewish people as a whole.

Converts' Views of Inter-marriage

This brings me to the last trend pointed to in this survey that demands attention, and that is the views expressed by converts on the subject of inter-marriage, particularly what they would do if their own children intermarried. Frighteningly, about 80 percent of converts or those married to converts scored high on the inter-marriage acceptability index: they would not, by their own admis-

sion, feel too badly if their children married non-Jews. Egon Mayer's study showed that many converts would *not even discourage* their children from marrying someone who was not Jewish.⁸ In the Reform leadership study, more than 50 percent of the converts responding — leaders, I remind you — would not even be bothered a great deal if their children *converted to Christianity!* (p. 109). There is here a world of difference between converts and born Jews, and one that augurs very badly indeed for our future. If today, when most Jewish parents still disapprove of intermarriage, we have such a significant intermarriage rate, tomorrow, when a substantial number will not disapprove, I fear that the figures will be very bleak indeed.

Now I obviously understand why many converts feel as they do, and in a sense I admire their consistency: they want their children to have the same freedom of choice that they had. The very term "Jew by Choice," so very popular today in Reform circles (some, indeed, argue that we are *all* "Jews by Choice") implies that members of the next generation are free to make a different choice, even if that means Christianity. But as people concerned about Judaism's future, it seems to me that we cannot look upon these statistics with equanimity, and must wholeheartedly reject the proposition that conversion to Judaism is an ephemeral decision in no way binding on one's offspring. Instead we must help converts understand *why* we feel as strongly as we do about preventing intermarriage and apostasy, and must emphasize that to our mind conversion implies not just a choice but a *permanent transformation* — a change in identity, traditionally even a change of name. Perhaps we should discard the very term "Jew by Choice" as misleading and replace it with a stronger term — a Jew by adoption, by conversion, by transformation. Certainly, it seems to me, as I have already argued, that we need to place new stress on the peoplehood aspects of Judaism, with appropriate educational and outreach programs.

Let us make no mistake; the data we now have at hand should serve as a dire warning: *Unless we act decisively, many of today's converts will be one-generation Jews — Jews with non-Jewish parents and non-Jewish children.* I say this with great personal sadness, since some of the finest, most courageous, and most dedicated Jews I know are proud "Jews by Choice," and the last thing I mean to do is to cast doubt on their sincerity. We are a better Jewish community thanks to those who have come to Judaism from the outside, and should be grateful that our problems stem from those entering the Jewish fold rather than from those rushing headlong to abandon it. Still, the data here speak for themselves and are positively alarming. We will be accountable to

posterity if, knowing what we now know, we close our eyes and do nothing.

Conclusion

Let me close with what I hope is a more comforting thought. Learned Jews and non-Jews have been making dire predictions about the future (or end) of the Jewish people for literally thousands of years — long before William Wirt and long after him — and, as we have seen, their predictions have proved consistently wrong. The reason, I think, has nothing to do with the quality of our prophets, but is rather to the credit of those who listened to them. Refusing to consider the future preordained, clearheaded Jews have always acted to avert the perils they were warned against, and in every case, to a greater or lesser extent, they were successful: the Jewish people lived on.

So it is today. We have prophets, we have wise leaders, and we have a future that is ours to shape. We can shape it well, or we can shape it poorly. May we find the wisdom to do a good job.

NOTES

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¹ William Wirt to John Myers (June 12, 1818), Myers Family Papers, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio. For the background to this letter, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), p. 178.

² See now Stephen J. Whitfield's essay on "The End of Jewish History," in *Religion, Ideology and Nationalism in Europe and America: Essays Presented in Honor of Yehoshua Arieli* (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1986), pp. 385-407, and in a slightly different version in Whitfield's *American Space, Jewish Time* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1988), pp. 171-191.

³ Mark L. Winer, Sanford Seltzer, and Steven J. Schwager, *Leaders of Reform Judaism: A Study of Jewish Identity, Religious Practices and Beliefs, and Marriage Patterns* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1987).

⁴ Jonathan D. Sarna, "Coping with Inter-marriage," *Jewish Spectator* 47 (Summer 1982), pp. 26-28.

⁵ Bruce Phillips, "Los Angeles Jewry: A Demographic Portrait," *American Jewish Year Book* 86 (1986), pp. 145-147, 153, and 177-178.

⁶ Egon Mayer and Carl Sheingold, *Inter-marriage and the Jewish Future* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1979); Egon Mayer, *Children of*

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Intermarriage (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1983); Egon Mayer and Amy Avgar, *Conversion Among the Intermarried* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1987); Steven Huberman, *New Jews: The Dynamics of Religious Conversion* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979).

⁷ Harold Kushner, "The American Jewish Perspective: A Conservative Perspective," *Judaism* 123 (Summer 1982), p. 298.

⁸ Mayer, *Children of Intermarriage*, p. 34.