

Coping With Intermarriage

By JONATHAN D. SARNA

"AN EPIDEMIC!" This seems to be the way of apprehending the intermarriage problem in the American Jewish community. Intermarriage is viewed as a disease and studied accordingly. How many are affected? Is the rate rising? What are the hardest hit areas of the country? Are men more prone than women? What are the early symptoms? How can I protect my children? The questions are important ones and the Jewish community's concern is fully understandable. But the disease metaphor strikes me as unfortunate. It obscures far more than it clarifies.

As I see it, intermarriage is a defect rather than a disease. It stems from our free, open and highly individualistic society. Intermarriage must be accepted as normative—an unfortunate but inescapable result of our voluntaristic democratic system. We may seek to limit the extent of intermarriage and to mitigate its effects. To end intermarriage entirely, however, would require us to put an end to our participation in liberal society. So long as we encourage individual freedom, and seek acceptance in the larger society which surrounds us, we must expect that Jews and non-Jews will meet, fall in love, and marry. Since romantic love and personal independence rank high on the list of values which Americans cherish, we must expect that Jewish opposition to intermarriage will frequently fall on deaf ears.

There is, of course, another side to this. The intermarriage rate serves as a barometer of Jewish-Christian relations. The same rising rate which now alarms us also reveals an improvement in intergroup relations, something we have traditionally found pleasing. What is more, the conditions which produce intermarriage also foster conversion to Judaism; indeed, the two phenomena rise and fall together. Of course, nothing forbids us from discouraging intermarriage and promoting Jewish communal interests. What we cannot do is prevent intermarriage. American religious tradition—a tradition based on church-state separation,

freedom, and voluntarism—makes that impossible.

What intermarriage poses, therefore, is not a threat—a disease to be warded off—but a dilemma central to our existence as American Jews. What to do when our American values and Jewish values conflict? American culture seduces us with non-Jewish partners of the opposite sex, all the while insisting that marriage is a highly "personal" decision in which love rules supreme. The state sanctions intermarriage; should clergymen refrain from performing the wedding ceremony, state officers, holding aloft the banner of non-sectarianism, do so gladly. Judaism, meanwhile, insists that marriage with a non-Jew is sinful, at once a violation of Divine law and an affront to Jewish solidarity. Most rabbis refuse to sanction the act, their powerlessness to stop it notwithstanding.

How have we confronted this conflict between American values and Jewish values? Over time we have evolved four basic strategies. They continue to be used today. The first two represent longterm indirect preventive measures aimed at keeping Jews and non-Jews apart; the second two directly counter intermarriage through the use of parental and communal pressure.

(1) *Consciousness raising.* This involves making Jews aware of their distinctive identity through formal Jewish education and rituals and practices. The Jewish community strongly supports such efforts, at home, in synagogues, in Jewish schools and at Jewish Centers in the hope that Jewishly identifying youths will select marriage partners similar in background to themselves.

(2) *Self-segregation.* This delimits the Jewish universe so that single Jews are most likely to interact with singles who "happen" to be Jewish. Jewish neighborhoods, Jewish clubs and organizations, Jewish schools, colleges with high percentages of Jewish students, and that traditional social barrier—Jewish dietary laws—all function to keep Jews within the company of other Jews. "The natural course of events" takes care of the rest.

What is important about strategies 1 and 2 is that they respect the American values of personal independence and romantic love, while attempting to further Jewish values by increasing the chances

Dr. Sarna is Assistant Professor of American Jewish History at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, and the author of *Jacksonian Jew: The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah*, and *People Walk on Their Heads: Moses Weinberger's Jews and Judaism in New York* (Holmes & Meier).

that the "freely chosen mate" will be from a Jewish home. They thus aim at creating an American-Jewish synthesis by promoting Jewish ends without openly conflicting with American norms. The strategies offer no guarantee of success, however. While they may serve to limit Jewish-Christian interactions they do not prevent them. Indeed, because these strategies work indirectly, sometimes without any mention of intermarriage, the Jew who happens to fall in love with a non-Jew may not realize how strong the community's reaction will be.

(3) *Parental pressure.* This familiar strategy confronts the intermarriage problems squarely by establishing marriage to a non-Jew as an act of family betrayal. Threatened sanctions may extend from excommunication to refusal to attend the wedding to mere sadness; whatever the case, we juxtapose family loyalty to romantic love with the aim of arousing guilt and remorse.

(4) *Communal pressure.* This strategy brands intermarriage as treachery toward Judaism and the Jewish people, desecration of Divine law, repudiation of Judaism's mission, and a threat to Jewish survival. A rabbi may refuse to perform the marriage, peers may threaten social isolation.

THESE strategies explicitly set Jewish values ahead of American values by insisting that romantic love and personal freedom must subordinate themselves to demands for group maintenance. But though sanctioned by our traditions, these strategies no longer hold the same deterrent effect as they did in the past. The consensus that used to support strong punitive actions against the intermarried no longer exists; indeed, many view anything more than expression of parental disapproval as indefensible, incomprehensible, and almost un-American. Furthermore, we tend to balance deterrence with hope for reconciliation: "reject intermarriage not the intermarried." Our desire for reconciliation is understandable, the more so if there is hope that the non-Jewish partner will convert and the children be raised as Jews. On the other hand, as more of us become reconciled to intermarriage, the deterrent effect weakens. In the final analysis, the twin aims of deterrence and reconciliation stand in contradiction to one another.

Given these structural tensions—identity vs. assimilation, Jewish values vs. American values, and deterrence vs. reconciliation—we can better understand the efforts at "synthesis" attempted by a large majority of modern Jewish intermarrieds. They seek to combine both intermarriage and

Judaism, and do so either by converting the non-Jewish partner to Judaism, by agreeing to bring up their children as Jews, or—at the very least—by bringing elements of Judaism into their marriage ceremony.

In all three cases intermarrying Jews seek to demonstrate some allegiance to Jewish values, as if to reassure loved ones that they have not assimilated all the way. According to available statistics, "intermarriage-in" (conversion before marriage, conversion after marriage, or an agreement to raise children as Jewish) is becoming the most common form of intermarriage, exceeding both "intermarriage-out" (conversion to the non-Jewish religion, or agreement to raise children as non-Jews) and "intermarriage-straddle" (neither side converts and children are raised with no religion or two religions). The search for synthesis explains why "intermarriage-in," especially when the non-Jewish partner converts before marriage, seemingly satisfies *both* secular pressures and Jewish ones, for it permits the exercise of American values while keeping the Jewish people intact.

The alarming intermarriage statistics frequently quoted (30-50 percent!) reveal a great deal about how to lie with statistics but nothing at all about the future of American Jewry. They do not distinguish "intermarriage-in" from "intermarriage-out." If, as preliminary survey data suggests, one to two-thirds of all intermarriages are now "intermarriages-in," many of them with full conversion, and in addition at least one-third of "intermarriage-straddles" also yield Jewish children, then, from the point of view of numbers alone, we have nothing to fear. The gains more than compensate for losses from "intermarriages-out." Far more research needs to be done into typologies of intermarriage, and into the religious character of families that result from them. Based on what we know already, however, it can safely be said that the size of the Jewish population depends far more on the birthrate than on the intermarriage rate.

All this is not to underestimate the many problems that intermarriages, even "intermarriages-in," pose. Non-halakhic conversions pose problems. Non-Jews who drift to Judaism without converting pose problems. Even "Jews by choice," converted according to halakha, pose—and face—numerous problems. And, of course, intermarrieds as a group continue to suffer from a much higher divorce rate than non-intermarrieds. But so long as we view intermarriage as a disease, a pathological abnormality that can somehow be cured, we shall continue to wring our hands and never meet these

problems head-on.

We must accept the fact that intermarriage, much as we oppose it, seek to prevent it, and continue to lament it, will continue to be a fact. We must realize that the intermarrying Jew need not be a traitor or rebel, but may in fact be eager to remain part of the Jewish fold. Finally, we must acknowledge that "intermarriage-in," even if it is not the same as in-marriage, can result in thoroughly committed Jews who pass on their Judaism from generation to generation.

Accepting the inevitability of intermarriage and making the best of the situation does not mean approving of it, much less making it into a virtue. It does mean coming to terms with reality. Instead of constantly proclaiming American Jewry's imminent doom, we should view problems like intermarriage dispassionately and in proper context. We can then work to manage them to the extent possible, realizing as we do so that whatever perils our free society may present, it also rewards Jews with manifold blessings.

The Past Revisited

By JOHN and DOROTHY GOLDMEIER

GERMANY is where we began our trip last summer. We stayed two days in Frankfurt, the place of my birth, with a physics professor, an old friend of Dottie's aunt. This rather remarkable man had started out as a communications specialist for the German Navy. We reminisced about La Rochelle, France, where he was stationed in the 1940s. He left La Rochelle, as he put it, "to make room for the new guests of the French Republic." Ironically, I was one of those "guests" when I was stationed there in the 1950s. The whole thing now gives me goose pimples! In February 1945, the convoy I was in en route to America took four weeks on the high seas to dodge the U-boats that he helped send after us. We mused together about the ironies of life. Dottie and I really liked the man. We couldn't help it. He was so nice to us—now.

The professor and his family said what happened from 1935-1945 was an "incomprehensible mistake." He had met his wife during the war, and the romance progressed after each carefully felt out the other and was satisfied neither was a Nazi, the first prerequisite in a climate of fear. He said he had fired only one shot during his "illustrious" six-year Navy career. He did see Jews working in labor gangs from a troop train going to Russia. He said many soldiers threw food out of the windows

for the Jewish prisoners to eat. I would like to believe that. And I think maybe it did happen as many times I heard of someone being saved by a "decent" German. Fear caused him and many others to "cool it," he said. He was almost arrested four times for his "attitude," which included wanting to remain in a low rank for six years so as to be as inconspicuous as possible (and avoid responsibility).

The professor's neighbor, a little old lady, fell all over us with enthusiasm, pleasure, and what may even have been close to love. She had, by chance, lived around the corner from my family in Frankfurt when my father had his wine business. She worked for Jews as a young girl and was proud of "our Frankfurt Jews." She tittered with glee at every syllable I pronounced with a Frankfurt accent and went absolutely wild with joy when I mimicked a bureaucrat at the railway station who had given us a hard time over damage to one of our suitcases in his care.

After the war, with her fiancé and her parents killed in the war, the old lady had wanted to emigrate to the U.S. She had planned to pass as a Jew to make emigration easier. She was so familiar with Jewish ways that I'm sure she would have made it. However, things got better, so she stayed, living as full a single life as she could as a "war-damaged" woman. Apparently suffering does not end with survival.

Anna Freud thought she discovered an impor-

Professor Goldmeier is a member of the faculty of the School of Social Work and Community Planning, University of Maryland, Baltimore. Mrs. Goldmeier is a Special Education teacher.