

Gerald Cromer
“The Quintessential Dilemma”:
American Jewish Responses To Intermarriage

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GERALD CROMER

“THE QUINTESSENTIAL
DILEMMA”: AMERICAN JEWISH
RESPONSES TO INTERMARRIAGE



The Rappaport Center for Assimilation
Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
Bar Ilan University – Faculty of Jewish Studies

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Gerald Cromer
**“The Quintessential Dilemma”:
American Jewish Responses To Intermarriage**

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The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

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Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality was founded in Bar Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but rather the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvement and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives available to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America. A working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness is a reflection of real flaws and weaknesses that exist in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, towards mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

Intermarriage and assimilation seem to have a chicken-and-egg connection. Assimilation, in the sense of a personal existential detachment from Jewishness, is conducive to intermarriage: if Jewishness doesn't matter, why choose a Jewish spouse? And intermarriage, in turn, is conducive to assimilation: What are the chances that a Jewish father or mother, who didn't care enough to choose a Jewish partner, will be willing and able to instill a significant sense of Jewishness in their children?

Given this powerful linkage between intermarriage and assimilation, it was clear that the Rappaport Center would respond positively to Prof. Gerald Cromer's proposal to research and analyze the "quintessential dilemma": the problems inherent in the modes in which the Jewish community and leadership respond(ed) to intermarriage. Moreover, such analysis can and should lead to consideration of how those modes may be improved, so as to ensure that the community takes the wisest and most effective courses of response to the great challenge to the future of the Jewish people that intermarriage and assimilation pose.

Prof. Gerald Cromer is a faculty member of the Department of Criminology at Bar Ilan University. His past research on central issues in Israeli and Jewish social dynamics, and especially on the relations between mainstream and marginal elements in society, is outstanding. In addition, he is not an 'ivory tower' academic, but

rather one who is deeply committed to the repair of social problems, as is evident from a perusal of his CV (see <http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/cr/>). These qualifications make him eminently suitable for the task he undertook in this research for the Rappaport Center. It is our hope that the findings and insights expressed in this publication will provide Jewish communities and leaders with a mirror of the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which they have until now related to intermarriage – and enable them to seriously consider and implement new strategies, better suited to ensuring the future of this ancient people in today’s turbulent times.

* * *

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Prof. Cromer for this seminal contribution to the endeavors of the Rappaport center, and to express appreciation to all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this paper: Ms. Iris Aharon, organizational coordinator of the Rappaport center; Ms. Ruchi Avital (text editor), Ms. Varda Yaari (translator into Hebrew), Mr. Ya’akov Hasson (proofreading and Coordinating with press), the Ben Gassner studio (cover graphics) and Art Plus press.

For all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed for all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, the publication of this paper is an opportunity to acknowledge the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being

of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

Introduction

As American Jews moved to the suburbs after the Second World War, they underwent a process of acculturation without assimilation (Rosenthal, 1960). Those living in the newly created gilded ghettos became increasingly indistinguishable from their gentile neighbors. At the same time, however, the new suburbanites largely remained a group apart. American Jews saw themselves and were viewed by others as “the classic illustration of voluntary group endogamy” (Goldscheider, 1982, p. 36).

This is not to suggest, of course, that there were no jeremiads or prophecies of doom regarding the future of American Jewry and the dire and, for some, unforeseen consequences of the desire to integrate into the wider society. However, it was not until the publication of a series of communal and national surveys about the rate of intermarriage that this concern became increasingly widespread. From the beginning of the sixties, communal leaders increasingly expressed their anxiety about the steady increase in the number of Jews marrying out, and the extent to which it constituted a threat to “the Jewish future” or “Jewish survival.”¹

1 This was often accompanied by expressions of concern about other

Those concerned were, of course, well aware of the fact that intermarriage, rather than being the cause, is the result of assimilation. Nevertheless, it was widely regarded as “the quintessential dilemma” of American Jewry (Sklare, 1971, p. 193). As the focus of concern shifted from integration to survival (Cohen & Fein, 1985), the issue of intermarriage rose to the top of the communal agenda. There was little debate about the extent of the problem. The controversy centered rather on its causes and consequences. Protagonists of all persuasions offered their competing diagnoses and prognoses of the situation.

A vast body of literature has accumulated on the subject of intermarriage over the last four decades. Epidemiological studies and etiological analyses abound. Very little research has been carried out, however, on the various reactions to intermarriage. The study that follows constitutes an attempt, albeit of a very limited nature, to redress this imbalance. Adopting a constructionist stance, it shifts the focus of attention from the phenomenon itself to the response it engenders in different sectors of the American Jewish community.

Notwithstanding these differences of opinion, there is widespread agreement that a serious effort must be made to prevent intermarriage. Even the most fervent advocates of outreach emphasize the need to encourage endogamy. However, an analysis of the programs designed to strengthen opposition to marrying out or to reduce the chances of doing so is beyond the confines of this particular study, which will instead focus on the response to those

demographic trends, particularly the declining birthrate in the baby boomer generation.

for whom the attempt at consciousness-raising and self-segregation (Sarna, 1982, p. 26) have failed.

The study opens with a review of the policies adopted over the last four decades to deal with the steady rise in intermarriage and the arguments made for and against them.² It then moves on to an examination of the ongoing debate regarding the causes of the increase. These analyses of the conflicting diagnoses and prognoses provides the basis for an examination of the way in which the different positions regarding the causes of intermarriage and the various ways of responding to it influence the internal and external boundaries of American Jewry. In the concluding section, the study moves from a descriptive to a prescriptive analysis. It describes the kinds of arguments that can and should be used in favor of an exclusive stance towards intermarriage.

2 The study does not relate to the controversy surrounding Alexander Schindler’s (1979, pp. 22–23) proposal to establish an outreach program to the unchurched and Gary Tobin’s (1999) call to engage in proactive conversion, because neither of them were designed specifically to deal with the problem of intermarriage.

Thou Shalt Not

In their attempt to demonstrate how severely traditional Judaism views intermarriage, the leaders of American Orthodoxy often quote the original prohibition: “Neither shalt thou make marriages with them: Thy daughter thou shalt not give to his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son” (Deuteronomy 7: 3), and the classic rabbinical interpretations of this prohibition. Fearful that the stigma attached to intermarriage is on the wane, they call for a renewal of family and community sanctions against those who marry out. Parents are urged to decide and inform their children which sanctions they will take, both with regard to the wedding itself and after it has taken place. Rabbis and other communal leaders are encouraged to deny them any office or honors because:

“Intermarriage is a uniquely heinous sin...Those who marry out throw down the gauntlet of rejection of our faith community. The traditional halakhic decision is to respond to this rejection by rejection. It is as valid today as it was centuries ago. Modification of this response, modification of our

abhorrence, would denigrate the dignity of Hashem and his chosen people. Such insult cannot be ignored. Moral turpitude must not be rewarded by social acceptance as it is today...[because] we remove the only barrier to intermarriage—other than Torah education—social sanction!” (Tobin & Simon, 1999, p. 80).³

Orthodox leaders draw attention to the fact that Judaism is not a proselytizing religion. Since the beginning of the Talmudic period, they argue, rabbis have tried to discourage converts. However, those who persist in going ahead, not for an ulterior motive but “for the sake of heaven,” are welcomed as full-fledged Jews. After meeting the requirements of the conversion process, i.e. acceptance of “the yoke of the commandments” in the presence of a qualified religious tribunal, immersion in a ritual bath, and for males, circumcision or the extraction of a drop of blood when a non-religious circumcision has already been performed, Jews by choice may join the ranks of the Jewish people (Bleich, 1990, pp. 19–26).

No Orthodox rabbinical authority is prepared to accept a conversion carried out by Conservative or Reform tribunals. Not only, is it claimed, do they fail to insist on all the obligatory prerequisites for a halakhic conversion, but their members are disqualified per se because of their denominational affiliation. However, there is a serious difference of opinion in the Orthodox camp itself as to whether it should adopt a more liberal stance towards conversion in the light of the ever-increasing number of

3 This is a quotation from an interview with Rabbi Moshe Tendler, a Rosh Yeshiva of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary. The fact that his criticism was also directed against some of his Orthodox colleagues is clear indication of the fact that they do not all share his unyielding stance.

intermarriages. While a clear majority of authorities are against such a move because they feel that it would further weaken the stigma of marrying out and in turn lead to a rise in the number of people who do so,⁴ some favor accepting Gentiles who have decided to convert for reasons of marriage. They defend their stance with references to precedents from the past and the exigencies of the present.

The process of conversion, Rabbi Marc Angel (1983) and other Orthodox leaders have argued, is, and for that matter always has been, a way of joining the Jewish people rather than of adopting Judaism. Ruth the Moabitess, they point out, first declared “Your people is my people” and only then “Your God is my God,” and the major Talmudic source on conversion explicitly states that potential proselytes are asked why they want to convert in light of the fact that the Jewish people is “sorrowful, hounded, oppressed, exiled and overcome by affliction”(Yebamoth 47a). Only after answering that question are they instructed in some of the major and minor commandments. While the criterion for deciding whether potential converts are genuine in their desire to cast their lot with that of the Jewish people can, indeed must, vary from case to case, the basic principle remains the same. According to this school of thought, conversion is about ethnicity, not religion.

Furthermore, Orthodox people that tend to a more liberal interpretation of halakha point to the need to adapt it to changing circumstances. They argue that the refusal to convert those who wish to do so for reasons of marriage may have been effective in

4 For a description and explanation of the greater diversity of opinion in Orthodox Responsa in the late 1800s and early 1900s, see Ellenson (1989, pp. 61–100).

closed societies of yesteryear, but such a refusal has no deterrent value whatsoever in the contemporary Jewish community. In fact, it may even have a negative influence on those concerned, pushing them further away from Judaism. Emphasizing that this kind of exclusive policy was only a means to an end – a way to keep people within the fold – some Orthodox leaders and scholars contend that such a policy can, indeed must, give way to a more inclusive one. Those who have decided to convert for reasons of marriage must be allowed to do so, in order that they and their prospective partner will feel welcome in the community and not cut themselves off from it.

The difference between the two Orthodox responses should not conceal the important common ground they share: Both constitute a reaction to the increasing number of intermarriages. Whether they adopt a defiant or an accommodative stance (Berger, 1977, pp. 75–177), Orthodox leaders are responding to this challenge. Their predicament is of course particularly acute because of the existence of other denominations, or what an editor of *Tradition* (Goldberg, 1998, p.19) significantly referred to as deviationist religious movements in American Jewry.

To Solemnize Or Not To Solemnize

In actual fact, the Conservative movement has adopted essentially the same stance as the more liberal strands within Orthodoxy. It is only Reform Judaism that differs significantly on the issue of conversion. Its requirements regarding both the conversion process and the couple's subsequent lifestyle are much less demanding than in the other denominations (Jacob & Zemmer, 1994).

Notwithstanding these options, a large and increasing number of intermarriages are non-conversionary ones. In such cases, the gentile partner may decide that he or she does not want or is not ready to become Jewish. The policy of both the Rabbinical Council of America (Orthodox) and the Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) is unequivocal on this issue. Their members are not permitted to solemnize such weddings. The state of affairs in the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform), however, is much more complicated. In order to understand the situation, a distinction must be made between the official policy of the movement and what happens in practice.

In 1909 and on three subsequent occasions, the CCAR declared, "Mixed marriage is contrary to the Jewish tradition and

should be discouraged.” In 1973, after two years of committee deliberations and a lengthy debate at its annual conference, the CCAR passed a resolution that resembled its earlier stance and went on to oppose “participation by its members in any ceremony which solemnizes a mixed marriage.” Clearly, the wording of this statement is much more strident than the previous one. However, the next clause recognized that the members of the CCAR “have held and continue to hold divergent interpretations of Jewish tradition.” In doing so, it transformed the conference resolution from a binding decision to a persuasive one, paving the way for those rabbis who conscientiously differ from the declared standard on mixed marriage and continue to solemnize them.

However, many of the Reform rabbis who do so insist that the prospective couple accept certain conditions. These may be related to the preparations for their marriage (e.g. taking a course of Jewish study), the wedding itself (e.g. no involvement of Christian clergy or presence of Christian symbols) or their family lifestyle afterwards (e.g. a commitment to bring their children up as Jews). Nevertheless, the marriage remains a non-conversionary one. Even if all the conditions are met, it remains a union between a Jew and a Gentile.

Notwithstanding, or perhaps because of the increasing willingness of rabbis to solemnize mixed marriages, the Reform movement finds itself engaged in an ongoing and often acrimonious debate regarding this practice, with both sides appealing to the Jewish past and future in an attempt to justify their stance on this highly contentious issue.⁵

5 The debate also includes a great deal of personal discreditation, particularly of those rabbis who agree to solemnize mixed marriages. They are often accused of doing so under pressure from their congregants or out of adherence to “the principle of a fast buck.”

Those rabbis willing to create alternative ceremonies to the traditional halakhic *kiddushin* ceremony, thereby solemnizing mixed marriages, place themselves firmly within the Reform tradition that views halakha as providing perspective and guidance rather than as a source of ultimate authority. Consequently, they have not only the right, but also the duty to adapt it to the needs of contemporary American Jewry. Significantly, however, these advocates of change also turn to traditional rabbinic sources to legitimate their position. Thus, the Talmudic principle of observing what the people are doing and ruling accordingly (Berakhot 45a) is cited in support of a more liberal stance towards mixed marriages. This is one of the instances, it is argued, in which rabbis can, indeed should, follow their flock rather than lead them.

Aware that Reform Judaism has often been less than respectful of many aspects of halakha, opponents of officiating at mixed marriages feel the need to explain why it is imperative to adhere to halakha in this regard. Thus, the CCAR committee set up to examine the issue stated very clearly that:

“It should be obvious that marriage is an issue *sui generis*, not comparable at all to, let us say, Shabbat observance or Kashrut or any of the other matters which have been cited futilely to demonstrate the impropriety of halakhic considerations. The once-and-for-a-lifetime nature of the act of kiddushin, the covenantal concept of kiddushin as expressed in the hallowed vow “.....kedat moshe veyisrael”, raises marriage to a unique level embracing all of the Jewish past and future as a covenant community.....Unless we are prepared to base Jewish identity and future either totally on ethnicity or on unstructured

not even specifically-hence vague and unspecific-intentions, we had better stick, as we have done so far, to the halakhic definition of Jew and Jewish marriage” (Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Mixed Marriage 1973, p. 61).

This argument in favor of the status quo is backed up by a rebuttal of the principle of observing what the people are doing and ruling accordingly. While it may have been suitable in Talmudic times when people were “steeped in authentic Jewish life-styles and traditions,” it is regarded as totally inapplicable to those who “live in the debris of the fractured Jewish community and beset by rampant assimilation.” Guidelines for rabbinic action, no less than rabbinic law, have to be adapted to the times.

Rabbis who solemnize mixed marriages insist that they are working in the best interests of American Jewry. Refusal to do so, they argue, is counterproductive. It drives the prospective couple away from Judaism and all things Jewish. The community’s rejection of the couple leads, in turn, to the couple’s rejection of the community. Willingness to solemnize the union, on the other hand, leaves open the possibility for a continuing search for meaning within the Jewish tradition and perhaps a more meaningful conversion at a later stage.

Those opposed to the sanctification of non-conversionary marriages view things very differently. In their eyes, this sanctification invests the marriages with a legitimacy of sorts. Convinced that mixed marriages are detrimental to the community and not “a productive opening towards Jewish survival,” these rabbis insist that their colleagues should refuse to solemnize them. Doing so, they argue, is not only the sole way of making it clear to the couple in question that their marriage is unacceptable; it also

constitutes the most effective means of passing on the message to others who may be thinking of doing likewise.

Regardless of whether or not they themselves are in favor of solemnizing mixed marriages, Reform rabbis have to relate to the question of the role the gentile partners can or should play in the Jewish community in general, and synagogue life in particular. Three aspects of the latter – membership, leadership, and involvement in ritual – have been explored, but it is the latter that has generated the most interest. There seems to be a general consensus that non-Jews should not recite any public prayer or carry out a ritual act which presupposes that they are Jewish.⁶ There are, however, a growing number of congregations that have changed parts of the liturgy to make it more universal, thereby allowing non-Jews to take a more active role in the service. In addition, there are those who maintain that Gentiles may recite the existing texts. The multivocality of meanings and the performative functions of language, they argue, make it possible for non-Jews to do so without offending the sensibilities of Jewish worshipers (Hoffman 1990, pp. 9–13).

6 This point of view is well summarized in Plaut and Washofsky (1997, pp. 55–75). For a recent Conservative responsa on this issue see Abelson and Fine (2002, pp. 602–604).

Rabbinic Invention

Addressing the Board of Trustees of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in December 1978, its president, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, asked, “Why should a movement, which from its very birth-hour insisted on a full equality of men and women in religious life, unquestioningly accept the principle that Jewish lineage is valid through the maternal line alone”? His speech set in motion a process that led five years later to a CCAR declaration that “The child of either Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent. [...] This status, however, must be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people” (Report of the Committee on Patrilineal Descent on the Status of Children of Mixed Marriages 1983, p. 160). This new policy regarding the status of children of mixed marriages is therefore both more inclusive and exclusive than the previous one. It opens the door wider, but at the same time, determines certain conditions for entry.

This dramatic change, rather than being part of a drive for gender equality, was the logical outcome of earlier steps taken by

the Reform movement regarding intermarriage. Having agreed to solemnize non-conversionary marriages, rabbis found it extremely difficult to reject their congregants' demands that the children of those marriages be recognized as Jewish. They came under increasing pressure to amend the maternal norm. "Social necessity," to quote the Conservative scholar Sol Roth (1985, p. 72), "was the mother of rabbinic invention."

Advocates of the reform made no attempt to hide the fact that the decision to accept patrilinearity was based on "current considerations" and designed to address "the human dimension of the issue." Invariably, however, they also defended the new policy by referring to the Jewish past. Rabbi Schindler and others pointed out, for instance, that although Joseph, Moses and Solomon all married Gentile wives, their children were considered Jewish, and that in both the Bible and the Talmud, the paternal line alone was followed in matters of inheritance and the priesthood. The new definition of Jewishness, they insisted, "does not represent so complete a break with tradition as might appear."

Those that favored patrilineal descent sometimes adopted a seemingly contradictory stance. They emphasized the extent to which the CCAR resolution had made a revolutionary break with the past. However, this too was portrayed as being in accordance with Jewish tradition. Recalling rabbinic innovations such as Hillel's introduction of the *prozbul* that prevented the automatic cancellation of debts in the sabbatical year, Yochanan Ben Zakai's elimination of the *sotah* ritual for a woman suspected of infidelity, and Rabbenu Gershom's edict outlawing polygamy, the advocates of change contended that "in times of necessity and for the welfare of the people, halakha was revised and traditions set aside in favor of more adaptive ones" (Zlotowitz, 1995, p. 265). They, it was

maintained, were simply continuing this practice and adhering to the tradition of reform.

Supporters of the new policy took this argument a step further. Not only were they acting in accordance with Jewish tradition; they were also improving it. Reform leaders were at pains to point out that their approach was now more stringent than that of Orthodox Judaism. Jewishness would no longer be conferred only on a biological basis; its presumption, when only one of the parents is Jewish would have to be established through “the performance of *mitzvot* (commandments) that serves to commit those who participate in them, both parent and child, to Jewish life.” Henceforth, nature would not enough; it would have to be reinforced by nurture.

Opposition to patrilineal descent both within and beyond the Reform movement was fueled, above all, by the fear that it would destroy the unity of the Jewish community. However, this disquiet is less germane to the present study than the widely felt concern that the new policy has led to a further increase in the number of non-conversionary marriages. Critics contend that this is so for two reasons. More people marry out in the first place because the adoption of patrilineal descent gives them a “theological legitimization” for doing so. Subsequently, they are less likely to convert since their children will be considered Jewish in any case. Principle and pragmatism, it is argued, work together to make a bad situation even worse.

Encouraging Jewish Choices

The responses to intermarriage described until now have been accompanied by an attempt to reach out to interfaith couples and to encourage them to make “Jewish choices.” The hope is that the Gentile partner will at some stage convert, but this is by no means regarded as the sole criterion of success. Indeed, there are those who argue that that the lifestyle of the couple matters much more than the formal status of the parents and/or children. Living Jewishly, they contend, is of far greater importance than being Jewish.

The Reform movement, followed by other religious and communal organizations, set up a wide variety of outreach projects. While a detailed description of these programs is beyond the confines of this paper, it is important to point out that they are designed with one of two aims in mind: to impart basic knowledge about the rudiments of Judaism, or to help the partners explore the nature of their relationship to their respective heritages and to think about how they want to incorporate them into their marriage and family life. These programs are backed up by a concerted effort to

persuade communal leaders and members alike of the need to accept those who marry out with open arms. They are urged to move “from outrage to outreach” in order to keep the Jewish partner within, and attract the non-Jewish one to the fold.

This policy has generated a heated debate in the American Jewish community. Once again, the advocates and opponents of change defend their stance by referring to both the past and future. Each side tries to show that its approach is not only in keeping with Jewish tradition, but that it is also the key to Jewish survival.

Opposition to outreach is grounded in the belief that while in biblical times and classical antiquity Judaism may have been a proselytizing religion, it has since discarded that role. Advocates of the different programs, on the other hand, contend that this change in emphasis only occurred because of pressure from the surrounding society. Jews, they argue, simply internalized the external restraints placed on them by both Christian and Muslim authorities. America, however, is a free country, so the Jewish community can, indeed should, return to the days of old and reach out to those beyond its confines (Seltzer, 1990)

Since the beginning of the sixties, those who view intermarriage as a dire threat to the continued survival of American Jewry have referred to it as “a spiritual holocaust.”⁷ Some of them suggest that it is even worse than the Nazi one because it is self-inflicted, “a holocaust of our own making.” Significantly, however, advocates of outreach also use the Shoah to support their position on both moral and pragmatic grounds. One of the lessons of the

7 Emil Fackenheim (1978, pp. 19–24), for instance, referred to the 614th commandment as being: “The authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another posthumous victory.”

Holocaust, they argue, is that we are obligated to welcome the stranger. In addition, after the loss of six million we cannot turn our back on those who may be potentially interested in joining the Jewish people. They constitute an opportunity to replenish our ranks that must be exploited to the full (Fishbein, 1973, p. 65).

From the very beginning, those in favor of the move “from outrage to outreach” pointed to this potential benefit for American Jewry. With the passage of time, the advocates of change have drawn attention to the positive results of their campaign. They point to the large number of Gentile partners who have come to identify themselves as Jews, and to take an active part in the life of the community. According to this view of things, outreach has transformed marrying out from a threat to an opportunity, and created a situation in which it can lead to a net gain rather than a loss for American Jewry (Massarik, 1978).

Advocates of outreach invariably take this argument a stage further. They claim that their programs can, and often do, have a positive effect on the Jewish partner by providing them with a chance to learn about Judaism and to explore their relationship with it. In many cases, this kind of search stimulates a new or renewed interest in and attachment to things Jewish. Meeting the other, it is argued, leads to a clarification of one’s own beliefs and a fresh understanding of the self (Perel, 1991, p. 149).

Academics and communal leaders alike have questioned the effectiveness of the outreach programs in the battle against assimilation. They are of the opinion that those involved in mixed marriages – both the Jewish and the Gentile partner – do not represent the best target population, and that the community’s resources should be channeled towards the moderately affiliated. Thus, Jack Wertheimer et al (1996) have suggested shifting the

emphasis to enlarging the core by shrinking the middle, rather than working with those on the periphery of the community or beyond its confines. Inreach, they argue, is preferable to outreach for one simple reason. It is more likely to be successful in strengthening American Jewry.

Taking this argument a step further, there are those who claim that outreach not only does less good than its proponents would have us believe but that it also causes a great deal of harm. The protagonists of this approach hold that the much-vaunted policy of rejecting intermarriage but not the intermarried inevitably leads to a legitimization of the phenomenon. They contend that if the community accepts those who marry out with open arms, others will conclude that there is nothing wrong in it, and follow in their footsteps. According to this view of things, outreach is counterproductive. Rather than inducing people to join the community, it encourages to them leave its ranks.

Making Intermarriage Work

Advocates of both an exclusive and inclusive policy towards those who marry out defend their stance in Jewish terms. They each portray themselves as the only true heirs of the nation's past and/or the sole guarantors of its future. There are those, however, who relate to the issue on a more personal level. A growing number of handbooks for intermarried couples focus on family ties in general and the marital relationship in particular. As far as the authors of these manuals are concerned, the most important thing is to help make intermarriage work and to ensure a joyous union.⁸

Those who adopt this kind of non-judgmental approach frequently resort to a market analogy. Jews who marry out and their Gentile spouses are exhorted to engage in "spiritual shopping" in order to find the faith – Judaism, Christianity or a compromise religion such as Unitarianism – that best meets their needs. The aim is to ensure that the couple in question make "an informed

8 Petsonik and Remsen (1988), Reuben (1994), and Rosenberg, Meehan and Payne (1988) are typical of this genre.

decision” or “a wise choice” rather than to guarantee, or even encourage, a Jewish one. Religious traditions, these mentors argue, are less important than people, and should therefore serve their needs rather than be served by them.

This focus of concern finds its clearest expression in the different stances that the handbooks for intermarried couples adopt towards conversion. Many of them argue that the decision to become Jewish must “come from the heart” and be “the logical conclusion of a personal spiritual journey.” Even more significantly, some authors relate to conversion as just one of the many ways of coping with the complexities of intermarriage. They are at pains to point out that that it is by no means suitable for everyone. The members of each individual couple have to decide what is best for them, and the criterion for their decision should be the success of their marriage. That is what really matters in the end.

Intermarriage manuals often advise parents to set certain rules of thumb regarding the religious upbringing of their children. These include choosing the faith of the more religiously committed spouse or simply ensuring that they are affiliated to one religion or another so as not to shortchange them in the future. Authors differ as to whether parents should raise their children in both Judaism and Christianity. Some believe that doing so is bound to lead to identity confusion later in life; others insist that it gives the next generation the best of both heritages as well as the opportunity to create a synthesis between them. Either way, however, it is the well-being of the child that is uppermost in these authors’ mind. That is the sole criterion for deciding how to raise them.

Those concerned with making intermarriage work make no attempt to underestimate the difficulties in doing so. In fact, they are often at pains to point out that the problem goes beyond the

perennial December dilemma about how to celebrate Chanukah and/or Christmas. Mixed marriages are thought to be threatened by a whole series of “time bombs” (Cowan & Cowan, 1987, pp. 127–165) that may explode at any moment. This is particularly the case because the delayed religious factor (Siegel & Siegel 1979, pp. 6–7) gradually comes into play. As people grow older and go through different life-cycle events, they become increasingly aware of their mortality and more cognizant of their need for continuity. In many cases, this leads them to a renewed interest in religion. Issues that once seemed inconsequential take on more significance and thereby become potential bones of contention.

Handbooks for intermarried couples invariably implore both the Jewish and Gentile partner to acknowledge the existence of these possible pitfalls and to take two kinds of action – one personal and the other interpersonal – to avoid them. Each spouse, it is argued, has to achieve individuation from their parents and discover what their religious affiliation means to them. In addition, husband and wife must engage in a constant dialogue in order to work out all the outstanding issues between them. Failure to do so is asking for trouble. Conspiracies of silence always lead to problems in the end.

This is not only the case in the religious sphere. Each partner is still deeply influenced by their “cradle culture,” however much they may feel they have distanced themselves from it. Intermarried couples are therefore advised to examine the ethnically based personality differences between them. Some manuals even raise the possibility of the Jewish partner going to an ethnotherapy group in order to reveal any internalized oppression that may exist. Negative feelings must be brought to the surface so that they can be dealt with in a positive way.

As part of their attack on the discord approach (Sklare & Greenblum, 1979, pp. 311–313), the handbooks are replete with stories of both successful and unsuccessful unions between Jews and Gentiles. These “living examples” are designed to show that marital difficulties are by no means an inevitable result of a mixed marriage. They are attributed instead to the partners’ unwillingness to acknowledge their potential problems, and/or to deal with them in an appropriate manner. Openness, it is claimed, is the key to marital success.

Some manuals take this argument a step further. Rather than simply contending that marrying out is not necessarily a recipe for disaster, they insist that it provides an opportunity for personal and interpersonal growth. Differences between spouses are to be celebrated because they can lead to a strengthening of their self-identity and, even more importantly, to a deepening of the relationship between them. Thus, in his “nonjudgmental guide” to making interfaith marriage work Steven Carr Reuben (1994, pp. 70–71) argued:

“Differences are not necessarily barriers in a relationship. Differences can be, in fact, opportunities for mutual support and decision-making. The challenge of an interfaith marriage is to create harmony out of differences, mutual respect and love in the midst of ambiguity and paradox. See every difference as a gift from your partner’s past, a window into a world that you have never known. Each difference that you uncover is yet another example of something that you can learn about and from each other, to add a unique and special dimension to your relationship and your love”.

According to this perspective, intermarriage should be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat on the individual level as well as on the communal one. If dealt with in the right way it can prove to be a blessing in disguise.

Etiology Stories

The different responses to intermarriage largely derive from the conflicting explanations as to why it has increased so dramatically over the last four decades. While it is beyond the confines of this paper to present a detailed review of the myriad reasons that have been cited, it is important to delineate some of the major developments in this regard. Without looking at the different etiology stories (Pfuhl, 1980, p. 142) that are recounted, it will be impossible to move on to the next stage of the study and analyze the way in which intermarriage has influenced both the internal and external boundaries of American Jewry.

As long as the rate of intermarriage remained low, academics and laypersons alike tended to explain the phenomenon in psychological terms, attributing it to personal rather than social factors. Levinson & Levinson (1958/9, pp. 115–119), for instance, resorted to the concept of neurotic exogamy to show how emotional conflicts within the family cause people to marry out. Others attributed intermarriage to Jewish self-hate. It is the ultimate escape route, they argued, for those who wish to sever their ties with their family or the wider community.

These and other psychological explanations served the dual function of reinforcing the norm of endogamy and allaying fears about the threat of intermarriage. However, these theories became increasingly difficult to sustain with the dramatic rise in the number of people marrying out. As the rate of intermarriage escalated, this came to be seen less as an expression of deviance of one kind or another and more as a function of opportunity. Milton Gordon (1964, p. 80) for instance, drew attention to the “indissoluble connection” between structural and marital assimilation and argued:

“Entrance of the minority group into the social cliques, clubs and institutions of the core society at the primary group level inevitably will lead to a substantial amount of intermarriage. If children of different ethnic backgrounds belong to the same playgroup, later the same adolescent cliques, and at college the same fraternities and sororities; if the parents belong to the same country club and invite each other to their homes for dinner; it is completely unrealistic not to expect these children, now grown, to love and to marry each other, blithely oblivious to previous ethnic extraction”.

Those communal leaders who make a similar point usually do so with a certain pathos. Robert Gordis (1966, p. 186), for instance, long ago referred to intermarriage as “part of the price that modern Jews must pay for freedom and equality in an open society,” and more recently Alexander Schindler (1979, p. 20) characterized it as “the sting that comes from the honey of freedom.” Nevertheless, they couch their explanations in neutral rather than moral terms. Nobody is to be held to blame for the situation.

Others, however, adopt a more judgmental stance. Even

though, or perhaps because, the increase in intermarriage is the inevitable consequence of the growing integration of American Jews into the wider society, they point an accusing finger at those who have embraced the latter trend without any reservations whatsoever. Advocates of the melting pot are held to task for having failed to realize or for being unperturbed by the thought that it would lead to greater assimilation and intermarriage.

While this stance is to be found in all sectors of the community, it is undoubtedly most clearly expressed in the Orthodox camp. Rabbis and lay leaders alike are highly critical of the other denominations’ effect on and response to intermarriage, and full of praise for their own achievements in these regards. For the purposes of analysis, the Orthodox argument is best considered under three headings – endemicity, immunity and conversion.⁹ These claims relate to the inevitably high rate of intermarriage amongst non-Orthodox Jews, its almost total absence amongst Orthodox ones, and the practical conclusions to be drawn from this differential respectively.

Leaders of the Orthodox community have long contended that the rejection of traditional Jewish beliefs and the failure to accept the yoke of the commandments inexorably leads to assimilation and intermarriage. “By establishing a Jewish version of Protestantism,” Ralph Pelcovitz (1976, p. 127) argued:

“It became more and more difficult to convince young people whose homes were devoid of Jewish observance that there was anything wrong in marrying a non-Jew. [...] [It] is difficult

9 This kind of argumentation is analyzed in much greater detail in Cromer (1995).

to convince young people that rejecting intermarriage is important and vital to the Jewish people when the counter argument is, “What will be the difference between my home life and that of my parents”.

According to this view of things, once both the rationale for living in full accordance with the Torah and the means for doing so are discarded there is no reason why people should restrict themselves to marrying within the fold. There is nothing wrong in leaving it. This situation is compounded by the fact that non-Orthodox rabbis and particularly Reform ones have legitimized intermarriage. In the eyes of the Orthodox, the CCAR decisions regarding the solemnization of weddings between Jews and Gentiles, the involvement of non-Jews in synagogue life and patrilineal descent have given people the clear impression that marrying out is acceptable, and thereby enabled, and maybe even encouraged them to go ahead and do so.

The allegedly sorry situation beyond the confines of the Orthodox camp is frequently compared to what is thought to be the much more healthy one within it. Those Jews who have clung to traditional beliefs and practices are portrayed as being largely untouched by, and even immune to, “the plague of intermarriage.” Their love of Torah, it is argued, prevents them from falling in love and marrying a non-Jewish person. To do so is simply out of the question.

The illness metaphor (Sontag, 1978) is just one of a series of images that Orthodox leaders employ to illustrate the contrasting fortunes of those who live within and beyond “the four cubits of halakha.” Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, they, in common with those who adopt a non-judgmental approach to Jews who marry

out, make frequent resort to economic metaphors. It is the “spiritual bankruptcy” of non-traditional Judaism, they argue, that leads to assimilation and intermarriage. Orthodoxy, on the other hand, prevents these negative phenomena. It provides “insurance” against them.

Orthodox leaders suggest two major ways to reduce the rate of intermarriage in other sectors of American Jewry. Time and again, they implore parents to make decisions regarding their place of residence and children’s education that will increase the chances of them making Jewish friends and decrease the likelihood of them coming into contact with Gentile ones. However, actions of this kind do not get to the crux of the issue. The only way to really deal with the situation is for Jews of other denominations to join their camp. According to Orthodox leaders:

“To begin with, there is only one Jewish view that offers a foolproof and watertight protection against intermarriage: the Torah. [...] All other views, beliefs, credos, dogmas or arguments do not have this convincing power. Once the present generation of American Jewish parents becomes mature enough to understand this truth, to realize that there is no other form of Judaism but Torah, they will see to it that their children receive a real Torah education. Those children will then automatically be safeguarded against intermarriage; they will always endeavor to avoid any activity that might bring them into the temptation of intermarriage” (Hecht, undated, pp. 7–8).

Accepting the yoke of the Torah is the one and only solution to “the crisis of intermarriage.”¹⁰

10 Secular Zionists make a similar point with regard to living in the State of

Many Conservative and Reform leaders take exception to this kind of self-congratulation. They feel that it underestimates their movements' contribution to the struggle against assimilation. However, there are also those who display a great deal of regard for Orthodox Judaism's achievements in the battle against intermarriage.¹¹ It is this admiration that is largely responsible for the widespread reappraisal of the role of ritual in Jewish life and the much-vaunted return to tradition. From an Orthodox standpoint however, this is not enough. Conservative and Reform Jews, it is argued, continue to regard religious observance as a matter of choice, and the commandments therefore cannot have the same decisive impact as they do on Orthodox Jews who view them as binding. It is the divine imperative that makes the difference.

Israel as opposed to the Diaspora. See for instance Halkin (1977, pp. 29–75) and Gavison (2003, pp. 76–77).

11 Susser and Liebman's (1999, pp. 145–151) analysis of the "lessons of Orthodoxy" is a classic example of this stance.

Boundaries Around

Group boundaries are maintained by controlling the admission of new members and the expulsion of existing ones. As Michael Walzer (1983, p. 62) has pointed out, “admission and exclusion are at the core of communal independence. Without them, there could be not be communities of character, historically stable, ongoing associations of men and women with some special commitment to one another and some special sense of their common life.”

In traditional Jewish society, the rules regarding both the exclusion and inclusion of members were clear and rigid. Severe sanctions were imposed on those who married out and serious demands were made of gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism. The situation has been altered beyond recognition since then. Changes have occurred even within the Orthodox camp, and more radical developments have taken place beyond its confines, particularly under the aegis of Reform Judaism.

The CCAR resolutions concerning the rabbinic solemnization of non-conversionary marriages, the participation of non-Jewish partners in different aspects of synagogue life and patrilineal

descent have further blurred the boundaries of American Jewry. A large number of gentiles have to some extent at least become part of the community. While the Reform movement is engaged in a concerted outreach program, it is doubtful whether these efforts have led or will lead to a clearer delineation of the dividing line between Jews and Gentiles. This is particularly true because they are not specifically designed to encourage the conversion of the non-Jewish partner. However, as the following statement made by Eric Yoffie (2001, pp. 155–157), the President of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, regarding the participation of non-Jewish spouses in the governance and ritual life of congregations indicates, there is also a deep ambivalence and even opposition to the setting of rigid boundaries:

“There must be standards and boundaries, and they must be defined with reasonable clarity and precision. Healthy individuals define standards for themselves and so do healthy religious traditions. [...] As essential as boundaries are, the power of our outreach work derives from our refusal to be obsessed with them. What distinguishes us from others and accounts for our success is that we have put forth a new paradigm: We emphatically affirm the necessity of standards but do not spend inordinate amounts of time and energy trying to define them with microscopic precision. We believe in boundaries, but we have faith that the average Jew in the average congregation will do a pretty good job of figuring out what they are. [...] Boundaries? Absolutely. But a boundary by definition is a barrier, and [...] while barriers have their place, bridges are always more important”.

Yoffie and other supporters of outreach are at pains to point out that their reluctance to draw boundaries should in no way be taken as a sign of support for or endorsement of those who marry out. They are totally opposed to intermarriage on both ideological and pragmatic grounds, but believe that if and when it happens, synagogues and other communal organizations must reach out and encourage both partners to make Jewish choices. However, this distinction between act and actor is difficult if not impossible to maintain. Building bridges to mixed couples gives them and others the impression that their decision to intermarry was not that bad after all. This leads, in turn, to a further weakening of the stigma against marrying out and a reinforcement of the belief that it can strengthen the Jewish community rather than endanger its survival.

Both the advocates and opponents of outreach are concerned about the future of American Jewry, and are convinced that the adoption of their policy on intermarriage constitutes the best way to ensure it. There is, however, a growing number of people for whom this issue is of little or no consequence. Their major or even sole aim is to help mixed couples have “a joyous Jewish-Christian marriage.” Besides giving “authoritative advice” about how to do so, these self-appointed mentors try to encourage rabbis and other communal leaders to befriend both partners, and to help them understand and break down the barriers between them. Clearly, therefore, there has not only been a blurring of the boundaries between American Jewry and the surrounding society; recent years have witnessed a concerted attempt to help intermarried couples break them down so that they can achieve personal happiness and family harmony.

This weakening of the external boundaries of the community has been accompanied by, or to be more precise, has led to a

strengthening of its internal ones. Since the issue of intermarriage is a summary symbol (Gusfield, 1996, pp. 72–74) of all the major dilemmas facing American Jewry, it has given rise to a wide-ranging polemic about the relative merits of the different denominations and/or of Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism. Protagonists of all persuasions claim that their approach is both the most authentic and the most effective way to deal with the situation.

Changes in Judaism are usually accompanied by the claim that the innovators are merely rediscovering or returning to the true tradition (Charme, 2000, pp. 138–139). Not surprisingly therefore, Orthodox and non-Orthodox leaders alike appropriate certain historical periods and disregard others in order to show that their response to intermarriage is the authentically Jewish one. Significantly, even those Reform rabbis who contend that their stance constitutes a revolutionary break with the past try to legitimize it by recalling earlier rabbinic innovations and appealing to what was referred to above as a tradition of reform. They, in common with their Orthodox counterparts, invoke essentialist authenticity (Charme, 2000, pp. 135–140).

The Orthodox rarely criticize the individuals who actually marry out. Their ire is directed instead against the “deviationist religious movements” that are allegedly causally responsible for them doing so. Their leaders are held to task for having legitimated and thereby encouraged intermarriage. The longstanding claim that Conservative and Reform Judaism have betrayed their Jewish past is augmented by the pragmatic one described in the previous section. Only Orthodoxy, it is argued, has remained faithful to halakha, and therefore it alone can ensure the survival of American Jewry. According to those in favor of a more inclusive approach, however, exactly the opposite is the case. As has already been

shown, they insist that reaching out to mixed couples brings many of them into the fold and will help replenish the dwindling community in the years to come.

Clearly, Orthodox and non-Orthodox leaders alike use the rhetoric of rationality as well as the rhetoric of rectitude (Best, 1987, pp. 116–117) in their struggle for legitimacy. They resort to both moralistic and causalistic arguments (Davies, 1973, p. 3) to prove their case. In many instances, however, the dichotomy between these two kinds of discourse is not as clear as Best and others would have us believe. Protagonists of all persuasions argue that their success in combating assimilation and dealing with the problem of intermarriage is proof of the truth of their beliefs. Thus, the claims concerning Jewish continuity and authenticity are intertwined. They work together to reinforce the boundaries between Jews of different persuasions.

Boundaries Within

The arguments put forward by the advocates of an exclusive and an inclusive response to intermarriage have been given equal attention in order to do justice to both points of view. In doing so, however, the study presents a somewhat misleading picture of the situation. The vast majority of American Jews view marrying out with equanimity, and a growing number of communal leaders see it as a positive phenomenon. In their view, intermarriage is an opportunity rather a threat because it provides a chance for quantitative and qualitative growth on a communal and/or personal level. It can, and for that matter already has led to the enrichment of the married couples and the burgeoning of American Jewry as a whole.

This development has of course had an enormous impact on the image of those who marry out. They are rarely viewed as deviants, and are sometimes even looked up to as role models. Some of the manuals for intermarried couples, for instance, portray them as pioneers who are paving the way to a more promising future for themselves and the wider community. In contrast, those who continue to take a hard line on the issue of intermarriage are

already a cognitive minority (Berger, 1971, pp. 18–19) and are fast becoming cognitive deviants (Douglas, 1982, pp. 363–390). Erecting, or rather maintaining boundaries by limiting the choice of marital partners, is widely regarded as politically incorrect and even racist. The stigma has moved from the Jews who marry out to those who oppose intermarriage (Fishman, 2001, p. 87).

This dramatic change has occurred as a result of a pervasive process of coalescence “through which American Jews merge American and Jewish ideas, incorporating American liberal values such as free choice, universalism, individualism, and pluralism into their understanding of Jewish identity” (Fishman, 2000, p. 1). Advocates of an exclusive approach to intermarriage have therefore pointed to the need to question this view of the situation and to develop an alternative one. Susser and Liebman (1999, p. 150), for instance, argued that:

“...the axiom that American and Jewish cultures march to different drummers (whatever their undoubted affinities and cross-fertilizations) must be deeply incorporated in the American-Jewish consciousness. Even posing the problem in this way, that is recognizing the potential disharmony between Jewishness and Americanism, is a great improvement over the very prevalent and highly facile assumption that the two constituent parts of American Jewish identity make for a perfect fit. With the problem posed in this way, it would at least be understood that difficult choices need to be made. A discourse of difference needs to be legitimized in the non-Orthodox world that above all would require a different and more unambiguously critical approach to the sensitive question of intermarriage specifically and the dominant melting pot

more generally. The older, more sanguine strategy claiming that American Jews could preserve their social integrity despite overt disdain for clearly demarcated communal borders must be recognized as having failed the test of time”.

Recent research findings on Jewish identity suggest that this argument can also be made in slightly different terms, with the emphasis being placed on the boundaries within the individual self rather than those of the community as a whole. Cohen and Eisen (2000), for instance, have drawn attention to the twofold move toward privatization and personalization that characterizes contemporary American Judaism. The importance of the public sphere, they argue, has severely diminished. The discovery and construction of Jewish meaning now occurs in the quiet recesses of peoples’ private lives rather than in organizations designed to defend the interests of American Jewry as a whole, of beleaguered communities around the world or of the State of Israel. Additionally, in the absence of compelling religious norms, contemporary Jews refashion tradition in accordance with their own personal needs and values. They pick and choose those rituals and observances that are meaningful to them at any particular point in time or stage in the life cycle. Now, more than ever, the sovereign self is the principal source of authority for American Jews.

As Cohen and Eisen (2000, pp. 195–196) are at pains to point out, although terms such as identity and self suggest a monolithic and static entity they are, in fact, plural and dynamic. The identity of American Jews is an unfinished product or, in the oft-quoted phrase of Stuart Hall (1990, p. 225) “a matter of becoming as well as of being.” It is created in an ongoing dialogue with the Jewish past and the contemporary other. Consequently, although Jewish

tradition acts as an “interpretive structure” (Oyserman & Markus, 1993, pp. 190–191) through which contemporary Jews seek coherence in their lives,

“They see no need for a hard-and-fast distinction between the Jew and the American inside them. They feel no need to decide which of the two they will be or to sacrifice one in order to achieve the other. Indeed, they can envision no way even to think about these things except at boundary moments (a prospective intermarriage, for example) which threaten the blurring of identity components with which they are comfortable” (Cohen & Eisen, 2000, p. 196).

In order to encourage, or to be more precise, to enable contemporary American Jews to ask these “uncomfortable questions”¹² prior to such boundary moments, it is necessary to develop a discourse of difference at the personal as well as the communal level. Not only the boundaries surrounding the group, but also those within the individual self need to be delineated and strengthened.

Adopting this line of action entails a clear rejection of Jeremy Waldron’s (1995, p. 112) cosmopolitan alternative according to which “the person is nothing but a set of commitments and involvements, and maybe the governance of the self is just the more or less comfortable (or at times more or less chaotic) coexistence of these elements.” However, since the return to the traditional patterns of a stable identity controlled from the inside is not a viable alternative for the vast majority of contemporary American Jews, the discourse of difference must be based on the

12 This expression is borrowed from the title of Kahane (1987).

development of a multicultural identity. The aim should be an anchoring of the self in the Jewish tradition and the incorporation of new contexts of meaning at the same time (Sagi, 2000, pp. 183–186).

Clearly, a discourse of difference based on this kind of self-image would not make a claim to absolute truth. Rather than negate other worldviews or alternative interpretations of the Jewish one, it is meant to encourage contemporary American Jews to both embrace their cultural specificity and to make it their own. Doing so is the only way to avoid the danger of living in “bad faith” because, as Steven Charme (2000, pp. 140–144) has pointed out, peoples’ understanding of their identity is inauthentic unless they accept both the historical, cultural, and political contexts of that identity, and the fact that there are a wide variety of ways of assuming it on an individual level. Recognizing the constraint and choice involved in the search for self has a liberating effect. Awareness of both sides of the process makes it possible, at least, to achieve existentialist authenticity.

Advocates of an exclusive response to intermarriage have said little in this regard. The discord approach is the only way they relate to the issue on a personal level. Despite the fact that the focus of American Judaism has moved from civil religion to a more spiritual one, and from a collective quest for sacred survival (Woocher, 1986) to a search for self-fulfillment, the case against marrying out is based almost entirely on its allegedly negative effects on the community as a whole. The arguments are, therefore, increasingly irrelevant to the day-to-day concerns of contemporary American Jews.

A discourse of difference that focuses on the boundaries within the self rather than those surrounding the community seems to be

a much more promising starting point for a polemic against intermarriage than the kinds of rhetoric presently resorted to. This is not to suggest, of course, that the task of persuasion will be an easy one. After all, many American Jews are of the opinion that marrying out does not hinder, and may even help, their search for Jewish meaning. However, by concentrating on the issue of existential authenticity, this kind of argumentation goes to the heart of the widespread quest for a “postmodern Jewish self” (Cohen & Eisen, 2000, pp. 34–42), and is, therefore, a particularly suitable starting point for a dialogue between the different points of view.¹³ In this sense at least, those who want to continue the struggle against intermarriage would do well to follow the advice of the sages, and observe what the people are doing and why before trying to convince them to behave otherwise.

13 This search is much less common amongst non-affiliated Jews. The discourse of difference, in common with other efforts to reduce intermarriage, should therefore be directed at those in the middle rather than on the periphery of the community.

