

15

ASSIMILATION, INTERMARRIAGE AND CONVERSION TO JUDAISM

"Marrying a Gentile is totally forbidden [in traditional Jewish law]." -- **Michael Asheri**, 1983, p. 332

While Adolf Hitler failed to destroy the Jews, many these days fear that they are in danger of accomplishing their own destruction via a younger generation's *choice* of extinction. Jews have always resisted surrendering their identity chauvinism to go the way of French-Americans, Italian-Americans, Greek-Americans and so many others have already done in completely assimilating into American society decades earlier. The American Jewish community -- more intensely than any other people -- has always resisted that dreaded curse: *assimilation*. "The hydra-headed monster of assimilation takes many forms," says Richard Gordis, "the 'most menacing' of which is intermarriage." [SILBERMAN, p. 285] "What centuries of persecution have been powerless to do," wrote Lewis S. Benjamin in 1907, "has been efficient in a score of years by friendly intercourse." [SILBERMAN, p. 286] "We have survived," says Alan Dershowitz, "-- sometimes by the skin of our teeth -- millennia of rape attempts against the Jewish body and soul by villains and monsters of every description. Efforts to convert us, assimilate us, and exterminate us by the sword have taken an enormous toll, but in the end they have failed. Now the dangers are more subtle: willing seduction, voluntary assimilation, deliberate abdication." [DERSHOWITZ, p. 354] "On the one end of spectrum," remarks Henry Feingold, "is the danger of absorption into a benevolent society; on the other is the possibility of physical destruction ... It seems like both dangers require a conscious will to overcome. That may be the secret of Jewish survival." [FEINGOLD, p. 67]

Intermarriage (marrying non-Jews), notes Egon Mayer, has always been "the cardinal social offense that an individual Jew can commit against his family and community." [SCHNEIDER, p. 334] "There are two main taboos laid upon the Jewish people," wrote Ann Roiphe in 1981, "The first and most important taboo is not to leave the tribe ... The taboo against intermarriage is really only an extension in practical matters of the first taboo. If you marry a stranger it will lead to your eventually leaving the tribe, and if you yourself do not, then your children and grandchildren will and so the body of Jewry will be depleted. Each loss is grieved and each time someone breaks the taboo the ranks close tighter behind him. They don't say (not relatives, friends or friends of relatives) good luck, Godspeed, they vilify and despise." [ROIPHE, 1981, p. 197]

Kitty Dukakis, the wife of Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis, remembered being taken to the synagogue as a child by her grandmother:

"I remember, too, being the subject of discussion among the

mezzanine denizens. The ladies looked me over and mumbled, under their breath, 'shiksa.' I was about four and a half when I heard that term for the first time: It is Yiddish and means a non-Jewish girl.

At the very word, my grandmother would turn excitedly and shush her friends. She'd purse her lips, look over to the side, and pretend to spit, saying something like 'p-tui, p-tui!' I learned, later, she was spitting to ward off the 'keenahori,' the evil eye. 'It's not true,' my grandmother cried vehemently. 'She's not a shiksa. She's Jewish on both sides!' My grandmother never knew my mother was only half-Jewish and that my sister and I had gentile blood. I think it would have killed her." [DUKAKIS, K., 1990, p. 55]

Vickie Bane notes the case of famous radio talk show host "Dr. Laura" Schlessinger (whose father was Jewish, but mother not):

"Laura told Ethnic Newswatch that their Jewish neighbors on Long Island were very 'unaccepting' of her mother because 'she was a shiksa [a non-Jewish woman] and because she was gorgeous ... A lot of problems came from the Jewish women. I got into fistfights because they called my mother a dirty refugee." [BANE, V., 1999, p. 25]

In Peru, Israeli Elaine Karp is married to a popular 2001 presidential candidate, Alejandro Toledo. But her relations with the local Jewish community was strained, noted the Jewish Chronicle, "partly because of her high profile marriage to a non-Jew ... Her mixed marriage and her leftist views have caused some rejection." [PERELMAN, M., 4-20-01]

In 1982, Earl Shorris noted the perspective of his Uncle Phillip about his son dating non-Jews:

"When [my Uncle Phillip's] son, then a medical student, brought home a Gentile girl to meet his parents, Phillip is said to have addressed the boy as Tom, a subtle pun on a Hebrew word for wrong thinking. The young woman, confused at hearing her beau called by an unfamiliar name, asked my uncle, Do you always call him Tom? Only when he's with you." [SHORRIS, E., 1982, p. 53]

Jews, writes Inge Lederer Gibel, "are desperately concerned with the ever-rising rate of intermarriage ... Even Jewish secularists ... often resist or withhold their approval when a child announces the intention to 'marry out.'" [GIBEL, p. 53-54] This situation inevitably leads to the standard Jewish 'universalist/particularist' contradiction and the hypocrisy of preaching one world view while practicing another. Gibel notes that

"The bulk of Jewry [worries about] the high rate of intermarriage, and the dichotomy of teaching ones' children about universal values and the

kinship of the human family while in the next breath saying, 'But you mustn't marry [a non-Jew]." [GIBEL, p. 54]

Even Gibel, who decries Jewish racism and married a Black man, told her son, as she "told his sister: I don't care who you marry, what color, what nationality, as long as she is a good human being and willing to make a commitment to a Jewish home." [GIBEL, p. 65]

A 1990 survey of the American Jewish community set off a blaze of Jewish worry and hysteria. 52% of all marriages by Jews in America today, the study revealed, were to non-Jews. (Some scholars have argued a more realistic figure is 40%, which is still -- for most Jews -- intolerably high). "This (52%) number," says J. J. Goldberg, "electrified Jewry from coast to coast. Within weeks it would spread by word of mouth and through newspaper headlines, impassioned sermons, and anguished editorials." [GOLDSTEIN, p. 66]

Many talk about Jews marrying non-Jews as if it was the reincarnation of the Nazi gas chambers. "The intermarriage process will take everything Jewish in its wake," declared Rabbi Pincher Stolper, the Executive Vice President of the Orthodox Union, "it will grow until it engulfs the entire community. It is another Holocaust." [GOLDBERG, p. 66] "Intermarriage," says Rabbi Sol Roth, "is a holocaust of our own making." [SILBERMAN, p. 286] "We will destroy ourselves," worried Rabbi Morris Shapiro, "not through the gas chambers but the love chambers." [RITTENBERG, p. 8] "There are no barking dogs and no Zyklon-B gas," declared Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald, founder of the National Jewish Outreach Program, "... but make no mistake: this is a spiritual Holocaust." [TOBIN, G., 1999, p. 1] In England, where Jews fight their own intermarriage battle, the United Synagogue Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks "reportedly said that intermarriage could complete the work of annihilation attempted by Hitler." [BAADEN, p. 7] Paul Cowan recalls what his non-Jewish wife faced when they visited Israel: "Israelis and Jewish-American tourists accused her completing Hitler's work by marrying a Jew." [COWAN, P., 1987, p. 7] ("When I see those direct-mail envelopes screaming 'Another Holocaust ... here in America,'" says Zev Schwebel, "and then find inside an appeal for money to fight the 'holocaust' of intermarriage, it makes my blood boil. This is an obscenity ... How dare they equate the horror of a Nazi with a couple that intermarry? This sort of talk is morally reprehensible." [HALBERSTAM, p. 130])

Roberta Farber called the large number of young Jews desiring to marry out of the Jewish community "devastating," suggested proposals be enacted to "thwart" it, and wondered how best to "retard" intermarriage." [FARBER, p. 14, 20] Stephen Whitfield notes that the rise in Jewish intermarriage "has been so dramatic that panic buttons have been pressed." [WHITFIELD, American, p. 19] Emma Klein suggests "communal" outreach programs to pull wayfaring Jews by birth back into the fold to "weather the threat of intermarriage." [KLEIN, p. 3] Norman Cantor bemoans "the racial suicide of a runaway rate of intermarriage." [CANTOR, p. 434] Michael Wechsler says that it has reached "alarming proportions." [WECHSLER, p. 275]

"The current intermarriage scare," wrote J. J. Goldberg in 1996, "is having a subtle effect on the balance of power in Jewish life. It is putting liberals on the defensive, by raising doubts about the very idea of

Jewish integration in an open society. Jewish institutions are devoting a growing share of their resources to shore up the Jewish community from within, and are backing away from their traditional role of trying to better American society ... Simply to say aloud that Jews should fight for the rights of all people -- once a universal view -- now invites public attack." [GOLDBERG, p. 64] "The Jewish community is hysterical about Jews marrying non-Jews," noted Gary Tobin in 1999, "The language of tragedy and despair pervades analysis and discussion of what is called the 'intermarriage crisis' in America today. Denominations within Judaism have passed bellicose resolutions calling for prevention of intermarriage; and respected scholars, rabbinic leaders, and popular culture figures in Jewish life consistently liken intermarriage to disease, war, and genocide." [TOBIN, G., 1999, p. 1]

"Part of me," says scholar Steven M. Cohen, the chief harbinger of the 52% intermarriage figure, "[sees] my friends who are intermarried and celebrating Christmas as renegades, as heretics, as a traitor of sorts, as missing a very important part of Judaism -- and I pity them." [COHEN, Discussion, p. 19] "Intermarriage is a violation of Jewish law," argued Blu Greenberg in a (1997 issue of the left-wing) Tikkun magazine roundtable discussion about the subject, "It's an abrogation of the covenantal concept of how one enters the Jewish community and peoplehood." [FIRESTONE, TIKKUN, p. 37]

What other ethnic group in America could continuously, very publicly herald itself in such a way, with no fears of vehement criticism of its motivational core: naked *racism*? Any "white" group with a similar agenda is categorically deemed as ideological descendents of Nazi fascism. African-American groups with out-group marriage prohibitions are seen as Black versions of the Ku Klux Klan. But Jewry consistently resists confronting its own intrinsic racism in this matter. The Jewish Chosen People concept, by religious Jews or atheist Jews, is blurred, vaguely alluded to, as in this observation by Jewish author Gary Tobin:

"Many Jews may not know much about Judaism, but we do know that we are somehow different because we are Jews -- whatever that means. And we know that other Jews are somehow connected to us." [TOBIN, G., 1999, p. 3]

In the face of all the myths about the Jewish community's interethnic tolerance for other communities, Maurice Lamm's 1980 volume, The Jewish Way in Love and Marriage (Harper and Row, publishers) is based on Jewish religious law and advises the following:

"Permit no interdating -- not once, not even in a group ... Make your child positively and absolutely aware of your horror at the prospect ... Do not attend wedding receptions or receptions of intermarried friends ... You must not accept a mixed marriage at all ... Pull out every stop ... Of course it is heartbreaking to be severe with your own child, but not melt ... Interfaith-marriage is treason against the Jewish people, its Bible, its history, and its laws." [LAMM, p. 63-64]

In a section entitled "The Rights of the Intermarried," Lamm notes that a non-Jewish marriage partner may not be buried in a Jewish cemetery, nor may an unconverted child of a non-Jewish woman. [LAMM, p. 54] In the case of homosexuality, "the *Halakhah* decrees that the lesbian is not punished with death as the male homosexual would be, and is permitted to marry a priest. However, the transgression does warrant a disciplinary punishment -- flagellation." [LAMM, p. 67]

(Despite these traditional perspectives about same sex love, Jewish homosexual Lev Raphael's views about marriage, in his youth, to non-Jews were kosher. "Beverly and I did not get married," he writes, "I knew more and more clearly that I could not marry a non-Jew, no matter how much I loved her. What pushed me over the edge? Imagining Christmas, so profoundly a part of Beverly's life, in 'our' house. I couldn't do it, nor could I ask her to give it up. I couldn't confuse myself or any children we might have. I wanted a Jewish home. No -- it wasn't that affirmative. I realized I couldn't have a *non*-Jewish home; that was as far as I got, and it meant much more to me than my subterranean attraction to men ... I wished my brother hadn't taken something away from the family by marrying a non-Jew." [RAPHAEL, L., 1996, p. 1213]

Paul Cowan recalls a non-Jewish girlfriend he once had (he did marry a woman who converted to Judaism):

"A few weeks after I got back from Israel, I invited my girlfriend, Beth, a Smith undergraduate, an Episcopalian-born poet from suburban Connecticut, whose literary ideas had influenced me, to spend time at my family's house on Martha's Vineyard. Ever since I had returned to America, I'd been toying with the idea of retaining the name Saul Cohen, since I thought that act would allow me to feel the same clear sense of my own identity as I had in Israel. It was a whimsical notion, of course, since it would plainly wound my father [who changed his name from Cohen] far more deeply than it would satisfy me. In fact, Beth was the only person to whom I ever mentioned the fantasy. Was I testing her? Probing for her innermost feeling about Jews? Probably. They came, in a rush, when she rubbed her hands in a Shylock-like gesture and said, 'Saul Cohen. That's not you. You don't want to go back to the ghetto.' It seemed like a flash of bigotry, and it bothered me so much that I never dated her again. When we discussed the episode, years later, she remembered it as vividly as I did. She had been sure that I was abandoning my identity as an American for a romantic illusion. The illusion might not have been so threatening if it had included her. But that night at supper my sister Holly had glanced toward Beth, then turned toward me and said, 'I feel proud to be a Jew. Don't you?' I nodded, Beth recalls. Then, later, when I told Beth I was thinking of changing my name, she began to feel so excluded from my family's -- and my -- inner

core that she went outside and wept. For years I remembered her as a latent anti-Semite. She remembered me as one of the chosen people, who secretly believed that everyone else was inferior."
[COWAN, P., 1982, p. 113]

"I'm horrified by the attitude of so many Jews toward intermarriage," complained John-Paul Flintoff from Great Britain in 1998, "It's not just in Israel. You come across the same thing in Israel. Yes, my wife is Jewish." [FLINTOFF, J., 1--14-98]

"Among the most vehemently opposed to the prospect of intermarriage," says Lena Romanoff, who surveyed over 500 members of a 'Jewish Converts Network,' "some [Jewish] parents are initially inclined to go to any lengths to end the relationship. Through outbursts, threats, and pleadings, the first stage in the sabotage plan is directed at the son or daughter. When that fails, and it usually does, discouragement is aimed at the non-Jewish partner through displays of indifference, coldness, or downright hostility." [ROMANOFF, p.81]

Social worker Edwin Freedland noted in 1982 that:

"When some Jewish parents realize that they might have a non-Jewish in-law the reactions can be severe. I have seen Jewish mothers threaten suicide and Jewish fathers go into severe states of depression. I have of threats to cut children off emotionally and financially and to get the child kicked out of medical school! I have witnessed harassment in the form of daily letters or phone calls. I have seen parents resort to arguing the Jewish partner out of the potential marriage, and I have seen the effort made with the non-Jewish partner. Whatever form the reaction takes, however, the rationale is usually phrased in terms of, or accompanied by comments on, the survival of the Jewish people. 'How can you do this to us?' is usually mixed with 'Remember the Holocaust.'"
[FREEDLAND, p. 509]

Alan Adelson's book about the radical left-wing Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) notes that "one Jewish SDSer's parents took their son's emergence as a communist fairly placidly, but when he told them he was dating a Catholic girl, his mother gravely informed him: 'Son, you're killing us slowly.'" [ADELSON, p. 135]

A 1985 survey of American Jewry revealed that 43% of Jewish fathers and 50% of Jewish mothers were opposed to Jews dating non-Jews. Comparatively, only 16% of Christian fathers and 19% of Christian mothers opposed interdating. 59% of Jewish fathers and 62% of Jewish mothers opposed Jewish marriage to non-Jews, while only 29% of Christian fathers and 33% of Christian mothers opposed Christian marriages to non-Christians. [FORSTER, p. 69] Another study found that while 80% of the parents of non-Jewish spouses of Jews had positive attitudes about Jewish people, only a quarter of the

Jewish parents of a child married to a non-Jew had positive attitudes towards Gentiles. [FORSTER, p. 110] What group of people seem to be narrow-minded bigots here? Why is this aspect of the "champions of liberalism" and "fighters against intolerance" never highlighted?

Jewish isolationism of course has deep and ancient roots, and even in America Jewish fears of, and hostility to, intermarriage are not new. In 1912, one survey noted that only seven of 100 rabbis surveyed in America had ever performed a mixed marriage. A 1909 resolution of the Central Council of American Rabbis declared that "mixed marriages are contrary to the tradition of the Jewish religion and should be discouraged by the American rabbinate." As late as the 1970s, even among Reform (generally considered to be a very liberal branch of Judaism) rabbis, "virtually all" of them opposed mixed marriages on principle and a majority refused to officiate such weddings. [MACDONALD, p. 98] "Most Jewish parents want their children to maintain Jewish contacts," wrote Albert Gordon in 1959, "They do not favor the idea of intermarriage, primarily because it is their desire to perpetuate the Jewish people and the 'religion of their father,' however they may define that religion ... Intensification of efforts to counter this situation, which Jews must regard as critical, must therefore occupy the most prominent place among the concerns of American Jews." [GORDON, A., p. 245]

While for decades in American popular society a parent's resistance to his or her child marrying someone of another race or religious faith has been the bottom line gauge of a bigot, "the battle against intermarriage," said Arthur Hertzberg in 1964, "... is conducted among Jews more bitterly and with relatively more success than any other group in America. It makes no difference whether Jews believe or do not believe in any version of the Jewish tradition; they battle with equal fervor against the threat of intermarriage of their children. Certainly one would be shocked to discover non-believers of Catholic or Protestant extraction fighting comparably with their own children." [HERTZBERG, p. 291]

In 1999, an American Jewish Congress-sponsored reprint article quoted an excerpt from a letter of a post-World War II era Jewish woman in Poland who cut off her relationship with the non-Jewish man she loved. Why? "My beloved, my darling," she wrote, "my dearest! What do you know about me? ... You will never be able to understand me, or the sufferings of my [Jewish] nation. And now I'll tell you everything. I'll tell you the most important thing: I am Jewish. I am not for you. You are not for me." [KOZMINSKA-FREJLAK, p. 12]

In 1972, Rabbi Louis Bernstein noted the "frightening increase in intermarriage" and the Rabbinical Council of America set up a National Commission on Jewish Survival to fight it. [COX, p. 185] In 1977 Elihu Bergman, the Assistant Director of the Harvard Center for Population Studies, started seeing the dam leaking and worried that "a disaster is in the making." [SILBERMAN, p. 275] In 1987 a New York-area Conservative Judaism Rabbi Association passed a resolution banning rabbis who perform intermarriages. "Any rabbi who officiates [at an intermarriage] is approving it. It will destroy the character, the uniqueness of the Jewish people, which we are obligated to perpetuate." [RITTEBERG, p. 8] Still in June of 1997, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, described as "a, if not the, leading spokesperson for Reform Judaism" (the most *liberal* strand of formal Jewish faith) and head of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said: "I do not perform interfaith marriages. I personally do not believe that rabbis

should marry Jews and non-Jews." [SHANKS, p. 47] (Yoffie, by the way, rose to power in the ranks of the Association of Reform Zionists of America). "No Judaism, halikhic or otherwise," said Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in 1993, "sanctions marriage between Jews and non Jews without threatening Jewish continuity at its foundations. Such, however, is the rate of intermarriage in highly acculturated Jewish communities that exclusion of the outmarried can equally be perceived as a demographic disaster." [SACKS, J., p. 160-161]

This opinion is an ancient one. Centuries before Christ, "the principle of the Jewish master race, founded upon the myth of racial purity," notes Old Testament scholar John Allegro, "was being jeopardized by intermarriage on an increasing scale." [Allegro, p. 52] In the Torah/Old Testament, Nehemiah even declared that

"I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak their own language. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair... Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?" [NEHEMIAH 13:23-27; in Allegro, p. 52]

In Jewish tradition, notes Dan Rottenberg, even among Jews,

"there were complex rules regarding who could marry whom, for the groups constituted a distinct social pecking order, as follows, starting at the top:

- (1) *Kohanim* (priests) -- male descendants of Aaron, who was a brother of Moses and a descendant of Levi.
- (2) Levites -- other male descendants of Levi, who served as assistants to the *Kohanim*.
- (3) Israelites -- all other Jews of unblemished heritage (that is, descendants of Jacob who had not intermarried with non-Jews).
- (4) Halalim -- offspring of some forbidden marriages entered into by priests.
- (5) Gerim -- converts to Judaism.
- (6) Harurim -- freed slaves.
- (7) Mamzerim -- bastards.
- (8) Netinim -- descendants of the Gibeonites, who were circumcised at the time of Joshua (1200 BC?) and were not regarded as full Jews because their conversion was effected by trickery.
- (9) Shetukim -- persons unable to identify their father.
- (10) Persons unable to identify either their father or their mother.

Not included in this list were gentiles and slaves, who had no legal status at all

in Jewish law at the time, since Jewish law applied only to Jews." [ROTTENBERG, D., 1977, p. 60]

"Being Jewish," as we have so often seen, has always been packed with a range of contradictions and paradoxes; the subject of intermarriage -- so deeply entwined in the strange genetic, ethnic, and nationalist maze of "Jewish identity" -- is no different. While Jewish mythology traditionally makes implicit claims of a direct genetic lineage to the Israelite patriarch Abraham, and various rabbis throughout the centuries have legislated against marrying non-Jews, a quick scan of ancient Jewish history reveals that a number of preeminent Israelite historical characters had married out of the community.

The original patriarch himself, Abraham, cohabitated with Hagar, an Egyptian; Joseph married Asenath, an Egyptian; Moses married Zipporah, a Midianite; King David's mother was a Moabite as was his great grandmother, Ruth; and, as far as King Solomon goes (whose mother was a Hittite), "he loved many strange women, including the daughter of Pharaoh, women of Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites." [KOESTLER, p. 235] (King Solomon was reputed to have hundreds, if not thousands of wives).

Even such seminal modern Zionist heroes like Theodore Herzl, Chaim Weizmann, and Ben Gurion all had children who married non-Jews. [SCHNEIDER, p. 339] Max Nordeau, one of the foremost Zionist pioneers, was married to a Christian. Even Israeli right wing prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's first marriage was to a woman whose mother was not Jewish.

Yet Moses himself cautioned against exogamy (DEUTERONOMY 7: 34) and "the promises of Isaiah and the injunctions of Ezra in matters of separation," noted J. O. Hertzler in 1942, "are as valid today among the Orthodox as at the hour of their supposed utterance ... A generation or two ago, among many Jews, a father would say kaddish (a prayer for the dead) over the child who was intermarried, as if he had died. Intermarriage was an unforgivable sin, more sinister and dangerous than religious apostates." [HERTZLER, p. 79]

Such injunctions still hold firm in Jewish Orthodox communities today in America (6% of the United States Jewish population, 14% of the New York Jewish population). The rate of intermarriage in the Orthodox community, according to two Jewish researchers on the subject, is "virtually nil." [FARBER, p. 17] (In 1991 a study even showed that 85% of all Jews in New York married other Jews.) [FARBER, p. 16]

By 1990, however, with so many young Jews (or divorcees taking on second or third marriages) marrying out of the Jewish community across America, "religious and communal leaders," says Edward Shapiro, "could no longer hurl jeremiads against exogamy or berate the intermarried, particularly when often their children and closest acquaintances had intermarried." [SHAPIRO, p. 5] "The non-Orthodox ... walk a tightrope," says Lena Romanoff, "Although they do not want to encourage intermarriage, they also do not want to alienate young Jews who, with or without approval from their rabbis or parents are increasingly likely to become involved in intermarriage." [ROMANOFF, p. 6] Hence, since about the

1960s, Jewish communities (except the Orthodox who ban it) have had no choice but to slowly shift from an intolerance of intermarriage to damage control: it was time to swallow their convictions and make strong efforts to keep the children of mixed marriages Jewish.

Outreach programs or not, there is a strong tendency to keep the children of mixed marriages Jewish anyway. Given traditional Jewish identity (with its obsessive root and intolerant view of Christians), it should be no surprise that Jews in mixed marriages are far less willing to give up links to their heritage than Gentile spouses. In a 1980s New York area demographic study, for example, the results suggested that three-quarters of Jewish women who marry Gentiles planned to raise their children as Jews. [SILBERMAN, p. 303] Calvin Goldscheider notes that "usually the Jewish partner remains attached to the Jewish community and in many cases the partner not born Jewish becomes attached to the Jewish community through friends, family, neighbors, organizations, secular and religious. Most of the friends of the intermarried are Jewish; most support the state of Israel; most identify themselves as Jews." [GOLDSCHIEDER, p. 139] "In my experience," says social worker Edwin Freedman, "it is far more likely that when Jews and non-Jews marry it will generally be the non-Jewish partner who is influenced away from his or her origins. When the focus is confined to those marriages in which the Jewish partner is female, then I have to add that I have almost never seen such a union where the non-Jewish male will be the less adaptive partner in family matters." [FREEDLAND, E., 1982, p. 503] "*If half the children [of mixed marriages] are raised as Jews,*" notes a hopeful Charles Silberman, "*there will be no net reduction in the number of Jews, no matter how high the intermarriage is.*" [Silberman's emphasis] [SILBERMAN, p. 303]

Faced with a younger Jewish generation that is more inclined to exogamy, some liberal community leaders, rather than lose Jews en masse, have faced the "disaster" with controversial, nontraditional, emergency remedies. While not proselytizing, some Jewish leaders are exploring *conversion to Judaism* by non-Jewish spouses as an option to keep a dedicated Jewish lineage and identity. (By 1990 there were about 190,000 formal converts to Judaism in America, the overwhelming majority married to born Jews). [EPSTEIN, p. 38] If, for instance, the non-Jewish marriage partner converts to Judaism, the chances of the union's children being raised as Jews is much higher. While 75% of mixed married children remained Jewish when the non-Jewish partner converted to Judaism, likewise 75% of the children were not raised Jewish in non-converted households. [EPSTEIN, p. 40]

For many converts, their new Jewish identity has some unexpected aspects.

"Virtually every Jew by choice to whom I spoke," says researcher Charles Silberman, "told me that conversion involves a transformation in identity ... 'All of a sudden you feel labeled and vulnerable,' a Denver convert told me ... A New Yorker put it more graphically: 'I feel much more of that 'when will those *goyim* get me?' syndrome than I expected." [SILBERMAN, p. 317] More demanding than any religious allegiance, one study found that 71% of converts to Judaism felt that support for Israel was important; 70% even felt it important to visit the Jewish nation. (Two-thirds of the converts married to Jews earned \$75,000 a year or more). [FORSTER, p. 97]

"As a new Jew," counsels Laurence Epstein in his book for converts, "the convert needs to identify with the Jewish community so deeply that the community's concerns are absorbed by the convert. The Jewish community cares about the survival and security of Israel. So must the convert. The Jewish community cares about preserving the memory of the Holocaust so as to firm its resolve to fight anti-Semitism. So must the convert." [EPSTEIN, p. 198]

In 1973 the Reform and Conservative rabbinate decided to deal with the unpleasant situation of increasing intermarriage by creating a formal course for converts to Judaism (i.e., mostly non-Jews who sought to marry Jews) "in order to preserve a Jewish identity in the home to retain the next generation (as *Jews*)." [FORSTER, p. 55] It was agreed not to publicize the course, however, for fear of encouraging intermarriage (as well as the program's inevitably controversial nature in Orthodox circles); "students" were selected by rabbis. The course addressed a wide range of "Jewishness" -- "highlights of Jewish history includ[ed] the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel." [FORSTER, p. 56]

The overwhelming majority of conversions in America are performed under the auspices of Reform or Conservative rabbinate. In Israel, which is deeply, and increasingly, influenced by Orthodox dictate, these conversions are not recognized as being legitimate. Jewish Orthodoxy formally dominates the Israeli religious (and, to some degree, secular) system. "It has long been known," wrote Uri Huppert in 1988, "that Reform and Conservative rabbis are not authorized to officiate at ceremonies for their own congregants. They can neither marry, nor divorce, nor bury them." [HUPPERT, U., 1988, p. 51]

Many converts to Judaism in America have a rude and unexpected awakening when they visit Israel and find that there they are not Jews after all. "More than one convert," says Laurence Epstein, "has told me they wished they had known of these disputes [between Reform and Conservative Judaism and Orthodoxy] before they converted." [EPSTEIN, p. 44] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that "some hundreds of thousands of individuals who have received Reform conversions or patrilineal Jewish identity [i.e., only the father is Jewish], or are the children of women who have [converted to Judaism], consider themselves Jewish and halakhically are not." [SACKS, J., p. 186]

In 1998 this experience befell Andrea Kinkel, the daughter of Germany's foreign minister, who married an Israeli citizen and converted to Orthodox Judaism in the United States. The Israeli Foreign Ministry rejected her conversion when she and her husband moved to Israel. [DEUTSCH-PRESS] Similar is the case of Abraham Elhiany, born and raised in Louisiana. His father was Jewish, his mother was not. Upon moving to Israel, his various papers testifying to his "Jewishness" were decided to be forgeries by the Israeli rabbinate (although he was told by one clerk that the matter could be settled for \$1,000). [ARNOLD, p. A1] Even if a Gentile jumps through all the hoops of rigorous year-long study (and, for males, a circumcision rite) to be an Orthodox Jew in Israel, the conversion is only valid in that country.

By traditional Jewish law, not only are non-Orthodox conversions to Judaism unacceptable. Any Jew who divorced and remarries without getting a specially Orthodox "bill of divorce" will thereby have children who are automatically considered by the Orthodox to be *mamzerim*, illegitimate, no matter who the Jewish parent remarries. *Mamzerim* are children born of incestuous or adulterous unions. "They carry a

stigma with tragic consequences," notes Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. "[By Orthodox decree] they may not marry a legitimate Jew. The Reform abandonment of halikhic divorce thus creates a halakhic fact of illegitimacy ... The potential for human grief is enormous." [SACKS, J., p. 183-184]

For those who do successfully become converts under strict Orthodox observance in Israel, in 1985 the Israeli Interior Ministry afforded them still another slap in the face, highlighting their status as "second-class Jews." All converts to Judaism were henceforth to have their Israeli identity cards stamped with "convert" next to the word Jew. [JEWISH WEEK, 7-4-86, p. 3]

This issue of "conversion to Judaism" and its attendant paradoxes and incongruities demands scrutiny. The [Encyclopedia Judaica](#) uses this alleged Jewish openness to conversion as evidence against the worst racist implications of the "Chosen People" mythology:

"[The Chosen People] concept has been the object of criticism, misinterpretation, and attack from within and without. The anti-Semite has seized upon it as an unveiled claim to Jewish superiority, and caricatures it by maintaining that it is the basis of a program of world domination ... Judaism has always been open to the proselyte who -- by accepting it -- becomes part of the Chosen People. This fact is often cited to refute charges of 'racial' exclusiveness."

[ENCYCLOPEDIA JUDAICA, p. 502]

What about the opportunity for anyone to convert to Judaism, which "refutes" the charges of an intolerant "racial exclusiveness" as bedrock to the faith?

The main reason some liberalizing strands of Judaism have begrudgingly warmed to the idea of conversion is not because of any intrinsic openness in the faith, but because younger, secularized, and assimilating Jews are increasingly marrying non-Jews. If Jewish parents have to swallow poison, they would -- as the lesser of evils -- at least get the poison to convert to Judaism.

Because most people who convert to Judaism have a romantic involvement with a Jewish partner (over 90%) [FORSTER, p. xi], conversion to Judaism and intermarriage is highly related. Many conversions of course are merely expeditious. According to a 1979 study, 47% of the converts become Jews because of pressure from the spouses-in-law, or for the sake of their children. In a 1987 study 40.6 per cent of Jews married to non-Jews were unhappy that their spouses were not Jewish; only 14.4% of the corresponding Gentile partners were unhappy their spouses were not Christian. Gentile spouses were found to be likely to convert to Judaism if requested to do so by Jewish in-laws. [FORSTER, p. 76] Likewise, Jewish spouses "preferred that their partners take on Judaism rather than become involved in Christianity themselves, because they wanted to retain their Jewish connection and identity, and they felt uncomfortable affirming Christian beliefs. They tended to actively encourage their partner's conversion." [FORSTER, p. 118]

One such study found that 98% of Jewish parents and their children married to non-Jews favored conversion (of the Gentile spouses); 58% of Jews married to Gentiles "actively encouraged conversion of their mate." [FORSTER, p. 135]

"When Yehuda insisted I have an Orthodox conversion," says Margaret Morrison, a Gentile married to an Israeli Jew, "so that we and our children would be fully accepted in Israel, I was shocked."

"Eric [Goldberg] and I dated for two years," says another Gentile woman who married him, "and the only thing Jewish I ever knew about him was his name ... There was not one Jewish book or article in his apartment, and we never discussed Jewish issues. Was I shocked during our first real discussion about marriage when he practically demanded that I convert to Judaism and insisted we be married in a synagogue by his rabbi." [ROMANOFF, p. 63]

Jacob Kramer simply told his non-Jewish girlfriend: "I'm not a particularly knowledgeable or a religious Jew, but deep down I feel Jewish, and I want you to consider sharing that feeling with me. Let's explore together." [ROMANOFF, p. 64] Ronald Maislin's "major, and not uncommon, dilemma, was whether he should first ask Debbie to marry him, then to convert, or vice versa. "I didn't want her to think I was blackmailing her into an answer," he says, "But the fact was I probably would not have married her without conversion." [ROMANOFF, p. 66] Madeline Plotnick told her would-be husband: "Al, I want our children to be Jewish, not just because I'm Jewish but because they would share a common religion with us. I want you to become a Jew so we can share everything together." Michael Hart wrote a letter to his girlfriend: "I asked her to consider my proposal seriously but ended by saying that if she could not convert or at least consider it as a future option then I did not want her to respond to my letter. [ROMANOFF, p. 67]

"After only a few months of being together," says Yossi Klein Halevi,

"I couldn't imagine life without [non-Jewish] Lynn. And though I tried to forget the future, I dreaded a choice between Lynn and Jewish loyalty. I wanted her to convert to Judaism, to share with me the quest of how to be a Jew in this time. But I knew that could work only she fell in love with the Jewish people." [HALEVI, MEMOIRS, p. 210]

Insisting that Lynn move with him to Israel, she eventually complained that "It's all on me. I'm the one who has to make the big changes. Fall in love with Judaism, fall in love with Israel. I feel like an appendage to you. It's a setup." "You're right," replied Halevi, "but what's the alternative?" [HALEVI, MEMOIRS, p. 228]

Paul Cowan explains common obsessions with Jewish identity in an intermarriage:

"Usually even the most disaffected Jews want to raise their children as Jews. Many are aware that, according to sociologists and demographers, increasing numbers of Jews who marry in the 1980s are choosing gentiles as their

spouses. Even though they themselves are intermarrying, they often are afraid that their children will be assimilated into Christian culture. They fear that if they don't insist on maintaining Judaism in their homes they will betray more than four thousand years of proud history and deprive their children of a valued legacy.

It is often impossible for their gentile partners to understand the intensity of these feelings. They wonder why so many Jews who marry Christians insist on celebrating Jewish holidays and ignoring Christmas; on sending children to Hebrew school and keeping them out of churches. Why are they insensitive to some of the deepest feelings of the gentiles that they love? Why, the Christians wonder, are Jews so stubborn?

Why, some Jews respond, are the gentiles unable to understand the depth of their loyalty to their heritage and their people?" [COWAN, P. 1987, p. x]

"Many Jews in modern America believe it is enough to feel Jewish," says Lena Romanoff, "to be a gastronomic or cultural Jew, perhaps with the notion that, as inexplicable as it is, they have little "J" cells in their blood.... When it comes time to encouraging conversion [in their Gentile partners] these Jews understandably find it difficult to explain this seemingly inexplicable commitment to their partners." [ROMANOFF, p. 64]

And how are converts to Judaism accepted in the Jewish community?

"The Jewish community as a whole," says Brenda Forster and Joseph Tabachnik, "still evidences great suspicion towards converts ... Since Jews know of their own Marranos who faked being Christians for centuries, they have historical grounds for being suspicious." [FORSTER, p. 74] "The Jewish community's is a shamefully ambivalent attitude," complained Rabbi Laurence Kushner in 1997, "even down right hostile toward people who want to join us. It is based on a narrow, ethnic definition of what it means to be a Jew, and has no basis in present social reality." [FIRESTONE, TIKKUN, p. 37]

Even those few Gentiles who convert to Judaism with no attendant romantic interest in a Jew find their sincerity demeaned in the Jewish community. "It is assumed by those of a negative bent," says Brenda Forster, "even when the facts are known to be otherwise, that ... converts ... have convert[ed] for utilitarian reasons." [FORSTER, p. 76] Jewish identity, Laurence Epstein warns would-be converts, "... is something of an ethnocentric nature, such as the view that converts are not really Jewish, that only someone born Jewish could truly understand how a Jew feels." [EPSTEIN, p. 52]

"Rejection," says convert Lena Romanoff, "from all corners of Jewish society, is nothing new for a convert ... It points to one of the most serious problems facing all converts: lack of acceptance by other Jews ... Despite my obvious commitment, the consensus in my [Jewish in-law] family was that it would

be better if my "past" was not made public knowledge ... I began to think I was walking around with a disease of some sort." [ROMANOFF, p. 128-129]

"Unlike Christians," says Brenda Forster, "who open their arms and doors in great warmth, concern, and support for converts, Jews are generally suspicious ... Jews by choice [converts] are surprised and hurt by evidence of nonacceptance from Jews that continues for years ... Recent figures (1985) put the Jewish-Gentile divorce rate at 55%, with the Jewish-Jewish rate at 10% ... Negative reactions [to Gentile spouses] by Jewish in-laws, by Jewish leaders, and by the Jewish community may eventually take their toll." [FORSTER, p. 133-134]

"Sadly enough," says Lena Romanoff, "some born Jews disregard the level of commitment and sincerity of the convert. In their eyes a convert is a convert and will always be a convert ... I especially found it ironic when I hear Jewish parents say that they would rather their child marry a secular, assimilated Jew than a convert. In these cases, the convert is greeted with hostility or suspicion, whereas those same parents would never pass such judgment on the uncommitted Jew." [ROMANOFF, p.] As Nahum Goldmann notes, "the Talmud says that a *ger*, a convert, is as hard to bear as a sore." [GOLDMANN, N., 1978, p. 65]

"Jews are born, not made," insisted Marty Ross, the father-in-law of a convert, "The Jewish people fought long and hard to survive the ravages of history. Why should an outsider, after a few months of study, be entitled to claim our inheritance?" [ROMANOFF, p. 130] "To be a Jew," says Jewish scholar Nicholas de Lange, "is thus to acknowledge an attachment to this historic experience. Conversion to Judaism is often conceived in religious terms, but religion is only one aspect of Jewish identity. One cannot become a Jew through subscribing to a set of religious beliefs, any more than one ceases to be a Jew by losing one's religion. (We do not speak of a 'lapsed Jew.')

Hence converts are normally spoken of not as converts but as proselytes, a Greek term which originally meant 'immigrants.' To become a Jew is essentially to join a people." [DE LANGE, N., 1987, p. 20]

"Four thousand years of Jewish history," observes Lena Romanoff, "have cast a unique perspective of the world on many Jews -- a perspective that above all emphasizes the uniqueness of a people who have triumphed over repeated periods of persecution, alienation, aloneness. For some the sense of uniqueness is threatened by one who tries to 'join the club.' This belonging is seen as a birthright, not something that can be learned or transferred." [ROMANOFF, p. 131]

Elected as "sisterhood president" at her local synagogue, when it was revealed that Romanoff was only a convert, and not a born Jew, she was informed that she "was no longer sisterhood president because one of the members does not think that a convert is a real Jew." [ROMANOFF, p. 129, 1990] Anita Gray also converted to Judaism, married a Jew, and eventually became a "national vice chair of the United Jewish Appeal, a board member of the Council of Jewish Federations, a leader in the Cleveland Jewish community, and an active participant in the North American Jewish Forum." She recounts her horrible experience at a conference about Jewish identity in Israel when she admitted that she wasn't born Jewish:

"They had not met people like me -- converts. It was as if I had two heads. An Israeli Lubavitcher [Hasidic] rebbe [rabbi] jumps up yelling, 'A Jew knows a Jew through the eye.' Then an aide to [prime minister Menachem] Begin stands up, points a finger at me, and declares, 'You're a tainted woman. Your children will not be able to play with my children.' I was devastated." [STARR, J., 1990, p. 208]

In 1991, a newly appointed executive director of a Jewish education program drew strong criticism, particularly from the Orthodox and Conservative communities because she was married to a non-Jew. Jewish defenders of Judith Greenberg called the attacks "shocking" and her critics "bigots." About twenty letters of protest had come to the Jewish Education Service of North America, not including others directed to Greenberg personally, "from people trying to force her out." Rabbi Marc Angel, President of the Rabbinical Council of America, objected to Greenberg, calling her a "bad role model ... [for] Jewish values." [AIN, 4-19-91, p. 4] And in 1995, Jonathan Tobin, executive editor of the Connecticut Jewish Ledger made national news for consistently refusing to publish interfaith wedding and engagement notices in his newspaper. [LIEBERMAN, p. 14-15]

When Nan Fink (who "as a girl felt inexplicably connected to the victims of the Holocaust") tried to convert to Judaism, "vicious letters and middle of the night telephone calls threatened the Conservative rabbi with whom Fink initially studied for conversion. At her local Orthodox shul no one would even speak to her. When referred to an Orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem, he informed her that conversion would cost 'only \$8,000, a real bargain.'" [PFEFFERMAN, Do We, p. 8] Fink, the former wife of Tikkun editor Michael Lerner (left-wing harbinger of "Jewish values") notes that:

"I was ... having a difficult time in the Orthodox shul, where I have been going to services with Michael and his teenage son for the last few months. I had hoped to find friends in this community, hardly anyone would speak to me. It was not my imagination. One day an anonymous letter arrived, scrawled on light blue note paper, telling me that I didn't belong at the shul. Shocked, I quickly tore the letter to shreds. This was only a preview of what would come. A few weeks later one of the women congregants beckoned me to the side of the room after the service. I had seen her before, but we hadn't spoken. 'Nobody wants you here,' she said in a stern voice. 'People are too polite to tell you directly, but that's how they feel. You're not welcome. Do you understand?' I left the shul weeping." [PFEFFERMAN, Do We, p. 10]

In Fink's conversion case, noted the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, "sometimes Fink even 'caught herself buying into the implicit racism,' musing that a particularly non-Jewish friend was 'goyishly' bland or restrained." [PFEFFERMAN, Do We, p. 8]

Louisa Gibson, also married to a Jew, notes her own hellious road towards conversion to Orthodox Judaism:

"This was a Blakeian period for me. A transition from innocense to experience. I was coming from a strong Catholic family, convent educated, sheltered. My parents did not teach us to judge people on the basis of their race or religion. I knew that bigotry and racism existed but had never felt it. It shocked me, and, like a person in shock, it took a while to understand that I was victim of these attitudes. I was an outsider ... Everyone knows the convert has to be rejected. Little else about conversion is generally spoken about ... Why do so many Jews believe their personal response to a convert must also be one of rejection?"
[GIBSON, L., 2000, p. 24]

A convert to Judaism in 1958 told Jewish sociologist Herbert Gans "of becoming disturbed over a discussion at an informal party, the subject being how to inculcate Judaism into their children 'keep them away from the goyim -- the non-Jews.' This resident was very active in the Jewish community and feared the consequences of revealing his origin. Nevertheless, he felt the time had come to announce that he had been born and raised a Christian. The declaration broke up the party, and shocked some people. He said afterwards: 'From now on, they'll be on their guard about me in their presence. They've lost their liberty of expression, they don't express themselves without restriction now. At party if anybody says something, everybody looks to see if I've been offended and people are taken into a corner and explained about me.'" [GANS, p. 229]

That same year scholars George Eaton Simpson and J. Milton Yinger noted that

"Intermarriage is opposed by some Jews even when the non-Jew joins the Jewish group because 'an alien element is introduced.' According to [S.E.] Goldstein, the feeling that this element is 'a source of weakness and danger' has become stronger in recent years owing to the spread of a nationalist spirit among Jewish people." [SIMPSON/YINGER, p. 569]

"If the notion of [a giant extended Jewish] family is taken seriously," note Charles Liebman and Steve Cohen, "it affirms a biological affinity. No amount of religious mystification can make biological Jews of converts." [LIEBMAN/COHEN, p. 24] Even if a non-Jew converts to Judaism, explained Nathan, a Jewish senior citizen, to researcher Barbara Myerhoff, "that won't make him a Jew. You could say a broche [blessing] over a chicken, but that won't make him a fish." [MYERHOFF, p. 79]

"The most insidious and persuasive barrier to a convert's full integration into the Jewish community," noted Gary Tobin in 1999,

"derives from the passionate and often heated who-is-a-Jew debate.

Underlying many of the arguments swirling around in this discussion is the (secret) conviction that true membership in the Jewish community can only be achieved by birth. All other comers can never be like us, not really, not in their hearts. But we cannot say this out loud." [*original author's parenthesis*: TOBIN, G., 1999, p. 99]

"There is a debilitating hesitancy," wrote Raphael Baaden, a Jew by birth, in 1996,

"around the question of conversion [to Judaism]. It cannot be positively encouraged [by Jews] ... because, well, it can't. Instead, it seems we should concentrate on exhorting Jews to marry Jews -- that is (although it's usually not stated in these terms) *born Jews* ... A halakhic ruling about the inclusion of certain Jews -- namely those with Jewish mothers and non-Jewish fathers [i.e., the classical religious ruling of who is a Jew] seems to have been fashioned within a discourse of racial purity into a threatening statement of exclusion. This discourse of racial purity clouds our thoughts continuously, in particular when the question of conversion arises." [BAADEN, p. 11]