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INTERMARRIAGE CIRCA 1918

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Oct 20 2010

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Intermarriage is without doubt destroying the American Jewish community.

There are approximately 5.6 million American Jews, some 2 million of whom live in households identified as non-Jewish. Better than half the Jewish children under the age of 18 are being raised as non-Jews or with no religion. Whereas before 1965 only 10 percent of American Jews who married did so outside the faith, that percentage has jumped over the past two-and-a-half decades to at least 52 percent.

These statistics are depressing, alarming, and frightening. But this is not an entirely new

phenomenon in American Jewish life. Page 6 of the January 20, 1918 edition of the New York Tribune carried an article headlined "American Melting Pot Already Diluting Jewish Religion and Race." The article, written by D. M. Hermalin, described the marriage, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, of "Esther Lifshitz, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Samuel Lifshitz, an Orthodox Jew, to John D. Sylvester, a full-fledged American Gentile."

Hermalin reported that "the marriage ceremony was performed in the bride's home. Father, mother, uncles and aunts and numerous other relatives were present. An Orthodox rabbi performed the ceremony and made the bridegroom repeat in pure Hebrew '*Hare ath m'kudsheth li b'tabaath zu k'dath Mosheh v'Israel.*'"

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"It was no secret. Everybody present knew that the young bridegroom was a Christian, and he refused to embrace Judaism at the solicitation of Esther and her relatives. He agreed, however, to a Jewish marriage ceremony."

According to the article, "The entire affair went off without a ripple in the life of Jewish orthodoxy on the East Side. The reason is that such things occur on the East Side, in Brownsville, Williamsburg, Harlem, and The Bronx, or

wherever Jews in New York have settled in large communities."

Hermalin wrote that intermarriages are "almost a daily occurrence now," but that just a few years before, intermarriage "would have called forth surprise, astonishment and resentment on the part of the religious." He attributed this to the precipitous drop in immigration from Eastern Europe that began in 1915.



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Hermalin pointed out that without a steady influx of Jews from the Old World who were raised in an environment of commitment to religious practice, there are few people "to criticize the actions of the younger generation in America and to remind the old of its religious duties."

Hermalin claimed that if Esther Lifshitz had wanted to marry her suitor in 1915, "and he had refused to become a member of the synagogue, she would have had to leave the house of her parents and probably been disowned by them."

Jewish immigrants who came to America began to lose their commitment to Jewry, wrote Hermalin, and Jewry in America survived only because new immigrants from the Old World arrived to reinforce Judaism here.

It was the influx of Jews from Germany in the early part of the 19th century that was responsible for keeping Judaism viable in the United States. "But," Hermalin noted, "with all due respect to their religious ardor, it was comparatively short-lived. During the time of forty years, German Jews in America lost even that enthusiasm which they had originally brought with them. They produced rabbis who knew very little of the Hebrew language and literature, and their sermons were smattered with politics, philosophy and everything but Judaism."

Thus, during the middle of the 19th century the German Jews who were here were well on their way to assimilation. But a new influx of Jews from Europe that began after the Civil War and gained momentum after 1881 bolstered Judaism in America.

"The influence of the new arrivals," Hermalin continued, "was immense. They actually made prominent American Jews feel ashamed of intermarriage and practice a purer Judaism than they had ever done before. All was well so long as the influx of immigration did not come to a stop. Then the World War broke out and the transformation came. It came suddenly and with gigantic strides. It does not manifest itself exactly in conversions to Christianity, but the laxity of religious adherence on the one hand and frequent intermarriage on the other hand all tend to undermine the integrity of Judaism in America."

Once immigration to America slowed to a trickle after 1923, Judaism again entered a period of decline. There were, however, other factors that came into play during the first part of the 20th century, namely the founding of yeshivas, which tended to stem this decline or at least slow it.

Thus, when new Jewish immigrants arrived here after World War II, they had a basis on which to build and used this to increase the quality and quantity of Torah education available to young people. This led to the establishment of the many vibrant Orthodox Jewish communities we have today. But let us not fail to learn from the lessons of the past: our survival as Jews is predicated on giving as many Jewish children as possible as extensive a Torah education as possible.

Indeed, several studies have shown that extensive Jewish day school education is the prime contributor to the formation of strong Jewish identities; that Jewish schooling correlates with reductions in intermarriage and more Jewishly active lives; and that the intermarriage rate decreases within the non-Orthodox community as a result of a Jewish high school education.

We must never forget these facts, because history teaches us that the consequences of doing so will, God forbid, lead to catastrophe for the Jewish people.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. He writes a Jewish Press feature column, "Glimpses Into American Jewish History," which appears the first week of each month. He can be contacted at levine@stevens.edu.

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Please explain

Date 02:10, 10-23, 10

Can someone please explain why it matters who you marry if you a non-religious Jew ? If you

don't having conflicting ideas about God race should not even be an issue for marriage. I think race is about as important as hair color or eye color. Irrelevant.

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