

Comments on "Keruv and the Status of Intermarried Families"

RABBI SEYMOUR SIEGEL

The question of what to do with intermarried families is vexing and important. On the basis of statistics and experience, we know that it might be *the* most important problem facing American and world Jewry.

In defining halakhic norms applicable to intermarried individuals and their offspring, it is necessary to state our goals. These norms should be tested not only on a halakhic basis, but on the likelihood that they will help us to achieve our ends. As the history of halakhah shows so clearly, halakhah is changed in light of the ends. To pretend that halakhah exists and is fashioned in a historic and sociological vacuum is to be both inaccurate and unfair to the creative genius of Judaism.

Our ends are to prevent intermarriage as much as possible -- always with the realization that we will never fully succeed in preventing intermarriage altogether. In the now classic study of "Intermarriage and the Jewish Future" by Egon Mayer and Carl Sheingold (American Jewish Committee), it is stated that the "born-Jewish" partner in an intermarriage roughly reflects the "denominational background" of American Jewry: 11.1% have Orthodox backgrounds; 29.3% Conservative; 26.7% Reform; and 32.9% are not affiliated. What is also important is that about 70% of the parents of the born-Jewish spouses belonged to a synagogue and over 65% were perceived by the respondents to the survey to have been "somewhat religious." Of the born-Jewish respondents, 11.7% went to a Day School or Yeshivah. None of the panaceas against intermarriage are foolproof -- even Day School education! Therefore, when speaking of our problem, we are speaking of a phenomenon that is found in practically every Jewish family, at least in the United States and Canada. According to Professor Mayer:

The Jewish involvement that probably exerts the greatest influence on the religious and ethnic identity of young children (and their parents) is participation in synagogue life. The data make clear that while 15 to 20 percent of the mixed marriage couples surveyed do belong to a synagogue, and attend services with some regularity, the vast majority do not. It should be noted, however, that intermarried couples often

find scant welcome in both religious and secular organizations. Lack of involvement does not always reflect a lack of desire on the part of the intermarried couples to belong (p. 17).

At the time of the study, 21% of the born-Gentile respondents had converted to Judaism. One-third of the converts did so after marriage. What is startling in the study is that the vast majority of converts are actively involved in their synagogues, and approximately two-thirds attend services with some degree of regularity. The comparable figures for non-converts is less than one-third. According to the National Jewish Population Survey, fewer than half of all endogamous Jewish families are involved in synagogue life. The converts are more Jewish than the "born Jews"! In general, one could say on the basis of the data that conversionary families are more Jewish than endogamous families. The obvious implication points to the crucial factor of conversion in the salvaging of families of intermarried couples. Therefore, our halakhic norms should be judged by the effect they have on the potential conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. However, if we follow the recommendations of the authors of "*Keruv* and the Status of Intermarried Families," which appears prior to this paper, the following will happen:

- (1) When a potential convert who is the husband of a Jew comes to shul and wants to wear a tallit, we will tell him to take the tallit off. (Beit Yosef, *Orah Hayyim* 10, cites some authorities, admittedly a minority, who certify as kosher tzitzit woven by a non-Jew.) If we tell them to take off their tallitot because it is traditionally "Jewish garb," how about a kippah? I find this recommendation particularly unconvincing.
- (2) Six-year-old children of a non-converted wife of a Jewish man will not be permitted to attend Hebrew School, because it might ultimately "lead to intermarriage." The authors overestimate the danger of intermarriage for pre-adolescents. They also underestimate the embarrassment and resentment which will be felt by rejection of would-be children-students in Hebrew Schools. They are also to be turned away at the door of USY events and synagogue trips. This all in the name of *keruv*!
- (3) There will be special tutors for about-to-be converted children even organized by the rabbi. Do these classes have names -- like special classes for non-Jews, etc.?
- (4) The *Kol Bo Al Avelut* is not as harsh about burial of the spouses of Jews as are the authors (p. 190).

Even the authors admit that these proposals are harsh. I wonder what the evidence is that harshness leads to better results than kindness, consideration and friendliness. Is it clear that we will benefit if we cut off the non-Jew from everything communally Jewish? The authors even want

Comments on "Keruv and the Status of Intermarried Families"

the born-Jewish spouse to be denied offices in the community. For years, such a person was national chairman of the United Jewish Appeal. I know of one such person who is among the largest contributors to the New York Federation. Should we deny these people honors because they are intermarried? I wonder whether the Board of the Seminary does not contain members whose spouses are not Jewish. I know of one high official who had his picture in *The New York Times* giving away his child at a wedding held in a famous church!

The famous statement about *semol dohah* and *yemin mekarevet* was interpreted by one great preacher in light of the fact that usually the right hand is stronger than the left one. Our pushing away should not be as forceful as our efforts to bring close.

Therefore, we should recommend to our rabbis:

- (1) They should make every effort to convert non-Jewish members of intermarried couples; and
- (2) In light of individual differences and circumstances, we should leave it to the *mara d'atra* to decide what kind of action will likely lead to conversion of spouses and/or children. This should be the halakhah in this very difficult situation.

