

# The Looming Intermarriage Crisis

By Marc Tanenbaum  
(JTA)

More than a decade ago, a young woman came to my office asking if I would preside over her conversion to Judaism.

The woman, a magazine writer, was a former Catholic nun who, under the impact of Vatican Council II, had become intrigued by Judaism and had begun a serious study of the Jewish religion and Jewish culture.

After determining over several meetings that her interest in becoming Jewish was genuine, I

arranged for an Orthodox and a Conservative rabbi to prepare her intellectually and spiritually for conversion, climaxed by immersion in a mikvah (ritual bath).

(She had asked for an Orthodox rabbi, saying that should she ever make aliyah to Israel, she did not want to have problems being accepted as a Jew.)

She subsequently married a young Jewish man who was a "cultural" or secular Jew. She set up a kosher home, "took" her husband to shul services on shabbat and Yom Tov and, later, had her two children educated

in an Orthodox day school.

As told to me, the husband in time felt pressured by all this unexpected Jewishness coming from his former-nun wife. He complained to his mother, also a "cultural" Jew. Her response was, "That's what happens when you marry a shiksa."

That is an intermarriage experience with "a happy Jewish ending."

Unfortunately, national Jewish studies on the rising rate of intermarriage provide little basis for any nachas. According to a major study by the Council of Jewish Federations, 52 percent of the Jewish men and women who have married since 1985 married non-Jewish spouses.

Some five percent of these marriages involve one partner who is a convert to Judaism. The survey found that Jews by choice (converts) number 185,000, while converts from Judaism number 210,000.

More significantly, nearly three of every four children of intermarriages are being raised either as Christians or with no religion at all.

That grim picture is deepened by the low Jewish birthrate (lower than Catholics and Protestants), the rising tide of divorce and broken families and the very limited immigration rate, mainly of Soviet Jews.

There is some consolation to be found in the rising numbers of children receiving a Jewish education, a high percentage of Bar Mitzvahs and increasing Jewish education among many adults. The dramatic rise in Orthodox Jewish commitment is an important balancing wheel.

Nevertheless, if present trends continue — and there is little sign of their abating — the American Jewish community is facing an unprecedented challenge to its continuity and survival.

There are serious people in the Orthodox, Conservative and Reform movements who are worrying deeply over these trends, and are trying to carry out "outreach" or "keruv" programs to lessen the hemorrhaging of the Jewish people.

If ever there were a challenge which cries out for a coherent, cooperative mobilization of Jewish wisdom and energies, it is the intermarriage time-bomb. Our very future as a significant American Jewish community is at stake.

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, for 30 years the director of the international relations department of the American Jewish Committee, is now a lecturer, writer and consultant.

## Letters to the Editor

### Thanks from a College Student

I would like to thank you for sending me *The Charlotte Jewish News* this past school year. It really helped me to keep in

touch with what was going on in the world and Charlotte Jewish community. I hope that you will be able to continue sending *The Charlotte Jewish News* to me at NC State this coming year.

— Jodi Wittlin

### Wants Paper Sent

I'm still living in New Jersey, but have moved again and would appreciate it if you can continue sending me *The CJN*. Regards to my friends in Charlotte.

— Cheryl Jankowitz  
Fort Lee, NJ

**We encourage our readers' viewpoints. Letters should be submitted typewritten and double-spaced and signed. Please include your address and phone number. We reserve the right to edit.**

## Year of Redemption

(cont'd from preceding page)

existent.

This perfect world will come about through our actions and deeds. By self-improvement and spiritual growth we could change our own surroundings and make a major impact on society. Every good deed, every mitzvah brings us a step closer to the perfect world. It is known in the Torah as the era of Moshiach. As Maimonides writes, that the coming of Mo-

shiach will first bring about change in the freedom and independence of Israel and will eventually lead to the prophetic vision of the future where the lamb and the lion will live side by side.

We are indeed in the shadows of redemption. It is certain that this year is ripe for the coming of Moshiach. May it be that this year of 5752 will be the year of Moshiach.

## Israel Seen Up Close

(cont'd from page 1)

traveled to Ben-Gurion Airport at 2 a.m. to meet an arriving flight carrying Soviet Jews.

As part of the course on religious pluralism, participants met with Rabbi Avraham Shapira, the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel and heard presentations from the leader of the Orthodox Degel HaTorah Party, as well as from representatives of the Conservative and Reform Movements in Israel.

To study the territories and settlements, the executives traveled to Efrat to meet with Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, who founded the community near Jerusalem.

The Institute was timed to coincide with the annual Jewish Agency Assembly, which is traditionally well attended by executives of large Federations but not by their colleagues from small cities. The group took part in Assembly sessions, even to the extent of proposing a resolution which was approved by the Assembly.

The Institute provided the executives with an intimate

understanding of the complexity and enormity of the task at hand — the absorption of Soviet and Ethiopian Jews. They also got a wonderful sense of the Zionist idealism in Israel, how the immigration has lit a fire in the life of Israel. The purpose of the State has again become clear. They came back knowing that their jobs have become more urgent and more complex.

Participants represented communities such as Southern Maine; Ann Arbor, MI; Asheville, NC; Chattanooga, TN; Austin, TX; all with Jewish populations of 5,000 or less.

The purpose of the Institute was to provide an opportunity for executives who rarely get to Israel to participate in an intensive educational program designed to improve their understanding of key issues as well as to enable them to take part in the Jewish Agency Assembly," said Dr. Joseph I. Cohen, Director of CJF's Community Services Department.

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