

# WILL OUR GRANDCHILDREN BE JEWISH?

## A Sermon Delivered by Rabbi Haskel Lookstein At Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun

Thirty-three hundred years ago, a group of slaves in Egypt took part in a ceremony through which they liberated themselves from Egyptian civilization by differentiating them from the pagan society of Egypt.

The commandment to do so is expressed by the Torah as follows:

בְּעֶשְׂרֵי לַחֲרֹשׁ הַזֶּה, וַיִּקְחוּ לָהֶם אִישׁ שֶׁ  
לְבֵית אָבוֹתָיו.

"Speak to the entire community of Israel as follows: On the 10th of this month, each man should take a lamb for the family, a lamb for the household." (Exodus, 12:3.) The lamb was a principal god of Egypt. On the 14th day of the month the children of Israel were commanded to slaughter that lamb and to sprinkle its blood on their doorposts. They then ate it, roasted whole, with matzoh and bitter herbs.

The sacrifice of the paschal lamb, the sprinkling of its blood on the outside of the home, and the eating of the lamb marked the beginning of Jewish distinctiveness from the society around us, a distinctiveness that has led to our survival over the past three millennia.

Many have marveled at our zealotry in guarding this distinctiveness. Paul Johnson begins his *History of the Jews* with the words: "The Jews are the most tenacious people in

history." He joins friends and critics alike who are united by their wonder at one fact: the survival of the Jewish people. The Assyrians and the Babylonians, the Medes and the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans are all gone. We, on the other hand, who have suffered endless persecution and physical threats to our existence, have survived as we were three thousand years ago.

### I. THE PROBLEM

Today, however, that survival, that differentiation, is very much at risk. The National Jewish Population Survey in North America, published in 1990, presents terrifying statistics on that risk. Among Jews who married since 1985, 57 percent married non-Jews. Interestingly, if we analyze the intermarriage rate by affiliation, the figures are as follows: 3.8 percent for Orthodox Jews, 41 percent for Conservative Jews, and 56 percent for Reform Jews. The figures for unaffiliated Jews are off the chart. Of the children of all these intermarriages 72 percent are being brought up as non-Jews.

Today there are about 3.2 million households in America with Jews. Of these, only 1.8 million (slightly more than half) consist of Jews living exclusively with Jews.

Moreover, intermarriage, which is running at ten times the rate in the

1960's, barely a generation ago, is now accepted as normal for Jews. In a recent survey only 20 percent of young American Jews declared themselves opposed to intermarriage - of that group only 6 percent were "strongly opposed." Reform Judaism now accepts intermarried couples into the synagogue and considers their children as Jewish, assuming they have some relationship to the temple. It is already possible for non-Jews to become officers in some congregations and, when their children celebrate bar or bat mitzvahs, to be called to the Torah. The differentiation is disappearing.

In a recent article in the *Jerusalem Report* (Feb. 10, 1994), Natan Sharansky, reflecting on a very impressive meeting in Palm Beach of Jews who had pledged over \$100,000 each to the UJA's Operation Exodus Campaign, wrote depressingly about the contrast between financial commitment and Jewish continuity. "One after another, the donors complained that their children were intermarrying. They felt they could not balance giving them a broad, liberal American education with explaining why it was wrong to have a non-Jewish boyfriend or girlfriend. They seemed embarrassed to teach their children that Jews have a special role and identity and there is a special

value to preserving their Judaism. And so, their legacy as Jews would end with their contributions..."

One might think that living in Israel is insurance against the loss of such differentiation. Think again. In a recent letter to the editor in the Jerusalem Post, Aaron Lerner writes about a speech given before the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations by Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin. The Israeli official stunned the gathering by saying that "if his child decided to marry a non-Jew, he would be hard pressed to offer any compelling arguments against it."

Talk about the Ten Lost Tribes? American Jewry - and, potentially, Israeli Jewry - is assimilating with the same breathtaking speed. Huge percentages of our people are in danger of simply being lost to Jewry.

## II. WHY HAS THIS HAPPENED?

Why in Reform and Conservative - and even in some Orthodox - families are children intermarrying at a dizzying rate? Why in active Zionist and Federation families is assimilation running rampant?

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*"They are people who identify as Jews but do not have a Jewish identity"*

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Let me report to you a story told recently to an organization called The Orthodox Roundtable by Dr. Irving Levitz, a prominent

psychologist and a past dean of Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work. He had a consultation with an intermarried Jewish woman who brought up her children neutrally, as Americans. At a Christmas party a friend gave her a gift. When she opened the gift she found a piece of jewelry: a crucifix with a diamond in it.

The woman was furious. "Doesn't she know that I'm Jewish?" she asked rhetorically. The woman's reaction indicated that she felt Jewish, she identified with the Jewish people and, nevertheless, she intermarried and she was bringing up her children essentially without religion. Why, then was she so furious?

Dr. Levitz suggested that the answer to this woman's fury and a possible explanation of the high intermarriage rate among many Jews who consider themselves to be Jewish lies in a distinction between identification and identity. There are people who identify as Jews but do not have a Jewish identity.

Let me explain: Many of us identify with sports teams. When the Knicks win we say "we won." When we pick up the paper in the morning we check to see how *our* team fared. We watch them on television. We buy season tickets. We are very much involved with the Knicks. We *identify* with them. However, we do not have a *Knick identity*. Patrick Ewing does. He wears the uniform; he plays in all the

games; he sweats in Pat Riley's grueling practices. He is a Knick by identity. We simply identify with him and the team.

The young lady Dr. Levitz discussed identified with Judaism; but she did not have a Jewish identity. An identity comes from internal feelings and is integrally associated with behavior. The author of the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* writes that behavior stimulates one's internal identity.

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*"The heart is moved by one's actions and deeds"*

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כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות.

"The heart is moved by one's actions and deeds." We have a Jewish identity because of our meticulous observance of Shabbat, prayer, tefillin, Yom Tov, kashrut, the laws of family purity and a host of mitzvot. Our inner feelings — our identity — do not simply descend upon us from the air or come from our genes. The *Chinukh* writes דע כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו. "Know that a person is motivated according to his behavior."

Today, Jewish Federations are working feverishly to shore up Jewish continuity. They are expending large funds to promote "Israel experiences" — lengthy trips to Israel for teenagers and young adults. They are introducing Jewish programming into Federation camps. They are encouraging Jewish experiences in Jewish community centers; the making of latkes, the

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baking of challah, and other similarly Jewish acts. Unfortunately, these kinds of programs, which have great importance, will only create Jewish identification, not identity. They may evoke support and emotion. They may cause a person to look at the newspaper in the morning and see what is happening to Jews. But these are external experiences, like the sports fan reading the sports pages or watching reruns on TV, or the youngsters collecting baseball cards. These kinds of activities do not demand behavior or values. They do not create an inner Jewish identity.

My friend, Sister Rose Thiering, identifies with Judaism more than the young woman Dr. Levitz was treating. But Sister Rose does not have a Jewish identity.

### **III. WHY DOESN'T JEWISH IDENTIFICATION WORK?**

Jewish identification will fall far short of protecting strongly against intermarriage or assimilation. If we are to read the statistics correctly we must come to this conclusion. The question is: Why? Why is Jewish identification too weak to act as a barrier to intermarriage? *The answer may very well be that many Jews identify as Jews but their identity is a secular one.* And secularism — at least its popular American variety - is a powerful religion which contains

values and stimulates action. It is the religion of America, and particularly of young America.

Let us consider some of the specific tenets of secularism that actually promote intermarriage and assimilation.

#### **1. The belief in the Sanctity of Individualism.**

The modern American secularist gives primacy to the individual in making his/her own decisions on everything. The credo is: “I am the measure of all things. It is my decision whom I marry. I have freedom to act as I wish and rights to exercise that freedom. I do not submit to the will of anybody else. Short of hurting another person, I decide what I will do and what I will not do; what I will eat and what I will not eat; with whom I will have sex and when; whom I choose to live with and under what circumstances; whom — and whether - I marry or not.”

It is noteworthy that Reform Judaism has made the principle of autonomy a fundamental ideal in the movement. This is one of the reasons that there are few if any rules in Reform. Someone once jokingly asked the President of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the Reform rabbinical organization) whether a member of the CCAR could do anything — short of

nonpayment of dues — which would mandate exclusion from the organization. The answer was, quite simply, “No.”

All of this is very far from a traditional Jewish identity which begins with the principle enunciated in The Ethics of the Fathers עשה רצונו ברצונך, בטל רצונך מפני רצונו. “Make His will yours; nullify your will before His.”

To the secularist, submission is absolutely alien to one's identity. It stifles the identity. To the Jew, it underlies one's identity. Our teacher, Rav Soloveitchik, of blessed memory, used to say that a *chok* (a mitzvah whose reason we do not understand) is more of a religious act than a *mishpat* (a mitzvah whose reason we know) because in the latter we are responding to our own will, while in the former we are submitting to the will of God. Judaism teaches that we are not the measure of all things and it is on that basis that a young man or woman has a much better chance of deciding to marry someone of whom his/her family - not to mention God - would approve.

#### **2. Pluralism**

The modern American secularist bases his life on pluralism and egalitarianism. Everyone's belief is equally valid and true. Ethno-

centrism is bad. The world is one. Barriers must come down. There is no superiority to Judaism. If that is the case, why not intermarry? There are very nice people among other faiths in this country: decent, humane, compassionate, fine people. "She is so wonderful; I never found a Jewish girl as kind and giving as she." "He is such a gentleman; the Jewish boys I have gone out with haven't treated me this way at all." Why not? If pluralism is "in" than Jewish distinctiveness may have no place.

This, of course, is the opposite of what our Jewish identity should tell us: *k'doshim tihiyu*. "Be holy; be different." This is what mitzvot like Shabbat, kashrut, the laws of family purity, the festivals and so much else in Judaism are designed to teach. But in order to learn it and, more importantly, to feel it, one has to be committed to certain rules of behavior. Baking challah on Fridays and making latkes on Chanukah will not do it. Not even Israel will do it. **כי אהרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות.**  
 "The heart is moved by one's actions and deeds."

### 3. The Idealization of Romance.

If one believes that marriage is simply finding someone whom you love and then spending your life with that person, it is difficult to explain why one should not love and marry a non-Jew. The Jewish view is that of course love underlies marriage. It is the source of marriage. But it is not the goal or the destiny of a married life. The purpose of marriage is to transmit the tradition of the past to the future; the way of life we received from our parents is handed over to our children.

We believe that the intimate relationship of marriage results from shared values. Maimonides referred

to this relationship as one shared by two people who are *chaverim l'dei'a* - friends because of ideals they hold in common. Sadly, intermarriage also results from shared values between the two partners - secular values. If our grandchildren are to be Jewish our children have to understand that the shared value of a marriage is to transfer one's own Jewish identity to the next generation.

In our list of statistics we cited the intermarriage rate among Orthodox Jews at 3.8 percent. One ought not be smug about that rate. It is probably a low estimate, and even if it is correct it is still much too high. But the reason the figure is as low as it is may very well be because Orthodox Jews are the least secular among American Jews and the most affiliated. Conversely, the reason why the college campus is a disaster area for Jewish continuity and intermarriage may be that the campus provides the quintessential secular, autonomous, pluralist experience.

In Barry Kosman's study he cites an amazing statistic. Of those *raised in Orthodox homes*, who received 12 or more years of Jewish education, one hundred percent of those interviewed in the study married *in* rather than *out*. One should stress that while Jewish education is critical, the raising of a child in a committed, religiously observant home seems also to be a vital factor.

## IV. WHAT TO DO

So what are we to do in order to change the trend toward assimilation and, God forbid, disappearance?

First, we must provide our children with the best Jewish education possible in quality and in quantity. Trips to Israel are very help-

ful but they will not solve the problem.

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**"Our homes must be filled  
 with religious behavior  
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A comprehensive Jewish education is critical. Second, our homes must be filled with religious behavior - concrete acts, mitzvot. Our homes should be places where our children will learn the principle of **בטל רצונך מפני רצונו**. "Nullify your will before His." They should be places where children take pride in our differentiation through the observance of kashrut, *taharat hamishpacha*, Shabbat and Yom Tov; where they experience a total Jewish way of life, with the stress on action - behavior and practice.

If we follow this prescription we can meet the world with both confidence and tolerance; with our distinctiveness and yet with respect for the uniqueness of others; with pride in our heritage and, at the same time, with the acceptance of the pluralistic commitments of others in the society.

A Jewish identity, as opposed to Jewish identification, comes from "the paschal lamb for the family, a lamb for the household." The primary place for forging that identity must be in our homes.

Thirty-three hundred years ago our act of taking the god of Egypt and slaughtering it was an act of self-liberation, an act of differentiation, setting ourselves apart from the world even while we were determined to be a part of the world. **The challenge for us today is to renew that process of redemption once again in our homes, in our schools, and in our lives.**