

## SESSION FOUR



acing Facts:  
*Intermarriage: When Love  
 Meets Tradition*

Documentary film, 1987  
 Producer: Lydia Kukoff  
 Director: Ilana Bar-Din

Length: 33 minutes

The next three films in this course deal with interfaith relationships, an increasingly prevalent phenomenon in modern life in America.

This session is different from the others in that it features a short documentary film. The “players” are real people, young couples who are intermarried or contemplating intermarriage, speaking candidly about their experiences and their hopes. The aim of this session is to delve more deeply into some of the significant issues relating to interfaith relationships and, in doing so, to allow course participants an opportunity to reexamine their own attitudes. The discussion will provide a framework for interpreting subsequent films in the series.

To clarify the terminology: An intermarriage is a marriage between one person who was born Jewish and one person who was not born Jewish. When the spouse who was not born Jewish does not convert to Judaism, the couple (and their children) are called a “mixed married” family. When the spouse who was born non-Jewish converts to Judaism and considers him/herself to be Jewish, the couple (and their children) are “conversionary” families. Households in which both spouses are born Jewish are called “inmarried” families. Sociologists and observers of the Jewish community distinguish between “conversionary” and “inmarried” families in order to analyze the ways in which Jews by choice (converts) find it easy or difficult to fully participate in Jewish life. They do not, however, regard converts as any less “Jewish” than born Jews.

*Intermarriage: When Love Meets Tradition* was produced in association with the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the religious and educational arm of the Reform movement. The five couples in the film are participants in a program designed to provide a Jewish

orientation for interfaith couples not closely affiliated with the Jewish community. Their real-life stories – and their struggles – are profound, presenting a window for understanding something about the large percentage of American Jews who marry non-Jews.

The focused-discussion group, led by a rabbi, meets for eight sessions. The film shows group members during these sessions as well as at home with their families; several parents also speak before the camera. Each couple's story has its own complexities and differences, related to the spouses' connections to their own religion, Jewish or Christian, relationships with the two sets of parents, and their outlook on how much their religious differences impact on their marriage. Because these five couples elected to attend this program, they are already demonstrating concern with issues of religion at this stage in their marriage. Although a viewer can gain much insight by listening to their dialogue, it is important not to generalize from them to all intermarried people.

Among the issues the couples discuss are raising children – whether it is best (for the parents, for the children) to choose one religion or if it is preferable or possible to bring the child up with both; celebrating holidays and family milestones; finding community; and, for the Jewish spouses, dealing with what one participant describes as the ultimate dividing issue: Jesus Christ.

Ironically, in mixed marriages, partners must confront, grapple with, and articulate their personal beliefs about religion and theology – issues that they might have cared little about when they chose to marry – to a much larger degree than spouses in inmarriages. As the rabbi in the film explains, “Two Jews marry – it’s an automatic. Whether or not they’re going to have Shabbat – we’ll come to it, maybe not, depending on their own inclination. But it’s not an automatic with you guys. Everything you do is going to be put under a microscope.”

The Jewish partners must come to terms with what being Jewish really means to them. Is Judaism a mutually agreed-upon set of religious beliefs, a civilization, a culture, or an exclusive club? What does it mean to belong to the Jewish people? Is one Jewish through prayer or action or knowledge or simply birth? One's answers to such

**Eve-Lynn:** *I want everything to be wonderful. The hardest thing for me to deal with is that any decision we make, somebody's not going to be happy.*

**Eve-Lynn's mother:** *We bring into the world something the world needs and that's worthwhile. And we're such a pitiful minority, that if Jews don't see that and make that selection there will not be any more Jews.*

**Ira's mother:** *We accept it. We have to be flexible. We don't want to lose our children.*

questions are relevant to considerations of how to pass on a sense of Judaism to one's children. Of course these are questions that many inmarried Jewish parents might ask, but for Jews married to non-Jews, the discussion is more complex and perhaps more consequential. And it is up to the Jewish partner to create a Jewish environment – if they choose to.

A poignant scene in the film features Eve-Lynn, a well-spoken young woman, seen trying on wedding dresses, with her mother at her side. She is about to marry a non-Jewish man, yet she doesn't want to give up her dream of a Jewish wedding – *huppah*, breaking a glass, parents lifted on chairs, etc. Although she seeks her mother's approval of the dress, her mother says she can't give it, for that would be approving the marriage. There is much pain in the conversation between two people who clearly love each other and share a set of values. When Eve-Lynn and her fiancé speak of their differences in the group, another kind of deep love and intense pain are evident.

These young people discuss their conflicts and concerns with an admirable honesty. But the viewer is left wondering whether ultimately their marriages will work.

The interfaith relationships portrayed in the next three films do not deal with intermarriage head-on, as this documentary does. Although Woody Allen does speak of his relationship to God in *Annie Hall* (and several other films), most of the other characters do not speak of spiritual issues or concerns about how to raise their children. Rather, the differences are evident on a more cultural level.

### **In Depth: A Changing Community**

If you read newspaper marriage announcements, no doubt you're aware of the large number of Jews marrying non-Jews. Moreover, it's likely that every course participant's life somehow has been touched by intermarriage.

The actual numbers are impossible to compute, as marriages in the United States are not officially registered by religion. However, recent surveys and population studies estimate the number of Jews who marry outside of their religion as 40 to 50 percent of all Jews who marry. This statistic has far-reaching implications for the future of American Jewry.

Who are the people behind the statistics? Which Jews are choosing to marry non-Jews? There are no simple answers. Some grew up in assimilated homes with little if any connection to Jewish life; they might hardly feel Jewish. Others see themselves as very Jewish. As seen in the film, there are people with strong Jewish backgrounds who choose to marry non-Jews, who view their marital choice *not* as a rejection of Judaism, but rather a decision based on love. There are still parents who might say *kaddish*, the traditional mourning prayer, for a son or daughter who marries out of the religion; others accept, with or without reservations and regrets.

How did we get here? Marriage and family itself have changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Single families, step-families, and very high divorce rates (some statistics say 50 percent of all couples who marry today will divorce), and endless combinations of culture and race have created more and different possibilities for ways of living in America today. Jews too are part of this changing definition. Some reasons for the high rate of intermarriage have to do with the greater exposure Jews have to people of other religions socially, professionally, and, particularly for young people, in educational settings. (A generation or two ago, immigrants and their children moved almost exclusively in circles with others like themselves).

The patterns of marriage and intermarriage have been changing over the decades since World War II. At midcentury, American Jewish men appeared to be much more likely to marry out of the religion than American Jewish women. During the past two decades, however, while the intermarriage rate has risen substantially (from 5 percent in the 1960s), the mixed marriage gender gap has been shrinking. Nationally, American Jewish women are about as likely as men to marry out; about one-third of men and women who were born Jewish are currently mixed married.

Levels of intermarriage today among younger Jews and among Jews who have married in the 1980s are strikingly high, and the great majority of these recent intermarriages are mixed marriages (the spouse was not born Jewish and did not convert). Significant differences reportedly exist between the Jewish behaviors of mixed married

families, on the one hand, and inmarried and conversionary families, on the other. According to recent surveys, mixed married families are less likely than either conversionary or inmarried families to join and attend synagogues, to become affiliated with Jewish organizations, to donate money to Jewish philanthropies, to visit Israel, and to perform Jewish rituals in their homes. Moreover, they are less likely to provide their children with Jewish education.

Interestingly, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin points out in *Jewish Literacy*, a high rate of intermarriage is not unique to the American Jewish community. In Germany and France a century ago, a similar percentage of Jews married non-Jews. In those countries, according to Telushkin, intermarriage was “almost always deadly for the Jewish community,” as the Jewish partner either converted to Christianity or agreed to bring up their children as Christians. In the United States, only a small number of Jews convert out of Judaism when they marry non-Jews.

### **Intermarriage and Jewish Identity**

Although times and concerns clearly have changed since the era depicted in the first film of this course, *The Imported Bridegroom*, contemporary Jews continue to grapple with – and must make their own peace with – some of the same conflicting impulses: the contradictions between tradition and change, between the Jewish and secular worlds. Both as a community and as individuals, American Jews continue to maintain a delicate balance between integration into American society and the preservation of a separate and distinct Jewish identity. For intermarried Jews, the balancing act can be even more difficult. The real challenge, for all American Jews, is to understand what we want to hold onto and why.

Jewish continuity is a great concern to the contemporary community. Who are the next generations of Jewish leaders? Will our grandchildren be Jewish? Are the links in the long chain forever broken? Will the community cease to be distinctively Jewish in a few generations? If the numbers are shrinking, who will support the vast network of Jewish social service and social justice institutions?

Concerns about communal vitality are far more complicated than simple issues of greater or lesser numbers

of people who call themselves Jews. Sociologist Samuel Heilman of Queens College suggests that “the challenge of the years ahead will be to give meaning to the content and character of being Jewish.” Israeli foreign minister Shimon Peres urges American Jews to “keep your children Jewish.”

Much of the debate is focused on children of intermarriage. There is no doubt that the future of the American Jewish community will be profoundly affected by whether or not the children of intermarried couples are raised as Jews. Being “raised as a Jew” is of course a vague notion, and what it means is a question worth consideration. The provision of Jewish education may be an important measure of whether or not children are in fact learning about Jewish tradition and peoplehood. Many Jewish leaders feel that the vitality of American Jewish life in the future is directly shaped by Jewish commitments being instilled in today’s Jewish youth.

Some relevant statistics: The majority of mixed married couples say they are raising their children to be Jews, but fewer than half of these children receive any formal Jewish education. In contrast, more than 90 percent of children of inmarried Jews (in the pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah years, ages 10-13) reported sending their children to religious schools, as did nearly as many conversionary families. Mixed married couples are twice as likely as either inmarried or conversionary couples to say they never attend synagogue services (one-third of mixed married versus around 5 percent of conversionary and inmarried couples). Two-thirds of mixed married couples have Christmas trees in their homes; about same proportion light Chanukah candles. (This data is based on a 1990 study done by the author and Mordecai Rimor, Gary A. Tobin, and Peter Medding, *Intermarriage and American Jews Today*.)

### **Dilemmas and Challenges**

American Jews have strong feelings about intermarriage. Although there is widespread concern about the issue, the approaches to it are not uniform. While some see intermarriage as a threat to the community’s strength, others see a potential for growth.

Some therapists, social workers, and academics who are involved in the issue see the challenge as making

Judaism more vital to the lives of Jews so that they will be committed to continuity. In a society where religion is a choice, connection to the Jewish community is no longer automatic. Many inmarried Jews are also uninvolved in Jewish life. Psychotherapist Esther Perel, who leads groups for intermarried couples, says: “Children growing up in the Jewish community know that they should not intermarry – they’ve been taught that very well – but too often don’t know why they should remain Jews.”

Many believe that raising children with a strong Jewish identity will help ensure they’ll marry other Jews. Day schools, Jewish camps, trips to Israel are seen as encouraging a lifelong commitment to Judaism. Recent research indicates that the more extensive the Jewish educational experience of children, the more likely they will be as adults to perform Jewish rituals, be involved in Jewish communal life, and marry other Jews (study by the author and Alice Golstein published by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University). But there are, of course, no guarantees.

Some see healthy benefits of intermarriage: a gain of potential Jews, an infusion of talent and energy to strengthen the Jewish community. For some Jews who intermarry, their marriage can prompt a new Jewish awareness, for they are confronting Jewish issues in mature ways for the first time, and deepening their commitment. And perhaps that person will pass on a more thoughtful and authentic sense of Judaism than an inmarried couple who “happen to be Jews” and whose Jewish education and connection to things Jewish is minimal.

Dr. Egon Mayer, a sociologist who is director of the Jewish Outreach Institute (affiliated with the Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate School of the City University of New York), believes that it is essential to Jewish survival that the Jewish community reach out to intermarrieds and welcome them. Among the findings of a 1993 survey conducted by Mayer under the auspices of the institute is that most American Jews would prefer that their children marry Jews and raise Jewish grandchildren. But if they had a choice between non-Jewish grandchildren – from a non-Jewish daughter- or son-in-law – and no grandchildren at all, the majority of Jews questioned say they’d prefer to

have grandchildren.

Charles Silberman, in his book *A Certain People*, captures some of the powerful yet ambivalent feelings Jews express: “However much Jews may oppose intermarriage in principle, in short, they accept it in practice.”

### **Policy Responses**

Today, congregations affiliated with every branch of Judaism include conversionary families, and many congregations include mixed married families. The various denominational movements have different approaches to both the theoretical issue of intermarriage and the practical concerns of dealing with intermarried couples and families.

The Reform movement is most pro-active in reaching out to intermarried couples. In 1978, a task force was established which, in 1983, became the Union of American Hebrew Congregations/Central Conference of American Rabbis Commission on Reform in Jewish Outreach. According to their literature, one of their aims is to “communicate that the Reform movement is concerned about the intermarried couple and that their family has a place in the Reform Jewish Community.” An introductory pamphlet titled “Inviting Someone You Love to Become a Jew” states that “Welcoming those considering conversion and new Jews by Choice into the Jewish community is one very important focus of Outreach.”

Many Reform temples offer introductory classes in Judaism for those contemplating conversion and also for interfaith couples considering raising their children as Jews. They also provide a range of programs for interfaith couples, the Jewish parents of intermarried couples, youth, and clergy and educators working with intermarried families.

Although the movement’s official policy is opposition to rabbinic officiation at mixed marriages (including co-officiation with non-Jewish clergy), a significant minority of Reform rabbis do officiate at such wedding ceremonies, in almost all cases with some criteria, for example, Jewish study, the intent to convert, or to raise children as Jews. (The movement has no sanctions against rabbis who choose to officiate at intermarriages.) In 1983 the Reform movement broke with tradition, recognizing as Jews the

**Mark:** *We almost said this is it. We're going to be over because we can't make this work. And like she said, we did a lot of crying and decided . . . We didn't decide anything. We knew that we didn't want to be apart. So we are going to find ways to make this work.*

children of Jewish fathers and non-Jewish mothers, as long as they are raised Jews. (According to traditional Jewish law, only the child of a Jewish mother is considered a Jew; children born to gentile mothers and Jewish fathers must be converted in order to be regarded as Jews.)

The Reconstructionist movement endorsed a policy of recognizing patrilineal descent even earlier, in 1968. The movement does outreach work to intermarried couples, and welcomes and encourages intermarried families to join their congregations. The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association's guiding policies and point of view are spelled out in the "RRA Guidelines on Inter-marriage," a document approved at a 1983 convention. To help curb intermarriage rates, they call for the "revitalization of Jewish life as the essential prerequisite for imparting a sense of Jewish identification." They state that "from the perspective of the Jewish people the most promising outcome of a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew results when the non-Jew is converted to Judaism." Recognizing that intermarriage is a reality in light of the "high degree of integration of Jews into North American life," they believe that "the rabbinic community cannot afford to turn away the significant number of mixed couples" who seek rabbinic support.

The movement's policy is that rabbis should reserve the traditional rites of the Jewish wedding ceremony (*kiddushin*) for marriage between Jews, but that it is permissible for a rabbi to be present at a civil marriage ceremony of a mixed couple. Such decisions are left to individual rabbis, and an estimated 25 percent of Reconstructionist rabbis will participate in intermarriages when the couple expresses some determination to be connected to the Jewish community and to establish a Jewish home.

The Conservative movement's policy is to "make the prevention of intermarriage a greater priority than *keruv*" (outreach to those who are intermarried), as stated in a paper, "The Mitzvah of Endogamy," by Rabbi Jerome M. Epstein, executive vice-president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. In the paper, he outlines five efforts necessary to prevent intermarriage: (1) strengthen Jewish identity and education; (2) encourage leaders to speak out for the *mitzvah* of endogamy and to provide

**Jane:** *I didn't realize how strongly I felt about being Jewish until the day my son was presented to me. . . . That child was going to have a bris.*

encouragement for those rabbinic and lay leaders who do speak out; (3) empower Jewish parents to speak the language of inmarriage to their children; (4) impact as many children as possible through intensive Jewish socialization, informal Jewish educational experiences, summer programs, and family education experiences; (5) develop appropriate curriculum materials to teach and explain why the Jewish community opposes intermarriage and favors inmarriage.

The goal of the Conservative movement's Commission on the Prevention of Intermarriage, established in 1991, is to "develop programs to help strengthen Jewish identity, thereby ensuring Jewish survival." Many of their programs emphasize "in reach," or "converting Jews to Judaism." A handbook titled "Enriching Jewish Life: Building Blocks for Marrying Within the Faith" highlights congregational programs that foster Jewish awareness and encourage Jews to marry other Jews.

Conservative rabbis will not officiate at intermarriages, and such marriages may not be held in Conservative synagogues. There is much discussion and debate about the question of synagogue outreach to intermarried couples and issues of synagogue membership and participation.

The Jewish Theological Seminary, in cooperation with the Rabbinical Assembly and other organizations of the Conservative movement, awards "Gateways" grants to synagogues to help fund effective efforts to reach out to intermarried couples. The purpose of the program is to "encourage greater efforts by the Conservative movement in opening 'gateways' to Jewish life for the intermarried who would be receptive to an outstretched hand from Conservative synagogues or other movement institutions."

Unlike the Reform and Reconstructionist movements, the Conservative movement does not recognize patrilineal descent. Thus, the offspring of a non-Jewish father and Jewish mother has a different status from the child of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother (unless the child converts).

The Orthodox movement is also most interested in preventing intermarriage, and sees education as the most effective method. According to traditional Jewish law, conversions for the sole purpose of marriage are

**Ira:** *When people say you're going to have a problem raising your kids, what they mean is you're going to have a problem dealing with Jesus.*

not condoned. They do not do outreach to intermarried couples, unless the non-Jewish spouse expresses a desire to convert and make a commitment to becoming an observant Jew. Orthodox rabbis will not officiate at intermarriages, and have urged their congregations not to attend any weddings that involve an intermarriage.

Those formulating policies on intermarriage face the dilemma of seeming to shut out those already intermarried if they seek to discourage the practice and, by the same token, to worry about seeming to encourage it by accepting the intermarried. Steven Bayme of the American Jewish Committee is one who feels the community must make a choice. He calls for strengthening the Jewish community itself so that people wish to remain a part of it, while increasing the likelihood of inmarriage by creating ways for Jewish singles to meet. Such actions can go hand in hand with outreach to intermarrieds, but, he writes, in a volume of essays published by the Jewish Outreach Institute, “if we truly believe that the Jewish family is an historical community rather than simply personal self-fulfillment, it is there that our moral imperative lies.” It is a notion clearly at odds with “pure chemistry,” though not, perhaps, with the reality of the complex mix of dreams, values, and attraction that have always accompanied romantic choices.

A final note about the documentary film: Eve-Lynn, the young woman seen shopping for a wedding gown, whose fiance notices on camera that she has started wearing a Star of David necklace again, broke up with him three weeks after the sessions ended.

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ What is the benefit to the participants of being involved in a group like the one pictured?
- ◆ When the couples discuss plans for their children’s religious upbringing, what other beneath-the-surface issues are being expressed?
- ◆ Do you think there are differences between couples with a Jewish-husband/non-Jewish wife and those with a Jewish wife and non-Jewish husband?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ Do you think Jewish traditions can be effectively passed on in a mixed marriage?
  
- ◆ What efforts, if any, do you think the organized Jewish community should be making regarding intermarriage? If the Jewish community were to embrace intermarried families in an organized way, would that send out a message that it was sanctioning intermarriage?
  
- ◆ What advice would you give to the young couples in the film to make their marriages work?
  
- ◆ What advice would you give to the parents? Must a parent decide between love for a child and Jewish survival?
  
- ◆ How would you explain the antipathy of some Jews toward intermarriage in a way that non-Jews might be able to understand?
  
- ◆ How may the place where an interfaith couple lives – i.e., small town, major city with large Jewish population, close to their families or not – influence how they resolve their conflicts?
  
- ◆ What is the effect of intermarriage on the extended family?

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING**

- ◆ Bershtel, Sara, and Alan Graubard. *Saving Remnants: Feeling Jewish in America*. New York: Free Press, 1992.
- ◆ Cowan, Paul and Rachel. *Mixed Blessings: Marriage Between Jews and Christians*. New York: Doubleday, 1987.
- ◆ Mayer, Egon. *Love and Tradition: Marriage Between Jews & Christians*. Plenum, 1985.
- ◆ Mayer, Egon, ed. *The Imperatives of Jewish Outreach*. New York: Jewish Outreach Institute and Center for Jewish Studies, Graduate School of the City University of New York, 1991.
- ◆ Silberman, Charles. *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*. New York: Summit, 1985.
- ◆ *Times and Seasons: A Jewish Perspective for Intermarried Couples: A Guide for Facilitators*. New York: UAHC, 1987, manual.