

# AJC and Intermarriage: The Complexities of Jewish Continuity, 1960–2006

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The American Jewish Committee was founded as a “defense” organization, not to make Jews more Jewish. Its purpose, as stated in its first constitution adopted November 11, 1906, was “to prevent the infringement of the civil and religious rights of Jews, and to alleviate the consequences of persecution.” After the founding generation, which included some Jewish scholars of note, membership was drawn mainly from the philanthropic upper classes. These people were deeply integrated into the mainstream of American legal and political life and not known for their piety or adherence to Jewish tradition. “Assimilationist” was the epithet most often hurled at AJC from other sectors of the American Jewish community, a stereotype strengthened by the organization’s coolness toward Zionism before 1948.

Beginning in the early 1960s, however, a striking evolution took place as AJC intensified its Jewish consciousness and soon became a major source of surveys, studies, and policy recommendations on Jewish identity in the modern world. Ironically, this allegedly least Jewish of Jewish organizations began addressing such controversial issues as intermarriage and Jewish continuity years before they came onto the American Jewish agenda, and its pioneering work laid the foundation for subsequent communal strategies.

## *The 1963 Image Study and AJC’s Jewish Identity*

AJC’s first serious attempt to enhance its Jewish profile came in the wake of problems faced in raising funds for the new organizational headquarters on the corner of 56th Street and Third Avenue, which opened in 1960. A.M. Sonnabend, who became president of the organization in 1962, discovered over the two years he spent fund-raising for the building a need for “improvement of the image of AJC in the community.” The problem, he felt, was “the way we present ourselves to the Jewish public.” A

specially commissioned “Image Study” was conducted in which 300 Jewish leaders across the country not associated with AJC were interviewed in depth about their attitudes toward the agency. The results were presented to the AJC Executive Committee in 1963.<sup>1</sup>

They confirmed that others saw AJC as a group of wealthy, socially exclusive, self-sufficient, upper-class German Jews—a kind of “Jewish four hundred”—that drew its membership from the ranks of Reform Judaism. Its leaders were viewed as “confirmed assimilationists,” interested more in associating with non-Jews than in concerning themselves with Judaism and the perpetuation of Jewish tradition.<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of the Image Study, AJC launched a campaign to change both outsiders’ perceptions and its own reality. The Public Relations Department worked to get the word out about AJC’s work in the Jewish community; a new membership drive sought out Conservative and Orthodox Jews as well as Reform; more attention was given to the Jewish Communal Affairs Department, inaugurated in 1958, with programs planned on Jewish identity and Jewish education; and chapters in Milwaukee and St. Louis sponsored chairs in Jewish studies at local universities, both to show new respect for this field as an academic discipline and as a way of reaching out to Jewish college students who, by all accounts, were becoming alienated from their heritage. The agency drew physically closer to Israel than ever before, pouring resources into its office there and arranging trips to Israel for AJC members and their children.<sup>3</sup>

AJC leaders also began to reconsider their vaunted organizational independence and distrust of Jewish umbrella organizations, rejoining the National Community Relations Advisory Council (NCRAC) in 1966. An original member of that body, AJC had left in 1952 when changes were proposed that appeared likely to limit the autonomy of the individual agencies. Announc-

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<sup>1</sup>“The Image, Role and Potential of the AJC,” report by Social Research, Inc., May 1963, in AJC Executive Committee Minutes, November 1–3, 1963, Blaustein Library, American Jewish Committee.

<sup>2</sup>On the Image Study and its ramifications see Marianne Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong: The American Jewish Committee, 1945–2006* (Waltham, Mass., 2006), pp. 103–05.

<sup>3</sup>American Jewish Committee, *The AJC and Israel* (New York, 1998), p. 6. AJC produced this pamphlet to mark Israel’s 50th anniversary.

ing the return to NCRAC, John Slawson, AJC's executive vice president, said, "We are getting back into the fold."<sup>4</sup>

But there was much further to go. Throughout most of his career at AJC, Slawson himself had been interested above all else in "American-centeredness," the successful integration of Jews into the American landscape. All the social science research and programming on Jewish identity that AJC had done up to the early 1960s was designed to further that end. Rabbis, to be sure, delivered the invocation and said the blessing over bread at AJC official dinners, but otherwise Jewish tradition and observance were absent. The renowned rabbi and theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, addressing several hundred members at a plenary session of the AJC annual meeting in 1960, gently criticized the organization when he reminded them of the famous George Bernard Shaw quip: "Youth is a wonderful thing. It's a shame that it's wasted on the young," and then said to his audience, "Judaism is a wonderful faith . . ." and let the sentence hang.<sup>5</sup>

### *A Crisis of Jewish Continuity*

It was during the early 1960s that doubts emerged about AJC's single-minded focus on the integration of Jews into all avenues of American life. For one thing, society was becoming more accepting of cultural pluralism and no longer demanded the total absorption of its minority groups. And for another, the AJC thrust had become perhaps too successful, especially when it came to the creation of families. Decrying the rising tide of marriage to non-Jews among the young people of his community, AJC member Max Stocks of Syracuse said in 1963, "We encourage our children to have friends who are not Jews . . . . However, there is an extraordinary tendency among young people to marry people they know and not people they don't know."<sup>6</sup> Dr. Irving Greenberg,

<sup>4</sup>John Slawson, "AJC at Seventy: A View from the Sixtieth," AJC Annual Meeting Proceedings, May 12–15, 1966, p. 22, Blaustein Library; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, p. 105.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Moral Challenge to America," AJC Annual Meeting Proceedings, April 22–24, 1960, p. 95, Blaustein Library. Caroline K. Simon, who was then chair of the Jewish Communal Affairs Committee, reacted by saying, "We want to plan so that Judaism will not be wasted on us, but will be strengthened by us." See also Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, pp. 114–16.

<sup>6</sup>Discussion following speech by Dr. Marshall Sklare, AJC Annual Meeting transcript, May 17–19, 1963, p. 14, Blaustein Library.

then a professor at Yeshiva University, addressing an AJC audience in 1966, said, "I think one reason why the first generation had less intermarriage was because the kids knew the parents would drop dead, literally. Whereas in the second generation, they know that given the ideology of the parents is pluralism and brotherhood, it won't be quite as disastrous."<sup>7</sup>

Paralleling the perception of accelerating intermarriage was Jewish concern about low birthrates. Both issues, presaging a decline in the size of the American Jewish community, became subjects of intense examination. The first blip on the screen came with the publication of an article, "Jewish Fertility in the United States," by Erich Rosenthal, then an associate professor of anthropology and sociology at Queens College, in the 1961 *American Jewish Year Book*. Rosenthal found that the Jewish fertility rate—25 percent below that of Catholics and 20 percent below that of Protestants—was not sufficient to replace the parent generation. The article ended on a hopeful note, however. Rosenthal theorized that as American Jews moved to the suburbs and achieved a more secure position in society, the number of children might rise.<sup>8</sup>

There was no optimistic scenario in a second article by Rosenthal that appeared in the 1963 *Year Book*. "Studies of Jewish Intermarriage in the United States" revealed that rates of marriage to non-Jews rose sharply with each succeeding generation of American Jews.<sup>9</sup> It was this study that brought the term "Jewish continuity" into the American Jewish lexicon and signaled what might be called the first Jewish continuity "crisis." AJC librarians reported receiving more requests for reprints of this Rosenthal article than anything else the AJC had ever published before.

In New York City, a conference of 50 rabbis and social workers convened in December 1964 to discuss strategies for synagogues and Jewish social agencies "to preserve the continuance of the American Jewish community against threats of assimilation through intermarriage." Among its recommendations were the es-

<sup>7</sup>Irving Greenberg, AJC Annual Meeting transcript, May 12–16, 1966, p. 130, Blaustein Library.

<sup>8</sup>Erich Rosenthal, "Jewish Fertility in the United States," *American Jewish Year Book* (hereafter AJYB) 62 (New York and Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 4, 24, 26.

<sup>9</sup>Erich Rosenthal, "Studies of Jewish Intermarriage in the United States," AJYB 64 (1963), pp. 3–53.

tablishment of counseling centers and institutes devoted to the problem, and a suggestion that Jewish social workers point out to clients contemplating intermarriage the consequences of such a step and inform them of the “growing evidence” that mixed marriage had less likelihood of success than inmarriage. Similarly, a conference of rabbis from Canada and Minnesota urged parents “to take a firm stand” against all interfaith dating and to encourage their children to date only other Jews. They, too, claimed not only that the children of mixed marriages were usually lost to Judaism, but also warned that there was a greater frequency of broken homes among intermarried couples than among those of common religious background.<sup>10</sup>

John Slawson, executing a complete about-face from his concern that American Jews were not integrating into their surroundings well or quickly enough, was seized with virtual terror when he examined the new data on Jewish families. Introducing Marshall Sklare, AJC’s resident social scientist, to a meeting in 1963, Slawson declared that he had been reading the latest Rosenthal study and woke up one Saturday morning with a start. “Does this mean extinction?” he asked himself. “I called up Dr. Sklare and woke him from his Sabbath slumber, and from what I could hear among the noises, about a half dozen babies were there, and I found out that there is some hope . . . . We should be concerned about Jewish population policy, which has not occurred to anyone in the Jewish group up to this time.” Sklare, for his part, confessed that it had only *sounded* as if he had a dozen babies, and noted that large-scale conversion of non-Jews might be a good thing for the American Jewish population. “Once you show Jews that the *goyim* like it,” he said, “they will undoubtedly be prepared to buy the product themselves.” The remark was greeted with loud applause.<sup>11</sup>

*Look* magazine, picking up on Rosenthal’s research, published a cover story entitled “The Vanishing American Jew.” At the AJC

<sup>10</sup>“New York Rabbis, Social Workers Offer Program to Check Intermarriage,” “Canadian Rabbis Urge Study on Intermarriage in Small Communities,” “Minnesota Rabbis Urge Parents to be Firm against Interfaith Dating,” clippings from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in Jewish Communal Affairs Department (hereafter JCAD), December 14, 1964, box 5, folder: “Interoffice Memos from Manheim Shapiro, 1960–64,” AJC Archives.

<sup>11</sup>Discussion following speech by Dr. Marshall Sklare, AJC Annual Meeting transcript, May 17–19, 1963, p. 10, Blaustein Library.

annual meeting of 1964, copies of the *Look* article were distributed to all those attending the plenary session on "What Future for American Jews? A View of the Evidence Pro and Con for the Survival of the American Jews." At that annual meeting, six of the 13 roundtable sessions were devoted to Jewish continuity. The *American Jewish Year Book* reported that in 1964 the "vanishing American Jew" was "the major preoccupation of American Jewry." The next year it noted that the problem remained "a focus for national attention," with "prognostications, repeated widely, that the forces of assimilation, secularization, and intermarriage presented a real threat to American Judaism."<sup>12</sup>

The sense of alarm spread to the world of Zionism. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's prime minister, had warned for years that American Jews were doomed to assimilation and disappearance if they did not come to Israel, but no one in the Zionist movement had realized the apparent urgency of the problem before. The World Zionist Organization (WZO) now called for stepped-up aliyah from Western countries; it said that emphasis had previously been given to bringing Jews from lands of oppression, but now the countries of the Free World needed to become a top priority. At its convention in October 1964, the Zionist Organization of America passed a resolution urging the aliyah of middle-class American Jews, and proposed that Israel build large housing projects and even new cities to house and employ them.<sup>13</sup>

A key step in AJC's move toward enhanced Jewishness was the retirement of John Slawson and the choice of Bertram H. Gold to succeed him. Gold—a product of Yiddish schools in his native Toronto and a former director of all the Jewish community centers in Los Angeles—took over on August 1, 1967, immediately after the Six-Day War, with the specific goal of bringing AJC nearer to Israel and to the American Jewish mainstream. Under his leadership the phrase "Jewish peoplehood," a term shunned by earlier AJC leaders because it seemed to separate Jews from other Americans, began to make its way into the organization's public pronouncements.

<sup>12</sup>Louis Shub, "Zionism," *AJYB* 66 (1965), p. 311; Sefton D. Temkin, "Religion," *AJYB* 67 (1966), p. 92.

<sup>13</sup>Shub, "Zionism," pp. 311–12; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, p. 136.

Another change that gave further indication of a shift in organizational direction was the appointment of Yehuda Rosenman as director of a reinvigorated Jewish Communal Affairs Department. Born in Poland after World War I, Rosenman had grown up in a traditionally Jewish, Zionist, and Hebrew-speaking home. One week before the outbreak of World War II he left Poland to visit relatives in the U.S.; with the exception of one sister, who had immigrated to Israel two years earlier, Rosenman lost his entire family in the Holocaust. Obtaining a degree in social work, he served for many years as executive director of Pittsburgh's Jewish community centers. He was just finishing a two-year stint working for the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Geneva and Paris when he was recommended for the Jewish Communal Affairs position at AJC, while Slawson was still at the helm.

Rosenman said years later that the greatest contribution he made to AJC was not changing his first name. In an early interview with Slawson, he offered to anglicize the name "Yehuda," feeling self-conscious about his European birth and accented English, and fearing that "Yehuda" might not be appropriate in the halls of the American Jewish Committee. There was no need, Slawson answered him, explaining that AJC had changed a great deal and needed to change more. "John Slawson became very Jewish in the last years of his stewardship of the AJC," Rosenman recalled. "After I came here I used to kibbitz with John and say, why the hell didn't you do it 20 years ago? You remind me of the man who before he dies, suddenly comes back to his religion."<sup>14</sup>

### *AJC Tackles the Inter-marriage Issue*

It was during Rosenman's tenure at the head of the Jewish Communal Affairs Department that AJC transcended its earlier history as simply a "defense" organization that favored the integration of Jews into American life and became one of the Jewish community's major centers for the study of intermarriage and analysis of its implications. Through its surveys, interpretation and publication of data, conferences and consultations, and policy statements, AJC

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<sup>14</sup>Yehuda Rosenman Interview, December 2, 1980, p. 20, AJC Oral History Collection, New York Public Library.

took an issue that cut to the heart of personal identity and Jewish survival and made it its own.

Much of the apprehension that greeted Rosenthal's 1963 article and the *Look* cover story was rooted in shock. Available surveys showed that up to 1940, the proportion of Jews intermarrying was 2–3 percent, rising to about 7 percent between World War II and 1960.<sup>15</sup> According to Halakhah, Jewish law, a marriage ceremony between a Jew and a non-Jew was invalid, and therefore the Orthodox and Conservative movements forbade their rabbis from officiating. Even Reform Judaism, which did not accept the binding authority of Halakhah and supported the autonomy of the individual rabbi, strongly disapproved of intermarriage.<sup>16</sup> Traditional parents were known to disown children who married out of the faith and even to mourn them as if they had died. Most secular Jews were deterred by strong social taboos against marrying non-Jews. And surveys indicated that Gentiles, for the most part, were distinctly disinclined to accept Jews as sons- and daughters-in-law.

But the situation was changing quickly. Among Jews marrying between 1961 and 1965, 17 percent intermarried, and for those marrying between 1966 and 1972 the rate was over 30 percent.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, conditions seemed to favor a continuing rise in mixed marriages. The vast majority of Jewish young people—perhaps as high as 85 percent—attended colleges and universities, settings where deep and intimate relationships between people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds were highly likely to occur. Social barriers had fallen; Jews and non-Jews often worked as colleagues, and not, as had generally been the case in the past, in a merchant-customer relationship.<sup>18</sup> Americanization and upward mobility had made Jewish men desirable mates, and fewer Gentile parents would object if their daughters married them. At the same time, observers speculated that Jewish men felt somehow drawn to marry non-Jewish women, and developed sociological,

<sup>15</sup> Fred Massaryk and Alvin Chenkin, "United States National Jewish Population Survey: A First Report," *AJYB* 74 (1973), p. 296; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, pp. 273–80.

<sup>16</sup> Norman Mirsky, "Mixed Marriage and the Reform Rabbinate," *Midstream* 16, January 1970, pp. 40–46.

<sup>17</sup> Massaryk and Chenkin, "National Jewish Population Survey," p. 292.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold Schwartz, "Intermarriage in the United States," *AJYB* 71 (1970), p. 116.

economic, and psychological theories seeking to explain the phenomenon.<sup>19</sup>

Individual rabbis found themselves unprepared to deal with large-scale intermarriage and its accompanying complexities. Hillel Foundation rabbis on campuses across the country could not comply with the requests of frantic parents who called up begging the rabbis to break up relationships or impending marriages. Other parents, intent on securing rabbinic officiation, threatened that the upcoming wedding would take place in a church if their rabbi did not agree to preside. In 1970, one Reform rabbi, David Max Eichhorn, circulated a list of 89 of his fellow rabbis (about 10 percent of the Reform rabbinate at the time) who were ready to state publicly that they would officiate at intermarriages without requiring the conversion of the non-Jewish partner. In an accompanying letter Eichhorn wrote, "It is clear that the unrestricted availability of this list will help to combat the defection of many of our people who are being lost to Judaism because of the spiritual insensibility of so many of our colleagues."<sup>20</sup> Some of his peers praised his honesty and inclusiveness, while others criticized him for countenancing and encouraging intermarriage.

CBS aired a popular situation comedy during the 1972–73 television season called "Bridget Loves Bernie." It portrayed a marriage between Bernie Steinberg, a Jewish aspiring writer working as a cabdriver (an unacceptable vocation in most American Jewish families), and Bridget Fitzgerald, a teacher from a wealthy Catholic family. The pair lived in an apartment above the delicatessen owned by Bernie's parents. Most of the plotlines had to do with the two families' divergent social, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, and their attempts to get along for the sake of the young couple.

Catholic organizations protested, but the response from the Jews was far stronger: a Jewish community already worried about demographic erosion was outraged that national TV would present

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<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Louis A. Berman, *Jews and Intermarriage: A Study in Personality and Culture* (New York, 1968), p. 341; Edwin H. Friedman, "The Myth of the Shiksa," in Monica McGoldrick, John K. Pearce, and Joseph Giordano, eds., *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York, 1982), pp. 499–526; and an AJC publication, Rela Geffen Monson, *Jewish Campus Life: A Survey of Student Attitudes Toward Marriage and Family* (New York, 1984), pp. 28–29, 37.

<sup>20</sup>Schwartz, "Intermarriage in the United States," p. 120.

intermarriage in a positive, lighthearted way. As AJC legal director Samuel Rabinove noted, Jewish organizations reacted this way even though they traditionally espoused freedom of speech and expression, and opposed censorship of any kind. The Synagogue Council of America, comprised of rabbis from all three major denominations, led a successful campaign to have the show canceled. The New York Board of Rabbis, which also had members from the different denominations, adopted a resolution strongly condemning any of their number who performed mixed marriages or who referred couples to rabbis who did.<sup>21</sup>

It was against this background that AJC's Jewish Communal Affairs Department, in February 1975, initiated a series of rabbinic "consultations" on intermarriage and conversion. AJC headquarters provided neutral ground where rabbis of the different denominations could talk to one another. A verbatim transcript was kept, indicating the meetings' importance in AJC eyes. Among the participating rabbis were Norman Lamm, Emanuel Rackman, Sol Roth, and Steven (Shlomo) Riskin (Orthodox); Max Routtenberg and Judah Nadich (Conservative); Harold Saperstein (Reform); and Ludwig Nadelman (Reconstructionist).<sup>22</sup>

By this time large-scale intermarriage was already a reality and discussion focused on the feasibility of developing a procedure for conversion to Judaism that would be acceptable to all segments of the Jewish community. Maximizing the number of universally recognized conversions would ensure that more children of such marriages would be raised in unambiguously Jewish homes. According to Halakhah, conversions had to be supervised by a *bet din* (Jewish religious court), and posed three requirements: commitment to live an observant Jewish life; ritual immersion in a *mikveh* (pool of water); and, for men, ritual circumcision. Persons born to a Jewish mother were deemed Jewish regardless of the background of the father, whereas a person born to a Jewish father but a non-Jewish mother was held, in the absence of conversion, to be a non-

<sup>21</sup>Samuel Rabinove, "Intergroup Relations and Tensions in the United States," *AJYB* 75 (1974-75), pp. 130-32; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, p. 275.

<sup>22</sup>"Consultation on Intermarriage and Conversion: Summary Report, Jewish Communal Affairs Department," February 27, 1975, Bertram H. Gold Collection (hereafter BHG), box 136, folder: "Intermarriage and Conversion 1975-77"; and JCAD, box 13, folder: "Intermarriage: General Materials and Correspondence 1973-76," AJC Archives.

Jew. Orthodox authorities did not acknowledge conversions that did not meet their standards.

The rabbis at the consultation struggled to find common ground. One idea that came up was the creation of a "super bet din," a rabbinical tribunal recognized by all groups that would arrange conversions, but the proposal met with several objections. Rabbi Saperstein pointed out that Reform was already accepting, de facto, children of Jewish fathers as fully Jewish if they underwent a bar mitzvah or confirmation, which counted as a public profession of Jewish commitment (in 1983 Reform would adopt this position officially). While Reform rabbis might be convinced to require ritual immersion and circumcision, he said, their feeling was that "we are saving these children for Judaism rather than closing the door to them," and there was no chance that the movement would give any outside body veto power over its conversions.

Rabbi Rackman discouraged the proposal on practical grounds, saying it would be "almost futile in the present climate, especially in the Orthodox group," which did not recognize the validity of the other movements. He suggested a more modest goal, seeking to ensure that children of intermarriage who had Jewish mothers—and who thus were indisputably Jewish—would be raised as Jews. He said, "Their children are not 50 percent but 100 percent Jewish. There may be 50,000 or 100,000 children of such marriages who are Jewish, and we ought to do everything in our power to claim them. We don't know how these children are being raised." Rackman also believed that "all the social workers in New York City ought to be sensitized to these problems. When a mixed couple comes to Jewish Family Service, the social worker should know enough to steer them to a sympathetic, understanding rabbi who may reclaim the family for the Jewish community."

Rabbi Riskin, also Orthodox, suggested bypassing the rabbinate entirely and establishing a bet din of three committed and observant laymen, one from each of the major movements. They would be taught the relevant rules and rituals as well as the basics of the Sabbath and the dietary laws, which they would teach the converts and require them to accept. Again, Rackman disagreed. "Let us not get into an area now which is as difficult as splitting the Red Sea," he countered. "Let us strike out in the one area in which we can function—reclaiming those Jews whom we have the power to bring back into the fold."

Riskin, for his part, argued that Rackman's plan for raising children of non-Jewish fathers as Jews would not work because most Orthodox synagogues would not accept into membership anyone in a mixed marriage, even if the wife was Jewish. "I repeat, therefore, that nothing is going to happen within the three establishment organizations," Riskin declared. "We shall have to proceed on an individual basis. Let me make it clear that personally I am very stringent with conversions and I do not relax any of the Halakhic standards. At the same time, I believe we need desperately in America a kind of bet din that will require only minimum Halakhic standards, and I am willing to go on line saying that."<sup>23</sup>

The next year AJC cosponsored an event that brought together virtually every synagogue body and rabbinical association, as well as the major American Jewish civic organizations. What was billed as the First National Conference on Mixed Marriage convened in December 1976, in New Jersey. Attendees participated in workshops and open discussions on how to combat intermarriage and "enhance Jewish survival." Yehuda Rosenman contributed by giving a talk on the demography, statistics, and sociology of the issue. After the conference, Rabbi Robert Gordis suggested the creation of a national institute to deal with intermarriage.<sup>24</sup>

Still, neither consultations nor conferences brought agreement on a course of action, and debates about intermarriage were still going on with undiminished force into the twenty-first century. Sharp differences of opinion arose. Some argued that intermarriage was actually a good thing for the Jewish community since, if handled properly, it could bring a net gain of Jews; therefore, the argument went, Jewish outreach to such couples was a wise use of communal resources. Others believed that this approach would only serve to lower whatever religious, cultural, and social barriers

<sup>23</sup>Minutes, Informal Rabbinic Consultation on Intermarriage and Conversion, November 3, 1975, section of verbatim transcript, JCAD, box 15, folder: "Intermarriage/ Rabbinic Consultations/ Max Routtenberg 1975-76," AJC Archives; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, p. 277.

<sup>24</sup>Program, National Conference on Mixed Marriage, December 14-15, 1976, Long Branch, N.J., JCAD, box 13, folder: "Jews, Judaism and Jewish Community: Intermarriage and Conversion 1976"; "Suggestions of National Institute on Intermarriage," letter from Yehuda Rosenman to Rabbi Steven C. Lerner, February 10, 1977, JCAD, box 14, folder: "Intermarriage General 1975-77," AJC Archives.

ers to intermarriage still existed, leading to more such marriages and, ultimately, the loss of far more Jews than could ever be gained back through outreach efforts. Also, these critics alleged, outreach programs expending valuable and limited communal resources on the periphery of the community that might be more wisely and effectively spent on shoring up the strength of two-parent Jewish families.

### *Data and Interpretations*

Yehuda Rosenman took the position that AJC could best facilitate the communal debate by research: finding out and publicizing what could be known about just how many Jews were being won or lost. "We cannot determine what, if anything, should be done," he declared, "until we have the objective data which tells us what the problems are and what the plus-minus effect for Jewish continuity is, stemming from increased interfaith marriages."

Pointing out that AJC was well-known for its "objective research and fact-finding," he announced that the Jewish Communal Affairs Department was embarking on the first nationwide study of marriages between Jews and non-Jews. It would begin with six communities: New York, two of its suburbs—Westchester and Nassau-Suffolk (Long Island)—Philadelphia, Cleveland, and San Francisco. Egon Mayer, at the time assistant professor of sociology at Brooklyn College, was designated to direct the research.<sup>25</sup> He had been one of several social scientists invited to AJC for a "brainstorming" session about intermarriage, and both Rosenman and Milton Himmelfarb, AJC's director of research, had been impressed by him. Data would be gathered via questionnaires and interviews administered by AJC volunteers under the direction of Mayer, and the results of the study would form the basis for an AJC policy statement on the subject.

The most challenging part of AJC's first foray into intermarriage research was identifying the sample and convincing people to fill out the questionnaire, a process that revealed almost as much about the phenomenon of intermarriage in the 1970s as the data

<sup>25</sup>AJC press release, February 7, 1976, JCAD, box 13, folder: "Intermarriage, Study of Effects of, Publicity, Articles, etc. 1976." AJC Archives.

gleaned from it.<sup>26</sup> Volunteers and local project directors in each of the six communities were first asked to get names of intermarried Jews from relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Then, Mayer suggested they contact Jewish and non-Jewish clergymen, "especially rabbis who officiate at mixed marriages, Unitarian ministers, etc.," and ask them to provide lists of names, addresses, and telephone numbers from their records or from people they knew. A letter to one minister, he assured them, had yielded several hundred names. Another technique was to ask local Jewish organizations to sponsor lectures with titles like "Intermarriage and Intergroup Relations" or "A Look at Mixed-Married Life," which, advertised in newspapers, would presumably attract intermarried couples. A representative of the project would give the lecture, and use the opportunity to describe the study and encourage members of the audience to participate. Those agreeing to do so would be asked, in turn, to submit more names, addresses, and telephone numbers.<sup>27</sup>

A master list of thousands of names was thus compiled, and each got a questionnaire, along with a letter from Egon Mayer announcing:

We are embarking on a nationwide study on the effects of Jewish intermarriage so as to shed some light, rather than heat, on this issue. For the purpose of this study I need to develop a large and representative sample of families with mixed religious backgrounds . . . . You can help me accomplish this difficult but important goal by filling out the enclosed questionnaire. You may be assured that our survey will be conducted with complete scientific objectivity and the right of privacy of all concerned will be faithfully honored by us.

The response rate was very low, and the final sample consisted of only 446 couples from all six communities combined. Presumably, people who felt the least bit ambivalent or uncomfortable about their marriages chose not to answer. Some recipients of the

<sup>26</sup>The study later received criticism for what was described as the ad hoc nature of the sample gathering and the lack of a control group of endogamous Jewish couples. See Sidney Goldstein, "Jews in the United States: Perspectives from Demography," *AJYB* 81 (1981), pp. 25–26.

<sup>27</sup>Memo: "Project on the Effects of Intermarriage—Instructions for the Conduct of Telephone Interviews"; Instructions for Interviewers, April 27, 1976; form letter from Egon Mayer sent to 275 people, April 6, 1976; Memo: Study on the Impact of Intermarriage: Supplementary Techniques for Obtaining Names," JCAD box 13, folder: "Intermarriage Study, Correspondence 1976–77," AJC Archives.

letter were enraged, as was one man from Philadelphia who made an incoherent phone call to his local AJC office, and then wrote and sent the following missive:

According to the letter from Dr. Egon Mayer on AJC stationery, my wife and I were selected from a "comprehensive" list of 1,000 people in and around Philadelphia. I want to know first, how this was acquired and second, who has access to this list. As I told you before you banged down the receiver, rabbis have told me it is a sin to bring up conversion to a converted Jew. I don't care if AJC members believe in sin. But if the rabbis are correct, it is horrendous on this one point alone that the AJC should do this. But more to the point as far as I'm concerned as an individual is that this has been a tremendous invasion of the privacy of my wife, my children and myself, with potential repercussions beyond what you know and which I only hope I can prevent.<sup>28</sup>

In March 1978, Mayer submitted a draft of his final report, entitled "Mixed Blessings under the Canopy," to Rosenman and the rabbinical advisory board of the Jewish Communal Affairs Commission (AJC "commissions" were the lay counterparts to the staff departments). The report found that in only one-third of the intermarriages surveyed did the couple state an intention to raise the children as Jews. Nevertheless, in interpreting the data Mayer took an optimistic, almost enthusiastic, stance toward intermarriage, asserting that the old negative attitude was obsolete. He wrote that rising intermarriage rates demonstrated a climate of growing acceptance of Jews, and that the increasing numbers of Gentiles who had Jewish relatives because of intermarriage would, in turn, lead to even more acceptance.<sup>29</sup>

Mayer claimed—as the words "mixed blessings" in his title implied—that intermarriage represented a significant opportunity for American Jews to increase their numbers; that there was no evidence that it hurt family relations in any way; and that rabbinic officiation at such weddings enhanced the likelihood that the

<sup>28</sup>Letter from Seymour Schubin to Dr. Murray Friedman, July 1, 1977, JCAD, box 13, folder: "Intermarriage, Study on Effects of, Correspondence 1976-77," AJC Archives.

<sup>29</sup>Egon Mayer, Confidential: "Mixed Blessings Under the Canopy, summary of study and findings of survey on the impact of marriage between Jews and non-Jews on individuals, families, and the Jewish community"; "Reactions to Study," memo from Yehuda Rosenman, March 2, 1978, BHG, box 135, folder: "Jews, Judaism and Jewish Community, Intermarriage and Conversion 1978," AJC Archives.

couple would identify with Judaism. He recommended that intermarried couples and their children be welcomed into the Jewish community, noting that "there appears to be an urgent need for programs and materials which would help Jewish families integrate non-Jewish members in such a way as to make the Jewish way of life an attractive alternative to the new couple."<sup>30</sup>

When the consulting rabbis met to discuss the draft, some urged that it not be published, or at least that certain parts be omitted. Noting the "delicacy of the topic," they feared that the study might be misused, misinterpreted, or taken out of context. Some said that while most American Jews saw intermarriage as a familial and sociological issue, for them it was a matter of Halakhah, and, in the words of one, "any sociological report which seems to say that we can increase our numbers through intermarriage will be used as a tool" against the position of Jewish law on the matter. The claim that rabbinic officiation led to positive Jewish outcomes was also controversial. A rabbi warned that this assertion could weaken the resolve of rabbis who were "holding the fort" and refusing to solemnize such marriages. If rabbis agreed to officiate without conversion, he continued, there was little motivation for the non-Jew to convert. In the end, the consensus of the rabbis was that intermarriage threatened Jewish identity, it should not be viewed as an opportunity to increase Jewish numbers, and "no statement issued by AJC should be construed as indicating resignation to, or approval of, intermarriage."<sup>31</sup>

Yehuda Rosenman refused to remove the claim about the possible beneficial impact of rabbinic officiation, but on everything else he and the Jewish Communal Affairs Commission, chaired by E. Robert Goodkind, agreed with the rabbis. Mayer's interpretation of the data, in the words of another staff member of the department, "was not one which we felt that the American Jewish Committee should associate itself with."<sup>32</sup> A final compromise was to issue two versions of the report. One, written by a program spe-

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Jewish Communal Affairs Commission Minutes, January 18, 1979, JCAD, box 16, folder: "Jewish Communal Affairs Commission Minutes 1979," AJC Archives.

<sup>32</sup>Memo, Confidential: "To Yehuda Rosenman from Carl Sheingold: Subject: Authorship of the Intermarriage Pamphlet," November 30, 1978, BHG, box 135, folder: "Jews, Judaism and Jewish Community Intermarriage and Conversion 1978," AJC Archives.

cialist in the department, Dr. Carl Sheingold, presenting Mayer's data but without his controversial assertions, was published in 1979 as a pamphlet with AJC's imprimatur under the title *Inter-marriage and the Jewish Future*. Mayer's original, more detailed report was available in mimeograph form for anyone who requested it. Mayer was also free to publish it elsewhere, which he did.<sup>33</sup>

Controversy of a different sort occurred when the Jewish Communal Affairs Commission then sought to have a statement on intermarriage passed by the AJC Board of Governors, the organization's highest policy-making body. The original proposed statement opened with these words:

Mixed marriage is a threat to Jewish continuity. Most children in mixed marriages are exposed to little of the Jewish cultural or religious tradition, receive no formal Jewish education, and have parents who lack the knowledge to impart such an education on their own. If this pattern continues, mixed marriage at its current rate or higher will almost certainly lead to an erosion of the size, strength, and vitality of the Jewish community.<sup>34</sup>

Commission chairman Goodkind, who would go on to become president of AJC in 2004, presented the statement for debate. One board member objected to the characterization of intermarriage as a "threat," claiming that the actual threat was "what could flow from a mixed marriage." Several other members requested the insertion of a statement supporting rabbinic officiation at mixed marriages. This was a politically explosive issue, Goodkind explained, and had therefore been left out of the statement. One prominent board member who had been active in AJC for decades and headed several important committees had a Christian wife who regularly attended and participated in AJC events. He too objected to calling intermarriage a "threat," and joined others in requesting language that would call for a change in communal attitudes toward mixed-married couples. The initial sentence was

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<sup>33</sup>One summary of Egon Mayer's own interpretations was "Intermarriage Among American Jews—Consequences, Prospects and Policies," published by the National Jewish Resource Center (CLAL) in its series *Policy Studies*, February 15, 1979, BHG, box 135, folder: "Jews, Judaism and Jewish Community Intermarriage and Conversion 1978," AJC Archives.

<sup>34</sup>Discussion on Proposed AJC Statement on Intermarriage, Minutes, AJC Board of Governors Meeting, March 21, 1979, JCAD, box 17, folder: "Intermarriage Study 1979," AJC Archives.

eventually changed to: "Mixed marriage currently poses serious problems for Jewish continuity." With this and several other amendments, the statement was approved.

### *NJPS 1990 and the Second Jewish Continuity Crisis*

No previous demographic study of American Jewry matched the complexity and scientific rigor of the National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 1990, sponsored by the Council of Jewish Federations, and none of its findings were more explosive than the data on intermarriage, which circulated through word of mouth well before the report was published.

Of all married born-Jews surveyed, 31 percent had non-Jewish spouses. This in itself was hardly news to informed members of the Jewish community.<sup>35</sup> Far more shocking was the generational breakdown: of those Jews who had married over the previous five years, 1985–1990, only 48 percent had married other Jews, so that the intermarriage rate among these younger Jews was 52 percent. Furthermore, only 28 percent of intermarried couples said that they were trying to raise their children only as Jews. Of the others, 41 percent said that the children were being raised at least partly in another religion, and 31 percent reported raising their children in no religion at all.<sup>36</sup> People who had been born Jewish but now considered themselves members of other religions numbered 625,000, and many of these were the parents of some 700,000 individuals under the age of 18 who were of Jewish descent but were being raised in other religions.<sup>37</sup> And only 14 percent of American Jewish households fit the traditional definition of a Jewish family—mother and father, both Jewish, married for the first time, with children.

The 1990 NJPS raised once again the fears about "Jewish con-

<sup>35</sup>Author's interview with Steven Bayme, May 25, 2006; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, pp. 369–73.

<sup>36</sup>The CJF released the study in the spring of 1991. The complete study is available on line from the North American Jewish Data Bank—a collaborative project between United Jewish Communities (the successor to CJF) and the University of Connecticut's Center for Judaic Studies and Contemporary Jewish Life and Roper Center for Public Opinion Research—at [www.jewishdatabank.org/NJPS1990.asp](http://www.jewishdatabank.org/NJPS1990.asp). See also Barry Kosmin and Jeffrey Scheckner, "Jewish Population in the United States," *AJYB* 91 (1991), p. 206, and Sidney Goldstein, "Profile of American Jewry: Highlights from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey," *AJYB* 92 (1992), pp. 126–27.

<sup>37</sup>Lawrence Grossman, "Jewish Communal Affairs," *AJYB* 93 (1993), p. 178.

tinuity" that had previously surfaced in the early 1960s. While subsequent recalculation would show that the most spectacular NJPS claim, the 52-percent intermarriage rate for young Jews, was exaggerated,<sup>38</sup> the fearsome "news" that more than half of American Jews were intermarrying made headlines. The *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek* ran long, prominently placed features about Jewish continuity and intermarriage, and Brown University sociologist Sidney Goldstein referred to the situation revealed by the study as a "silent Holocaust."<sup>39</sup> Jewish institutions and organizations feared that potential donors, members, and clients were literally passing out of existence before their eyes. Federations began to question their large allocations to Israel, since a large investment of funds would likely be necessary to buttress Jewish identity in the U.S. Indeed, some argued, such a reallocation would help Israel in the long run, since an American community with atrophied Jewish connections could hardly be of much help to the Jewish state.

The NJPS decisively reversed the optimistic spirit that had captured the American Jewish community in the late 1980s, best expressed by Charles E. Silberman in his 1985 book *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today*.<sup>40</sup> Silberman's picture of a thriving American Jewry, proud and sure-footed in its Jewishness and expanding numerically through the addition of spouses and children gained through intermarriage, fell by the wayside as more pessimistic portrayals, some using the NJPS data, appeared.<sup>41</sup>

Philanthropists and communal leaders sought new approaches to stave off demographic erosion. To energize Jewish life among college students, Hillel, the campus organization previously administered by B'nai B'rith, was revitalized and reorganized in 1994 as an independent nonprofit organization.<sup>42</sup> Among the philan-

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<sup>38</sup>The 2000–01 National Jewish Population Survey found a 47-percent rate. It can be accessed at [www.jewishdatabank.org/NJPS2000.asp](http://www.jewishdatabank.org/NJPS2000.asp).

<sup>39</sup>Goldstein, "Profile of American Jewry," p. 77.

<sup>40</sup>Charles E. Silberman, *A Certain People: American Jews and Their Lives Today* (New York, 1985).

<sup>41</sup>Among these were Arthur Hertzberg, *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York, 1989) and Samuel C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the Twentieth Century* (Seattle, 1995).

<sup>42</sup>For a brief history of Hillel, see Jeff Rubin, "The Road to Renaissance, 1923–2003: Hillel," at [www.Hillel.org](http://www.Hillel.org).

thropists who stepped up to spearhead new programs for Jewish youth were Charles Bronfman and Michael Steinhardt, who, along with several other wealthy associates, established Birthright Israel in late 1998 (known as *Taglit* in Hebrew), which provided free, ten-day educational trips to Israel for young Jewish adults who had never been to Israel before. By 2006 Birthright would log its 100,000th participant, with thousands more on waiting lists.<sup>43</sup>

### *AJC on Inter-marriage in the 1990s*

AJC, which had entered the debate over Jewish continuity in the 1960s, sought to confront this new reality. It first worked to update its 1977 statement on intermarriage in light of the NJPS findings and the results of its own new research studies. AJC position statements were understood as setting agency guidelines for policy and programming, and would also undoubtedly influence other Jewish organizations and institutions.

Both the AJC Board of Governors and local AJC chapters were deeply divided on the issue. In light of the proliferation of intermarriage, how far could they go in decrying the trend and advocating conversion for non-Jewish spouses without alienating members of their own families? Another weighty question, as it developed within the ranks of AJC and elsewhere, was the proper allocation of communal resources. Should limited funds be spent on “outreach” to the periphery—to those who had already chosen to intermarry—or on “inreach,” the term then coming into use to denote supporting and shoring up the ranks of those already moderately affiliated, in the hope that they would lead more intensive Jewish lives?<sup>44</sup> A third matter of controversy, already surfacing in some congregations, was what role, if any, should non-Jewish spouses and relatives play in their Jewish children’s synagogue life-cycle events, for example, at a bar/bat mitzvah or a wedding.<sup>45</sup>

Charlotte Holstein, who chaired the Jewish Communal Affairs

<sup>43</sup>See [www.birthrightisrael.com](http://www.birthrightisrael.com).

<sup>44</sup>For a treatment of this debate suggesting that by the late 1990s the proponents of “outreach” appeared to be winning, see Lawrence Grossman, “Jewish Communal Affairs,” *AJYB* 99 (1999), p. 191. For an overview of AJC’s approach, see Steven Bayme, “Intermarriage and Jewish Leadership in the United States,” *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, April 16, 2006, at [www.jcpa.org](http://www.jcpa.org).

<sup>45</sup>*Sanua Let Use Prove Strong*, pp. 379–80.

Commission in 1991, wrote movingly of her divided feelings as both a Jewish communal leader and the parent of a soon-to-be-intermarried child: as the commission was working to update the statement on intermarriage, her own daughter was planning her marriage to a longtime boyfriend, a born Catholic. "I love and respect my daughter and I would do anything to protect her happiness and future," she wrote.<sup>46</sup> As the statement was being drafted, she went on, "I felt that many aspects of it were directed at me personally." Reading that intermarriage ought to be prevented, that in such families it was difficult to impart Jewish knowledge and tradition to children, and that current rates of intermarriage would lead to "an erosion of the size, strength and vitality of the Jewish community," Holstein reflected that her own family was contributing to the problem.<sup>47</sup>

Even so, she recognized that she had to "draw the distinction between what I felt emotionally and what rationally was good for the survival of the Jewish community as a whole." She was not alone in her dilemma; many other AJC leaders had intermarriage in their families or were intermarried themselves, and thus there prevailed among them "a more accepting attitude toward intermarriage" than was the case in more traditional segments of the community, elements that AJC could not ignore if it wanted to assert leadership and act to preserve Jewish unity.<sup>48</sup>

The adoption of the 1991 Statement on Intermarriage was as lengthy and complex a process as ever took place within AJC. The organization had long since ceased to be a "committee" and was now a highly complex organization, with numerous lay subcommittees, many separate departments, and dozens of chapters and regional offices. While the president, officers, and executive vice president were empowered to act swiftly when there was an immediate danger to Jews, other decisions had to go through procedural channels that could take a great deal of time.

The first draft of the new intermarriage statement was composed by staff and then submitted to the commission members,

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<sup>46</sup>Charlotte Holstein, "When Commitments Clash: One Leader's Personal Dilemma," in *The Intermarriage Crisis* (New York, 1991), pp. 36–37; Elliott Abrams, *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in a Christian America* (New York, 1997), pp. 106–07.

<sup>47</sup>Holstein, "When Commitments Clash," p. 35.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

who came from different parts of the country and belonged to a variety of Jewish denominations. Revisions were suggested and approved, and then the draft was submitted to the board of governors, which decided on additional changes and sent the text off to the local chapters for their input. Twenty chapters responded: 17 of them approved; Minneapolis and St. Louis disapproved, and Cleveland abstained.<sup>49</sup> Chapters made their feelings known via letters, phone calls, and, in one instance, a video presentation. This chapter input led to a few additional changes. The amended statement came before the national board a second time where it was debated again, leading to another addition. Only then did it pass and become official AJC policy.

The final version was strongly anti-intermarriage in tone, saying, "AJC studies as well as other studies show that the rapidly rising number of intermarriages represents a serious risk to the vitality of the Jewish community, Jewish continuity, and identity. Clearly the Jewish community prefers that Jews marry other Jews." Yet while clearly stating that endogamy was preferable, it also held out conversion of the non-Jewish spouse as the best outcome of intermarriage, and added that in the absence of conversion the children should still be raised exclusively as Jews. The statement, then, assumed that it was possible to do "inreach" and "outreach" simultaneously. "The challenge for the Jewish community," according to the AJC in 1991, was "to offer positive communal and personal connection to the intermarried while at the same time to develop and encourage programs that lead to Jews marrying other Jews."<sup>50</sup>

Similarly controversial was the 1996 "Statement on the Jewish Future." It was not, strictly speaking, an AJC document, but was received as if it were. Its origins lay in an article published in *Commentary* that year on "How to Save American Jews."<sup>51</sup> AJC's Jewish Communal Affairs Commission, in consultation with leading academics, rabbis, and communal professionals affiliated with all the major Jewish movements, developed a programmatic state-

<sup>49</sup>Minutes, AJC Board of Governors Meeting, May 2, 1991, AJC Archives.

<sup>50</sup>AJC Statement on Intermarriage 1991, at [www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org), under "Jewish living—Jewish continuity and intermarriage."

<sup>51</sup>Jack Wertheimer, Charles S. Liebman, and Steven M. Cohen, "How to Save American Jews," *Commentary* 101, January 1996, pp. 47–51.

ment out of it, to which 30 prominent Jewish leaders appended their names. Although it did not represent official AJC policy, the *Statement on the Jewish Future* was published by the agency along with 13 essays responding to it—seven written by signatories and the other six by individuals who refused to sign.<sup>52</sup>

The statement began by noting the rising tide of intermarriage and the community's attempts since 1990 to foster Jewish continuity. "Certain initiatives, however, seem to us more likely to undermine North American Judaism than to strengthen it," the statement declared. "In a well-intentioned effort at inclusiveness, some in the Jewish community seem all too willing to sacrifice distinctive Jewish values and teachings. In response, we call upon American Jews to declare the following five values fundamental to any program of Jewish continuity in North America." The five were given Hebrew names: (1) "Torah," Jewish learning; (2) "*Am Yisrael*," Jewish peoplehood; (3) "*Klal Yisrael*," the community of Israel, denoting pluralism and mutual respect; (4) "*Brit*," covenant; and (5) "*Keruv*," outreach.

The last two had significant implications, according to the signers. *Brit* "serves to differentiate Jews from non-Jews and insure that the Jews remain a people apart." Thus there should be "strong, visible boundaries" between Jews and those not party to the "covenant," non-Jewish relatives. Only Jews should take leadership roles within the Jewish community and in Jewish religious life. And in terms of allocating communal priorities, the principle of *Keruv* was formulated as follows: "The moderately affiliated are the most promising candidates for outreach and—given scarce resources—outreach programs are most productively directed toward them." While noting that "outreach directed toward those who have moved furthest from Judaism and toward the non-Jewish marriage partners of Jews may also be valuable and should remain on the Jewish communal agenda," the statement cautioned:

Outreach to mixed-marrieds should never encourage religious syncretism or ideological neutrality to mixed marriage itself. We part company both with those who believe that any kind of Jewish involvement, no matter how superficial, promotes Jewish continuity,

<sup>52</sup>American Jewish Committee, *Statement on the Jewish Future: Texts and Responses* (New York, 1996), also at [www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org).

and with those who look upon outreach as a panacea and seek to dilute Judaism to make it more attractive to potential converts. Both of these efforts, while well-meaning, are doomed to fail; they promote not continuity but radical discontinuity and are at variance with our tradition.<sup>53</sup>

The statement concluded by reiterating its rejection of the communal consensus favoring unlimited outreach. It defended the need to make hard choices, saying, "There is no effective route to Jewish continuity that will not prove offensive . . . . Some losses are inevitable, and many of these will be personally painful to the leadership of the American Jewish community."<sup>54</sup>

The appended essays in support of the statement cited both strategic and principled arguments in its favor. Steven M. Cohen, professor of sociology at Hebrew University, wrote that "the moderately affiliated (even if they're intermarried) are much easier to reach than the unaffiliated (especially if they're intermarried)," and therefore "the same effort, the same dollars, the same rabbis and educators can have a more profound impact on families and individuals who are visible and are already somewhat committed to conventional Jewish life than they can on a population that is remote, uninterested, and invisible."<sup>55</sup>

Jack Wertheimer, a history professor and provost at the Jewish Theological Seminary, pointed out that Jewish schools and summer camps were already starved for adequate funds, and recalled some parents who had told him with "tears in their eyes" that they were removing their children from a day school because they could not afford the tuition. "Our present course seems hell-bent on harming that more engaged population," he claimed. Wertheimer concluded:

The more we try to make intermarried families feel comfortable in Jewish settings, the further we demolish barriers to intermarriage. Why should young people oppose intermarriage if they see interfaith families treated as equals in the synagogue? How can our youth develop a resistance to interdating and intermarriage when the Jewish community is becoming ever more reluctant to stigmatize intermarriage—and on the contrary, is creating a vast population of lobby-

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, pp. 14–15.

ists who favor the elimination of barriers to intermarriage because they themselves are intermarried?<sup>56</sup>

The statement's six opponents were equally vehement, and some were downright offended. Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin, who chaired the Reform movement's Outreach Commission, called the document unrealistic. "It is far too late in American Jewish history to turn back the clock," he wrote,

The authors know that only a time-machine-induced trip back to the thirteenth century has any hope of completely ameliorating the threat of mixed marriage. Time and circumstances being what they are, what should the community do? To *not* invest money in inter-faith families and their unique needs is tantamount to abandonment.<sup>57</sup>

John Ruskay, a top official at UJA-Federation of New York, believed that the federation system was already reaching out to the moderately affiliated, and added that the statement's critique of outreach to intermarried families smacked of an unfair Conservative-Orthodox attempt to cast Reform outreach "beyond the pale."<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Woocher, director of JESNA (Jewish Education Service of North Africa) said he did not sign the statement in part because it was "needlessly strident and confrontational."<sup>59</sup>

Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Reform synagogue organization, charged that the aim of the statement seemed to be to "attack the outreach work initiated in the late 1970s by the Reform movement and subsequently emulated by many others in the Jewish community." He accused the authors of engaging in "Jewish Darwinism . . . the belief that only the fittest Jews will survive, and that therefore only they are deserving of our support and attention."<sup>60</sup> The notion that Jews on the periphery of the community should be left unattended was, he felt, "theologically offensive, sociologically blind, and practically disastrous." He believed that the community was capable

<sup>56</sup>Ibid, p. 41. For more on Wertheimer's views on outreach see his "Surrendering to Intermarriage," *Commentary* 111, March 2001, pp. 25-32.

<sup>57</sup>*Statement on the Jewish Future*, p. 34.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, pp. 31-32.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid, p. 45. The "Jewish Darwinism" formulation was first made by Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of Great Britain.

both of outreach to the intermarried and programs directed at those already engaged in Jewish life.

Deborah Dash Moore, then a professor at Vassar College, was also intensely critical of the statement. "Why should we trust these self-appointed gatekeepers with their penchant for drawing boundaries?" she asked. "They would plan to leverage the future by laying guilt over the survival of the people at the feet of every American Jew and Jewish organization." Moore, a historian, argued that in the U.S. the Jewish "periphery" had always been larger than the "center," and "vigorously" objected to adopting what she called an Orthodox agenda. The writers of the statement, she charged, were "obsessed with excluding Jews, with building ever higher barriers to participation."<sup>61</sup>

### *Inreach, Outreach, or Both?*

These disagreements were by no means resolved by the AJC Board of Governors when it met in 1997 to issue a new policy statement and action plan on Jewish continuity. Again, the AJC consultative process ensured that months would go by before an acceptable text was approved. This statement, like its predecessor of 1991, affirmed a preference for endogamy; where intermarriage did occur, conversion; and raising the children as Jewish. However, unlike the 1996 Statement on the Jewish Future, it affirmed the value of both inreach and outreach. The board resolved: "The Jewish community must develop a multi-track approach to strengthen Jewish identity and positive Jewish experience in both in-marriages and mixed-marriages . . . . We must reach in and reach out."<sup>62</sup>

This policy statement reflected a new social reality. As the population of mixed-married couples and their children grew, old Jewish intermarriage taboos had all but collapsed. Rabbis reported fearing that their contracts would not be renewed if they spoke out against intermarriage, and in the Reform rabbinate, candidates for pulpits found that congregational search committees were increasingly seeking to hire rabbis willing to perform such marriages.

In AJC's annual survey of American Jewish public opinion

<sup>61</sup>Ibid, pp. 24–27.

<sup>62</sup>"Jewish Continuity: Policy Statement and Action Plan," adopted by the AJC Board of Governors, December 8, 1997, at [www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org).

conducted in the fall of 2001, well over half the sample—56 percent—disagreed with the statement, “It would pain me if my child married a Gentile,” and were either positive or neutral toward such a prospect. Only 39 percent agreed that “it would pain me,” and 5 percent were not sure. Seventy-nine percent of the respondents thought rabbis should officiate at mixed marriages and 50 percent said they should do so even if Gentile clergy was also involved. In reaction to the statement, “The best response to intermarriage is to encourage the Gentile to convert,” 68 percent disagreed, 25 percent agreed, and 7 percent were not sure. Most telling was the response to the statement, “It is racist to oppose intermarriage.” Exactly half the sample agreed.<sup>63</sup>

The boundaries that had separated Jewish from Christian religious practice were also eroding. A study that Brandeis University sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman did in 2001 for AJC, *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed Married Families*, compared mixed-religion families with endogamous Jewish families and those in which an originally non-Jewish spouse converted to Judaism. Fishman found that in the mixed-religion households, even in cases where the parents had agreed to raise the children as Jews, Christian practices tended to creep in over the years, especially if it was the mother who was Christian.<sup>64</sup>

In the sample of respondents studied by Fishman, more than 80 percent of mixed-married families reported Christian activities of some sort, Christmas and Easter celebrations being most common. Two-thirds of the families celebrated Christmas at home and 16 percent went to church as well. Over half celebrated Easter at home, 12 percent also attending church on that holiday.<sup>65</sup> In a finding that seemed to contradict the regnant assumption that nothing could be done to minimize the incidence of intermarriage, the study found that parental attitudes made a difference. Among the Jewish mixed-marrieds, 62 percent claimed their parents had said nothing to them about the importance of marrying a Jew; in contrast, 62 percent of the Jews married to Jews and 48 percent of those whose originally non-Jewish partner had converted indi-

<sup>63</sup>“Widespread Acceptance of Intermarriage,” *AJC Journal*, December 2000, p. 10.

<sup>64</sup>Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish and Something Else: A Study of Mixed Married Families* (New York, 2001), and at [www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org). On the role of gender in the dynamics of mixed-married households see pp. 2 and 31–33.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

cated that their parents had discouraged mixed marriage. Furthermore, Fishman reported, there was little “backlash effect, of negative reactions to discouragement of mixed marriage . . .”<sup>66</sup>

In February 2001, as *Jewish and Something Else* was going to press and in the wake of the annual AJC opinion survey showing that half of American Jews considered it racist to oppose intermarriage, AJC’s Contemporary Jewish Life Department (the new name for the old Jewish Communal Affairs Department) followed a strategy similar to what it had done in 1996, when it produced the *Statement on the Jewish Future*. It convened a coalition of some 25 communal leaders, rabbis, and Judaic scholars—including Professor Fishman—determined to “work together to restore the ideals of in-marriage” and to encourage Jewish leadership to take on the responsibility of promoting it as a norm. “In the face of an American culture that has declared interfaith marriage to be as American as apple pie,” asserted Steven Bayme, director of the department; “only Jews themselves can articulate the importance of Jewish in-marriage. The question is whether the Jewish leaders have the will do so.”<sup>67</sup> In cases where intermarriage did take place, the group—which soon adopted the name Jewish In-Marriage Initiative—pledged to advocate forcefully in favor of conversion.<sup>68</sup>

Sharp criticism came quickly. Egon Mayer, whose research on intermarriage had begun under the sponsorship of AJC and who was now founding director of the Jewish Outreach Institute, called the new endeavor “ludicrous” and “comical,” since fighting intermarriage was like “arguing against the weather.” “They’re going to make speeches to people who in every other aspect are integrated into American life, and expect those people to listen?” he asked.<sup>69</sup> Edgar Bronfman, businessman, philanthropist, and chairman of the World Jewish Congress, told a London newspaper that opposing intermarriage was “racist and begins to sound a little like Nazism.” For him, the choice was between “an attempt to double

<sup>66</sup>Ibid, pp. 7–8.

<sup>67</sup>Steven Bayme’s foreword, *ibid*, p. vi.

<sup>68</sup>AJC press release, “AJC Convenes Communal Leaders, Rabbis, Judaic Scholars to Explore Strategies to Address Intermarriage,” February 27, 2001, at [www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org).

<sup>69</sup>Debra Nussbaum, “Coalition to Fight Intermarriage,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency News Bulletin*, March 9, 2001.

the amount of Jews that there are” through outreach to the intermarried, or, alternatively, “we can irritate everybody who’s intermarried and lose them all.”<sup>70</sup>

Although several important AJC lay and professional leaders were part of the In-Marriage Initiative, the AJC Executive Committee, a small body that met in between meetings of the board of governors, voted not to grant it official endorsement. The coalition disbanded and reconvened outside the boundaries of AJC.

A few years later, yet another AJC study—*Young Jewish Adults in the United States Today: Harbingers of the American Jewish Community of Tomorrow?*—suggested that the concomitant problems of prolonged singlehood and childlessness might soon surpass intermarriage as the major threat to Jewish continuity. Completed in 2006 by Ukeles Associates, Inc., the report showed that more than half of all American Jews under the age of 40 were not yet married, and that 56 percent of American Jewry consisted of non-Orthodox singles and married couples without children. The Orthodox community, which was far less affected by the trend and therefore had many more children, was likely to grow in size and as a percentage of the total Jewish population as time went on. Another implication of this research was, outside Orthodox circles, the further weakening of parental resistance to intermarriage. As Jewish children grew older without marrying, parents were more likely to accept a son- or daughter-in-law of any faith, so long as they would be assured of grandchildren.<sup>71</sup>

The debates over intermarriage and Jewish continuity that were heard in AJC corridors and meeting rooms as it celebrated its centennial in 2006 might have surprised earlier generations of leaders, for whom the problem of anti-Semitism was the paramount reason for creating AJC and ensuring acceptance into the American mainstream was the overriding priority. But the very prominence of concerns about continuity 100 years later provided clear evidence of AJC’s ability to anticipate and adapt to changing communal priorities.

In its work on intermarriage, AJC proved its worth both as a re-

<sup>70</sup>Lawrence Grossman, “Jewish Communal Affairs,” *AJYB* 105 (2005), p. 207.

<sup>71</sup>Jacob Ukeles, Ron Miller, and Pearl Beck, *Young Jewish Adults in the United States Today* (New York, 2006). The results of the study were presented to the centennial annual meeting of AJC in May 2006 before publication.

search institution and as a Jewish body able to bring to the table all sides of the debate on one of the community's most explosive issues. Contrary to its former image as the least "Jewish" of Jewish organizations, it had come down decisively on the side of Jewish tradition by affirming endogamy and conversion at a time when both were slighted in many sectors of American Jewry. While there was no way to predict AJC's influence on the broader community, and diverse views about intermarriage and the inreach-outreach question still characterized much of the AJC membership, the organization's prominent involvement in the issue assured it a place where its leaders since the 1960s had wished it to be—in the mainstream of Jewish communal life.