

Leeor Eliyahu

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Waging and Winning the Jewish War Against Assimilation – The Problem – The Solution

Is the threat from within worse than external threats? Has indifference led to a decline of our Jewish culture and religious values?

Assimilation is defined as the “decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences”. (Alba 2006) It is a trend that is commonly seen in societies where minority ethnic groups live amongst a majority non-ethnic population. As minorities become accepted into the community at large, they begin to experience boundary blurring, an event that allows experiences and outlooks that were once distinctive to each side of the boundary to now be somewhat shared. This boundary blurring also prevents individuals from having to choose between the mainstream and their group of origin. (Alba 2006) The phenomenon of assimilation is seen within and experienced by nearly all ethnic groups living as a minority population. But this issue seems to be paramount in the Jewish narrative.

The modern Jewish story begins with the emancipation of Jews in Napoleonic France, and demonstrates that Jews living within the Diaspora have historically struggled with their Jewish identities. For centuries, Jews strived to be considered more German than the Germans, more French than the French, and more Dutch than the Dutch. Though once they were granted equality various other issues arose for them. How much do Jews need to conform to the culture of the land in which they reside? How much of the Jewish religion and traditions can be sacrificed while still maintaining Jewish identity? How can Jews combine both cultures and be considered both Jewish and countrymen? These questions,

which the Sanhedrin considered in response to Napoleon's Assembly of Notables, are still prevalent in Jewish communities today and I will demonstrate how the strength of one's Jewish identity is a clear indication to the degree in which s/he assimilates.

Prior to emancipation of Jews in European countries, they were completely segregated and alienated by the rest of their countrymen and were seen as outcasts. Many people believed that Jews and the "Germans" or "French" were incompatible and that they couldn't be one in the same. With the emancipation and the granting of rights for Jews that began at the end of the 18th century and ran into the 20th century, Jews felt a sudden need to "fit in" and prove that they were capable of being both Jewish and French. This began with abandoning Orthodox Judaism and traditional clothing and language; a decline in Yeshiva attendance; and ultimately the formation of the Reform movement. Reform Judaism initially denied the idea of a "Jewish nation" in order to prove that there was no conflict of interest; they simply were Jewish by religion but citizens and nationalists of their country. Furthermore, as the Reform movement did not see themselves as being bound to an unchanging tradition or divine law, they were able to make accommodations to new circumstances more easily. (Hartman & Hartman, 1999) This provided emancipated Jews the ability to show their loyalty to their country of citizenship. Additionally, with the onset of modern Zionism, many emancipated Jews feared the idea of a Jewish State as they thought it created a dual loyalty. In an article entitled *Zionism is Consistent with American Patriotism* written in 1915 in the United States, author Louis Brandeis attempts to prove to American Jewry and non-Jewish Americans that to be Zionist does not negate from one's American patriotism.

It is clear that throughout modern Jewish history Jews have grappled with the idea of dual loyalties and dual identities within their country of citizenship and their religion of Judaism. But how do Jews in North America, in Canada, in Edmonton deal with this conflict today? Is Judaism regarded as

simply a religion and not a culture or a set of values and traditions? Are we throwing our Jewish identities on the back burner as we strive to be part of this melting pot known as Canada? What are the pressures that we face that foster assimilation and how can we prevent them from going too far? In this essay, I will attempt to tackle this prominent issue and suggest ways of resolving the threat of assimilation that Phillips cites Bergman who stated that “intermarriage eventually would lead to a drastic diminution of the Jewish population.” (Phillip 2005)

While I sit here comfortably on my university campus, I can't help but contemplate what this external threat against the Jewish people is. It is hard for me to imagine a life where I would be treated as a second class citizen or deprived of my basic human rights. It is true that anti-Semitism is on the rise again. B'nai Brith Canada reports that incidents have increased by 11.4% in 2009. Yet I cannot fathom the idea that the Jewish people are facing another Holocaust. It certainly is not a plausible reality for the future, most definitely not for the near future and especially not with the existence of the State of Israel. This leads me to examine a possible internal threat amongst the Jewish people that may in fact be detrimental to our survival as a nation. This internal threat of assimilation, in my opinion, stems from both a desire to be part of the melting pot society of North America and ironically, a lack of an imminent external threat.

As much as Canada desires to retain a 'multicultural' society, a clear Canadian identity still exists and most immigrants strive to achieve. Even Canadian born citizens that come from ethnic backgrounds may attempt to dress, talk and act the same as those defined as truly Canadian. This process of assimilation begins with the “adoption of the majority culture by the minority group”. (Phillips 2005) Is it more important to be part of a hockey team that practices every Friday night or stay home and eat a family Shabbat dinner and celebrate Oneg Shabbat? What kind of choices do parents make for their children and how does that influence their children's Jewish identity? In order to define and clearly

measure the strength of one's Jewish identity I propose a model that has already been similarly defined as the tradition-socialization model by Lazerwitz in his book *Jewish Choices* (1998) (Phillips 2005). As Lazerwitz states, we should consider the following factors in the model: Jewish day school attendance and summer camp attendance, along with other factors I believe are relevant, synagogue membership, holiday practice, youth organization participation and young-adult orientated trips to Israel.

At the root of the internal problem of assimilation lies intermarriage. Gordon (1964) describes a two stage process of assimilation whereby the second stage is marital assimilation: one where the minority group is absorbed into the majority group through intermarriage. (Phillips 2005) Some have even speculated that intermarriage would eventually "lead to a drastic diminution of the Jewish population." (Phillips 2005) If one parent is not Jewish many aspects of family life within the home could be different. For instance, if Jewish day school is expensive it might not be a priority for a non-Jewish parent to support. If a non-Jewish parent does not know or understand holiday practice to what extent could a family engage in holiday traditions, and therefore to what extent can a non-Jewish parent's influence eventually dilute the Jewish familial socializations within the home? (Phillips 2005) Others have noted that is not just Jewish education but rather the combination of education, home life, synagogue teachings and Jewish organizations that are needed to create strong Jewish identities in children. (Schiff 1979) If a child did not attend Jewish day school and did not acquire many Jewish friends they might not want to go to Jewish summer camp or participate in youth organizations. These aspects of Jewish Diaspora life are key elements in strengthening Jewish identity and decreasing the chances of future inter-marriage.

Inter-marriage essentially weakens the possible Jewish identity that we can instil in our children. I am not suggesting that if both parents are Jewish the children will automatically have a stronger Jewish identity than those that are raised by inter-married parents; I simply am stating that the chances of a

strong Jewish identity are higher when both parents were raised Jewish. Moreover, even with only one Jewish parent, one may still have just as strong, if not a stronger, Jewish identity as those raised with two, it is simply harder and the chances are lower.

The cyclic nature of inter-marriage is one of the key problems with intermarriage. If a child is raised with a weak Jewish identity, because they did not attend a Jewish day school or ever truly be immersed in a Jewish environment, they themselves may not be inclined to marry a Jewish person as it simply does not hold much importance to them. This perpetuated train of events is only bound to repeat itself as one intermarriage fosters further changes within the social system leading to further intermarriage and eventually to a generation that does not know that they are Jewish. (Lavender 1976)

The prevalence of inter-marriage today leads me to question why in the current Jewish generation of young adults is it so much more common than only a generation ago. What has changed in the recent twenty to thirty years throughout Jewish society that has allowed inter-marriage to dominate 52% of Jewish marriages today? (Phillips 2005) I believe the answer lies in the fact that Jewish people today are fully accepted members of the community at large and boundaries have been sufficiently blurred. Thus, the issue of dating and marrying a non-Jewish individual becomes easy, accepted and the norm. It is ironic that we have fought for so many decades and centuries to be treated as equals and now that we have finally achieved true equality it has actually become a threat to the Jewish nation. For example, on a personal anecdote, two generations ago when my grandparents attended McGill University there were quotas on how many Jews were allowed to attend the University. A generation later when my parents attended McGill, their application asked them to specify what religion they are affiliated with. Today, a question about my religion on a University application or quotas against any religion or ethnicity is not only absurd, but against the law. These types of changes are not only showing that Canadian society has indeed accepted Jewish people as any other citizen of the Canadian

community but it also shows that inter-marriage would be a natural consequence. The fact that Jewish people used to be alienated and somewhat segregated in society caused them to group together and associate more with other Jewish people. They felt more of a need and even an urgency to stay together as one. Alienation was further perpetuated by living in Jewish populated neighbourhoods, going to Jewish schools and not working on Saturdays like other Canadians and demonstrated that Jews did not belong to the Canadian mosaic.

I will use a few personal case studies to demonstrate the torrid pace at which Jewish identity is fading. Firstly, the changes that have occurred here at Talmud Torah, the Jewish day school in Edmonton, in the few short years since I graduated is a huge indication of intermarriage. It is clear that since the time I graduated grade nine a mere eight years ago, there has been a drastic decline in the enrolment of students at the school, especially in the Junior High. A common theme in the past few years has only 2 of the 3 grades of junior high having students. Many of the classes in the elementary school have only one class, sometimes with only nine or ten students, and occasionally a disproportionate amount of boys and girls, which may lead to a decline in enrolment the following year. As the number of students that attend Talmud Torah dwindles, the opportunities in athletics, the arts and even social experiences also decrease; another key factor as to why small numbers continually get smaller. When I attended Talmud Torah the school was flourishing with a recently built new building, the implementation of the Junior High program and visions that the school would only improve.

Another example showing the decline in the participation in Jewish community life can be seen in the lack of kids participating in Jewish youth organizations, for example in BBYO. When I was part of the B'nai Brith Youth Organization we had 4 strong chapters, 2 female and 2 male. Since then, barely six years later, now that my sister is in the organization, there is only one chapter of girls and one chapter of boys due to a lack of participation and attendance. There is not even a whole generation gap between

my sister and me, yet now that she is in BBYO there is already a remarkable decline. This can be correlated with the increase in inter-marriage amongst parents and therefore a decreased need to have their children participate in Jewish community life.

On the other hand, there are others who believe that the alarming rate of intermarriage amongst Jews today is not a cause for concern. The quoted figure of 52% of Jews who intermarry has been challenged by scholars such as Cohen that claim it is only as high as 38%. (Phillips 2005) Massarik (1978) reasoned that as long as half of the children of intermarried couples were raised Jewish there would be no net loss to the Jewish population. (Phillips 2005) Supporters of Massarik even rebuked the American Jewish community's pessimistic outlook of the Jewish people. (Phillips 2005) Those who argue that intermarriage will not be detrimental to the continuation of the Jewish nation support the change from a less religious version of Judaism and a more ethnic version. (Hartman & Hartman 2001) It has been argued that a weak Jewish identity may be the result of a less religious Jewish generation who connect less to prayers and strict kosher laws and more with cultural traditions and stereotypical foods. Although the majority of scholars agree that intermarriage is not the most ideal way to perpetuate and instil strong Jewish identity within our youth, we must also realize that it does mean that Judaism is doomed; rather it may only mark a new adaptation to Jewish life. Judaism is now characterized by a much more diverse religious sector, chabad, orthodox, conservative, reform, reconstructionist etc, not just an ultra-orthodox denomination. It is celebrated and embraced through family traditions, holiday celebrations that have been altered from strict orthodoxy and cultural norms that allow Jewish life to adapt to modern times.

In order to fight and win this war against Jewish assimilation various strategies should be embarked upon. Firstly, I feel that Jewish day school is one of the most important ways of learning about Jewish culture, traditions and religion. It is the best way of immersing our youth in a strong Jewish

environment and allowing them to develop lifelong Jewish friends. Some have even cited that Jewish day schools are so critical that it is the only “type of Jewish education that stands against the very rapidly growing rate of intermarriage.” (Phillips 2000) Even the Jewish Agency for Israel whose primary mandate since 1922 has been to promote and increase aliyah, has recently changed its momentum in order to “give Jewish education projects more emphasis”. (Lipschiz 2010) Jewish Agency Chairman Natan Sharansky’s goal is to demonstrate their responsibility to enrich Jewish life everywhere and not just attract Jews to Israel. (Liphschiz 2010) However, tuition for Jewish education may be quite expensive and could be a major deterring factor. We, as a Jewish community, must figure out a way to make tuition more affordable to the average Jewish family, which would hopefully attract more parents to send their children. Another way to attract Jews of all age groups is to consider create strong Jewish community centres with unique programming. By encouraging attendance in Jewish day schools and making them more affordable along with creating fun programming at Jewish community centres we are creating a forum in which Jewish youth and young adults can develop friendships and relationships. This will help to strengthen their Jewish identity and their desire to marry other Jews.

Lastly, what many scholars in the field of Jewish education consider to be critical in the fight against assimilation is educational trips to Israel both as youth and as young adults. Experts believe that going to Israel is an excellent opportunity to have a live Jewish experience and be part of cyclical Jewish calendar year. Essentially, going to Israel and visiting the sites that one has learned about, speaking Hebrew and being immersed in a completely Jewish environment helps to strengthen one’s Jewish identity. As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this essay, the key to preventing assimilation is to create a strong Jewish identity. Taking young adults to the place where it all began, in my own experience, will enhance and reinforce their Jewish experience and identity.

In summary, Jewish communities must utilize various strategies in enhancing Jewish identity, a pivotal force in the fight against intermarriage and ultimately assimilation. If we do not implement new strategies we may face a new generation with an ever increasing intermarriage rate and the negative consequences it leaves on the Jewish nation. It is ironic that after our centuries-long struggle to be accepted into societies as equals finally materialized, we have almost lost sight of our Jewish heritage placed it as a second priority.

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