Earl Raab   April 30, 1979

INTERMARRIAGE AND CONVERSION

A case can be made that intermarriage will increase Jewish population. Consider

this arithmetic:

If 100 Jewish women and 100 Jewish men pair off and marry, having 2 children per

family, there is a total of 400 Jews.

However, if these 200 Jews intermarry with non-Jews at the going rate, then 81 of

these 200 Jews will intermarry. Among these 81,about a third will marry mates who

will convert to Judaism, according to the present fact of the matter. That means

27 alliances with conversion, and at the same rate of 2 children per marriage, these

27 marriages now account for 108 Jews.

Then there are the 119 who marry other Jews, and with 2 children per family,

account for another sub-total of 237 Jews. And there are the 53 Jews who marry mates

who do not convert. The evidence is that about ten children from those marriages,

when the mother is Jewish, will be raised as Jews and given a Jewish education.

That is a grand total of 408 (108 plus 237 plus 63).

Thus, if among 200 Jews there is *no* intermarriage, we end up with 400 Jews. But

if among 200 Jews, there is the prevailing rate of intermarriage and conversion,

we end up with 408 Jews!

Thus it would seem that if we wanted to increase the Jewish population, we would

push intermarriage. Arrange for joint church/synagogue socials. Encourage our

young people to mix with nice non-Jewish boys and girls.

Such a proposal is reminiscent of the local Mental Health Association President who once pointed out that since the rate of mental illness always drops during wartime, and since Mental Health Associations are in the business of reducing mental illness, such Associations should actively oppose all peace efforts.

However, there is a serious point in the above arithmetic. The conversion rate is critical. As long as about one third of those who intermarry do so with mates who convert to Judaism, then the Jewish population will not decrease as a result of intermarriage -- no matter what the rate of intermarriage. If that conversion rate would go up to 40 per cent, the Jewish population would be increased significantly by intermarriage, no matter what its rate.

But what about the qualify of commitment in "converted mate" families? The American Jewish Committee has recently done some research on that subject, with the important participation of its local chapters. That study found that about the same percentage of "converted mate" families light candles on Friday night, and attend services, as in those families where both mates were born Jewish. There is some difference between these two types of family when it comes to providing some formal education to their children. About 56 per cent of the "converted mate" families do so, as against 70 per cent of those families where both mates were born Jewish. It should be noted also that about 20 per cent of those families with one Jewish and one non-converted mate provide some formal Jewish education to their children.

In any case, the conversion rate -- backed of course by the quality of Jewish education -- is the *key* if we are concerned about the inroads of intermarriage, a phenomenon probably inevitable in an open society. The conversion rate in intermarriage is now about 33 per cent. Even in terms of continuity, as measured by the Jewish education of children, a conversion rate of about 40 per cent would prevent any *statistical* erosion of the Jewish population by intermarriage.