“Let’s [Not] Talk About It Later”

“Congratulations! It’s a Boy!” New parents Micah and Alexis kiss, as tears run down their faces. All the grandparents come bursting in the hospital room. Everyone is hugging and crying. Micah, his parents and his in-laws pull out their cell phones to call friends and extended family. Micah asks his mom to call a moyel to perform a bris and the room stops. Alexis says to her mom, “What?!? They aren’t doing that to my sweet innocent brand new baby!” The mood of the room shifts from one of joy, excitement, and sharing, to one of tension, discomfort and divisiveness.

Surprisingly, this couple’s sudden and jarring discovery at the eleventh hour, that they are not on the same page about a major decision, is not at all uncommon. How did they get to this point? Today, they are both successful professionals, who spend hours a day processing information, able to communicate in sophisticated and mature ways. Yet as their story unfolds, it becomes clear how the delivery room confusion happened. Before the two met, Micah was active in his temple youth group and NFTY region in high school and Alexis had always been involved in her church group. For both of them, religion became less important when they went to college. Soon afterwards, they met, dated, got engaged, were married by a judge, and still never found the words to talk about what would happen when the kids were born.

Intermarriage tends to be a divisive word in Jewish circles. Steven Cohen writes “Intermarriage does indeed constitute the greatest single threat to Jewish continuity today, both
on the individual level and on a group level.”¹ Analysts of the National Jewish Population Survey link educational experience with intermarriage rate. Cohen notes that in general, “the more Jewish educational experiences, the lower the chances of intermarriage.”² Remarkably Jewish education can be seen both as the powerful key in forming Jewish identity and as the system that failed to form Jewish identity. However, even the best educational experiences cannot provide silver bullets to end intermarriage.

I know I am not the only person who receives calls from friends who were active in youth group and avid campers, remarking with genuine shock at their own experiences. They say, “It’s weird to see a Christmas tree in my living room now that Jennifer and I are living together,” then adding, “But it’s important to her, so I won’t say anything to rock the boat.” Others, at least remotely acknowledging the presence of significant religious differences, still deny their complexity, saying, “I went shopping for a diamond ring today. I love her so much. We have not settled, or really even talked about our religious differences; but I am sure we can figure that out when the kids are born.” One young woman, who had actually been president of her youth group and went to camp for five years, said when preparing for her wedding: “Judaism used to be so important to me. It makes Seth uncomfortable. Now I see that I can be happy without it.” A few years later, the same woman had a powerful realization at a Passover seder, and shared, with deep remorse, “I forgot how much I love the Jewish stuff. Too bad I cannot have that in my life now.”

These are just a handful from the hundreds of people who graduated from Jewish teen programs with a strong sense of Jewish identity, but were at a loss of words when religion could,

² Ibid.
and should have come up. Even as seniors, these three people probably would have said that Judaism was a central pillar of their high school years. Yet, when they met a non-Jewish partner years later, they could not and/or would not express their connection to Judaism, perhaps even denying its significance to themselves. Early in the relationship, young adults may fear rejection from a partner if they express a need for Judaism in their lives. Teens who do not keep kosher or regularly attend Shabbat services may feel especially uneasy expressing a powerful connection to Judaism. In teen years, we need to foster that connection to Judaism.

Cohen showed that people who “went to supplementary school that met twice a week into adolescence, went to Israel and attended a Jewish camp … have a 14% lower intermarriage rate.”

Bruce Phillips, sociologist and professor at Hebrew Union College, noted that teens who “continued supplementary Jewish schooling beyond age 13 and were exposed to any type of non-formal Jewish education had the lowest rate of intermarriage (35%).” To be sure, our teen programs do have the power to shape a person’s Jewish identity. At the same time, though, we must not forget that they still have a 35% intermarriage rate. Maybe it is time to shift away from the belief that we can fully prevent intermarriage.

Intermarriage is going to happen. Debating with Steven Cohen, Sarah Benor, an assistant professor of Jewish Communal Service at Hebrew Union College, and a linguist interested in contemporary changes in Jewish identity formation, countered, “Just as it is impractical to expect that humans can completely eliminate CO₂ emissions, I think it’s impractical to expect Jews to

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3 Ibid.
5 Steven Cohen. 14
completely eliminate intermarriage. Intermarriage is a fact that we cannot change.” It is one of
the realities of living as liberal Jew in America. Instead of seeing the goal of Jewish Education
as eliminating intermarriage, let us embrace the reality that intermarriage is part of our past, our
present and yes, our foreseeable future, and teach to it. We need to recognize that we are
fighting the wrong fight. Let us stop fighting against intermarriage, and instead treat
intermarriage as a reality that our teens need to be much better equipped to manage.

In most Jewish educational settings, we currently have two approaches to intermarriage.
The first approach constitutes preaching to children that they should not marry non-Jews.
Although it has not been studied formally, it is my sense that this approach tends to be met with
limited success. Perhaps Judy Petsonk sheds some light on this when, analyzing intermarriage
through the lens of Erik Erikson’s developmental psychology; she notes that teens and young
adults are experiencing a need to separate themselves from authority and parents.7 Not
surprisingly, then, authoritative messages of “do not marry a non-Jew” would fail to reach a teen
audience in a productive manner. The second approach to intermarriage in education is
arguably even worse: to ignore it altogether and never speak about it. There is no mystery about
why and how neither approach gives young Jews the tools they need in the real world of dating.

Positive Jewish identities are good, but we can go a step further to give Jewish youth the
tools to express to a non-Jewish boyfriend or girlfriend that Judaism is important to them, and
how and why. We need to admit first to ourselves, and then to them, without judgment or
condescension, that they may, in fact, date someone who is not Jewish. Then, it is our job as

6 Sarah Benor. “Response to Steven Cohen’s Tale of Two Jewries” B’nai David Judea (May 5, 2007) 5
7 Judy Petsonk. “Sensitizing Jewish Professionals to Intermarriage Issues in Counseling, Group Work,
liberal Jewish educators to make it safe for them to think through the complex and emotionally charged issues, without shame, and without blame. We need to teach them to say the sentence as one young woman did early in her relationship, “I really like you and want to continue dating you. Judaism is also core to me and I want to have a Jewish family. I need to know if having a Jewish family is an option for you.”