

**REMARKS AT MEETING OF the COUNCIL
ON INCENTIVES IN JEWISH EDUCATION**

I have been asked to share with you my impressions of the impact on the Jewish community in general, with specific reference to my community and my institution, of the now famous or infamous statistics concerning the 52% out-marriages contained in the recent population study by the CJF.

The most shocking thing about this news is that anyone is shocked at all. In our bones, we all knew that it was coming--indeed, that it was inevitable. We were reluctant to talk about it without rhetorical disguises and semantic convolutions, because it was bad for our communal business, because we were tired of "crying wolf," and because we were apprehensive about the consequences.

But so deeply disturbing is this latest revelation about the decline of the Jewish community, that the times will permit nothing less than utter frankness. We must all be civilized, of course, but learn to speak to each other without the kind of courtesies and sensibilities that cramp our style and cause us to be less than honest with each other.

Harsh words, I know. But the bitter truth is that our Jewish community still has not absorbed the extent or meaning of this catastrophe. The forces of denial are already rallying: the CJF statistics will be questioned, vested interests will assert themselves, and we will try our damndest to shoot the messengers. More articles and books will be written declaring that maybe, really, intermarriage is good for us, that we must not submit to pessimism, that we are panicking prematurely, that "Gott vet helfn." (A remarkable paradox: those with the least faith in a Deity suddenly discover that we can rely on Him even if He does not exist...) And maybe worst of all, yet another commission will be formed, another study launched, and another conference called. And life will continue as usual, as it--life--ebbs away from the American-Jewish community.

Even now, some of us are reaching to the psychological medicine chest for some palliatives and have grabbed the most available nostrum -- "outreach" to the already intermarried. I can understand the pain of parents and others whose children have chosen to marry out. But is it right for the community as a whole, striving to survive intact, to invest its limited resources in those who, as adults, are on the way out by consciously opting for a non-Jewish spouse, and thus make it impossible for us to educate those thousands of children of parents not yet totally alienated from the Jewish people and faith? Yet we recite the word "outreach" like a mantra, we persuade ourselves against all logic and against all the readily available facts that this vast

distraction will somehow change the ugly reality which we have been forced to confront. And we are afraid that without this fig-leaf to cover our nakedness, our shame will be exposed -- most painfully of all, to our own eyes and those of our constituents. We are like the "Wise Men of Chelm" who, upon learning that many people were injured falling off their snow-capped mountain, deliberated for seven days and nights and decided to build not a fence on the mountain, but a hospital in the valley. So, instead of reacting with a cry for more Jewish education, we talk of "outreach" to those who are well beyond our reach.

I spent this past weekend in a large North American city and heard that the local Federation planned not only not to increase funds for Jewish education, but to establish a study commission that will consider, amongst other ideas, a plan to cut out all subsidies to Jewish schools. I do not believe that such radical steps will be taken by that group, but how many other communities will decide unilaterally to cut off the only branch that they are all still sitting on?

Well more than 52% or so of our population is lost to us -- the overwhelming majority of them irretrievably so. Of the remaining 48%, who knows how many marry within the Jewish community only by happenstance and not because of conviction--and who, considering the divorce rate, are liable to intermarry the second time around! And Jewish education is still seen as the preserve of "special interests" of only one segment within the Jewish community.

The bad news certainly presents a powerful argument for Aliyah. But the Israelis should draw little comfort from this awful news. Their own system of Jewish education -- not just Hebrew language and post-1948 Jewish history and Israeli geography, but Jewish tradition and religion and culture--leaves something to be desired. The problems are universal for Jews; without a solid, real, and authentic Jewish education, we cannot hold onto our young in a free, democratic society in this modern or post-modern world.

No one has been spared in this plague--no one!--but one thing is clear: Those with the most Jewish education and the most intensive Jewish education, have experienced the least defections. And those with the least Jewish education have suffered the most. The Orthodox community has been loudly proclaiming its *baalei teshuvah* (returnees to Judaism) successes; but both here and in Israel, the defections undoubtedly out-number the "returnees." Nevertheless, by and large, the number of out-marriages is less than with others. And as you go to the other end of the spectrum, where Jewish education is either shamefully dilute or totally absent, the numbers increase. The ripple becomes a stream, the stream a river, and the river a flood.

Yeshiva University will have to struggle harder to get more students willing to make the hard commitment to Jewish education. Orthodox Jews will have to work twice as hard to make ends meet --and many of them may not succeed. The *Haredi* institutions will be particularly hurt both because of the loss of the patronage of Reichmanns and others, and because their *Kollel* system --originally meant for the scholarly elite and metamorphosed into an educational norm for all--never made economic sense. But we will survive, only because Jewish education is for us a value etched deeply into the tablets of our most sacred convictions: *Talmud Torah ke'neged kulam*. However, unless generous help is forthcoming soon, large numbers of young people in this community, especially those whose parents are on the periphery, will be denied a Jewish education--*Jews who otherwise would be ready even to pay for it sacrificially*; but there is a limit to what a family can spend after all luxuries have been waived and food has become scarce.

My worry is not at all limited to the Orthodox Jews. None of us can afford to be parochial in the face of this developing tornado. My real worry is: first, that we will continue denying that the clouds have already gathered; that the thunder has begun cracking; and that the lightning is dancing around our heads.

My second worry concerns us, here--one of the most serious and promising groups in my experience to dedicate itself to Jewish education. We have been meeting about this problem for a number of years. We have our hearts in the right places, and we have been deliberating hard and long. All of us have had a clear premonition of the catastrophe at our door step, but we have been at work too leisurely. We have got to decide to act--wisely, not in panic, but act--and act now. Better to make a mistake here and there and be less than 100% effective, than emerge with a perfect plan but with virtually no one left to whom to apply it.

Furthermore, I am concerned that we will continue debating whether we should spend our resources on the marginal Jews or on those of more serious commitment -- and not wake up before realizing that in times of crisis and limited resources, you play to your strength and not to your weakness. Health professionals do that and call it triage; businessmen do that all the time and call it wise managerial strategy and good business practice.

And my fourth and biggest worry is worry itself: that it will discourage us instead of energizing us, that even more than denial there will emerge its diametrical opposite, despair and, hence, inaction and paralysis. Both denial and despair are morally equivalent. Both are--forgive the unmodern word--sins. Grievous sins. Terrible and unforgivable sins.

But we are Jews. And Jews do not and may not despair.

We know what has to be done: We have to provide for more and better Jewish education for our people. It is not a panacea. It is not a sufficient condition, but it most certainly is a necessary one.

And this group is the best and greatest hope for a new infusion of leadership, ideas, resources, and moral support for our overburdened, underfunded, overworked, and underpopulated Jewish educational system.

The alarming statistics that have so shaken us are not the sound of taps, but of reveille. So let us get moving, get down to work with ever fiercer determination to save, enhance, and transform Jewish education--the only way available to us to turn the statistics around and save our people.

Because the way to beat the odds is not by quitting the game but by playing harder and smarter than ever before.