

ISSUES

of the
American Council
for Judaism
WINTER 1998

Recently, many elements of the organized Jewish community have been in a state of near panic about what they perceive to be the growing threat to Jewish continuity. Rising rates of religious inter-marriage, large numbers of people born to Jewish families joining other religions, and low rates of synagogue membership and attendance have joined together to form what appears to be a crisis mentality on the part of many.

Others argue that in the free and open American society it is only natural that individuals would make their own religious choices and that while some would leave Judaism, others would join. In a society in which prejudice and discrimination are not important factors, the fact that men and women would marry those of other religious traditions can hardly be unexpected. The American melting pot, after all, has been at work and it is not only Jews who have been transformed by the process.

Beyond this, as Dennis Prager, an Orthodox Jew and radio talk show host points out, "Since antiquity people have been predicting the demise of the Jews, some with dread, others with glee. But despite all the travails and tests faced by Jews over the centuries, it is only of late that such predictions seemed plausible, at least in the U.S. where Jewry is on its way to becoming half its present number.... This is not altogether a cause for lament ... the freedom of American Jews to assimilate is also a blessing — it means acceptance instead of bigotry.... Inter-marriage is indeed a mixed curse. As a religious Jew myself, I want Jews to marry Jews for religious, not ethnic reasons. But inter-marriage also represents great advantages — personal freedom and physical security. As Rabbi Leo

Only as a Religious Community Is Jewish Survival Possible

by Allan C. Brownfeld

FAITH OR FEAR: HOW JEWS CAN SURVIVE IN CHRISTIAN AMERICA
by
Elliot Abrams,
The Free Press,
196 pp.,
\$25.00.

Baeck, the German Jewish leader, said after World War II: "If every German family had a Jewish relative, there would not have been a Holocaust."

Assimilation Not New

Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg of New York University points out that, "The loss of large numbers to assimilation is not a new phenomenon among Jews. Those who seek to make of it an unparalleled and unprecedented disaster are simply wrong.... Always and everywhere a saving remnant has chosen to be loyal. So it will be in the next century."

Entering the discussion of these issues with the book *Faith Or Fear: How Jews Can Survive In A Christian America*, is Elliot Abrams, who served as assistant secretary of state in the Reagan Administration and now heads the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.

Abrams points out that in the midst of the greatest religious expansion in American history, Jews are a shrinking minority. The statistics he provides bolster his case: Jews, who once comprised 3.7 percent of the U.S. population, have fallen to about 2 percent; one-third of all Americans of Jewish ancestry no longer report Judaism as their religion; of all Jews who have married since 1985, the majority have married non-Jews, while the rate of conversion of the non-Jewish spouse is declining; demographers predict anywhere from one million to over two million in the American Jewish population in the next two generations (as opposed to the current population of approximately 6 million).

There are, Abrams argues, a number of reasons for the declining identification with Judaism on the part of increasing numbers of Americans born to Jewish families. One of the most important is that mainstream Jewish organizations have promoted a variety of substitutes for Judaism as their major source of identity.

Religion Is Low Priority

In their 1989 book, *The People's Religion: American Faith In The 90s*, George Gallup, Jr. and Joseph Castelli declare that, "Religion is a low priority for American Jews, who lag behind the general population in membership in a congregation, worship attendance, and the importance they place upon religion in their lives." In the answer to Gallup and company's question about whether religion was "very important" in their lives, Americans on average said yes 55 percent of the time, and no only 14 percent. American Jews, however, said yes only 30 percent of the time, and no 35 percent of the time. A Gallup Poll taken in December 1991 asked New Yorkers "How important is religion in your life?" The results: 74 percent of blacks, 57 percent of white Catholics, 47 percent of

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