



**Children from
Intermarried Families:
Religious Schools
Confronting
the Challenge**

Rabbi Charles E. Simon

**2011 Hearing Men's Voices
— Monographs**

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The FJMC is the male volunteer arm of Conservative/Masorti Judaism dedicated to enhancing the quality of Jewish life, increasing volunteerism and helping fathers & sons develop into *Mentschen*. The FJMC services congregations in the global Masorti Movement. Its Shoah Candle, Keruv (outreach to inter-marrieds), World Wide Wrap and Hearing Men's Voices initiatives reflect the vitality of our vibrant organization. FJMC is the voice of Jewish Men.

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Rabbi Charles Simon

Introduction

The FJMC has been convening lay leaders, rabbis and academics to discuss the understanding and integration of intermarrieds into our communities since 1999. As a result of the seminars and training programs that have been developed, In the fall of 2010 FJMC began to examine how religious schools respond to the children from intermarried families and their relationship to the larger synagogue culture. A long forgotten publication, I Went to My Cousin's Crispening (Margie Zeskind and Sheila Silverberg, SheMar Productions. Inc. Miami, 1986), disseminated with the support of the Jim Joseph Foundation, served as the source of our inspiration.

The text was designed to sensitize nursery school teachers and teach them how to respond meaningfully to questions and situations that arise with children of intermarrieds. Discussions were generated as a result of scenarios presented. They included how to deal with non-Jewish symbols in the home, how to respond to non-Jewish family members' religious celebrations, how to work with parents who lack any Jewish memories.

The book and its implications were discussed in a series of meetings with FJMC volunteer consultants, all of whom noted that 25 years after its publication the numbers of intermarried families had increased dramatically. The group wondered how and if our religious schools adapted to this demographic shift. It might be possible, they reasoned, that the messages religious school teachers were currently sending could result in unintentional pain inflicted on children and their well-intentioned parents. After all, these families chose to have their children educated by us. They chose a Conservative/Masorti affiliation for a reason, but was our response sufficient and appropriate?

The Process

The process of learning how best to deliver this information took nearly two years. FJMC expanded the above mentioned curriculum to include children of all ages attending synagogue schools and, in the winter of 2010, convened a number of synagogue religious school principals in Chicago to

discuss how their faculties worked with children of intermarried parents. The concept and curriculum were presented in the hope they would conduct in-service trainings in their respective schools. The feedback from the session was extremely positive, but none of the principals succeeded in implementing the material for staff trainings.

A second attempt was made several months later. The curriculum was distributed to 40 men and women who had been trained as FJMC Keruv Consultants with the request they personally deliver the material and encourage their rabbi to use it to train their school faculties. This method, while more direct, also failed for reasons not addressed in this paper.

A third and final attempt was made in the fall of 2010. This time the FJMC succeeded in gaining the support of the three leading rabbis in the Baltimore community who worked together to sponsor a joint teacher training seminar. The session included the teachers of the local afternoon Hebrew schools and the Solomon Schechter Day School. This effort was coordinated by the local FJMC Keruv consultants. The seminar attracted 70 teachers. The evaluations were extremely positive, and a leading educator assumed responsibility for insuring follow-up.

Recognizing the uniqueness of the Baltimore community, with its large Orthodox population that includes many who teach in the Conservative supplementary and day schools, FJMC selected northern California for its next test site, assuming the more open culture of the Bay area would respond differently. It was anticipated that as a result of what was learned from these two diverse groups, a curriculum could be constructed that could be used anywhere in North America. More than 20 teachers from four Conservative synagogues and one Reform synagogue attended the seminar. In contrast to the Baltimore educators, many of the educators in California were intermarried.

Surprisingly, the northern California educators expressed the same concerns articulated in Baltimore. As a result of these pilot programs, the material and the role of the volunteer lay consultant were revised and a plan created to expand this effort throughout the Conservative/Masorti movement.

Moving forward: May – December 2011

The FJMC Keruv Committee set 2011-2012 as the timetable for expansion. Thanks to coverage in the Jewish media, the San Diego Board of Jewish Education, The Kehillah Partnership in Bergen County, New Jersey and

Gratz College, in a partnership with the Philadelphia based organization Interfaithways requested that the FJMC present this program as part of their wider outreach efforts.

In addition to these events, FJMC's volunteer consultants organized single or combined synagogue training for the following Conservative institutions between August and September 2011:

Florida:

Tamarac Jewish Center, Tamarac,
Cong. B'nai Torah, Boca Raton

New Jersey:

Marlboro Jewish Center, plus four neighboring synagogues
Beth Shalom, Livingston, plus 3 neighboring synagogues

New York:

JCC Harrison

Pennsylvania:

Temple Beth Hillel Beth El, Wynnewood, PA

Washington D.C.:

Congregation Adas Israel

To date, additional seminars are in the planning stage in Chicago, Cincinnati and Boston.

Following each seminar, the material, mode of presentation and role of the volunteer was re-evaluated. As of August 1st, a letter of agreement between the sponsoring body and the FJMC was created, along with a certificate indicating that teachers had participated in a two hour in-service training.

The Questionnaire

By the end of September 2011 approximately 192 evaluations were returned from approximately 400 people who attended the seminars.

The evaluation form included the following questions:

(5-point scales):

1. To what extent did this Workshop meet your expectations?
2. How useful was this Workshop in terms of your current job responsibilities?

3. To what extent were the Workshop methods effective for you?
4. To what extent did this Workshop help you in developing techniques for dealing with interfaith issues?
5. How effective was the presenter?

(long responses):

6. What are the most valuable items you learned from this Workshop?
7. What other topics or follow-up do you suggest?
8. Please make any other suggestions and comments.

Summary of Evaluations

The following are highlights from the survey

Questions 1-5:

75 to 85 percent of the people who filled out the questionnaire rated the seminar a "4" or "5" indicating that the seminar met their expectations, was useful, was helpful in developing techniques to work with interfaith issues and was well presented. 25 percent of respondents were not interested or expressed their discomfort with the topic.

Question 6

What are the most valuable items you learned from this Workshop?
A majority of the comments indicated an ignorance of synagogue policy regarding intermarrieds and lifecycle events, and a desire to become more tolerant and sensitive in their language and to develop more skills to maximize their effectiveness.

Question 7

What other topics or follow-up do you suggest? An overwhelming majority of teachers indicated they would like to learn more about demographic trends and what is occurring in families and to continue discussions generated by the seminars.

Question 8

Please make any other suggestions and comments. "Bring this to all committees in the synagogue;" "I would like to learn more about the challenges intermarrieds face and what their expectations are from teachers."

Conclusions

One of the obstacles that had to be overcome in nearly every situation was the absence of teacher in-service training in the supplemental schools. Principals often expressed a desire for the seminar but indicated they didn't have the funds necessary to pay teachers to attend the sessions. In each instance, the principals needed to be convinced to take a risk. Our strategy of: *If you schedule it they will come, was successful.*

Nearly all of the educators who returned the evaluations applauded this effort and felt that it should become part of an ongoing dialogue.

Nearly all of the teachers who attended the seminars felt they needed more direction working with children who had intermarried parents.

Nearly all the teachers expressed the concern that a disconnect existed between the rabbi and the educational staff.

Teachers and principals indicated they spent more time with the children than anyone else and yet are rarely questioned how a child could best be prepared for b'nai mitzvah.

Teachers and principals also felt they were usually the last people to learn of family crises.

Recommendations:

1. The relationship between the rabbi and the educational staff needs improvement.
2. Clergy needs to discuss and explain the synagogue's attitude towards intermarriages with staff, (educational and clerical) and all committees.
3. Clergy needs to work with educational staff to create a common language that embodies the synagogue's message.
4. Clergy need to establish relationships with intermarried families as soon as they enter the educational system.

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Mission
**The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs
involves Jewish men in Jewish life by
building and strengthening Men's Clubs
in the Conservative / Masorti Movement.**



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