

“Are They Running Away or Are We Driving Them Away?”

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Rabbi Jay M. Stein

“In 1899, on Shabbat Hanukkah, a 13-year old girl went for a walk with her family’s newly hired Catholic maid and never returned... She was brought to a Felician convent and forcibly held captive. Michalina, one of seven children, was the first born in a well-to-do loving Chasidic family. Her father, the scholarly Reb Yisroel, doggedly chased his daughter as she was sent from convent to convent. Thwarted at every turn by the Church and Polish civil authorities he none-the-less continued his long futile efforts to get her back.” This is the inside dust cover synopsis of the book, *Michalina, Daughter of Israel*, written by Rachel Sarna.

However, Professor Rachel Manekin of the University of Maryland tells a very different story. Michalina was 13-years old when she disappeared. She was the first born of seven and the daughter of the scholarly Reb Yisroel. She did find her way into the local convent, but according to Professor Manekin, it was her own choice. She was rebelling against a soon-to-be forced marriage. She lived in a home that was borderline abusive. The strict lifestyle that was being imposed on her forced her to run away. This was a time when education was being afforded girls and 70% of all girls enrolled in the gymnasium were Jewish. The privileged childhood gave way to one generation that did not understand the next.

Either version of the story makes a compelling and agitated comment about not only the Jewish world at the turn of 20th century Poland, but about the Jewish world at the turn of 21st century America. The parallels are scary, the likenesses undeniable and the results are obviously the same. The story of Michalina is our story. We can frame the discussion of whether or not she was abducted or ran away, in another way. We can ask, “Are we pushing people away or are they just being attracted to something else?”

This past year a population study was conducted by the Federation in order to better meet the needs of the Philadelphia Jewish community. It is an incredible work with a tremendous amount of information. Here is what we do know:

- The Jewish community of Philadelphia is getting older, with 26% of our population between 50 and 64 years old
- We are extremely well educated with 30% college graduates and 41% holding post graduate degrees
- We are a stable community with 54% of us having lived here for more than 40 years

And now the bad news:

- Intermarriage rates have increased since the 1996 study
- 45% of all couples under age 40 are intermarried
- Only 29% of children of intermarried couples are being raised only Jewish
- 30% are being raised Jewish and something else
- 27% are not being raised as Jews
- 14% are undecided

This year, J.K. Rowling, the superstar author of the *Harry Potter* series, addressed the graduating class of Harvard. She spoke to those who will likely be the most entitled and privileged of our society. Speaking of her own journey, she remarked that, “Rock bottom is a sure foundation on which to figure out who we are.” However, we cannot wait until we hit rock bottom to figure out who we are and we cannot wait until our numbers have shrunk to next-to-nothing before we realize our survival is tenuous at best.

The subject matter of this morning’s comments is from the most painful of issues which I often confront as a Rabbi. It is the issue with which I struggle the most, and it is the issue upon which I have the least consistent answers. In fact, and as you will see, I pray to grow and understand that my lack of fluid responses and solutions are not an indication of hypocrisy, but rather the mere plight of being a humane, observant Jew. So, to quote another flawed individual, “Let me make myself perfectly clear,” my comments are not meant to offend or to hurt and they are not intended to make light of a subject that lies at the very heart of the future of our people and our families.

We have fought hard for full acceptance into American culture. We worked diligently to make it here and we have gained a level of comfort unsurpassed by any other Jewish community in the Diaspora. We participate and make major contributions in every aspect of American society from entertainment to politics, from science to art. We have done so on the back of the Civil Rights Movement which taught this country the value and the equality of every human being. However, the double-edged sword is that the measure of our acceptance by those around us has been the unparalleled rate of intermarriage. We are so much a part of the communities in which we live that our neighbors are now willing to marry us. This was made perfectly clear by the marriage of Chelsea Clinton and Marc Mezvinsky.

When faced with the prospect of a child marrying out of the faith, never let go and never give up. I repeat what I said as I began. I reject the idea that we must render a piece of clothing and sit *shiva*, as there are those in our families and outside who demand it and there are those who expect it. We must remind them that life is too fragile. I have seen the pain of a child who dies and I have helped parents tear ribbons for children who have so tragically been taken early. So I say, “Don’t do it. Don’t let go.”

Never let go, never give up. Stay involved in your kids lives. Encourage your child to stay connected. Visit and have them visit you. Go to their home and have them come to yours. When they have children make sure you are the most loving, generous, and caring grandparent ever to walk the earth. Do what I do with every person I meet. Show them that we are a people that are inviting and want to make the world a safer, gentler place. We must shower those we love with love.

Never let go and never give up. When your child finally works up the nerve to tell you of the relationship, let them know how you feel but then move on. Tell them that you are going to stay involved in their lives and you are going to do your best to love their chosen mate. Then do it. Some of our children will marry people who are committed to their religion of birth. Some of them will marry people who are not. For those who have a connection to the faith of their parents, we offer a religion that very well may be the basis of their parents’ religion. For those who are not interested in religion, we offer a universe of meaning and belonging. I say we invite them to be a part of our world. Some of our greatest jewels and most valued members of our community are Jews by choice. They enhance our congregation and insure our survival.

Never let go, never give up. We must teach the Joys of Judaism. We must teach our children never to give up the sacred trust with which they have been endowed. We must continue to emphasize the rich

and substantive nature of who we are as people, and as a people we must welcome their chosen mates – no longer pointing fingers, no longer ostracizing.

Never let go, never give up. If you are intermarried or you have children who are, here is the invitation. Come and sit with me and let's begin the dialogue. Come and talk. As a people and as a nation we must protect the boundaries. We must not water down our standards, but as individuals all else is possible. So let's pave the way together. Let's spend an hour together, have one discussion – start a relationship. Please know where I am coming from. I love our people and our ideas. I am devoted to our tradition and I am passionate about bringing our unique message to the world.

We ought not to write-off the intermarried family, discarding them under the guise that they have rejected us, and therefore, they have no place in our community. We must continue to set their place at our table, but let's be clear that it is our table – and let's make that table one that is filled with love and compassion, warmth and understanding. Make sure it is set with tradition and ritual, custom and practice, all of which stems from sincere commitment. It will become really clear when the future is at stake.

It is clear to all of us that we love our children. We know the challenges that intermarried families face are immeasurable, the tensions with family and competing cultures, the internal pulls of upbringing and dreams for their children compound the anguish. Sometimes all of this can be overwhelming. So, let's work together to reunite those families and draw those people who have been defined or even re-defined themselves as peripheral.

The arguments must end. The fighting must come to a halt. We do not have the luxury of losing even a single soul, in fact; maybe we can even gain a few. We must find a way to welcome every Jew and their chosen mates into our congregation. We may have to split hairs to do it, but do it we must. We must topple the invisible boundaries we have created and break open the reservoirs of goodness that resides in this great congregation.