

Books

Why Marry Jewish: Surprising Reasons for Jews to Marry Jews

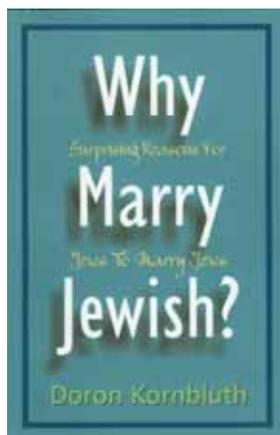
By Doron Kornbluth

Targum Press

Michigan, 2003

181 pages

Reviewed by Jack Abramowitz



Why should anyone in today's society care about marrying Jewish? Nowadays, a smoker marrying a non-smoker or a vegetarian marrying a carnivore is likely to raise more eyebrows than a Jew marrying a non-Jew. After all, isn't anyone who refuses to interdate, and potentially intermarry, elitist? Or worse, aren't they *racist*?

Friends and relatives hoping to dissuade intermarriage may give a variety of reasons: Jewish continuity; the prohibition against marrying out of the faith, as outlined in Deuteronomy, chapter 7; what would Bubby say?, et cetera. Unfortunately, while these arguments may be quite compelling to the giver, the average person contemplating intermarriage doesn't really care about Jewish continuity; Deuteronomy, chapter 7 or what Bubby would say, et cetera. Anyone seriously at risk of intermarriage is not likely to be swayed by

someone quoting Rambam. (Would that it were that simple!) That's why Doron Kornbluth is here to help.

Kornbluth is an author whose works on modern Jewish thought may already be familiar to readers. In addition to articles he has authored, Kornbluth edited *Jewish Matters* and co-edited *Jewish Women Speak about Jewish Matters* (with his wife, Sarah Tikvah Kornbluth). The genius behind Kornbluth's approach here is that he doesn't try to appeal to any particular sense of Jewish community (which is unlikely to be successful), or worse, Jewish guilt (which is undoubtedly doomed to failure). Rather, he takes the approach of "what's in it for me?" demonstrating the potential repercussions intermarriage could have upon the intermarried themselves.

An example of Kornbluth's approach at work: An argument that could be presented by someone contemplating intermarriage is the very basic question, "What difference does intermarriage make if neither partner is observant in their respective faiths?" With a simple word-association quiz, Kornbluth shows how even Jews who consider themselves unaffiliated may possess "innate negative reactions to much Christian imagery." The same imagery, of course, may hold very positive connotations for their potential spouses. This exercise reveals some very strong, diametrically opposed emotional reactions that a couple might otherwise not discover until triggered by some event later in life. Baptizing a child, for example, can be very distasteful even to an unaffiliated Jew, but it may not be a topic of conversation until the couple is expecting.

This is by no means the only arrow in Kornbluth's quiver. In another section, he demonstrates the complicating factor that the least religious time in most people's lives typically coincides with the peak dating and courtship years. The result is that while religious differences may not be a problem for young lovers, future events

from births to deaths often spark renewed religious zeal.

This later-in-life discovery of spirituality is not a uniquely Jewish phenomenon. Neither is the inherent difficulty of a "mixed" marriage. Higher divorce rates are clearly documented in such cases, regardless of whether the couples are Jewish/Christian, Hindu/Moslem or even Protestant/Catholic. Religion, which serves as a bond in some relationships, acts as a wedge in others.

Rather than relying strictly upon Jewish sources to emphasize these points,

Kornbluth doesn't try to appeal to any particular sense of Jewish community or Jewish guilt. Rather, he demonstrates the potential repercussions intermarriage could have upon the intermarried themselves.

however, Kornbluth brings copious support from secular studies and non-Jewish clergy. Again, this is a far more compelling approach for people on the verge of intermarriage. Remember: They already know that intermarriage is *asur* (prohibited); they don't care. But in a society with an already staggering divorce rate, demonstrating that one is entering a demographic particularly susceptible to failed relationships may give one pause where traditional sources are ineffective.

Throughout the book, several such tracks are taken, any of which may be more persuasive to a particular reader. Cumulatively, they present a particularly forceful argument.

Perhaps the greatest coup is that Kornbluth is able to present his position (which also happens to be that of the Torah) in a manner that is non-threatening

Rabbi Abramowitz, MS Ed., is director of national programs for NCSY.

and inoffensive. Not only is the book food for thought for even the most assimilated of Jews, it can also be given to non-Jewish partners without serious risk of offending them. (There are, of course, people who are offended by any divergent position, no matter how it is presented; one can't do much in such instances. But the average rational person is not likely to be put off by this book.)

Why Marry Jewish is one of the books I often present to teens graduating from the Orthodox Union's youth group, NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth). The reaction of the following young woman, now a student at the university of her home state, is not uncommon; she was just kind enough to commit it to writing:

The book you sent me [Why Marry Jewish] is excellent. I have this guy friend who wants to date me. I explained the whole religious thing and he went off about how irrational that is and how he'd love me and wouldn't "interfere" with my religion. I received the book on Saturday, and, of all things, he read it. It was amazing; he understood afterwards. I have to say, it came at a perfect time. It's really good. I know you were hoping I'd never need it but it proved very useful.

The last line of her note is very telling: I didn't actually *expect* her to need it. While not from an Orthodox background, this is a girl from a home with strong Jewish values. Through her involvement in NCSY, she had also developed certain sensitivities to Torah. One would not have thought her seriously at risk of intermarriage. But the young man interested in dating her was apparently sincere and persistent. How does a modern Jew say no to an offer of honest affection? *Why Marry Jewish* not only presents the case to Jews who may need the facts, it can also convey the message to the non-Jewish significant other in terms that a young man or young woman in an already conflicted state may not be able to convey.

One quibble that readers of *Jewish Action* might have with *Why Marry Jewish* is precisely the thing that makes it so effective with its intended audience: the scarcity of traditional Jewish sources. Even when presenting our position to non-believers, we still feel better when we know we are grounded in Torah. Some Biblical sources do surface in the appendix, but they are interspersed among modern quotes from Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, Herman Wouk and Reform Rabbi Janet Marder. Readers who desire more traditional resources will effectively be left to their own devices.

In 1972, CBS ran a short-lived sitcom called *Bridget Loves Bernie*. The comical premise was a (stereotypical) Catholic girl married to a(n equally stereotypical) Jewish boy. A mere thirty years ago, that was considered a provocative premise, and the show actually offended some viewers' sensibilities. Intermarriage was a scandalous concept, but even then it was a threat to Jewish continuity (as well as a violation of Deuteronomy, chapter 7 and an affront to Bubby). Nowadays, society accepts intermarriage as the norm and condemns those who oppose it.

For too long we've been on the defensive when it comes to intermarriage. *Why Marry Jewish* gives those on the frontlines some much-needed ammunition to address this issue proactively. **JA**