



Double or Nothing?: Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage (Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life & HBI Series on Jewish Women)

Sylvia Barack Fishman

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Some observers believe America's promises are dramatically fulfilled by marriage across boundaries. Following their hearts rather than familial and communal preferences, intermarried couples illustrate the triumph of such Romantic values as the sanctity of the individual and the sacredness of personal passions. Intermarriages are also touted as emblems of increased tolerance.

If intermarriage is a blessing, American Jews are among the prime beneficiaries. Recent statistical studies show that about half of all recent marriages involving a Jew have been to non-Jews. Many of these Jews maintain at least some ties to their own ethnoreligious heritage. At the same time, very few of the non-Jews marrying Jewish men and women today convert to Judaism. The same cultural tolerance that nurtures mixed marriage also promotes the idea that each partner can maintain his or her own distinctive, premarriage identity. Thus, the homes they form include two religious identities, and, often, two or more ethnic identities.

The American Jewish resistance to intermarriage held by earlier generations has given way to the view that intermarriage is normative in the American milieu. But what is the impact of mixed marriage on Jews and Judaism? Concerned that intermarriage may weaken American Jewish vitality, many wonder: Will the blessing of American openness cause Jewish culture to be virtually loved out of existence in twenty-first-century America? This provocative question frames Fishman's study.

Drawing on more than 250 original interviews with mixed-married men and women, focus group discussions with their teenaged children, materials produced by communal, secular, and religious organizations, and conferences, books, and films created by and for interfaith audiences, Fishman examines family dynamics in mixed-married households. She looks at the responses of Jewish and non-Jewish family and friends. She investigates how the "December dilemma" plays itself out in diverse mixed Jewish households and explores popular cultural depictions of mixed marriages in fiction, film, television, and in material artifacts such as the "Mixed Message Greeting Card Company."

Fishman concludes with a look at Jewish communal responses from rabbis, schools, and synagogues, and the Jewish community to the potential demographic crisis resulting from mixed marriages. While understanding and accepting the cultural imperatives that have produced high intermarriage rates, Fishman emphasizes the key role of education in creating Jews who seek to remain affiliated. As one reviewer points out, her book offers a "well-thought-out response to a problem that has generated more hysteria than reasoned analysis."

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