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SHALOM TV PANEL: ACCEPTING INTERMARRIAGE THREATENS JEWISH FUTURE

HUC-JIR professor claims Jewish "doves" on intermarriage refuse to accept "realistic analysis"

March 24, 2008 (Fort Lee, NJ) -- In a dramatic television roundtable on the future of American Jewry, the increasing acceptance of mixed marriages is identified as the most serious threat to Jewish continuity.

Available this week on Shalom TV, the panel discussion features Dr. Steven Bayme, director of the Contemporary Jewish Life Department of the American Jewish Committee, citing the dangerous change in Jewish cultural thinking about intermarriage.



"For 4,000 years, Jews knew that mixed marriage was not the right thing to do. They still may have done it, because we often don't do the right thing. But we knew it was the wrong thing to do. Now, we are witnessing a cultural change, where people are saying, 'It's okay. It's a perfectly acceptable thing to do.' It's that cultural change that I spend an awful lot of nights worrying about."

According to Dr. Bayme, this normative change comes from a well-intentioned desire in the Jewish community "to reach out and bring in people on the periphery" of Jewish life, given the impact of intermarriage rates that have hovered near 50% for decades.

"Intermarriage is a major challenge to American Jewish life, and whether you're a hawk on it or a dove on policy, you at least ought to agree on the problem," comments Dr. Steven Cohen, research professor of Jewish social policy at the Reform movement's rabbinical school, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. "I find too many doves on intermarriage refuse to accept what I would call a 'realistic analysis' of its effects."

A leading expert in American Jewish demography, Dr. Cohen decries as "horrible" the low percentage of Jews who descend from intermarriages, pointing out that only "thirteen percent of grandchildren of intermarried Jews are, by any stretch of the imagination, Jewish. Eighty-seven percent are not Jewish. That bothers me! It really is awful."

Moderated by Shalom TV's Mark S. Golub, the television panel also includes syndicated columnist and USA Radio Network Host Michah Halpern, and Betty Ehrenberg, advisor to the president of the World Jewish Congress. While Mr. Halpern is less troubled than other guests by reports of a declining population of committed US Jews (from six million to four million)--encouraging instead a vibrant Jewish life for the involved community that organically attracts Jews on the fringe, Ms. Ehrenberg expresses deep concern about the lower figures coupled with a "thinning out" of Jewish identity.

(MORE)

"If we will have fewer Jews, no matter how you estimate the exact number, we will have fewer people who vote, we will have a weaker political voice," she says, mindful of the community's influence on national and world affairs. "If you combine weaker numbers with weaker identification and weaker Jewish understanding, then you have a recipe for disaster."

"It's less a question of 'Are we six million or 4.2 million or somewhere in between?'" adds Dr. Bayme. "What really is happening is that America is changing radically in terms of its population patterns. In that sense, the grounds of concern are quite real.

"American Jews, right now, are trying to reinvent mixed marriage as an opportunity rather than as a problem," continues Dr. Bayme. "If we're not realistic enough about saying it's a problem, we'll get nowhere with it.

"The current generation of Jewish leadership needs to be challenged in terms of where it is going to place its emphasis. If it conducts business as usual--and I tend to think it will--then I am very agonized and very worried."

Shalom TV is a mainstream Jewish cable television network seen nationally on Comcast; in New York and New Jersey on Time Warner; and in Pennsylvania on Blue Ridge Communications. The free English-language "Video On Demand" network features news and event coverage, a Jewish film festival, Israel updates and travelogues, kids programs, and Jewish studies. Shalom TV's offices and production facilities are located in the New York City metropolitan area.

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