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Intermarriage in Judaism

Rabbi David M. Freidenreich

Intermarriage in the Bible and Jewish History

Abraham was now old, advanced in years, and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said to the senior servant of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, “Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but will go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.” (Gen. 24:1–5)

When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite; and they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah.... Rebekah said to Isaac, “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?” So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.” (Gen. 26:34–35, 27:46–28:2)

Discussion Question:

Why is it so important to Abraham and Rebekah—and also to Hagar (Gen. 21:21)—that their sons marry someone from their own native region?

Abraham, Hagar, and Rebekah lived *in* the Land of Canaan, but they did not regard themselves or their children as being *of* that land. It was vitally important to these parents that their sons marry people like themselves: members of Abraham’s clan or, for Hagar, a fellow Egyptian. This desire to remain separate from the local population posed real challenges and hardships. Abraham’s servant feared that no woman would agree to leave her home to marry Isaac. Abraham’s grandson Jacob went abroad himself to find his wife; he never saw his mother again. After Jacob and his uncle/father-in-law, Laban, had a falling-out and severed ties, Jacob’s children had no choice but to associate with locals, with traumatic consequences in the case of his daughter Dinah, who suffered rape (Genesis 34).

The desire to be in the land but not of it characterizes much of Jewish history. God enjoined the Israelites about to enter the Promised Land not to marry members of the Canaanite nations (Deut. 7:3). Jews who returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile went further, promising not to marry any locals (Ezra 10; Neh. 10:31). Biblical and postbiblical writers express concern that intermarriage threatens the purity of the Jewish people and that Gentiles will lead their Jewish partners into idolatry or immoral behavior.

As Jews settled throughout the Middle East, Europe, and North Africa, they rapidly adopted local cultures, languages, and habits. Even so, they retained a distinct identity in part through the practice of marrying fellow Jews. It helped that Christians and Muslims, to varying degrees, also saw the Jews as a separate community—in the land but not of it—and opposed intermarriage. Nevertheless, mixed marriages occurred in small numbers throughout the Middle Ages, more frequently in the Islamic world than in Christendom. Most of these marriages resulted in the Jewish partner converting to Christianity or Islam, or at least consenting to raise the children in the dominant religious tradition. Only rarely did the Gentile spouse become Jewish, despite Christian and Islamic laws forbidding such conversions. I am unaware of cases in the Middle Ages in which a Gentile spouse remained non-Jewish but consented to raising Jewish children.

Intermarriage in America, Past and Present

In the past twenty years, there have been exactly two cases in which a local Jewish boy married a local Jewish girl. What has kept the Jewish population constant as families have moved away and older people have died is the fact that most young adults leave town for a more or less prolonged absence at some time or another during marriageable age, and a fairly large number return with their mates from afar.... Nearly every “old” Jewish family with children of marriageable age has been affected in one way or another by intermarriage. Although there is always much sadness on the part of the immediate family and much sympathetic clucking of tongues from friends, the announcement that a young man is about to marry or has already secretly married a *shiksa* hardly creates a sensation by now.... There is a certain restraint in the comment of Jewish families on the subject of intermarriage. “You can never tell when it will happen to you,” they explain sadly, placing it in much the same category as cholera. (Shafter, 62–63, describing Jews in mid-twentieth-century Maine)

Discussion Questions:

In what ways, and for what reasons, were the Jews of mid-twentieth-century Maine similar to the biblical figures Abraham, Rebekah, and Hagar? In what ways, and for what reasons, were their intermarriage-related experiences different? In what ways, and for what reasons, are the reactions to intermarriage described here similar to or different from your own?

Jews came to the United States seeking opportunities that they lacked in the Old Country, especially the prospect of ensuring that their children would have a better life. For the most part, these Jews were proud of their identity and sought to transmit Jewishness to their children. Finding a Jewish spouse, however, was sometimes challenging. Many men who immigrated in the mid-nineteenth century went back to Europe to find a Jewish wife, often returning to the U.S. with several of her female friends and relatives as potential partners for Jewish friends who could not themselves afford to travel. The practice of importing brides declined as the American Jewish population grew, but most Jews from small communities, like the one in Maine that Toby Shafter describes, followed in the figurative footsteps of Abraham’s servant and grandson: they left home to find a spouse. Unsurprisingly, some Jews (mostly men) chose instead to marry one of their Gentile neighbors.

The percentage of American Jews married to non-Jews increased rapidly in the last third of the twentieth century, creating consternation in the Jewish community. Indications of this impending shift, however, had been apparent earlier, as is evident in Shafter’s 1949 comparison of intermarriage and cholera. Jews, after all, had long sought genuine acceptance in American society. Over the course of the twentieth century, Jews began to interact more frequently with non-Jews in social and residential as well as business settings. This tendency intensified as anti-Semitic discrimination subsided during and after World War II. Jews in an affluent 1950s suburb of Chicago, including many who were deeply committed to their Jewishness, told researchers that having a mostly Jewish circle of friends makes no difference in determining whether someone is a “good Jew.” The most important criteria for being a good Jew, they said, were living an ethical life—in other words, being a good American—and being proud of one’s Jewishness (Sklare, 321–332).

Old Country stereotypes about immoral Gentiles and concerns for the purity of the Jewish tribe—both encapsulated in the derogatory term “shiksa”—faded as American Jews increasingly spent time with American Gentiles, often regarded simply as fellow Americans. Christian stereotypes about Jews also faded as a result of these interactions, and the intermarriage taboo receded on both sides. The rise in Jewish-Gentile marriages, moreover, paralleled a rise in Catholic-Protestant unions and marriages of partners with different white ethnic backgrounds: Jews, attempting to express their self-identity as “good Americans,” behaved in the same way as their Christian neighbors. Today, in the community that Shafter describes and in many others like it, nearly every Hebrew school child has a non-Jew-

ish parent. The fact that many non-Jews choose not only to marry Jews but to raise their children as Jews without themselves converting, a phenomenon without historical precedent, is eloquent testimony to the acceptance of Jews and Judaism in contemporary American culture.

What changed over the course of the twentieth century was not only the intermarriage rate but also, and more fundamentally, the conception of what it means to be Jewish in a majority-Gentile society. As American Jews, we generally regard ourselves as being not only *in* this land but *of* it as well. For over two thousand years, Jews perceived themselves to be set apart from their neighbors. The commitment to marrying a fellow Jew served as an especially powerful means of preserving this collective identity. But, as Jews have long said, “America is different.” We feel thoroughly at home in the U.S., in part because integration into American society does not require the renunciation of our Jewishness. This integration expresses itself in many ways, mixed marriage being one of them.

American Jews can still choose to be in the land but not of it: the ultra-Orthodox are the most obvious—but not the only—example. The vast majority of American Jews, however, feel neither the need nor the desire to make the sacrifices associated with self-segregation, even if they may find the prospect of their children or grandchildren marrying non-Jews to be distasteful. Anecdotal evidence, moreover, suggests that communal attitudes toward intermarriage are becoming increasingly tolerant. What remains unchanged is the challenge posed by the very success of the Jewish community in achieving its American dream. How can Jews who are fully integrated into a non-Jewish society, among them those with Gentile family members, cultivate a strong sense of Jewishness for themselves and for future generations?

Discussion Questions:

How would you answer the question above, either as a Jew regarding the Jewish community or as a Muslim regarding the Muslim community? What role should non-Jewish (or non-Muslim) partners play in the Jewish (or Muslim) community? How should the community engage these individuals?

For Jews: How, if at all, should Judaism or Jewish institutions change in response to the rise in intermarriage? Should the definition of who is a Jew, or a synagogue member, be revised? Major rabbinical schools in the U.S. refuse to admit intermarried students; should that change?

For Muslims: Which elements of this description of intermarriage in the American Jewish community resonate with your experiences in the American Muslim community? Which elements do not resonate? Why and why not?

References

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Sklare, Marshall, and Joseph Greenblum. *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*. New York: Basic Books, 1967.