

# Reform Judaism: In 1000 Words

## Intermarriage



### Context

*According to a recent Pew Report<sup>i</sup>, one in five American adults was raised by two people with different religions, or in a home with one parent religiously affiliated and one not. In such an age, in which relationships and marriage between people of different faiths and cultures has become a norm, how do we respond to mixed-faith relationships as Reform Jews?*

*In this article, **Rabbi Josh Levy**, Rabbinic Partner at **Alyth**, explores the distinctive Reform Jewish voice on intermarriage.*

### Content

The classical Torah text on intermarriage does not set the tone that we as Reform Jews would want to set at the start of this discussion. Such couples and families receive a warm welcome across our movement. Nonetheless it is the starting point for many of the challenges this issue has raised within Judaism throughout history:

*When the Eternal your God brings you to the land... and dislodges many nations before you... grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods.*  
(Deuteronomy 7:1-4)

This prohibition of marriage between Israelite and non-Israelite was later extended beyond a specific ban on the marriage of an Israelite to someone from the seven nations of Canaan, to a general rejection of any union between Jew and non-Jew. It is a prohibition that, in truth, was rendered largely unnecessary by the reality of Jewish life from the rabbinic period into the middle ages. This was a time in which ordinary Jew and non-Jew were unlikely to interact, in which the Halachah – Jewish Law, according to which Jew and non-Jew cannot be married, was the dominant legal framework for Jewish life, and the power of rabbinic authority was, unlike today, unchallenged.

It was an issue that sprang forwards, though, with the emancipation of Jewry from the 1770s onwards, through which the full political and social acceptance that we now enjoy was attained, with all the new realities that brought. This included: substantial social interaction with those of other faiths and none; a belief in romantic love rather than a reliance on arranged union; a diminishing of the importance of Jewish ethnicity and the concept of 'Jewish purity'; and above all a new legal reality in which civil marriage became an alternative to religious marriage, removing the power of rabbinic authorities to prevent such unions from taking place.

So what have we learned over the years since emancipation?

The first thing we have learned is that prohibition doesn't work. The divine command, *You shall not intermarry with them*, has little weight in our communities. Being 'against intermarriage', as parts of the Jewish world are, doesn't make it go away. The link between upbringing and who we marry is not straightforward. As the American Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes: "We now have enough data to say categorically that there is simply no way to stop Jews from marrying non-Jews. Fierce rabbinic bans are risibly ineffective. Insulting forms of covert ostracism only make us look xenophobic and weak."<sup>ii</sup>

We have learned something else, too, and perhaps more importantly: That the passage from Deuteronomy as

well as being ineffective is also just plain wrong. The reason it gives for the prohibition – *they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods* – is not accurate.

On occasion, and especially in cases where the non-Jewish partner has a strong commitment to another faith tradition, this does happen. But in most cases, the idea that intermarriage leads to the rejection of Jewish life is not realised in reality. Where there is rejection of Jewish life, this happened well before the point of marriage, or sometimes as a result of the response of the Jewish community to the new partnership. If Jewish identity is still important in the life of the Jewish partner it doesn't cease to be so as a result of intermarriage.

We see the evidence of that in our communities, where couples including a non-Jewish partner can and do commit together to create a Jewish home, and do so successfully, raising children with strong Jewish identities, in homes full of knowledge and passion. The ability to create a *bayit b'Yisrael* – a home in Israel, is not compromised by the fact that one part of that home is not Jewish. This makes it more complex, for sure, but does not preclude the possibility. Indeed in opening doors for families of many configurations to engage meaningfully in their Judaism, we are strengthening the community, not weakening it.

The evidence is also beginning to point to something very interesting. That one of the biggest variables in whether a couple which includes a non-Jewish partner will make this commitment together is our response. How willing we are to embrace the choices that they have made, to welcome the non-Jewish partner as a member of our communities, the extent to which we create opportunities for their lives together to be honoured with us.

As a movement we are adapting to this new reality. Across the life cycle, we have, over the last generation, created the ability to welcome, to respond to the needs of mixed faith families: Most of our synagogues have associate memberships for non-Jewish partners; most rabbis carry out Chanukat HaBayit – Home Dedication ceremonies, recognising a commitment to create a home in Israel; many will help couples to celebrate with new Jewish rituals after a civil wedding; our mohelim will carry out circumcision for the sons of mixed faith couples; we have a choice of mechanisms to enable the children of mixed faith couples to be recognised as Jewish in our communities; we welcome non-Jewish parents as active participants in their children's Jewish education, including involvement in the ceremony of Bar and Bat Mitzvah; in some of our cemeteries we are able to bury mixed-faith couples together.

This does not in any way lessen our commitment to Jewish marriage. Rather, we recognise that two people who have committed to create a Jewish home together, who study together, who are often immersed in the life of their Shul together, are entitled to find a place in our communities, with appropriate ritual to match.

*You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me.*

Intermarriage is a reality. 'Our children' do take 'their children'. Lots of them. But 'turning away' is not the inevitable consequence – the rationale given by Torah no longer applies. Marrying a non-Jew is not a declarative act severing links with Judaism. Much, though, depends on how we are able to respond. No longer do the words of Torah 'they will turn away' ring true.

Rather the question is one for us: 'will we choose to turn them away'? As Reform Jews, we choose not to do so, but to welcome 'them' in, and to benefit from all that they bring to Jewish life.

## Contemplation

*Rabbi Levy makes clear in this article that intermarriage is a reality, and that we can make it a route through which we welcome people into Judaism. How do we find meaningful ways to engage Jews and welcome their partners, without falling foul of ancient and modern stereotypes and tropes regarding the results of intermarriage? How flexible can we be, while maintaining our commitment to Jewish marriage and Jewish families?*

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<sup>i</sup> 2014 Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center

<sup>ii</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *I'm God, You're Not: Observations on Organized Religion & Other Disguises of the Ego*, Woodstock 2010, page 25