

A modest approach to intermarriage

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

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No issue divides the liberal rabbinate in this country as much as that of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews and rabbinic officiation at such marriages. While all organized groups of rabbis express disapproval of intermarriage, a significant minority of Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis will officiate at marriages between a Jew and a non-Jew.

Most of these rabbis will do so only in certain circumstances. Some will insist that children of the marriage be raised as Jews, that the non-Jewish partner not be an active participant in another faith or that some other standard be applied. A smaller group will officiate without such preconditions, and a few will even co-officiate with non-Jewish clergy where it is clear that no embrace of Judaism is shared by the couple.

While the Conservative rabbinate officially forbids officiation at mixed marriages, there has been significant pressure brought on Conservative rabbis by congregants in some places to make exceptions to this position. Reconstructionist and Reform rabbis, whose organizations disapprove of intermarriage but do not forbid officiation, are in the more difficult position of having to make individual decisions on this matter, often in the face of great personal and professional pressures.

As a Jew and as a rabbi, I disagree deeply with those of my colleagues who officiate at such marriages. I believe the rabbi is not only a religious functionary, but an appointed leader of the Jewish people. That people longs to survive and live on for generations to come.

Intermarriage is a most significant threat to Jewish survival, and rabbinic participation in it is, in the words of one of my colleagues, something like officiating at the funeral of the Jewish people. I believe Jews want rabbis who are people of strong principle and unwavering commitment to Jewish survival and Jewish religious practice. This has to include distress over assimilation and unhappiness about intermarriage.

A rabbi who is personally opposed to intermarriage but gives in to the pressures of congregants' demands has become a follower, rather than a leader.

At the same time, however, we have to face reality. Intermarriage on a massive scale is a fact of American-Jewish life, and we rabbis are not able to make it go away. Putting

our heads in the sand and pretending that intermarriage does not exist will not reduce the percentage of such marriages by a single digit.

If we are committed to life in the open society, to sending our children to colleges and universities, to work environments and recreational centers where Jews and non-Jews mix, we have to live with intermarriage.

Nor is the marrying couple to be blamed. We rabbis and educators can cast aspersions on parents who did not give their kids sufficient Jewish education or on homes where Jewish observance was not carried out. But all of us, by now, know pious Jews — rabbis among them — who have intermarried children.

The truth is that even Jewish education and commitment do not serve as inoculation against falling in

love with a non-Jew. They do predict a higher chance of conversion to Judaism (in which case there is no intermarriage, of course) or of continued Jewish commitment by the intermarried Jew. But the rabbi has no right to blame the couple who come to his or her office seeking help in planning a marriage the rabbi cannot perform.

What are we rabbis to do? We simply cannot turn away nearly half the Jews who come to us in hope of getting married. The truth is that marriage is one of the few times in life when Jews still turn to rabbis and when a rabbi has a chance of making a significant impact on the life of the young couple at a crucial moment.

My colleagues who perform intermarriages often have come to that decision because they feel unable to

turn away a Jew who comes to them for help at such a moment. Though I disagree with their conclusion, I am sympathetic with the premises that lead them to it.

Jews who are turned away by rabbis, they claim, especially by rabbis who refuse to see them or speak with them at all, are likely to harbor ill feelings toward the Jewish people. These Jews feel blamed and rejected by the only Jewish leaders they know. When it comes to raising children, the next crucial stage in the life cycle, some may remember that they were not welcomed by the rabbi when it came to talk of marriage.

From a Jewish point of view, the best solution is obviously conversion to Judaism, and I am an enthusiastic advocate of that path. Many Jews who were not born to Jewish parents have become vital members of the Jewish community. I have seen Jews-by-choice become rabbis, scholars and active leaders in their synagogues and communities. I have endless respect and affection for these Jews.

But I know that conversion is not always possible. Many potential spouses are frightened by a demand for conversion or do not see themselves psychologically ready to take such a dramatic step. Some are concerned about the feelings of their own families, while others genuinely maintain faith in their own religious traditions.

For all situations but the last, I offer the following proposal, adapted from the practice of several Reconstructionist rabbis. The rabbi should gladly meet with any couple who want to come to discuss marriage. If one partner is not a Jew, the rabbi should offer some version of the following suggestion:

"I teach a course called 'Introduction to Judaism' at my synagogue. It is a 16-week program offered twice each year. I would like you to commit yourselves, as a couple, to attending eight sessions of that course. There, you will learn about the principles of Judaism and the basic structure of our Jewish calendar and way of life.

"After you have been to eight sessions, I would like to meet with you again. This is the point at which I would like to discuss with you the possibility of conversion to Judaism. If you are willing to convert, there are eight more sessions to attend. These will be supplemented by a tutorial in Hebrew sight reading. At the end of those sessions, I will be delighted to officiate at your conversion to Judaism" — hopefully, through a communal Beth Din — "and your wedding.

"Should you decide, at this point, that you are not interested in conversion, I would like to discuss the reasons with you. If I am satisfied that the non-Jewish partner would be truly welcoming of Judaism in the home and supportive of Jewish education for children, I will happily attend your civil wedding ceremony as a guest. After the conclusion of the ceremony, I will be glad to offer words of welcome from the Jewish community.

"You must understand that this is not a Jewish wedding ceremony, and I will not be able to attend if elements are introduced into the wedding to make it appear as though it were such a ceremony. But I have great respect for the seriousness with which you have studied Judaism and the openness with which you approach the question. It is in recognition of these that I feel it appropriate for me to offer such a public greeting."

I believe there are several advantages to such an approach. In it Judaism will be taught without a "gun" being held to the head of the prospective convert. Such an open ended approach, allowing for and respecting freedom of choice, will serve to remove pressure and to make the possibility of conversion more attractive.

The demand of eight study sessions will allow the rabbi to separate those who are earnestly struggling with the possibility of conversion but cannot make the final choice from those who do not care and simply want rabbinic presence to mollify the Jewish family. The study sessions and interviews will give the rabbi — or the teacher of the course when the rabbi cannot do it alone — a chance to get to know the couple and relate to them on a personal level.

For many of these couples, it will be the first opportunity both the Jew and the non-Jew have had, as adults for serious contact with a knowledgeable and committed Jew. All of the above can only be of benefit to the Jewish people.

No, this will not solve all the problems. When the non-Jewish spouse is deeply committed to another faith and seeks to raise children in that faith, I believe the rabbi should actively try to discourage the marriage.

There will be couples who want to be married immediately and who would not consider attending an eight-week class. I believe a rabbi should have the dignity and self-respect to refuse to perform such marriages.

This proposal opens the rabbi's door. No one can say they were turned away by such a rabbi. If a couple is not willing to engage in the process, even to try it out, I believe officiation at their marriage does not dignify the rabbinate.

It is most important for us to remember that intermarriage is not one's fault. Rabbis should not blame parents; parents should not blame children. Intermarriage is the inevitable flip side of our acceptance and integration into American society.

These are blessings for which all of us, even rabbis, have to be grateful. We are happy to live in a society where our acceptance by others is the greatest threat to our survival. But our embrace of this open society should not extend to abandonment of or compromise with the trust we bear for the future of Jewish existence.