

No 'mazel tovs' here: Ruling would produce 'shunned' offspring

THE RABBI'S TURN RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

Let me tell you about my Tante Shushke. She was my grandmother's aunt, the only one of my great-grandparents' generation on that side of the family to have made it to America. She was the family paradigm of *frumkeit*, of what it meant to be pious — sometimes too pious.

Tante Shushke had two sons, both of whom grew up in New York in the early part of this century and married nice Jewish women. Everything was fine in the older son's family, but the younger daughter-in-law was something of a rebel. She refused to go to the mikveh before the wedding. To her dying day, so the family story goes, Tante Shushke never touched those grandchildren!

I had long forgotten this old story until someone this week showed me a recent position paper of the Conservative movement's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards regarding the question of whether intermarriages of synagogue members or their children may be announced officially or whether congratulations may be offered on the birth of a non-Jewish child or grandchild in the synagogue context.

I quote from the ruling, which currently "constitutes the sole position of the Law Committee on this subject":

"1. Intermarriages should not be publicly acknowledged in any recognized forum within the congregation.

"2. Congratulations may be offered to the intermarried parents on the birth of a child to a Jewish mother, or on the birth of a child to a non-Jewish mother if both parents have committed themselves to a prompt conversion of the child to Judaism.

"3. Congratulations should not be offered on the birth of a child to a non-Jewish mother married to a Jew under any other conditions.

"4. The same standards as above apply as well to offering congratulations to grandparents on the birth of a grandchild.

"5. It is inappropriate to acknowledge the occasions in which public congratulations would not be offered through the publication of the receipt of a donation, or through the use of a plaque for display, such as a Tree of Life."

Tante Shushke would be proud of my friends and colleagues in the Conservative rabbinate. But I am not. I am afraid they have once again succumbed to the great temptation of seeing the rabbi's role as that of "holding the fort" by burying his head firmly in the sand — and here in a particularly unpleasant way.

Intermarriage may be growing, the problem may be raging all about us, Jewish life is being transformed — but here in our synagogue it will not be mentioned. Those children and grandchildren simply do not exist, at least not insofar as the synagogue is concerned.

Of course it is hard to imagine that all Conservative Jews will put up with such a view, if it is ever put into practice. Can you imagine the offense of mentioning one member's newborn grandchild from the *bimah* this week, but not another's, because that member's child chose to sin by intermarrying?

What a terrible way to add to the pain of a grandparent! What a burden of blame it places upon a parent, perhaps a loyal and devoted member of the congregation, for not having been able to prevent a child's intermarriage. One can only hope that rabbis of wisdom and sensitivity will ignore this ruling — something we rabbis have a way of doing when the occasion calls for it.

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The tremendously strong reaction American Jews had to the "Who is a Jew" debate less than a year ago — regarding whether those converted by non-Orthodox rabbis can be considered Jewish by Israel — will have to lead to a rejection of positions such as this one as well. Ordinary Jews who are usually uninvolved in rabbinic debates became so exercised over "Who is a Jew" because there virtually is no Jewish family — outside the self-enclosed ghettos of Mea Shearim or Williamsburg — in which intermarriage has not happened.

In that debate Jews were concerned with the recognition of conversions, acts that often were performed at tremendous emotional cost to both individuals and families. In this case another (and unfortunately larger!) part of the population will be affected.

What will it mean that the birth of one's grandchild cannot

be announced from the *bimah* or listed in the synagogue's bulletin? Will such a synagogue be able to remain one's community, or will he have to either fight the rule or look elsewhere for a synagogue in which he — along with those grandchildren when they choose to visit — will feel welcome?

We Reconstructionists believe that any attempt to create a meaningful Judaism for our times has to take realistic account of the situation in which we Jews find ourselves. We live in an open society and see ourselves as full participants in the cultural, political and social life of this country.

While many of us live part of our lives in self-contained, all-Jewish social networks, none of us lives there entirely, nor do we want our children to do so. We send them off in mainstream America to colleges, to universities and into the workplace knowing that the environment will hardly be an exclusively Jewish one.

The price of living in this open society is intermarriage, and we pay it dearly. Of course we should encourage conversion to Judaism wherever the partner is open to it, and we should encourage intermarried families to raise their children as Jews. But we encourage them by welcoming them, not by denying that they exist.

Every synagogue should have a real program of outreach to mixed-marriage families, seeking to create for them an approach to Jewish life that will help them through the thickets of an often complicated personal situation.

Does this mean then that "anything goes," that the synagogue and rabbi should maintain no standards at all with regard to the lines between non-Jew and Jew? I think not. There

do have to be standards; Jews respect a rabbi and a synagogue that stand for something, that do not accommodate themselves entirely to the fashions of the time. But these standards have to be built on the twin pillars of integrity and *menschlichkeit*, or personal decency.

I continue to believe and teach that intermarriages should not be performed by rabbis or in the synagogue. The intermarriage is not a Jewish ceremony and its performance under Jewish auspices is confusing and inappropriate.

At the same time, I believe most strongly that every rabbi who gets a call from a couple about to intermarry must meet with them, welcome them to join the synagogue, and explain to them why he or she cannot perform the ceremony. Such a meeting, if well-conducted, may open up the door for present or future consideration of conversion to Judaism.

I similarly understand what my Conservative colleagues were trying to do with this ruling. I agree that there is a difference between Jew and non-Jew. Just as I do not believe non-Jews should have an aliyah in the synagogue (nor should non-Christians take communion in church), so I could not imagine a *mi-sheberach* prayer for this non-Jewish grandchild in which it is wished that he or she be "raised to Torah, the *chupah* and good deeds." That indeed would be an inappropriate travesty.

But not to mention the child's birth in synagogue announcements? That seems to me to be cruel and excessive punishment to parents and grandparents, as well as a guarantee that this family, if they ever do decide to affiliate, will go elsewhere. I urge my Conservative colleagues to reconsider.