

## The History of Jewish Interfaith Marriage

Perhaps you have wondered, “Why have there been such strong feelings against interfaith marriages in the Jewish community? Why this desire to build fences? Where does this idea that mixing with other cultures will destroy Judaism come from?”

Let’s start with the Torah and the Book of Genesis and see what we can learn about the early perspective on this question.

Take a look at this image (a print by the artist Joel Moskowitz):



What do you see here? It is an image of a branch grafted to a tree. This is the way old fruit trees are regenerated with new fruiting ability.

The Hebrew means: “and every soul that they had made.”

Do you remember the story in the Torah portion Lech Lecha in Genesis 12? Abraham was called by God to leave his land, his birthplace, his father’s house, and to journey to the land of Canaan:

Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot and all their possessions *and every soul that they had made in Haran.* (Genesis 12:5)

Who were these people and what does it mean, “souls that they had made?”

According to rabbinic interpretation, the "souls they had made" represented the first people to choose Judaism and this is why all who choose Judaism are known as ben (son of) or bat (daughter of) Abraham and Sarah. Abraham shared his new idea about one God with the people who lived in Haran and attracted others who joined his family in their journey. There is no mention of a problem with mixing cultures.

Let's take a look at the early marriages in Genesis.

For Abraham and Sarah, the first Jewish parents, there were no Jewish girls to introduce to Isaac. They sent their servant back to family so that the wife chosen for Isaac would be part of their clan and not a Canaanite. There are several stories in Genesis where Sarah is called Abraham's sister, which suggests some familiar relationship beyond marriage for them. This suggests a cultural tradition of clan marriages from our earliest ancestors.

There are expressions of antipathy to the neighboring tribes in the early marriages. Abraham said to his servant:

swear by Adonai, God of heaven and earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from among the daughters of the Canaanites... (Genesis 24:3)

Here are two more examples:

When Esau was 40 years old he took to wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite. They were a bitterness of spirit to Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 26:34)

[Rebekah said to Isaac] I abhor my life because of the daughters of the Hittites [referring to Esau's wives]; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of the Hittites... what would my life be worth? (Genesis 27:46)

Rebekah sent Jacob back to her family, to the house of her brother Laban, so that Jacob's wives were part of the clan.

But is marriage within the clan an in-marriage? We know that Laban's household worshipped other gods. We also know that his daughter Rachel, who became Jacob's wife, followed the ways of her childhood home. In Genesis 31, we read that Rachel stole her father's household gods and put them under her saddle as she left her childhood home with Jacob, even after Jacob has introduced her to the voice of Adonai. Perhaps she thought those gods would increase her fertility.

In the next generation, Jacob's twelve sons and one daughter, we see no concern from Jacob about intermarriage with local cultures. Both Judah (Genesis 38:1) and Simeon (Genesis 46:8) chose Canaanite wives and Joseph's wife, Asenat, was Egyptian (Genesis 41:45).

Interestingly, these texts all identify a child as the progeny of their father reflecting patrilineal descent. The names of the sons of Joseph and Asenat are Ephraim and Manasseh; Jacob blessed them. Jews traditionally bless their sons on Shabbat evening by invoking their names: "May you be like Ephraim and Manasseh..."

Perez, a son of Judah and his Canaanite wife Tamar, is an ancestor of King David.

This seems to be more than an acceptance of intermarriage, more like an endorsement!

We don't know how Jacob felt about the proposed match of Dina to Shechem (Genesis 34), a local boy. We only know that Dina's brothers asked that Shechem and his clan all circumcise themselves, which turned out to be a pretext so that Levi and Simeon could go and kill them in their weakened condition. The Torah tells us that Jacob was angry with his sons and worried that there would be a retaliatory attack, but there is no mention of his views on the proposed marriage with Shechem. We don't even know if the brothers cared that Shechem was not Jewish; after all, Simeon himself was intermarried. We only know that they felt their sister was defiled.

Moses, who God chooses to lead the Israelites from slavery to Mt. Sinai, was married to Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest (Exodus 2:21) when he saw the burning bush. This seems to indicate that God did not have a problem with his intermarriage. Yes, Jethro, her father, was a great friend of Moses and the Jewish people, but this is not the only story where intermarriage is not a problem in the Torah.

There is one additional instructive story of intermarriage.

After entering the land of Israel, we have the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman who was twice married to Jewish men, first to Naomi's son and then to Boaz. Ruth is seen by later generations as a convert for her statement to Naomi that "your people will be my people and your God will be my God." This "your people will be my people" is very close to the commitment that many rabbis ask of non-Jewish partners – that they commit to raising children only in Judaism. Isn't this what ends up happening if you agree to support the Judaism of your children? You end up involved at some level in the Jewish community and you could say to your partner, "your people have become my people."

Not only was this an accepted marriage but Ruth's story has become part of the liturgy and we read it every year at Shavuot, the holiday of receiving the Torah. And she is the great grandmother of King David – who, by the way, was also intermarried, to Bathsheba.

Now, let's take a look at a verse from Exodus. This verse like the very first one we looked at from the time of Abraham tells us a bit more about groups of people joining the Jewish community. When the Exodus from Egypt occurred:

And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand walkers, adults not counting children. *And also a mixed multitude went up with them.* (Exodus 12:37-38; emphasis mine)

A mixed multitude is called an *erev rav* in Hebrew. Who were these people named as *erev rav*? Why do you think they came with the Israelites as they left Egypt? Some for love? Some to escape slavery? Some who had witnessed the plagues and the power of our God? There is nothing written that these "non-Israelites" were repulsed or rejected.

Deuteronomy 29:9-11 goes further and demonstrates that the mixed multitude was well integrated into the people of Israel. It explicitly acknowledges that the Israelites were no

longer all descended from Abraham when the law was given at Sinai:

You all who stand here today [at Sinai] before the Lord, your God—your tribal heads, your elders, your officials—all the people of Israel, your children, your wives, *and the stranger within your camp*.

This is a long string of our ancient ancestors intermarrying, and bringing and allowing other cultures to live together with them.

Now, let us look at the sources for the segregationists, those who see intermarriage as forbidden.

This is the commandment that is the basis for all the injunctions and prohibitions on intermarriage that follow in later Jewish writings:

When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to invade and occupy, and He dislodges many nations before you — the Hittites, Gergashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger than you — and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughter to his son and you shall not take his daughter for your son. For he will turn away your children from following Me, and they will worship other gods, and the Lord's anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out. (Deuteronomy 7:1-4)

What is happening here? The Israelites are poised to cross the Jordan and enter Israel. The Torah forbids intermarriage with the seven Canaanite nations on the grounds that the Canaanite spouse could turn the Israelite partner away from the worship of God. Although some interpret this as the word of God prohibiting intermarrying with *only* these specific cultures because they engaged in idolatry, human sacrifice and other forbidden practices, this verse is the basis for a general interdiction against intermarriage.

Since there were instances in the past when the Israelites did not resist the worship of foreign gods, they interpret this as the word of God prohibiting intermarrying all other cultures who could turn our children away from Judaism.

What do you think was God's intention here? We have a pattern of intermarriages and intermingling in Genesis and Exodus being accepted by God, and a direct commandment against intermarriage. The rabbis were aware of this contradiction and solved it by saying the early marriages of Rebekah and Rachel were preceded by a conversion.

But God's stated goal with the commandment is to keep us from abandoning the laws and practices that God had spelled out for us. If we accept that as a goal we stay committed to today, the disagreement over whether intermarriage is a problem or a solution rests on whether intermarriage will necessarily turn children away from Judaism.

Can a marriage where both parents are not Jewish be committed to Judaism and raise children that are committed to Judaism?

We say, “Yes, if they are supported!”

They need the support of resource-rich Internet sites like InterfaithFamily.com and Jewish institutions that explicitly welcome them and recognize their status as capable Jewish families. If organizations make this clear, then interfaith couples will also see this and feel as comfortable as any other couple in Judaism and join the community. Yes, there may be issues and complications with extended family, but there can be issues and complications with any two families who have different styles and traditions. I think we have made these issues sound daunting for too long. There have long been support groups led by outreach professionals and volunteers, sensitized clergy and Internet discussion boards to share helpful strategies and insights. We have needlessly deprived our community of the energy, passion and resources of those in interfaith marriages.

After the First Temple was destroyed, the Jewish community was in shambles. The land was completely razed to the ground and the population was drained away – deported to Babylonia, escaped to Egypt and other surrounding countries, or dead of starvation and disease. The land was almost empty. Some slowly moved back and went to the site of the Temple and made sacrifices, but the Israelites who remained in the north were under foreign rule and mixed with the pagan practices common in their area. The promises God had made to the children of Israel of living forever in the land seemed broken. This broken promise put everything else God had commanded into question.

The Jews who were exiled were the leaders and scholars of Jewish society, and it was in exile that Judaism was maintained. Since the exile and the destruction of the Temple were seen as God’s punishment for not obeying God’s laws, new stress was put on obeying the commandments.

When the Second Temple was dedicated in Jerusalem in 515 BCE, sacrifices and prayers for the king of Persia included! There were many intermarriages in Jerusalem; 57 years later, when Ezra the scribe returned from Babylonia with the exiled Jews, there were also many intermarriages among them.

The community was divided into two camps over the intermarriage issue. The prophet Isaiah called for the full admission of any foreigners who would follow the law, while the prophet Haggai regarded any contact with foreigners as a contamination that had to be stopped.

The leader of the segregationists was Ezra the scribe. Eager to return the people to the practices of the Torah that had been ignored and forgotten, and convinced that intermarriage was the cause, Ezra tried to compel Jewish men to divorce their foreign wives. Instead of claiming intermarriage had turned people away from Torah to a new religion with immoral practices, which is the only stated concern in the Deuteronomy commandment against intermarriage, Ezra, and later Nehemiah, focused on a new idea: that Jews should maintain the purity of their blood or, as Ezra called it, “holy seed.” 5

This argument to bolster Ezra's attempt to compel divorces of women who were not Jewish (Ezra 9:1-2) was a totally new concept and a break with the arguments of the past.

In the Book of Jubilees (which is not part of the Tanakh or Hebrew Bible), Ezra combined the Torah laws, punishments against human sacrifice and cult prostitution with the Deuteronomic ban on intermarriage, warning that "any man in Israel who wishes to give his daughter or sister to any foreigner, he is to be stoned." In other words, intermarriage meant death for any family that sanctioned an intermarriage.

The priests and nobility that led the assimilationists argued that forcing an intermarried couple to divorce was worse than any danger from intermarriage. Divorces would not only break up families, but force the children of those marriages to leave the Jewish community. To strengthen their position, they formalized the process of conversion. For them, Judaism was to be a world religion defined by practice and belief, not bloodlines.

The assimilationists also produced writing to support their cause, including the Book of Esther – the story of a Jewish woman who was able to save her people because she married a Persian King – and the Song of Songs – celebrating Solomon's love for a woman from Lebanon. Both of these books are part of the official cannon of Judaism.

Although the segregationists dominated and won control at that time, intermarriages continued. Following the conquest of Alexander the Great, Greeks became the most common foreign partners of Jews.

Hundreds of years later, the rabbis and sages of the Talmud were also very concerned with the future of Judaism, and feared that intermarriage would mean the end of our rich and healthy tradition. Building on the injunctions of the segregationists, not only were intermarriages banned but the sharing of bread, oil and wine with non-Jews was also declared off limits. The Talmudists returned to arguments based on the moral authority of Judaism and not on the purported need for purity of Jewish blood. Unable to ignore the evidence of accepted intermarriages, they maintained that the biblical intermarriages of Jacob's sons and of Ruth were acceptable because the women embraced Judaism in some way before they married.

How were these early commitments to Judaism expressed? On what were they based? For Rachel and Rebekah, the Torah tells us that Adonai played a hand in their selection. If there was an embrace of Adonai, it is not mentioned. Asenat, Joseph's Egyptian wife, was chosen for Joseph by Pharaoh and nothing is said about either Joseph or Asenat's response.

This was at the same time that Christianity gained momentum, with its leaders also troubled by intermarriages of Christians to others, and trying to prevent them. Priests threatened to excommunicate parents if their children converted to Judaism, and threatened death to those who converted to Judaism and all who assisted them. Later laws were passed equating intermarriage to adultery, another capital crime punishable by death. The rabbis of the Talmud were surely responding to these injunctions when they

attempted to keep Jews from eating and drinking with non-Jews. Intermarriage could threaten reprisals to an entire village.

But, even in the Talmud there were voices that spoke of intermarriage as a solution and not a problem. This is the beauty of the Talmud; minority opinions are preserved.

Rabbi Elezar ben Pedat said that the exile of Jews from Israel, the most terrible event in ancient Jewish history, had a positive outcome, that:

the Holy One, praised be He, exiled Israel, among the nations for the purpose of gaining strangers/converts. (Pesachim 87B)

Like the prophet Isaiah before him, Rabbi Elezar saw the potential in being welcoming. He must have seen how those of other cultures had added to the Jewish community throughout time. He needed to have a biblical proof text to support his opinion and he chose this verse from Hosea 2:25: “I will sow her in the land as My own.” His interpretation of the Hosea verse is that God planted souls in the land that were destined to be a vital part of our community.

Moses Maimonides wrote a comprehensive book of Jewish laws in 1180 called the Mishneh Torah. He is considered one of the greatest of Jewish sages. Let’s take a look at what he said:

Loving a *ger* [many bibles translate *ger* as stranger or resident alien] who has come to nestle under the wings of the *Scheninah* [a name for God] fulfills two commandments. One, because the *ger* is included among the neighbors (and we are commanded to love our neighbor) and two, because the Torah says ‘You shall love the *ger*’ (Deuteronomy 10:19). In this way, God commands us to love the *ger* just as God commands us to love God’s self. As it is written, ‘And you shall love the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 11:1). The Holy One blessed be God, loves the *ger*. As it is written: ‘And God loves the *ger*’ (Deuteronomy 10:18). (Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot Chapter 6:4)

As we have seen, there have always been people of other cultures who have lived in Jewish communities. Today, we are grateful to have many who support their partners and children in leading Jewish lives. These people choose to live among us and be part of our communities.

There is a long history of concern about the preservation of Judaism, but also a pattern of biblical intermarriages and children of those marriages being blessed and becoming the progenitors of King David and the messiah.

In every generation or era, there have been sages and rabbis who have seen intermarriage as positive. It is time for that stand to become the dominant voice in the Jewish community. If we can clarify to the larger Jewish world that interfaith families can hold the same concern about the preservation of our beautiful, deep, insightful tradition, and that interfaith families can and do create another generation of committed Jews... if we

can eliminate the vestiges of rejection and disdain of interfaith families and recognize that their desire to be inside the Jewish community is a sign equal to that of Rebekah and Rachel and of all those who followed the Jews out of Egypt... if we can create a Jewish culture where interfaith families are not just tolerated but acknowledged for the treasure that they are and for the gifts that they give us... then we will certainly insure a future for Judaism. *Ken y'hi ratzon*. May it be God's will.