

# Intermarriage: A Reappraisal

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I was a little boy, wearing my favorite pjs, curled up under a warm blanket in the back of our Studebaker station wagon. We were at the Berlin Turnpike drive in, one of the truly great dinosaurs of the outdoor cinema world. In the old days of the drive-ins, they'd show a number of cartoons, followed by a kiddie picture. Then there would be a pause while the kids were tucked in to go to sleep and the grownups went to the concession stand.

That night, my sisters were asleep, and I was supposed to be sleeping, too. But due to a congenital delight in staying up late at night, I was wide awake and ready to secretly watch the adult feature, *The Jazz Singer*. The year was not 1927, so it wasn't Al Jolson, starring as Jake Rabinowitz, aka Jack Robbins. And it wasn't the 1980 remake starring Neil Diamond as Yussel Rabinowitz and co-starring as his father, in one of his absolutely worst performances, Sir Laurence Olivier. This remake of *the Jazz Singer*, the

grown up movie I was about to steal a glance at starred Danny Thomas as Jerry Golding.

While the actors are different and the characters names are often changed, the story, in all of its incarnations remains the same. It is an iconic tale, a true bildungsroman about a nice Jewish boy from a good Jewish home on the Lower East Side of New York City. The father is a fourth generation Cantor who expects that his son will follow in his footsteps and those of the men who had come before. Except no one asks the poor kid what he wants, and what he wants is to be a big American entertainer, not a cantor.

Jerry breaks with his family and chooses the lights of Broadway over the ner tamid. His mother is heartbroken and his father is furious and utterly inconsolable. The better the son does on stage, the more estranged he grows from his family of origin.

Jerry's struggle is the classic push-pull between tradition and modernity, the story of the Jews in the United States. When the story was first told in 1927, it mirrored the reality of many Jewish families, including Al Jolson's.

Whether or not to abandon Orthodox Judaism, to shave one's beard, to send

one's daughter to work or even to public schools, to begin assimilating into the great melting pot of America, these were not quaint issues. One can only imagine how many heads were shaking over this situation in the movie houses of America. The older generation shaking no and the young, often first generation heads shaking yes.

Then of course, what happens to the nice Jewish boy trying to make it big on the road, looking to be a real American? He meets a real American girl. Her name in 1927 is Mary Dale (played by May McAvoy), in 1980 it's Molly Bell ([Lucie Arnaz](#)), and in the 1950s version, she's Judy Lane, played by the incomparable Peggy Lee. Of course, this trio of names is not reminiscent of the Old Country. Yes, Jerry has fallen for forbidden fruit, the non-Jewish girl.

The moment word gets to the Cantor and his wife back on Delancy Street, a heartrending scene occurs, one that appears in all 3 movies that I still remember from the back of the Studebaker. Jerry's father slams his hands down on the table and cries, "We have no son!" As his wife whimpers and

weeps, the Cantor rips the lapel of his jacket and begins to recite the mourner's Kaddish.

I wondered then, as a little boy, what was it that evoked such rage? How could a father say that his son was dead to him because of his girlfriend? Little did I know as a child just how close to the bone the issues of interfaith dating and intermarriage hit the Jewish soul. The simple truth is that for countless generations, the very notion of intermarriage was considered anathema. Families feuded, children were disowned, grandchildren were ignored, feelings were hurt, unkind gossip spread, all due to those who married someone not Jewish. There were parents who did indeed sit shivah for their intermarrying children.

But the inexorable force of Jews and non-Jews living and working in the same space has increasingly led them into love and marriage. The number of Jewish families with a relative in an interfaith marriage has continued to grow. What was once a *shanda*, an unthinkable insult to family honor, is in many families just another part of living in the post modern world. This is

not true in the Orthodox community, however. To look at any number of Orthodox websites or books on the subject of intermarriage is to get an education in just how far apart our denominations are about some very real issues.

By the time I was ordained at the Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1984, I knew that without question, *b'emunah shleima*, with absolute faith, I would not officiate at interfaith weddings. I believed that, as a rabbi, my role was to participate in Jewish life cycle events. A wedding between a Jew and a non-Jew, I felt, was not a Jewish event. I would go to an interfaith wedding; I would bless an interfaith couple at Shabbat services. But I would not, could not, in good conscience, perform intermarriages.

I also believed that as a rabbi, my obligation was to ensure the future of the Jewish people. I felt that when Jewish partners married each other, their children would stand a better chance of being raised as Jews. And we have the statistic: Nearly all children (96%) in households with two Jewish spouses are being raised Jewish, compared to a third (33%) of the children in

households with one non-Jewish spouse. I believed in assuring Jewish continuity. So the fact that slightly more than a fifth of Jewish adults who were raised by two Jewish parents are intermarried, while, in contrast, nearly three-quarters of Jewish adults with just one Jewish parent are intermarried mattered to me.

I also believed that my role as a rabbi was to foster the growth and the continuity of the Jewish people. And as I understood that function, it seemed counterintuitive to support the notion that intermarriage could ever be a positive act within the Jewish community. The best thing I could do for my Jewish community was to encourage Jewish marriage.

With all of my heart I supported the notion of conversion to Judaism for the non-Jewish partner. That made sense to me. I was willing to put forth lots of time to make that happen. I referred interfaith couples to classes and on a few occasions ushered into the Jewish people a new Jew by choice. I also referred interfaith couples who had made their decision to get married to colleagues whom I trusted would perform tasteful ceremonies not co-

officiated by clergy of other faiths and not occurring on Friday night or Saturday during the day.

This has been my practice for over 23 years. As I have lived by principles, I have never downplayed or minimized the presence of non-Jewish spouses in temple life. I invite non-Jewish parents to take their rightful place on the bimah when their child becomes a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. I have been a fervent supporter of our movement's outreach program. I wholeheartedly welcome interfaith families to our congregation.

When I was ordained in 1984, the intermarriage rate was about 35%. Today, it is 48%. In 1984, about a quarter of Reform rabbis performed intermarriage. Today, over 50% of Reform rabbis, including the president of my rabbinic union the CCAR, say that they will perform intermarriages of one sort or another. It's a long way from Delancey Street.

I have never been pressured to perform an interfaith wedding. Ever. But recently, I have had some very intense thoughts about this subject. After 23 years, I am reassessing my position on intermarriage. Why?

A couple years ago, a temple member who wishes to remain anonymous, a person by the way whom I love dearly and admire as a parent, as a Jew, and as a true paragon of probity, asked me a question. “What are you going to say when my child, a kid you know and love, whom you taught, stood next to on the bimah, brought to New York City, graduated from Midrasha, what are you going to say when my kid comes to you and says, ‘Rabbi, this is the person I love and we want to get married by you at our temple. My fiancé is not Jewish but has agreed that our children will be raised Jewish.’?”

I answered that I would lovingly explain that as I define my role as a rabbi, I cannot facilitate that life cycle event. He asked me further, “Don’t you risk alienating my child from the temple and the faith in which he was borne and raised?” I answered that I hoped our relationship was strong enough to transcend this ideological dichotomy. I then said what I have said to a

number of folks over the last 23 years. “I can’t give your child and your child’s fiancé the 25 minutes of a wedding ceremony, but the day after I will be right there to embrace them for the next 50 years.” My friend shook his head. He wasn’t convinced. And now I’m not so sure that I’m convinced either. After I walked away from him, I had the opposite of what the Eagles call a “peaceful easy feeling”. I have been steadily stewing over this for 2 years.

I’ve been at Beth Avodah for 10 years. What will I say when some of those children I have always called ‘my kids’, children I have loved and guided since they were in preschool, what will I say to them? That line, ‘I can’t give you 25 minutes of a wedding service but I’ll be here to give you the next 50 years’, feels a little hollow, a bit insufficient.

Here’s what I know: that among all married Jews today -- including those recently married and those married long ago whose marriages are still intact -- 31% are intermarried. That number will not decrease. Inter-marriage is a permanent phenomenon in America. And for the first time ever, a majority

of Jews said that they would not be hurt or offended if their child married a non-Jewish person.

I believe in a truly vibrant Jewish future. And I don't believe we can create such a future unless we embrace interfaith couples. We have to accompany them from the periphery into the center of Jewish life. The more that interfaith couples are helped and encouraged to create a Jewish home, raise children as Jews and learn all about the dimensions of Jewish life, the better our chances of Jewish survival. Reaching out to interfaith couples doesn't diminish our community or our commitment to Jewish continuity. It enhances it.

Reform Judaism has differentiated itself from other streams in Jewish life by welcoming intermarried couples into our community. Yes, we encourage Jews to marry Jews. But we do not reject Jews who marry non-Jews--and for good reason.

I am endlessly amazed and moved by the dedication and commitment of so many non-Jewish parents, spouses and partners who participate at Beth Avodah. They know that they are welcome here, that we acknowledge them

as a part of the family rather than as pariahs or second class citizens. In return for that openness and heartfelt embrace we extend, many TBA non-Jewish spouses have embraced our synagogue's mission of strengthening Jewish life through membership and through involvement across the spectrum of synagogue activities.

I believe in the Jewish people. I believe in the unique gifts we bring to the world. I am committed to our survival. I do know that when 2 Jews get married, their children are very likely to be raised as Jews. I do know that a child borne and raised in a home with Jewish parents will more likely marry a Jewish partner. I do know that the divorce rate for intermarried couples is twice that of same faith couples. I do know that the majority of children raised in interfaith families are not raised as Jews.

I used to believe that by refusing to perform intermarriages that I was somehow preserving the continuity and the integrity of Judaism itself. But I realize now that the scene has shifted. Paradoxically, if I don't perform intermarriages, if I send good and loving couples away who want to figure out how to build a Jewish home out of their different backgrounds, if a

justice of the peace signs the license instead of me, then just maybe they'll never come back.

I have said many times that my job is making Jews. Therefore, I now welcome the opportunity to officiate at weddings of interfaith couples as long as they commit to upholding the essential message of a Jewish wedding ceremony--that the new couple will establish a Jewish home. The couple must make this commitment at the outset. They must commit to raising their children as Jews. Then they must act on it with both partners attending an "Introduction to Judaism" course or its equivalent to learn a common Judaism and support each other.

And so, I want to conclude by saying to my honorable friend, if your child comes to me and says, "Rabbi Stern, this is my fiancé, and we'd like you to do our wedding", then for the first time in my rabbinate there will be subsequent conversations. If your child comes half-way and says, "Rabbi, my non-Jewish partner who is not ready to commit to conversion joins me in wanting to make a Jewish home and a Jewish family. Help us make that

happen”, then I will come half-way and together we will walk to the huppah. I will do this because I believe it is the best way to take the reality of intermarriage and still get Jewish children. This is how we will make Jews.