

Intermarriage

Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

One of the debates that emerged from [Noah Feldman's article in the New York Times Magazine of July 22](#) revolved around the question of how the community and the individual should respond to intermarriage and the intermarried couple. Again we find the dialectic. There were those who maintained that the Maimonides school (Feldman's high school *alma mater* in Brookline, Mass.) was correct in distancing itself from him and his non-Jewish wife. Others, including **Rabbi Shmuel Boteach, in "Stop Ostracizing the Intermarried", Jerusalem Post, July 22**, contend, though, that the proper response to intermarriage is to be welcoming, for, in that manner, it may be possible to bring the family back to the Jewish fold (which would, theoretically, conclude with a conversion of the non-Jewish spouse). Others identified a distinction between the personal response and an official response; while on a personal level, we, of course, can be welcoming, these individuals contend that the Jewish establishment must still maintain a policy of distance and rejection. Still others defined a difference between the intermarried individuals and the institution of marriage, calling upon us to be warm towards the individuals while still distancing ourselves from them as a married entity. Intermarriage is a violation of our standards yet the question remains: how are we to respond when these standards are violated?

The question applies to much more than just the issue of intermarriage. Whenever a standard is set, the question always emerges regarding how to respond to a violation. If the response is too lenient, the potential exists for the standard to be ignored. If the response is too harsh, questions of justice, mercy and the appropriateness of the response in the given circumstances arise. We are concerned about the individual. In shunning the intermarried couple, a permanent bar to their entry (re-entry) into Jewish life is almost assured. Yet, in welcoming the couple into the community, the message we impart is that there are limited repercussions to intermarriage, thus signaling the perception that this

undertaking is “not so bad”. We are concerned about the standard. In the case of intermarriage, as Rabbi Boteach clearly identifies, the reality of intermarriage need not be the end of the discussion. It is possible, with conversion, for the couple to eventually even become strong members of the Jewish world. In responding to an individual case of intermarriage, clearly maintaining a level of warmth opens up the possibility of a positive conclusion. But what is the message we give to others? In exhibiting warmth in one case, how many will learn that this violation of a standard does not have any consequences? We potentially open the door to intermarriage.

The solution is not an easy one. It would seem to demand balance. We must focus on the individual while we also maintain a focus on the communal – while it would seem that what serves one does disservice to the other. The personal also includes elements of broader relationships. In the past, an offspring who intermarried was often disowned. Is this the proper response today? If not, why not? Let us also ask: if so, why? Our identity as Jews is clearly of great importance, but what about the other aspects of our identity – and, in fact, what about how these other aspects of our identity affect our Jewish identity? In rejecting the child, what are we saying about parenthood and the parent-child relationship? What is the effect of our response to intermarriage on the value demands of parenthood? The challenge of intermarriage is not solely in the question of how to maintain this one standard of Jewish identity, effectively the strength of this standard. Intermarriage raises numerous other issues which also demand contemplation in considering how to respond, again both personally and individually. What is often overlooked in discussing the problem is the multi-faceted nature of it. Whatever stand we take in regard to intermarriage yields the potential for many lessons. To correctly analyze and determine a stand, one must consider these variant potential statements that one will be making with one’s stand.

There are two major responses presented in the defense of intermarriage. One is the value of love. The other is the challenge of racism. Many years ago, while teaching an afternoon Hebrew high school class, I asked this group of sixteen year olds about their attitude to intermarriage. In those few moments, I gained a true appreciation for the American Jewish psyche. Of the twelve students, two emphatically declared that they would never marry a non-Jew. The majority of the class, eight students, said that they would, of course, like to marry a Jew but if they fell in love with a non-Jew, there would be

no choice; after all, love is obviously more important. This statement of this group of teenagers can be discounted for so many reasons, yet these words reflect much insight into the dilemma of intermarriage. Marriage is ultimately a personal choice; it reflects a decision regarding with whom you would like to share life. The question of intermarriage is thus: why should national, religious or any communal identity affect this decision?

The remaining two students in the class basically said that intermarriage was not one of their concerns. One of these students was most emphatic in her pronouncement that she did not care. "What difference does it make whether one is Jewish or not," she announced, "so we have a family meal on Pesach and they have one on Easter?" Jewishness, to this girl, was simply a method by which to express values that, in actuality, were universal. How could such a standard override the value of love?

To argue against intermarriage must demand a worthwhile reason to solely consider a Jewish spouse, a reason that can explain this limitation on choice. Of course, if one falls in love with a Jewish individual, there is no problem, no issue to contemplate. But what if one falls in love with a non-Jewish spouse? What reason could there be to forego marrying the one you love because of Jewish identity? The simple response of many people is to avoid this issue by declaring that this manifestation of love, specifically a conclusion in a successful marriage, is, really, impossible; for a variety of reasons, it is contended, intermarriages simply do not and/or cannot work. The mystical argument that the Jewish soul can only find true love connecting with another Jewish soul is often advanced in support of this contention. Strangely, many, even without any other manifestation of Jewish religious consciousness, accept this argument and shy away from intermarriage. Others project an argument, grounded even within a secular framework, that marriage demands some similarity between the partners and the chasm of different religious backgrounds, inherent in intermarriage, is too wide to bridge. The question of the value of love versus the value of Jewish intermarriage is thereby avoided. For most people contemplating intermarriage, these types of arguments are actually rejected. There are far too many happy intermarriages to provide evidence that the contrary is true. The demand must be to explain why, indeed, the value of Jewish values must override love or the choice of love.

The first step to intermarriage is usually the decision to date a non-Jewish individual. The essential question is, therefore, why choose not to. The problem with

limiting whom we choose to date is the challenge of racism. We are describing a person based on their group affiliation, not on their inherent, distinct personhood; is this not what racism is about? To argue for why Jewish identity must be a consideration in a choice of spouse thus really demands a reason for why this national/religious identity should be a factor in this choice and why the inclusion of this factor is not racist. Without considering these questions, the response to intermarriage becomes circular. Those with strong emotions of Jewish identity will continue to argue against intermarriage based, really, on these emotions – but will have limited success in attempting to convince others without these strong emotions of Jewish identity. The issue demands a reason; it demands of individuals with these strong emotions to consider the other without these emotions. Ultimately it demands a description of the value of Jewish identity that exists outside of the personal emotions but gives reason for why Jewishness should, and must, continue to exist. This demands a definition of Jewishness that explains why it is even more important than love and why the protection of this concept of Jewishness, in limiting the choice of marriage partner, is not racism.

The ultimate question arising from the story of Noah Feldman is thus not what to do but, rather, what led to this. Somewhere along the line, Noah Feldman felt that marrying the non-Jewish woman he loved was of superior value to maintaining his and his progeny's Jewish identity. How did he arrive at this conclusion? Perhaps he rejected this assumption, believing instead that he could maintain a Jewish identity even with intermarriage. This would, actually, seem to be the new theory of many in the general Jewish community – that Jewish identity can survive intermarriage. The fact is, though, that this is a definition of Jewish identity vastly different than the one taught to Dr. Feldman at Maimonides (at least, we would assume it to be a vastly different definition). The question now becomes: what occurred to change Dr. Feldman's perception of Jewish identity? In many of the articles that considered this issue, including Dr. Feldman's and many in response, there was a sore lack of focus on the very reason for Jewish identity. There was much discussion of what to do in the face of intermarriage but there was little said on the essential issue. This goes beyond the question of why intermarriage is a problem. We know that intermarriage negatively affects Jewish identity – but then the real question is: so what? What is Jewish identity and why is it important? Those are the questions we truly have to answer – in a way that is meaningful for the person

contemplating intermarriage.

In a round-about way, Rabbi Boteach actually addressed this question. He mentioned in his article that he attempted, when he met Noah Feldman's wife-to-be when she was at Oxford, he attempted to show her the beauty of a Jewish life-style with the hope of attracting her to Judaism and avoiding the problem of intermarriage with conversion. I wondered why Rabbi Boteach would consider this approach; would Noah Feldman himself not have attempted to attract his girlfriend to Jewishness? What Rabbi Boteach was presenting, within a broader perspective, was a belief in the endearing aspect of Jewishness that would eventually attract all. The question of intermarriage only arises because one has not seen the essential attraction of the Jewish life-style, not the Jewish spouse nor the non-Jewish spouse. The answer to intermarriage is conversion and the secret to the success of conversion is the attractive nature of Jewishness (so this approach goes).

This yields a whole new issue in itself. In [Kiruv: A Paradox of Hashkafa, Nishma Update 5754-01](#), I raised the issue of how we must be careful that kiruv, outreach, does not negatively affect the essence of Jewishness. The problem is that in attempting to gain interest in Judaism from someone, we have to, effectively, market Judaism to that person. The result is that Judaism will become evaluated pursuant to that person's internal value system. If the person becomes interested in a Jewish life-style, it would be because Jewishness has met that person's test of what he/she wants. The question is whether we manipulated Judaism/Jewishness, in any way, to gain this approval. In the 1960's, when the *kiruv* movement truly began with earnest, there was concern raised, by many leading rabbis, about the potential negative effect on Orthodoxy from this endeavour. The specific concern was that, in attempting to reach out to the non-religious, religious individuals would in turn be affected by secular and non-religious interests. The concern I am raising here is somewhat different. It is Judaism itself that is my focus. In attempting to present Judaism in a way that would be of interest to someone, i.e. meet the person's interest, are we skewing our presentation and understanding of Judaism in favour of this perspective? Sometimes our approach to *mitzvot* has to, in fact, be based upon a perspective that no person in their sane mind would undertake this action if not demanded by God. The result of such a perception would be that Jewishness, at least this specific aspect of

Jewishness, would not be attractive to the individual; specifically, in the case of intermarriage, it would not be attractive to the non-Jewish spouse, based upon this individual's internal value structure. Is this not the very reason for *Halacha's* strict standards in conversion? There is only one reason to convert. It is not the attraction of the Jewish life-style; in fact, an aspect of the sincerity of the process is that one chooses it in spite of its often difficult nature. The reason for observance can only be to fulfill the Will of God.

Therein lies the true essential issue of intermarriage. It is a rejection of the Will of God – but how are we to respond to one who so violates His Will? To simply be welcoming not only challenges the standard but ignores the very reality of the standard. To simply reject the offender may clarify our view of the significance of this standard but what will be the effect in actually attempting to rectify the transgression. To simply be welcoming, misrepresents Torah – not simply in the acceptance of the intermarriage but also, even, in a subsequent attempt to project the attractive nature of this system. To simply reject also misrepresents Torah for it ignores our responsibility to the other and the recognition that the ideal is in the manifestation of the Will of God in all aspects of this reality. Noah Feldman's intermarriage raised many issues. The truth is that it should raise many more. It's not about critiquing or judging Dr. Feldman; that is between him and HaKodesh Baruch Hu. We though have to contemplate the issue in terms of what we can do – and the issue demands much more consideration, specifically as it forces us to truly analyze the nature of our Jewishness.