

Intermarriage: Challenges and Possibilities
 Rabbi Donald B. Rossoff
 Temple Emanuel of South Hills
 Yom Kippur 5779/2018

Friends, I hope you found that moment a few minutes ago as powerful as I did, when a special group of our Temple community rose to this bimah and received our thanks and blessing. Rabbi Locketz and I were especially privileged, because we witnessed something that no one else did. We saw the beautiful faces of those who stood here with us here this day, as well as the beautiful faces of those among you who were so moved. This is a practice which was originated by Rabbi Janet Marder in Los Altos and which I have done a good number of times in other synagogues. Whether or not your settled Rabbi will continue this blessing will be up to her or him. But today, I felt it important to send a message both to those who stood up here and to the congregation as a whole. You see, I am very well aware of how sensitive this topic of intermarriage is here and in the Jewish community at large. And that is precisely why I need to address it now, and to speak with you this morning about intermarriage.

At this point, I know many of you are thinking, "Oh no. He's going to talk about me, about my parents, or my children or the person sitting next to me." I want to reassure you from the start that if you are afraid that I am going to talk about you, don't worry, I am. I am speaking about you and you and the person next to you and in front of you and in back of you. I'm speaking about you and I'm speaking about me. You see, for most of us, the marriage of a Jewish person to someone of another faith background is a family fact of life. Intermarriage touches all of us.

For many, what is touched is sensitive, perhaps painful. Many of you are married to someone of another faith background. Many of you are from other faith backgrounds, a number who became Jews by choice and many who did not. Many of you are products of an intermarriage. Many of you have children who are interdating or intermarried, some of whom are raising their children as Jews, some as Christians, some as neither and some as both. All of us have relatives and friends who are in an interfaith relationship.

It is not easy to speak about intermarriage from the pulpit. Regardless of what I say, I run the risk of not being heard or understood, for often people hear what they expect to hear or hear the worst of what they fear will be said, and not what is actually said. Yet it is risky not to speak of it. For there are few other issues in American Jewish life which affects us as deeply as individuals, as families and as a religious community. As your rabbi, I speak about this because I care about you and your families and their well-being. I care about Temple Emanuel and its future; I care about the Jewish People and its future. I share my thoughts and my experiences, not as the final word, but as the first word in a widening conversation. Some topics demand dialogue, not monologue. We plan to have a couple of dialogue meetings, with those in the congregation who are intermarried as well as those who have children who are intermarried. And so, we begin.

Intermarriage is a fact of life in general and a growing phenomenon among non-Orthodox American Jews. In that there is good news and there is bad news. The good news is that the high rate of intermarriage reflects an unprecedented acceptance of Jews in American society, acceptance that today we take for granted. Despite the fact that anti-Semitism is still crawling around in dark places under the rock, a rock that has been lifted as of late, we have found a true and open welcome on these American shores, where most everyone has internalized Dr. King's dream that we judge each other solely by the content of our character.

That is the good news. The bad news is that there are now fewer positively identifying Jews in this *goldena medinah*, our golden land, than in previous times. According to the 2012 American Jewish Yearbook, "the population of Americans of Jewish descent is demographically characterized by an aging population composition and low fertility rates significantly below generational replacement."¹

While numbers are tricky depending on whom is included in "Jewish population," there is no doubt that we are shrinking in proportion to the rest of the American population. Our teacher and friend Dr. Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis says "the reasons [for the decline] are many: a... Jewish birth rate, below replacement level...; fewer Jewish immigrants...; a flattening of conversions to Judaism; and, of course, the burgeoning effects of non-marriage, late marriage, and intermarriage."

In earlier decades, it was believed that if a Jew married out, as it were, he or she was trying to escape being Jewish. And for some that was true, just read Philip Roth. Beginning, we think, in the 70s and 80s, Jews were marrying non-Jews, not as an act of rebellion, but as a consequence of having made it into American society. Doors in higher education and in the workplace formerly closed to Jewish people, especially Jewish women were now open;

and Jews naturally, fell in love with the lovely people they met in school or at work. Even more recently, another factor has been the changing nature of identity.

Younger people today have multiple identities. Their Jewish identity, as strong as it may be, is but one of many identities with which they connect. Many see no contradiction between feeling strongly Jewish and marrying someone who is not. Witness Mark Mezvinsky, raised as a Conservative Jew, who stood under a chuppah with yalmeke and tallis on a sunny Saturday afternoon and married Chelsea Clinton. People these day don't see themselves as marrying "out," they are just marrying. Actually, fewer Jews are marrying at all, but a high proportion of those who do marry do not marry other Jews. And most of them are not raising their children as Jews.

When it comes to mixed marriage, I have a mixed agenda. I love Judaism and think that living as part of an historic covenant community is an incredibly meaningful and beautiful thing. I also believe that Judaism has something to give to the world. You see, I take seriously God's charge to Abraham and Sarah when they were called to covenant with these two words: "*H'yay b'racha* – be a blessing... , so that through you and your descendants will the families of the earth be blessed." And in order for Judaism to be a blessing to humanity, there must be Jews. That is why I am deeply committed to the meaningful survival of the Jewish people. I want for us all to have Jewish children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. And that is most likely to happen when Jews marry other Jews. So I will not say that intermarriage is categorically bad. But given the proportion of non-Orthodox Jews who intermarry and the statistics that tell us that most do not raise their children as Jews, I have to that in and of itself, intermarriage jeopardizes Jewish continuity.

On the other hand, saying only that intermarriage jeopardizes Jewish continuity and closing the door on those who would be part of our Jewish adventure, is a self-fulfilling prophesy. I believe that in order to preserve Jewish continuity, we need to heed the words of the prophet Isaiah who said, "*Harcheive maitaraich* -stretch out your tent pegs!" Make the tent bigger! As I said on erev Rosh Hashanah, we need to have a more inclusive, more embracing WE. So when Jews intermarry and want to part of Jewish life even after the wedding, I think it important to affirm and support them, and to tell them how very precious they are.

You see, you who are intermarried and are part of our community are in the minority, nationally, and even more so in the Pittsburgh area where survey says that an even greater proportion of intermarried couples are not raising their children as Jewsⁱⁱ. But that is not you! Your presence here gives witness to a choice, sometimes easy, sometimes not, you have made. You have chosen clarity over indecision. The homes you have established are Jewish homes. Your children, our children, are Jewish children with precious Jewish souls. And you who stood up here on this bimah, what an amazing gift you have given, not only to our Temple but to our people and our faith!

Our movement's former president, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, referred to you as heroes of Jewish life... and you are. The thanks we offered you this morning and the blessing we asked were not strategic. They were real and heartfelt, well-earned, and, for the Jewish community at large, long overdue. And you will see as time goes on, this recognition and this gratitude will be more evident to you and to your relatives as your children become bar or bat mitzvah.

Now friends, as long as we are talking – or at least I am - I want to mention one other thing very, very delicately. I want you to know that you are and will continue to be accepted and loved as you are; but let me say a word about conversion. When non-Jewish spouses were surveyed as to why they did not convert, a surprising number said, "Because no one asked me too. I never got the sense that it was important." Conversion is not for everyone for a 1000 different personal reasons. But it is not unimportant! This is not a blanket call for everyone to convert. But if you were waiting to hear that you would be welcome, let me say it now. The door is open. If you are looking to deepen your religious life and Jewish home, know that becoming Jewish can be a beautiful source of spirituality and meaning. Do not be discouraged by those who say that being Jewish is something in the blood, and you can't really convert. They are simply wrong. Those among us who have come to Judaism by choice are wonderful guides in this regard. Just speak with anyone who has taken the plunge, as it were. In the words of a late, great Jewish sage, "Can we talk?"

I turn now to those parents whose children who are intermarried or are interdating. If you care about having your children remain Jewish and having Jewish children themselves, I would counsel patience, honesty, tact, sensitivity, and more patience. If you are not happy, understand why. Is it because you feel rejected? Don't. Chances are, your child's choice of love is not a rejection of you. Is it because you want Jewish grandchildren -- as most of us do? Voice your concerns in a caring way. If there is an interest in things Jewish, be supportive. You may find yourself being your grandchild's only Jewish role model. Be a good one, but don't undercut the choices your children have made for their children. I know, it can be very tough. Know that you are not alone. We'll talk.

And for those of you in the younger set who are in an interfaith relationship, I counsel you to work out this religion thing in advance. Trust me, you may not want to start what might be an uncomfortable conversation, but you need to do this more than you think you do at this stage of your life. You see, the moment that the discussion is no longer theoretical and you hold that real live person in your arms, everything changes, and things that were not important before can become very important. Best to find out what this is long before that overwhelming moment. Take time to talk about it. A lot. Time spent in avoiding the subject is not neutral, it is negative. But time is your friend if you use it, talking with each other about memories, feelings and faith, hopes, prejudices, fears and bottom lines. And don't fool yourself into saying, "We'll work on it later, we'll decide when the kids come." The hospital nursery is not the place to decide between circumcision and baptism.

Finally, a few words for parents who are concerned about your children intermarrying. By the way, I have found that this can include some parents who themselves are intermarried. I know that might sound hypocritical, but as one person, a Mrs. Hashioka, put it, "I know first-hand how much easier it would have been to have a Jewish home had I married someone who started out on the same page as I. I want my children to have it easier than I did." So parents, I would advise you to do two things. I will begin with the second thing.

Second, let your children know how you feel. At the very least, you can easily say something to the effect, "Being Jewish and having a Jewish family is very important to me. I hope that it is and will be important to you." You may not have control over whom they date past a certain age, like 8 or 9, but they should still know what you think and feel. The night when your child brings home the Christian or Muslim or Sikh friend (Who is usually a wonderful person -- our children have excellent taste.) is not the time to start making your feelings known.

That was second. The first thing I recommend is to raise the children actively Jewish. Give them good, warm Jewish family memories. Celebrate the holidays and Shabbat in concrete ways. Let them see that being Jewish is not a hobby, something you do when you are not doing the really important things -- work, school, vacation. And you are not just going through the motions for the sake of the children, for if Judaism is a childhood thing, then there will be no reason not to leave it behind with other childish things. When you say those words, "Being Jewish is important to me," your credibility depends on what they have seen over the years about how important Judaism really has been to you.

Then, try to see that they have Jewish friends, are part of Jewish groups, go on after Bar/Bat mitzvah to confirmation. Sending them to Jewish camps like Camp Haram and Israel can have a huge impact. If they choose a college, stress the importance of a not being one of seven Jews on campus. Will this guarantee that they will only go out and marry another Jew? No. There are no guarantees. There are families that do everything "right" and their children still make their own choices. There is no sure fire way of making sure that your children marry "in" instead of "out" -- not even moving to Israel or going Chabad. But you can stack the deck.

If we work towards creating joyous and unambiguous Jewish identities within our homes and our Temple, hopefully our children will see that an important part of them, a part of them that they like and want to hang on to, is connected with their being Jewish. Then, even if they marry someone not of our faith, they will hopefully feel strongly about having a Jewish home and Jewish children.

And speaking of Jewish children, let me add that I don't believe that one day out of 365 is going to negate a child's Jewish identity, even if it is spent helping grandma and grandpa decorate their Christmas tree. Even if your child dresses up in a rabbit costume, year after year, playing the Easter Bunny at a friend's backyard Easter egg hunt or becomes the best Santa Clause in the entire 8th grade - as did the youngster who grew up to be the rabbi who stands before you. When religious identity is solid and joyous, then visits with other religious traditions won't weaken it and in some case, it can strengthen it.

Friends, in the final analysis, intermarriage is not the issue. That is but a symptom, a by-product of living in an open society. The real and pressing issue is: Why be Jewish? Why care about being Jewish at all? What is there about being Jewish and living Jewishly that is in any way compelling and worth sacrificing for?

Living, as we do, in a free society, we don't have to be Jewish. That means that anyone who takes Judaism seriously is a Jew by choice. I chose to affirm Judaism and to live a Jewish life because I believe that our society does not serve as a source of a consistent moral values, and because I have experienced the joy, the meaning, and the necessity of being part of a caring community of conscience and consequence. And... because being Jewish runs in my family.

I want my children and my grandchildren, when, please God, we have them, to embrace Judaism, not because crazy people hate us, but because God loves us and needs us to be partners in the ongoing creation of a

better, fairer, more just, more compassionate, more peaceful world. I want them to take to heart those two words which define the reason and purpose for our existence as a covenantal community: “*He’yay b’racha* – be a blessing... , and through you will all the families of the earth be blessed!”

We are heirs to a beautiful heritage and a noble mission. Yes, we've been persecuted through the years. But that is largely because we have always maintained that the messiah has not yet come, and until we have that better, fairer, more just, more compassionate, more peaceful world, the status quo is simply not good enough; and the world doesn't like hearing that. Those are my reasons. Think about your own and share them with the important people in your life.

Friends, I for one am grateful to live in a society where being Jewish is not a stigma and people can love whom they so choose. But because we live in a free and open society, we face the greatest challenge to continued meaningful Jewish life ever presented. If we disappear from this continent, it will not be because of the hatred of the anti-Semites, but because of the indifference of the Jews to being Jewish. But if we care, we can make a difference! As Rabbi Locketz said so beautifully last night, *yesh tikvah* – there is hope, as long as we substantiate hope with action. And as Dr. Sarna says, “Whether assimilation or revitalization ultimately predominates will be determined day by day, community by community, Jew by Jew.” The Jew lives with hope!

And so we will continue to program for the evolving Jewish family, guided by the words, “*Talmud torah k'neged kulam*,” which translates as “There is nothing more important than Jewish education.” We will continue to welcome those who come to us, whether making a commitment to be part of a particular Jewish family or to be part of the Jewish people. And together we will inspire our children to become serious, unambiguous Jews who want to create Jewish families of their own.

In a few moments, the Torah will again remind us that before us lie choices: curse or blessing, death or life. If we say that the choice to marry a person of another faith background brings on curse and leads to death for the Jewish people, then it will. But if we see, not just the challenges, but the possibilities and opportunities, then our response can be one of life and blessing, as we have witnessed this morning. Let us choose life, life for ourselves, life for our families, life for Temple Emanuel and life for the Jewish People, so that we can become the blessing we were called to be - for each other and for all the families of the earth!

Keyn y’hi ratzon – May this be God’s will and may it be ours as well.

Shanna tovah – G’mar chatimah tovah!

ⁱ Sergio DellaPergola. "World Jewish Population, 2012." *The American Jewish Year Book* (2012) (Dordrecht: Springer) pp. 212–283

ⁱⁱ Boxer, M., Brookner, M., Aronson, J., & Saxe, L. (2018, February). STEINHARDT SOCIAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE: 2017 GREATER PITTSBURGH JEWISH COMMUNITY STUDY. Retrieved from <https://www.brandeis.edu/ssri/communitystudies/pittsburghreport.html>