

Jared & Ivanka and Edward & Caroline
Toldot 2009

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
November 21, 2009

We read in this morning's Torah portion:

Rebekah said to Isaac, "I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob (our son) marries a Hittite woman like these, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?"

So Isaac, being the good husband that he is, goes along with his wife's request. He blesses his son Jacob telling him not to marry a Canaanite woman and sends him off to his wife's family in Haran, to live with her uncle Laban, where he will be able to find a suitable mate. Even Esau gets the message that there are certain people he, a descendant of Abraham and Isaac is not to marry. So he takes a wife from the offspring of Ishmael. The only slight complication is that he did not get rid of his other wives – but that is not our concern today.

What is going on in the story? Rebekah is a nice Jewish mother, concerned about who her son is going to marry. The great patriarch Isaac is really just a puppet, acceding to whatever his wife tells him to do. He reminds me of one of the first jokes I ever told in a public setting, when I was a kid. It is about a great disturbance in heaven caused by the sudden arrival of a large unruly group. The angel in charge of sorting out the souls and determining who is to be admitted to heaven decides the way to cut through red tape would be to separate everyone into two groups. So he says, "Whoever has ever been ordered or told by his wife what to do, stand over here on this side. And whoever has never been bossed around by his wife should stand here on the left."

There is a great deal of commotion and movement, and then bewilderment when the angel sees that everyone is standing on the right, and only one little old Jewish man is standing by himself, on the left. At that point the angel comes over to him, reviews the chart with information about his life and deeds, and asks the man, "Irving, tell me how is that you lived 86 years, were married 57 years, and you are standing over here on this side."

The guy shrugs his shoulders and says, "I really don't know how to explain it. All I know is my wife told me to stand over here on the left."

Isaac reminds me of that guy. Rebekah is clearly the one who understands what is going on. She knows who it is that needs to be the progenitor and ancestor of the Jewish people. But she also understands that in addition to seeing to it that Jacob get the blessing, he must marry a woman from the clan, and not outside of the tribe of Abraham.

And so it is that throughout history, Jews have sought to preserve our ethnic ties and our heritage by marrying within the clan. As a result of many historic factors, Jews have often mistakenly thought that this means Judaism is not open to accepting individuals who choose to become Jewish. Nothing could be further from the truth. While Rebekah presents one model in the Torah, we also have other models as well, including Tziporah, the wife of Moses, who was the daughter of a Midianite priest. Most famous of all is Ruth, who cast her lot with the people of Israel, declaring to her mother in law, Naomi, "wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your God shall be my God, and your people shall be my people." How is that for being a loyal daughter in law?!

The Torah does not proscribe how one becomes Jewish. The Talmud came up with the means whereby one could become a part of the Jewish people. Yet even there the requirements are somewhat vague and broad. They include sincerity, a willingness to cast one's lot with the fate of the Jewish people, a commitment to live a life of mitzvot, and acceptance of the One God. Later generations of rabbis further refined the process, and defined more precisely the necessary steps one must take and what conversion entailed.

Many do not realize it, but at one time we were a religion which actively proselytized. Some of the great rabbis quoted in the Talmud were themselves converts to Judaism, or the offspring of people who had converted to Judaism. This all changed when the Romans saw how successful we were in bringing people, in the words of the rabbis, "*metachat kanfei HaSchechinah*, under the wings of the Divine Presence." They forbade Jews from converting others, and the Church reinforced this. Over the centuries Jews were secluded and their contact with non Jews was severely limited. Significantly, the restrictions were imposed on us by others. They did not spring from an inherent aversion in Judaism to conversion.

And yet, despite this, there still have always been those who have joined the Jewish people. Have you ever seen Jews from India? They look like Indians. And Yemenite Jews look like other Yemenites. Jews from Arab lands look very much like the people from their land of origin. Either we are, like Woody Allen's movie of many years ago, chameleons, like Zelig, or there has been intermixing, with people from native lands who became a part of the Jewish population.

Too often Jews today are under the mistaken impression that it is wrong to ask someone to consider becoming Jewish. (I will be handing out leaflets at the end of the service to our non-Jewish friends who are attending today's bar mitzvah.) We respect other religions, and should not and do not seek to convert those who practice another faith. But if one is searching, if one is interested in considering becoming Jewish, if one questions their religion, and especially if one is involved in a serious relationship with a Jew, we should be welcoming and encouraging them to take this step. The Talmud tells us to pull closer with one hand anyone who inquires about becoming Jewish. Yet at the same time, we are warned not to misrepresent the challenges and burden of being Jewish. Consequently with the other hand we are told to push them away and warn them of the difficulty of the demands of being obligated to fulfill the mitzvot. We shouldn't emphasize just the pushing away. Judaism is a beautiful and meaningful way

of life. We should be proud and want to share it with others, especially with loved ones, rather than discouraging them from exploring and considering becoming members of the Jewish people.

All of which brings me to Edward Schlossberg and Jared Kushner.

Edward Schlossberg, a nice Jewish boy married royalty. He is the husband of Caroline Kennedy. Last I heard, Caroline, like the Pope, is still Catholic, and her children are Catholic. Jared Kushner, on the other hand, a nice Jewish boy, also married a woman from a very prominent family. Just a few weeks ago he married, Ivanka Trump, the daughter of Donald Trump. Only Ivanka, who has been to Israel, was married under a chupah by an Orthodox rabbi, a friend of mine, Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, for after several years of courtship, she studied and ultimately converted to Judaism. It was important to her fiancé that she embrace Judaism, and so she undertook the process of learning and then decided to become a Jew.

Writing in the Jewish Forward, Sylvia Barack Fishman noted that, "In 1926, when writer Ellin Mackay, heiress to the Comstock Lode mining fortune, fell in love with famed Jewish songwriter Irving Berlin, her Catholic father raged that they would marry "over my dead body." When the couple eloped, he disinherited his daughter. After their civil ceremony, Ellin Berlin was dropped from the social registry — although her sister, who dated a Nazi and wore a diamond swastika, remained a member in good standing. How times have changed."

Donald did not disown his daughter. Instead, he threw the wedding at his private club, and said what a perfect couple they make.

If the matriarch Rebekah were alive today, she probably would still prefer for her son Jacob, probably known by now as Jack or Jason, to marry a nice Jewish girl. But as Ivanka reminds us, nice Jewish girls are born into the faith, or they undertake a sincere and rigorous process of studying Judaism and choose to become Jewish. To which Isaac would probably say, "Yes dear, whatever you want. Just tell me where to stand."

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November 21, 2009
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