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Whether to Officiate at Interfaith Marriages

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An excited young couple walked into my office. The young woman was someone I knew well. She had grown up in the temple. I had officiated at her Bat Mitzvah and taught her a few years later when she was confirmed. Alongside her was a thoughtful fiancé. They had called to ask if I would officiate at their marriage, and rather than give an answer on the phone I invited them to come in and meet.

As most of you know, I have never officiated at interfaith marriages. In fact, when I interviewed to become the rabbi of Temple Beth-El eighteen years ago, this was one of the topics the search committee asked me to address. The thoughts I shared with them and the answer I gave to the young couple in my office were the same.

I explained that according to our tradition, a Jewish marriage is effected when the groom stands before two or more witnesses and makes the legal declaration: Harei at... “You are betrothed to me, with this ring, according to the laws of Moses and Israel.” And the bride affirms his statement by accepting the ring.

Because Jewish marriage is a legal ritual, it is only binding if the groom’s declaration is valid. That is, if both the groom and the bride accept the laws of Moses and Israel. If either of them is not Jewish, then the declaration has no legal standing. This doesn’t mean that the couple can’t marry. They can have a civil ceremony and will be warmly welcomed into our community. But simply put, a Jewish wedding has no legal standing for a couple who are not both Jewish.

When I gave this explanation eighteen years ago, I was fully prepared to hear the search committee tell me that I was not the right candidate for the job. And frankly, I was a bit surprised when they told me: “Good – that’s how we feel as well.”

I was surprised because during the five years I spent in Rhode Island before coming to Northbrook, my response had produced its share of tears. The most painful was when a woman came to the temple with her Roman Catholic fiancé. You know the phrase “a match made in heaven” – this was one. She stood about 3’10” and he was almost her equal. They both believed in God, found comfort in their faith, and they told me how important it was to have a rabbi officiate at their marriage.

As I looked at them there was no doubt in my mind that if they had gone their separate ways and spent the rest of their lives looking, they could not have found a better match than the person standing next to them. This couple was b’sheret – they were meant to be. And I still feel guilty about the tears they shed when I gave my answer.

Yet despite those tears, I knew that when I became a rabbi, I was accepting responsibility for upholding a tradition that is thousands of years old; that I was making a commitment to act with integrity. It was not my right to “sell out” our tradition. Instead, I accepted that there would be times when I would be required to say “no.”

Now I'm sure that you can empathize with my situation. After all, how many times have we, as parents, said no to our children and watched tears flow in response. When we say "no," it's not because we don't love our children; it's not because we want to hurt them. When we say no it's because it's just not possible to give our children everything they ask for – it's not right or responsible. And in the long run, it can end up causing more harm than good. Parents have an obligation to raise good children. So, when there's a conflict between making children happy and teaching them to be good, parents understand that they must endure their children's tears and do their job.

So, back to that young couple sitting in my office. When I met with them, I fully expected to feel the sting of tears. What I didn't expect was to hear that young woman who grew up in our congregation proclaim that I was a racist and that Judaism is a racist religion.

Her response stunned me. It's not that I've never heard this accusation before. It's usually made in reference to verses in the Torah that call us God's special treasure, or God's holy people. But Judaism teaches that what makes us a treasure – what makes us holy – is that we live by an ethical creed. We are taught to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and therefore know the pain of oppression. Not only do we know it, Judaism teaches that we have an obligation to use our memory of that pain to build a just, fair society, which protects the rights of those who are most vulnerable and respects all people.

In my lifetime, I've witnessed how these values brought Jews to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. Jews traveled to the South and demonstrated side by side with African Americans for equal treatment under the law. Jews were not only present in the Civil Rights Movement – we assumed leadership positions. These same values draw Jews into leadership positions in our world today. So to condemn Judaism as racist because I was not able to officiate at a wedding – I found this reaction incomprehensible.

Last winter, during my time at the Hartman Institute, I spent some time studying the issue of intermarriage and had a chance to discuss my wedding meeting with 30 Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist rabbis. To my surprise, many of the non-Orthodox rabbis said that they had been told that it's racist not to perform intermarriages. They heard this – not only from engaged couples, but even from their own children.

You know, it's one thing to have an unpleasant encounter, it's quite another to discover that a personal experience represents the perspective of a generation. And as I spoke with my colleagues it became clear that regardless of how I view Judaism, for this new generation, and for many of their parents, the issue of intermarriage casts Judaism, as a whole, in a very different light.

This summer at Hartman I began to understand where this perspective comes from. Speaker after speaker referenced a 1979 book, The Heretical Imperative by Peter Berger, a Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University. The root of the word "heretical" in the book's title comes from the Greek word "heresy," which means choice. Thus, "the heretical imperative" is a description of our modern world where an individual's right to choose is a sacred value.

In this modern world the individual decides where to live, what to eat, where to work and what to wear; the individual can choose the form of their body, and of course, who they marry. Ours is a world of individual choice, which by its very nature conflicts with the old, traditional community and its clear line of authority.

Berger explains this conflict in his book. He writes that human beings require a community of people who see the world the same way as they do to reinforce their beliefs about reality. He gives an example

of the military – where soldiers live by the values of honor, courage, and loyalty. As long as a soldier is in the military, these values serve as a foundation for his actions, so much so, that he takes these values for granted. However, if he leaves the military, it's likely that one day he will question those values, for they are no longer reinforced by the community he lives in. Thus, according to Berger, values don't exist on their own; they are a product of the shared beliefs of a community.

In a traditional society, like the military, individuals set aside their ability to choose and agree to accept rules and values established by the society. On the plus side, this creates a stable world. On the minus, this creates a world where certain outcomes cannot be changed. It creates a world of "fate."

In modern society the only universally agreed upon value is the autonomy (the freedom) of the individual to decide for him or her self. This is a world where an individual's beliefs are often in conflict; where people are uncomfortable, not only about the decisions others make, but with the choices they have to make for themselves. On the plus side, this is a world of freedom, not "fate." On the minus, this is a world where certainty is hard to find.

In our world, we make decisions for ourselves. We decide, not only what we want to do, but what we should look like. We think for ourselves, stand up for what we believe in, and cherish our own moral autonomy. We no longer look to tradition to tell us what the world is; we do a Google search and decide for ourselves. We no longer look for a rabbi to tell us what type of marriage is valid. We already know what makes a marriage valid. It's to marry the person we love. We seek out a rabbi, simply to perform the ceremony and sanctify our choice. If Jewish tradition does not conform to our worldview – if it rejects the one we love because they do not share our religion, then there's something wrong with Judaism. It's racist. And if Judaism is racist, if its values do not conform to the world we live in, then Judaism has nothing to offer me in my life and I will reject it.

The truth is, Judaism's conflict with modernity has existed for centuries. This conflict is the central dramatic element of the play, Fiddler on the Roof, which depicts life in Russia's Pale of Settlement in the 1800's.

As you know, the story revolves around Tevya the milkman – trying to arrange marriages for his three daughters. He works with Yenta the matchmaker to find a husband for his daughter Tzeitel. They decide upon the butcher, a good man who will provide her with a decent standard of living. But Tzeitel has her heart set on Feivel the threadbare tailor. And rather than rely on the traditional authority of her father to make a match, she asks him to acquiesce to the desires of her heart. And he does.

This simple decision opens up the floodgates of Tevya's world. In quick succession, his daughter Hodel asks to marry the non-observant, socialist revolutionary, Perchik. And then his daughter Hava asks her father to accept Fietka – a non-Jewish boy who is her intellectual equal. While Tevya grudgingly accedes to Hodel's request, he cannot accept Hava's. Tevya refuses to give his permission to her marriage. Yet, the decision is no longer his to make. Not only does Hava marry her love, but the play ends with Tevya's entire world being torn asunder, as he and his family are forced to flee from their traditional community and find a new place in the world.

As much as this play tells the story of Jewish life since the 19th Century, it's also the story of our world. Joseph Stein, the author of Fiddler on the Roof, visited Japan when the play opened up there. During a conversation with the producer he was asked if they understood the show in America. "Yes," he said, "why?" The producer answered: "Because it's so Japanese." We had no idea it had such universality.

Obviously, the universality of Fiddler on the Roof has nothing to do with the milkman or his religion.

Rather, it's a reflection of the tension that exists between traditional societies and our modern world of choice, a tension which, when combined with the power of technology, will unquestionably alter every society on the face of the earth.

In a traditional world, the thought that a rabbi, or any member of the clergy, would officiate at a wedding between people of different faiths would be inconceivable. The question would not be asked. But in our modern world, a place where traditional beliefs and values have no greater standing than the emotions of our heart, a rabbi who relies on tradition to base his decisions is perceived as a racist.

The truth is, in today's world a traditional value such as marrying within your faith has almost no relevance to the life of our children. According to a recent Pew Research study, 40% of marriages in America are between people of different religions. Not only do we live in a world where intermarriage is a natural occurrence, we live in a world where a prominent intermarriage – say the marriage of a President or Vice President's daughter conveys a sense of pride to our community. How else to explain the Internet debate over the marriage of Prince William and Kate – who apparently may also be Jewish.

Earlier I mentioned the conversation I had with my colleagues last winter. During that time our studies were focused on the issue of boundaries – how a community defines who is, and is not a member. From the time the Temple was destroyed, until the 18th Century, the entire world was structured by traditional religious communities. A Jew lived in the Jewish community. A non-Jew lived in their community. If a Jew wanted to marry a non-Jew, he understood that to do so meant leaving his community. And often times a man would marry outside of his religion for just this reason – as a means to escape.

In today's world, marriage is no longer a commentary on communal affiliation. Like we saw in Fiddler on the Roof – marriage is about love. When a young Jew has a strong enough bond to her religious tradition that she wishes, not only to have a rabbi officiate at her wedding, but has made a commitment to raise her children as Jews; when we live in a marketplace of religions, rather than defend a status quo which no longer exists, or traditions which no longer connect people to their heritage, or give them a sense of holiness, we must revise our traditions so that they will be relevant to our lives and enable us to open our arms to whole-heartedly embrace this couple and welcome them into our community.

This summer I walked through Meah Sharim and saw a Yiddish poster on the wall warning residents about the evils of the iPhone. The ultra-orthodox community will wage a good fight, but not even the walls of their ghetto will be thick enough to prevent technology and choice from entering their community. And when it does, it will tear at the fabric of their traditional authority structure, just as it has spawned revolutions in other parts of the world. We no longer live in our great grandparent's world. It doesn't exist anymore.

And yet, two centuries ago, Jews who did live in that world recognized that maintaining rituals for the sake of tradition alone no longer had relevance in their lives. They realized that in order for Judaism to endure, it must adapt to the world that Jews live in, just as it always has. The Reform movement was created, not to separate from Orthodoxy, but to make sure that the soul of Judaism did not perish along with a bloated body.

Reform Judaism suggested that Jews could pray in a language they understood. It taught that men and women should have the opportunity to be equally obligated under the law. It came to America and decided that for an adult man to convert to Judaism, he should not be prevented because of a fear of circumcision. Like our prophets of old, Reform Judaism taught that rituals become empty vessels unless there are positive values associated with them.

I became a Reform rabbi because I believe in the values of Reform Judaism; that tradition has a vote, not a veto; that the kernel of Judaism is more important than the chaff; that Judaism teaches that we were formed in the image of God so that we might act in godly ways, creating and building a better world.

And now, I am ready to affirm that my role as a rabbi is to strengthen the Jewish community by building Jewish families. And for those members of our people who have committed themselves to raising a Jewish family and building a Jewish home, I will be honored to officiate at their marriage and welcome them into our family.

In the Torah, we read about our patriarch Jacob's most beloved son, Joseph, who was sold into bondage in Egypt. There he married Osnat, a daughter of the priest of On. Joseph and Osnat had two sons, boys who grew up immersed in Egyptian culture, so much so, that when their grandfather Jacob first saw them, he didn't know they were a part of his family.

But Jacob's eyes were opened, when he heard their names – Hebrew names – Ephraim and Manasseh. Then Jacob knew that they were his kin, and he adopted the boys as sons of his own. Before he died, Jacob gave each of them an inheritance along with his other sons. And he gave them a blessing, which we continue to recite to this very day.

On Erev Shabbat we bless our sons by asking that God make them like Ephraim and Manasseh – the children of Joseph and Osnat. They are not only a part of our people; they are children who bring blessings to all of us.

May our people continue to be blessed and enriched through Jewish children, brought into the world by parents who respect the teachings and faith of our tradition so much, that they commit to making it the framework for their home

Hazak, Hazak, v'Nitchazek – May our people grow strong and let us gain strength from each other.
Amen.