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January 27, 1989 Reform Rabbis and Interfaith Marriage

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Sometimes, it starts like this, "This is Mrs. Alef. I live in Omaha and my daughter is getting married." "Mozel Tov," I say. "How can I help you?" "Are you available to do the wedding?" she asks. "May I ask how you happen to be calling me?" I inquire. "Have we met before?" "No" she says. "But you are a Reform Rabbi, right?" "Yes," I respond, and let the silence grow heavy until she says at last, "Her boyfriend is not Jewish, but you will do the ceremony, right?" "Mrs. Alef," I say, as non-committedly as possible, "when are your daughter and her finance planning to be wed?" "Three weeks from next Sunday," she tells me. "Are you free?" "Mrs. Alef, I am afraid that you are misinformed to think that I officiate at an interfaith marriage ceremony. I am available to meet with your daughter and her intended to discuss their plans for their married life together and the part that their religious convictions may have to play in the future, but on such short notice it would be difficult for me to provide them with very many options in sorting this whole thing out." "What do you mean?" she interrupts. "I thought Reform Rabbis do mixed marriages." "I'm sorry that you have that impression, Mrs. Alef. Although there are some individuals with Reform, Conservative, and even Orthodox ordinations who do so officiate, they do so against the principles of their rabbinic organizations and contrary to the tenets of their movements. Have you or your daughter discussed this with your family Rabbi?" "Oh, we don't belong to a synagogue..."

And so it goes...

Or, sometimes it starts like this... "Rabbi, this is Mr. Schwartz. I am a member of your congregation and my son is getting married." "Moszel Tov," I reply. "How can I be of help?" "Well, the girl is not Jewish, you see. But they would like to have a Rabbi do their wedding." "Of course, I am willing to be of assistance in any proper way that I can. I am available to meet with them to discuss their plans if you will just have them give me a call. Although I do not officiate at interfaith marriages until I talk with them, let's not conclude that that is the only solution to this matter." "Well, if you don't officiate, why do you want to meet with them?" "Perhaps, with sufficient lead time and if his finance is not a practicing member of another faith, there may be a possibility of uniting them religiously as well as in marriage." "Oh, no," says he. "She's a religious girl, attended Catholic parochial school. She would never convert!" "If this is in fact the case, Mr. Schwartz, how do they expect to conduct their religious home life and raise their children?" "Well, from what they tell me," he says, "they are going to let them decide when they are old enough which one they would rather be." "From the way you are telling me this, Mr. Schwartz, it does not sound like you find it a very meaningful answer." "No, I think it's ridiculous, but I don't want to interfere. It will only make things worse. Can't you do something, Rabbi?" "What would you have me do, Mr. Schwartz?" "Talk them out of it, or do the wedding! Why can't you be practical?" "I'm afraid that it would be inappropriate for me to do either of those things, but I'm available to meet

with them to help them clarify these issues and to find an accommodation that will preserve everyone's integrity, if at all possible." [silence] "I don't know, I will see if I can get them to call you."

And so it goes...

I know of no more disorienting and emotionally disturbing issue confronting the Jewish community today than this one. Even death and divorce seem to pale by comparison. I could go on listing case studies almost ad infinitum: ""Will you co-officiate with her priest?" "My child is not religious but it would kill his grandfather if a rabbi did not do the wedding." "Maybe if you do it, she will convert someday." "Couldn't you just say a prayer and let them break a glass or something?" "Rabbi, why can't you be more flexible?"

And so it goes...

This is not intended to be an answer to the psychological disillusion to which the American Jewish community is passing in these days. No one has an answer to that. Fifty years ago one Jew in twenty-five married a non-Jew without benefit of conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. Twenty years ago it had become one Jew in ten. Today, it is at least one Jew in three, and in some regions of the country as many as one in two or higher.

Along with a corresponding diminishment in Jewish consciousness and self-presentation to the outside world, there has been a rapid acceptance of Jews into the social mainstream by even the elite gentile culture as, more and more frequently, it is Jews their children meet in the upper echelons of education, the professions, and income. Such social tolerance breeds association, and association increases the incidence of romance, love, and marriage. Hence, such interfaith marriages as we are seeing today are the inevitable product of the freedom, tolerance, and welcome acceptance which Jews now enjoy in America, and nothing short of a reactionary social cataclysm such as none would wish is likely to do anything to stem the tide.

It is true that much of the conventional analysis of yesteryear still holds: there is a high correlation between the degree of family and personal assimilation, if not outright abandonment of Judaism, and the likelihood of an interfaith marriage. Yet, this does not tell the whole story either. Many a loyal and practicing Jewish family has found itself in this plight, perplexed, angry, and bitter, futilely berating themselves with anguished questions about "where we went wrong," or "what we did to deserve this." And it is into this maelstrom that the Rabbi is brought in, like Sir Lancelot to slay the dragon of shame and regret and to give the impression that Camelot is still intact.

Why does any Rabbi decline to officiate at an interfaith wedding ceremony? Though some cannot see past the inferred statement of disapproval that our refusal seems to impart, one thing we try to make clear is that our concern for this couple as persons is not at issue. Given the opportunity, we will meet with, counsel, commiserate and assist in every way possible, including advise on how to "explain things" to their parents and create a beautiful wedding ceremony that will do justice to their shared, mutual values and commitment.

What we cannot do, however, is surrender our own integrity and sense of responsibility to the Jewish people and faith, of which we are ordained guardians and preservers. We cannot employ a religious liturgy that will put words in the mouth of a non-Jew that will make of them a hypocrite at the very moment of their taking upon themselves one of the most solemn pledges of their entire human existence. [We can no more impose these on them than we could accept our own children's vows being phrased "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," unless they had first converted to that faith that employs such a formula.] Neither can we permit such vow-taking to be diminished in significance by ignoring its particular sanctity for the generations of our people who standing underneath the chuppa to utter those same words in testimony to their devotion to "the law of Moses and the faith of Israel" meant everything, and not just the illusion of a Jewish marriage and ensuing family life.

Is there another alternative, perhaps? Could we change the words, eliminate some of the holiest symbols, but at least provide some Jewish flavor? I am a Rabbi, not a chef.

Could I just do a non-denominational service, without any, or with only a few references to Judaism? I am a Rabbi, not a judge or a justice of the peace.

I am ordained by the Jewish people, and confirmed by my state of residency, to perform the marriages of Jews, and any deviation from that commission is a betrayal of my role and a fraudulent misapplication of my privilege.

Do I have any advice, you ask?

Advice? Advice, yes. Easy or quick solutions, no. What follows are my ten commandments for coping with intermarriage:

1. Tell your children in words and actions how important Judaism and its preservation to the Jewish family are to you and, you hope, always will be to them.
2. Cultivate an attitude of self-presentation in them that will make it clear to any and all who come to know them that they are affirmatively Jews, and that their personal life would be unsatisfactory, incomplete without a meaningful Jewish family life for themselves and their children.
3. Should they enter into a relationship with a non-Jew, do not hesitate to explore with them early on in the relationship how they are planning on addressing the religious differences between them, both in the short run and in the eventuation of a marriage and with regard to the conduct of their family life thereafter.
4. Where it is apparent that the relationship is a mature one based on compatibility and sincere affection, do not challenge, criticize, or denigrate it in any way. Do encourage them to speak with you about these issues and to seek the guidance and advice of the Rabbi.
5. Do not behave as though it is none of your business. Family strength, harmony, and mutual welfare are everybody's business in the world of Jewish community life. Not only is your relationship with your child at stake, but so is your relationship with

your grandchildren, to say nothing of the issue of whether Judaism in your family has a future or ends with you.

6. Determine if the non-Jewish intended is a practicing member of another religious faith. Many Americans, who nominally identify themselves as “Christians”, are, in fact, secular, ethical humanists whose attachment to Christianity is little more significant than enjoyment of a Christmas tree.
7. Very often such people not only do not subscribe to the dogmas of the church in which they were raised, but actually reject them. Where such impediments have been cleared by the person himself, it is often remarkably easy to facilitate that person’s assimilation into Jewish life. Even before any formal steps of such a kind have been taken, make it clear in word and deed that you are extending the hospitality and warmth of Jewish family life to that person to the full extent of what their conscience permits them to do. This includes the celebration of Shabbat dinner and worship with you at the synagogue, participation in the Passover Seder, attending at High Holidays and festival events, and generally doing all in one’s power to make that person feel like an “insider” to our community. The sages observed that it was not an accident that Ruth, the Moabite woman who came to symbolize all the goodness that Jews by choice can mean to our faith, phrased her statement of commitment this way: “Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.” Never doubt for a moment the importance of this element alongside all the obscure theological sidetracks into which we so often digress.
8. In the absence of any professed faith, commitment or observance on the part of the non-Jewish intended, do not miss the opportunity to ask, “Would you be willing to take a course of study in the beliefs and practices of Judaism? You would be amazed how often I hear from such persons, “I didn’t know you could convert to Judaism,” or “No one ever asked me.” or “I didn’t know you I would be welcome.”
9. Even if, for a variety of reasons, the conversion and Jewish marriage of the non-Jew is not obtainable by the time of the couple’s planned wedding date, do not give up. By persistently maintaining that same openness and encouragement, and acceptance of that person’s good will, it is possible that he or she may accept our invitation later. I have heard of people who convert into Judaism as much as seven, fifteen, and even twenty-five years after the original wedding took place. We always follow such a time of fulfillment with an authentic Jewish wedding ceremony. It has enormous significance for both persons because they stand as equal beneath the chuppa at last.

10. Remember these basic points we tell our confirmants each year: when it come to love and marriage, the only thing beyond your control is with whom you are going to fall in love. “Fate,” or “destiny” call it what you will, it’s not going to be your conscious choice when the time comes. But what you can decide is

whether you will continue to be a faithful Jew or not; whether your home life will reflect your Jewish commitment or not; and whether your children will be Jews or not. Those things are up to you, you alone will be responsible for the answers. But, know this too: the answers you give to those questions will have everything to do with whether you will ever have an authentic Jewish wedding as the entry to an authentic Jewish marriage.

If these views have helped in even a small way in enabling you to grasp this awesome and challenging subject more thoroughly, then I'm grateful for your patience in hearing me out. If there are areas that still remain unclear, there are a number of worthwhile publications produced by our Reform Movement which deal with a variety of specifics. They are available on request from our office. Better yet, call me, and let's talk. Within the limits of my legitimate alternatives, I'm always at your service.