

Interfaith Marriage

Rabbi Steve Cohen

Yom Kippur 2007

Congregation Bnai Brith, Santa Barbara, CA

She met a nice guy; they've been dating for a couple of months....and he's Jewish! Those words, uttered with such delight by untold numbers of Jewish parents and grandparents, are tough to hear if you are the non-Jewish member of CBB, who is married to a Jew.

These are the same people, by the way, to whom we are saying "Welcome interfaith couples! Join us, bring your kids, send us your money. Sing, pray, study and build this community with us..."

Which of these is true?

During the rest of the year, we often leave tough questions unasked, and live with a certain amount of contradiction and inconsistency. But Yom Kippur asks us for integrity. On this one day of the year, we want to be able to say one thing, to all people. And not to speak out of both sides of our mouth. God willing, the integrity of this day will overflow, and spread through the rest of the days of our year.

So I would like to tackle this difficult issue this morning. I actually sent out a letter to all of the non-Jewish spouses I know of in our congregation, inviting them to come this morning....just to keep me honest, and to make sure that anything I say here is meant for everyone, the Jews and the non-Jews of our community.

I sent the letter, by the way, long before I knew what I was going to say. So if I have seemed unusually tense in the past few weeks...that's one reason.

The topic of intermarriage has many dimensions: historic, communal, religious and intensely personal. That's part of what makes it so complicated. Personally, I am here this morning as the father of my own two children, Rachel and Ari, ages 19 and 17; and as the rabbi of this congregation, and as a son-in-law myself. Each of these parts of my self thinks differently about the meaning of marriage, about children, about family, community and peoplehood. I'd like to offer some thoughts from each of these parts of myself this morning, in an attempt to paint the fullest possible picture of this complex subject.

First, as a father, thinking about my own kids getting married, I pray for three things. First, I pray that the person they marry will have a good heart, be honest and a good communicator, and be loyal, caring and supportive. I know that's actually more than one thing....but I'm thinking I only get three wishes. Secondly, I hope that I will be able to have a strong and deep relationship with both of my kids for the rest of my life, and also with their husband and wife, and with their children, my grandchildren. And finally, I hope that Rachel and Ari will marry Jews, and will carry on the tradition of our ancestors, each of them in their own way, and pass it on to their children. Just like in the fairy tales: three wishes. 1. A good person. 2. Open to me...the father-in-law. And 3. a Jew. Marian pointed out to me that I should include hoping that they get married at all....but I think I only get three wishes, so that will have to just be implied.

Having reached the age of fifty this year, I know that this is asking a lot. So many things can happen along the way, and I have seen that none of these are guaranteed. On the contrary, it seems almost too much to hope for! To find a good person, with a good

heart and good character, who is not already taken, and with whom the chemistry is right...takes a miracle! Every good match, said the ancient rabbis, is a miracle more difficult for God to perform than the parting of the Red Sea!

And then, at least as difficult as finding a good person, to maintain a close relationship with ones grown children and grandchildren, in this day and age when families are often scattered all over the globe, is terribly hard and requires enormous commitments of time, and energy, and money...and none of that guarantees that we will actually like each other! And then finally, to find someone Jewish, or willing to convert, who is also a good person, not a fanatic, and who is available, ...it takes a certain amount of divine intervention.

So I pray. 1. a good person. 2. open to me—the father-in-law and 3. a Jew. I do know it's asking a lot, but if you don't ask, you can't complain later.

I am well aware that a time may come when I will be asking myself, which of these matters most to me? The very thought gives me a headache. But I will tell you that, deep down, if I have to answer—most important to me is that Ari and Rachel marry good people. A very close second, but definitely second, is a strong life-long relationship with my children and their children. And a very close third, but definitely third, is that they marry a Jew.

At this point in their lives, Rachel is 19 and Ari is 17, how much does what I think or what I want even matter any more? According to our tradition, they became responsible for their own decisions at age 13, and I know that most of whatever influence I once had is passed. Will they find and marry a good person? I have had nineteen years to teach them, by my words and actions, what caring and honesty and love look like...that opportunity is mostly over. I hope that as they are choosing a mate, they will at least consider my opinion...and I hope even more that I will be able to offer it with both wisdom and restraint.

Will we maintain a strong and deep relationship as they go out into the world? Here much is up to me...and much is completely beyond my control. Will they live near or far? Marian and I both moved far away from our parents...not a good precedent. Will we spend time together on vacations? I hope so. Will I be able to open my heart to them, to really share my joys and sorrows with them, and to hear and listen to the unfolding of their lives? More than anything else...this is up to me.

Will they fall in love with a Jew, and marry him or her, and live as a Jew, and pass it on to the next generation? I have done what I could to make this important to them. I became a rabbi,...that could easily have backfired and driven them far away from Judaism...but so far, so good...; I baked challah with them when they were little, and built a sukkah every year, which only collapsed on our heads once or twice, I asked them every year at the Passover seder what their job was when they were a slave in Egypt, made up bedtime stories for them about King Solomon, and sang them to sleep with Hebrew songs...nothing I can say or do now will compare to the power of those early childhood experiences and memories.

When Adam awoke and first encountered Eve, he said “this one at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” and the voice of the Torah then comments: “therefore a man leaves his mother and his father, and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” As my children move to leave us, and to find the person who will be bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh, I hope that they will find a good person, open to me—the

father-in-law, and a Jew. And if not a Jew, then at least a good person, and open to me—the father-in-law. And if not open to me, the father-in-law, then at least...a good person, kind, and honest, loyal and loving.

That's where I stand on intermarriage as father. Now let me turn to my perspective as rabbi of this congregation.

As a rabbi of the Jewish people, I have three responsibilities...which are often in tension with each other, and the challenge of my job is often to find the right balance between the three. I have a responsibility to the tradition, to the Torah. Rabbi means teacher, and as teacher I feel a sacred responsibility to transmit the tradition faithfully, to study it as deeply as I can, and to share what I have found with all of you, as honestly and as faithfully as I can. Secondly, I have a responsibility to this congregation, to this living community which has chosen me to serve as its leader... to say and do the things that will promote the community's health and vitality. And finally, I have a responsibility to the individuals, to each unique human being, whether they are three years old or 103.

Intermarriage, obviously, rises up as a force and undeniable presence in all three realms...in the tradition, in our congregation and in the individual lives of every single member. The tradition is at times unmistakably clear in its position about intermarriage, and at other times, less so. From the very beginning of the Jewish story, Jewish parents want their kids to marry in the tribe. Abraham makes his servant swear by “the Lord, God of heaven and God of earth that you will not take a wife for my son from among the Canaanites among whom I dwell.” And in the next generation, Rebecca complains about her son Esau's Hittite wives to her husband Isaac: “I am disgusted with my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman, from among the native women, what good will life be to me?” Rebecca never really had trouble making up her mind...about anything, including her daughters in law ...and it's incredible to hear that voice ringing out, so familiar, from a distance of 3,000 years. On the other hand, Joseph marries an Egyptian wife, and the Torah makes no judgments about that. And Moses, even Moses ...marries Tsipporah, daughter of Jethro the priest of Midian...and the Torah gives no indication whatsoever that this was a problem.

The traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, clearly, celebrates the coming together of two Jews...and yes, there are plenty of Biblical and Talmudic texts which demand Jewish in-marriage. But Judaism is a tough old tree, and has survived many storms through a remarkable balancing of rigidity and flexibility. This tradition is alive today because our sages throughout the centuries have known how to adapt to changing social realities.

American Jews in the 21st century are most certainly living in a new social reality. For the past fifty years, we have been living, working, learning and playing side by side with non-Jewish friends and neighbors. It is not even slightly surprising...it was inevitable...that large numbers of young Jews would fall in love with and marry non-Jews. This is a new reality, not contemplated by our traditional texts. I have no crystal ball, and so I cannot say how Jewish tradition will evolve over the next 100 or 200 years. But in its response to the still new phenomenon of widespread intermarriage, the tree of tradition will survive as it always has, by bending in order not to break.

What about our congregation? What impact is intermarriage having on Jewish communities around the country, and specifically here at CBB? Well, I'd say it's an interesting mix. On the one hand, it can make things more confusing. I'll never forget,

for example, when Mark Silverberg was telling the story of the birth of Isaac and he began with “Once upon a time, there was a mommy who had a baby...and the Mommy’s name was....” And one of our tiny tots shouted out “Mary!” That just wouldn’t have happened back in Brooklyn. Or when I’m sitting with the kindergartners and announce that I’m going to tell them about a holiday, and an eager five year old pipes up “It’s Christmas!” As the children in our school grow older, we try to teach the basic rites and rituals of Judaism, and to instill in the kids a strong and proud Jewish identity...but frankly, when only one parent is Jewish, it leaves children wondering...especially little children...which parent is right, and whether the things we are teaching at school are real, or fake. Like I said, it’s confusing.

On the other hand, anyone in the Temple leadership will tell you that many of our most exciting, most creative, most generous, most provocative, most inspiring members are...our non-Jews! This synagogue would not be anyway near as fresh, as vibrant, as smart, or as moral as it is without the non-Jewish partners in our interfaith marriages. Just like biodiversity in the rainforest, the religious/cultural/intellectual diversity here has made us stronger and healthier as an ecosystem.

More complicated? Yes. More confusing? Yes. More interesting? Absolutely.

And finally, my third area of responsibility: the individuals. Is there anything that I can say...in general...about the impact of intermarriage on a couple, and the two unique souls that comprise it?

Obviously, when one person is Jewish and the other is not, there is a difference. That in and of itself means nothing. In every marriage, there are significant differences. One person likes sports and the other can’t stand them. One person loves classical music and the other likes jazz. One person loves to stay at home and the other wants to go out. One person enjoys hiking and the other prefers the ocean.

And incidentally, marrying a Jew in no way means that there will not be huge differences. Let me mention a few prominent Jews, and you tell me what they all have in common: Joe Lieberman. Albert Einstein. Woody Allen. Ruth Bader Ginsberg. Barbara Streisand. The Lubavitcher Rebbe. Ehud Olmert. Do they share a culture? Political views? Sense of humor? Do they even all enjoy bagels and lox? I doubt it!

The point is, a Jew shouldn’t expect that by marrying another Jew, they will avoid huge differences. Difference, in fact, is exactly what makes marriage such a dynamic arrangement. Two human beings resolves to bring together their two personalities, two cultures, two minds...and allow them to fertilize each other. That is what makes marriage so difficult...and potentially so wonderful. All marriages are difficult, requiring constant communication, negotiation, apology, forgiveness...and a healthy sense of humor.

Religious differences can be destructive to a marriage, if they are ignored or swept under the rug...but that is true of all significant differences in marriage. That being said, I honestly believe that a religious life is one of the most beautiful and enriching things that a couple and a family can share with each other. So much of what parents and children do together is basically business: scheduling and carpooling, shopping and home repair, all of which is important...but mundane. And American recreation...the skiing, or camping, or just watching TV, is fun and wonderful...in this day and age, anything that families do together is great. But in religious life we come in

contact with the transcendent, with God. And it's nice to be able to do that together...as a couple, a family.

Father, rabbi,...I'm also a son-in-law.

Marian and I are coming up on our 21st anniversary. In the early years of our marriage, I remember wanting very much to know what my wife's parents thought of me, and whether or not they approved of me and our marriage. Perhaps I had an unusually voracious appetite for approval, but I don't think it's just me.

Maybe it goes back to that line in Genesis, "therefore a man leaves his mother and his father and cleaves to his wife." As a son in law, or daughter in law, we know that on some level we have taken our spouse away from his or her parents...and we want that to be OK. Hence the familiar line I hear constantly from the mother or father of the bride or the groom..."I'm not losing a son; I'm gaining a daughter!!" It's a beautiful sentiment, but it rarely captures all of the emotions of the day.

I will always remember the moment when Marian called her mother in England to let her know that we were getting married. It was a sudden decision, by the way...a story for another time. Full of excitement, Marian told her Mother: "Mum! I'm getting married to Steve Cohen." There was a long silence on the other end, as she digested this bolt from the blue, and then Fran...my mother-in-law...replied "well, you couldn't have chosen a better family."

Now it's true that I come from a very good family, and it was very nice to know that Fran thought highly of my parents. However, I couldn't help noticing that she didn't say anything about me!! Since then, Fran has let me know many times that, indeed, she does love me...and feels her daughter found a good husband.

I tell this story because I think it is relevant to the problem with which I began this sermon...the comments that we hear other people make, like "she's dating a guy...and he's Jewish!" especially those which seem to reflect upon us. I think that each one of us, at some deep level, is keenly sensitive to the question of whether or not we are a good catch for our spouse...it probably has some evolutionary origin.

And of course we care about what our own parents think of our choice of husband or wife...how could we not. I had a yelling match with my own mother, some time in my mid-twenties, a long time ago...well before I got together with Marian. (We don't yell anymore!) I had just brought home my latest serious girlfriend...and gotten a very lukewarm reaction. My girlfriend had left, and I was with my mother, yelling at her: "It seems like you never approve of any of the women I all in love with...I can't make you happy!" We were both exhausted, and my mother, her voice full of fatigue, let loose with a great truth: "Well, I guess that's your problem, isn't it?"

I felt like I had been slapped by a Zen master. My mother, whose approval I had always sought and thought I needed, was telling me that ultimately my need for her approval was my problem, not hers. It was a moment of liberation.

We do want our parents approval...and our parents-in-law's as well. But the mystery of finding our beshert...the one our soul loves, and for whom we are destined...is in the end, beyond human understanding. God is in heaven, making matches for us here on earth...may we all be blessed with a loving and supportive family, a warm and embracing community, and the firm and gentle guiding hand of God in the great turning points of our lives.