

## A Rabbi's Child Inter-marries: When the Personal and Communal Intersect by Sherry Israel

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When our children were old enough to begin dating, my husband Dick, *z"l*, made his position very clear: it was very important to him that they marry Jews—so much so that if any of them intermarried, he told them that he would not attend their weddings. I let them know that it also mattered to me that they lead committed Jewish lives and have Jewish families, but I didn't talk about what I'd do if they chose otherwise; to be honest, I didn't know.

Both our daughters married in their 20s and both married Jews in joyous Jewish weddings: one son-in-law a Jew-by-birth and one a Jew-by-choice. Our sons went through their 20s unmarried, like so many others of their generation. The elder, by this time in his mid-30s and working in New York, had resumed dating a woman he had first met when they had worked together in Boston. She was also now in NY, finishing a Ph.D., and they were getting serious. She wasn't Jewish. I had dinner with him one evening when I'd gone into New York for my work [\[sri1\]](#) and we talked about it. Our conversation was frank but warm. While he was clear that he intended to have a Jewish home and raise Jewish children, I challenged him. "But how can you do that? Don't you hear the contradiction?" His response: "I know, Mom. It would have been easier if I had fallen in love with a Jewish woman, but I didn't. She is right for me. She knows how I feel. We'll make it work. I'll just have to be a single Jewish parent."

I came away from the conversation full of respect and relief that they had been talking about their religious differences and future family plans and almost convinced that he would be able to do what he said he intended. I now knew what I would do if one of our children were to marry a non-Jew: I would accept his choice, love his chosen as another member of our family, and support them as much as I could in creating a Jewish home.

They made it official soon after. But Dick's feelings had not changed. I wrote in my journal entry for the day, "March 27, 1999. David and Pamela called to announce their engagement. Dick digs in." They set a wedding date for December 19 of that year.

Pamela's parents lived in Boston. The kids said they would get us together to meet the next time they came back to Boston. We didn't want to wait that long, so we invited Pamela's parents over for tea and conversation. Given what David had told us about his future in-laws, we expected to get along, and to like them, and indeed we did. Along with our tea and cookies, we were able to have a very open conversation about our children's inter-religious choices and I learned the first of many important lessons: the non-Jewish family in an interfaith marriage may be as unhappy/upset/concerned about their child's choice of a mate from a different religious tradition as we are as Jewish parents. While they do not usually share our Jewish preoccupation with numerical survival, they can anticipate all the other issues—grandchildren who will not share their religion, life-cycle celebrations that will not be those of their tradition—as involving great personal loss, just as we would if the tables were turned. If the Jewish family is lucky, as ours was, the soon-to-be *machatunim* (in-laws) would also have resolved to love our child as a member of their family and to support the couple's life decisions, and also to approach all the differences ahead with good will and positive curiosity.

But none of this made Dick feel any better. We did not throw an engagement party for David and Pamela. He loved both of them personally, but he felt, as he put it, that he could not joyously share the fact of their engagement with our community of friends.

Dick was a very complex person. For one thing, who he was as a person and who he was as a rabbi were inextricably entwined. This was both one of the most inspiring and beautiful and one of the most difficult things about him. Being a rabbi was a calling for him. Helping the Jewish people survive and thrive was not just his job; it was what he cared about totally. The down side of this dedicated position was that when his job came into conflict with more personal matters, the latter often had to give (I think it's a situation many rabbinic spouses and family members have experienced).<sup>[sri2]</sup> And so, too, here: no matter how much he loved David and respected Pamela personally—and he did both, with no reservations—in his role as rabbi, he could not be joyous when *any* Jew chose to marry outside the Jewish tradition. And so he could not share David's joy at finding the woman he wanted to marry and share his life with.

Dick's professional reservations were compounded by some personal considerations as well. He was always a Jewish boundary crosser. Ordained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR), he had membership by right in the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) as soon as he graduated, but he also applied for and received membership in the Rabbinical Assembly (RA) as soon as he went to work for Hillel, work he chose in part because it allowed him to work across all the "denominational" boundaries and beyond. He applied to the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of American (RCA), too, but they demanded exclusive allegiance even back in the late 1950s, so he never did join the RCA. Here in our community, his (and my) Jewish pluralism continued. We were founding members of the non-affiliated traditional-egalitarian Newton Centre Minyan, and also participants in the life of Shaarei Tefilla, a Modern Orthodox synagogue in the neighborhood.

At Shaarei Tefilla, as at Orthodox congregations in general, members' children do not intermarry, or if they do, there is so much shame about it, a suggestion that perhaps the parents had done something wrong, or not done enough of the right things, that people don't admit to it. So, too, for Dick: he could not invite our Shaarei Tefilla friends to an engagement party, because he was personally, not just professionally, ashamed that his child had made this choice. In fact, he could not even bring himself to *tell* Shaarei Tefilla people about it. Here, too, I made a different choice. I knew we were not the only family in these circumstances. I think it is healthier, both personally and for the Jewish future, to be open about what is going on. So I told our Shaarei Tefilla friends of David and Pamela's engagement, along with everyone else I shared the news with. In some ways, I suppose I was helping Dick in a co-dependent way: since he knew I was telling our friends, he didn't have to, and was spared facing the full impact of his choices.

David and Pamela began to plan their wedding. It would be the wedding Pamela had always wanted, at a downtown Boston hotel, but with a non-denominational ceremony they created themselves, led by two sets of friends. (One is not required to have a clergy- or officially-led ceremony in Massachusetts.) In deference to both Dick's and some of our friends' sensibilities, we would invite only a very small circle of intimate friends. But it turned out that Dick was still committed to what he had been telling our children all those years—that if they were marrying a non-Jew, he would not attend the wedding.

Dick and I shared most basic values, including religious ones, though we differed on a number of particulars. Normally, we respected and supported each other's differences, including those regarding religious decisions. Dick was a very principled person, again, an admirable trait,

made even more so in a person who had his eloquence and ability to articulate his principles. But another word for “principled” is stubborn. Of course, so am I, when it seems called for. This time, I thought he was making a terrible mistake, and I would not leave him alone.

From the beginning, I experienced what was happening to us as a classic Kohlberg-Gilligan conflict. For those who aren't used to this psychological jargon: Lawrence Kohlberg did a set of classic studies on moral reasoning that led him to posit a continuum of moral development along a scale whose summit was reasoning based on abstract moral principles. For example, if a person was asked whether a man who could not afford the medicine for his mortally ill wife was justified in stealing it in order to save her life, Kohlberg saw those who invoked abstract principles about the value of life above the rules of ownership, for example, as making the most mature moral judgments. Subsequently, Carol Gilligan noted that some people, most often women, were using different principles, based on human relationships, to reach equally mature moral positions. So, too, with Dick and me. He was arguing that he should make his decision about attending the wedding based on his principled position about intermarriage. I argued that such a decision would irrevocably damage his relationship with Pamela—that he could *say* staying home from the wedding had nothing to do with her personally, but how could she not *experience* it as personal?

In fact, there are multiple conflicting principles in Jewish tradition. The sages at times counseled even more drastic counter-normative activity than attending intermarriage ceremonies, *mipnei darchei shalom* (for the sake of peace)—a phrase that suggests to me an understanding that in a conflict between principle and relationships, there are times when the latter should trump—whether for pragmatic or Gilligan-ish reasons doesn't matter here. We talked a lot, some days, it seemed, about nothing else. We visited with friends with whom he was willing to let me open the same conversation. Finally, since Dick himself had written that any religion that does not make its practitioners better human beings should be suspect, he was able to hear my concerns.

I think something else was also going on, although I don't think I spoke of it with Dick at the time. As I suggested earlier, it is sometimes hard for rabbis to separate their professional and personal commitments. Jack Bloom has written about rabbis being seen as “symbolic exemplars,” that is, about congregants displacing their expectations about their relationships with the Holy One onto their rabbis, who become their stand-ins for God. It is essential for rabbis to be aware of this dynamic. But it is equally essential for them not to confuse the persona that evokes these projections with their own actual selves. That rabbinic persona was not the whole of the man I married, although I knew how great a part it was of his life as he lived it; nor was it the whole of our children's father. I think Dick was having a hard time making the distinction, and it was compromising his ability to be a good father (and father-in-law to be). I mention it here because I know how hard it is for rabbis to resist getting caught in this dynamic. Another reason, beyond the claims of parenthood, that it is essential for rabbis to be able to resist it, is that part of what they are modeling, part of what people are always watching in their rabbis, whether we want them to or not, is how to have loving Jewish families. In this regard, how one responds to intermarriage is just (!) another living out of family patterns.

Besides these three key frames of self, family, community, Dick had one more reference group to contend with: his rabbinic colleagues, in the form of the official policies of the movements. I assumed that in late 1999 other Reform and Reconstructionist colleagues had already faced the issue of a child intermarrying; if that were the case, we did not know who they were. No one was talking about it. Apparently, this hasn't changed much. When Kerry Olitzky

asked me to write this article, he told me he had previously approached some Reform rabbis whose children he knew to have intermarried, but none of them was willing to write about it for this issue. Silence is still the norm. The Conservative movement's official position in 1999 was that not only could its members not *officiate* at an interfaith wedding, they could not even *attend* one, not even for a family member. This position has not changed. I asked around discretely among some Conservative rabbinic friends at the time and learned that there were RA members who actually had attended interfaith weddings of close family members—a brother, a cousin—but “don't ask, don't tell” was the going practice. On hearing this, Dick was still certain that he must be the first RA member to have a *child* intermarrying, so his shame, his sense of failure, was compounded. I believe that official policies that encourage people to hide their important personal truths do not serve either those people or *klal Yisrael* well. It reminded me, *l'havdil*, of the policies of certain African leaders who denied that their adult children had AIDS or that their nation had an AIDS epidemic, which of course made it impossible to develop public health strategies for preventive education and effective treatment. We cannot diagnose our Jewish condition and devise effective strategies for intervention if the very people who will need to be most involved in implementing those strategies have to keep their own personal involvements secret.

Eventually, Dick agreed that he would be at the wedding. He had not changed what he believed as a rabbi, but he was able to realize that if he didn't attend, the fact of his absence would overshadow David and Pamela's place at the center of everyone's attention, and he didn't want that to happen.

However, as it turned out, he was not there, but not by his choice. He was hit by a car as he returned from his daily run on the morning of the wedding. Another family member accompanied him to the emergency room as the rest of us dressed for the wedding. Word came to us that although he was terribly bruised, nothing was broken; he would be fine and he wanted us all to go on to the wedding. We went. We even danced. One physician friend who was at the wedding kept in touch with the ER and gave me bulletins every 15 minutes to reassure me and enable me to be present to David and Pamela and all the others there to celebrate. Later, when some of us were visiting Dick in his hospital bed, he cracked, in his inimitable way, “Well, I didn't want to go to the wedding, but the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* sure plays rough.”

All the while I was urging Dick to change his mind, to back off from his earlier decision and declaration, all I was thinking about was how our son and new daughter-in-law would feel if he didn't attend. I still think these elements of personal relationship have to be foremost in our minds as we decide what to do as individuals in these circumstances.

But I think there are also wider communal considerations that are worth bringing into the picture. So allow me, please, to change perspectives from wife and mother to observer of the American Jewish scene. Here, the issues become those of Jewish identity and Jewish continuity.

First of all, we should note that most Jews in America are not Orthodox. Most of us do not live in sequestered communities. Our children go to school and college with non-Jews and do not marry until relatively late, some in their late 20s, or more often in their 30s. Their social and work lives are lived in multi-cultural surroundings. Under these conditions, it is safe to say that some amount of intermarriage is not just possible, it is inevitable. But also because of these same conditions, intermarriage in our day does not mean turning one's back on the Jewish people, as it once did. In twenty-first century America, ethnic and religious identities are no longer seen as

ascriptive, as given at birth and then imprinted forever. They have become matters of individual choice. Additionally, couples now assume that each one can maintain his or her identity as an individual even if married to someone who has made a different choice.

Those of us born before the middle of the twentieth century may find our minds boggling at these ideas, but the evidence is very convincing. Intermarriage does not reflect a rejection of Jewish commitments; rather it is an acceptance of American norms. If this is so, preaching against intermarriage may make rabbis feel better, but it's not likely to impact the behavior of the next generation. Assuming we oppose intermarriage because we want to support Jewish continuity and to increase the odds that our children's offspring will be Jews, the best thing we can do, I believe, is to make our children so deeply Jewish in both identity and understanding that they will make Jewish homes no matter whom they marry. This means giving them a thorough Jewish education and the experience of deeply lived Judaism in our homes and communities. It doesn't guarantee anything. Nothing does in life. But it ups the odds.

I had actually come to this conclusion and was teaching it to my students well before my own sons both became living examples of my academic conclusions. I confess that my academic knowledge did not make it personally easier to be comfortable with my sons' choices initially, but it did give me language to help me understand what was happening. I could see that Dick and I had not in fact failed as Jewish parents. Our sons have intermarried, but they remain committed to living Jewish lives and having Jewish families. They are continuing to be links in the chain of Jewish life.

Second, because we know that Jewishness happens not just inside people's heads, but even more in communities, if we want Jews to continue to choose to live Jewish lives, it is imperative that we make our communities, families, and institutions welcoming to them. This is as true for in-married as for intermarried couples. I think this is the principle that drives the programs of "outreach" and *keruv* (and I make an intentional distinction between the two) that are now beginning to take root.

I know that there are those who argue that announcing intermarried families' *simchas* or welcoming them into congregations is wrong, because it sends the message that intermarriage is normatively acceptable. This argument is deeply flawed, because it ignores the realities of the sociology of American Jewish life and the workings of identity definition in twenty-first century America. It assumes that internal Jewish communal dynamics are driving our children's marital choices, when, in fact, for most young American Jews, the choices are much more influenced by the wider currents of American life. Intermarriage is an inevitable by-product of what our grandparents dreamed of when they came to these golden shores: that their offspring would make it in America and be fully integrated into American life. Their dreams have come true; and intermarriage is the other side of the coin of the success of their dream.

I happen to think there is also a good traditional framework for such a position: the distinction between decisions made before something has happened, *lehatchila*, and what applies *bedi'avad*, after the fact. Rabbis can believe that it is easier to raise Jewish children in a home in which both parents, and both sets of extended families, are Jews (although, to be sure, this depends a lot on the families' Jewish feelings and commitments) and so argue for in-marriage *lehatchila*, and can continue on principle to decline to officiate at an intermarriage as if it were a Jewish marriage. But once the deed is done, and we are presented with the fact of an intermarried couple, *bedi'avad*, if they show any signs of wanting to be part of our Jewish communities and

institutions, we must encourage, support, and welcome them. Every movement and institution will have to work out its own solutions to the boundary issues this presents, but there are enough examples of ways to do this with integrity that anyone who is of good heart and mind can work through the details.

Pamela and David are happily married. Their first child, a son, had *milah l'shem gerut* (a circumcision as the first step in halachic conversion), and when he was old enough, David brought him to the *mikvah* to complete the process. At the circumcision, my joy was tempered by empathy for my *machatunim* (in-laws), who came to celebrate with the family, but for whom the fact that their first grandchild was not going to be baptized was not easy. Our second son, Joshua, is now also married, and his wonderful wife, Mary Anne, who is not Jewish, has agreed to raise their children as Jews and support Joshua in doing so. Their first son, named after Dick, has also had *milah* and *mikvah*. Since I first wrote this essay, in early 2005, each family has been blessed with a second son.

We are all sad that Dick never got to meet these grandchildren. I'd like to believe that he would have continued to soften his principled stand and come to feel the love and pride I do as I watch our sons being loving Jewish fathers and husbands and enjoy the goodness and accomplishments of our daughters-in-law. But to tell the truth, I'm not sure.

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