

Intermarriage in a New Age

Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s several things seemed axiomatic and unarguable in Jewish life. Russian Jewry needed our help, Israel was to be supported at all costs, American Jews were veering away from their heritage and, finally, intermarriage would be the death knell of our community.

While we did need to rally for Soviet Jews – how many of you remember attending the massive gathering in Washington, DC in December of 1987?



That was a stirring time of social activism for our community. It was vitally important.

And Israel, how many of us have visited Israel? Wonderful! [I am excited that we are planning another multi-generational trip for February 2019.](#)



Overall, we have become more nuanced, less monolithic, in our support for Israel. We have deeper, more sophisticated perspectives on our Jewish homeland. We love the State of Israel, but often we do not feel comfortable with the actions of the current Israeli government.

For example, I am disappointed that this Israeli government has reneged on its commitments to the Kotel compromise, which would have allowed for an egalitarian setting at our holiest space. This government continues not to allow me to practice as a rabbi in Israel, it does not support religious pluralism while it kowtows to ultra-Orthodox haters of other Jews, and is a government that does not seem interested in peace, preferring to keep the status-quo where Palestinians are denied their rights.

So, while we support Israel, it is a nuanced support.

But the biggest cultural change in our community has occurred around intermarriage. While the rate of intermarriage remains high – over

50% nationally (and there are differences among the movements – 70-80% for Reform Jews, in the 30's for Conservative, and single digits for Orthodox), our attitude has changed dramatically.

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When I grew up, intermarriage was seen as a grave threat to the survival of the Jewish people in America. I was taught that the only solution was conversion since endogamy – marrying only someone from within the faith – was and remains a laudable goal. True not only in our culture, but in many others – perhaps you saw the popular comedy, *The Big Sick*, this summer, where you can see this value among immigrants from Pakistan to the U.S.



However, endogamy does not work for everyone. The approach I was taught was for the non-Jewish partner to choose Judaism, to become a Jew-by-choice. If one wanted to raise Jewish children, then the best option was to convert before marriage.

My father, Rabbi Stephen C. Lerner, opened his [Center for Conversion to Judaism](#) in New York in 1981 and has brought some 1,800 people *tahat kanfei haShekhinah* – under the wings of the Divine Presence, the poetic rabbinic phrase for joining the Jewish people. And I am so proud of what he has accomplished!



I cannot tell you how blessed the Jewish people have been to have such seekers formally join our “tribe.”

Jews-by-choice enrich Judaism and the Jewish people in countless ways. They bring a unique perspective and often encourage their Jewish partners to deepen their own flagging Jewish commitments. Their ability to bridge the gap between our faith and the world around us has made us a stronger community. Temple Emunah, in particular, is blessed to have numerous Jews who have made this journey as adults.

Each year, Rabbi Fel and I are honored to study with amazing individuals who spend at least the better part of a year studying in the [Jewish Discovery Institute](#) and meeting with us regularly. Becoming part of our community, they embrace the breadth and depth of our 4,000 year path before immersing in the living waters of the [Mayyim Hayyim mikveh](#) where they become children of Abraham and Sarah, just as Jewish as any born Jew.



Photo by Tom Kates

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But conversion is not for everyone. Some people struggle to believe in any tradition or divinity. Some have family ties that make formalizing their Jewish associations unrealistic. There are many considerations to taking on such a deep commitment.

When I came to Emunah in 2004, I was not really aware of another option for these individuals, couples, and families.

But my eyes were opened. I thank our rabbi emeritus, Rabbi Eisenman, and our own [Keruv Committee](#), which pioneered pushing the boundaries of what I thought possible.

It was here at Emunah that I learned that there was another path – one could marry someone who is not Jewish, yet raise a Jewish family.

Some of these individuals eventually converted to Judaism after 5, 10, 13, 23, and 28 years of marriage and some have not.

But those who have made Emunah a spiritual home for their families, even though they are not Jewish, have become some of the most supportive members of our community. While they are not Jews, they are most certainly *Krovei Yisrael* – close to the Jewish people, married to Jews, parents of Jews, teachers of Jews, and supportive of the community as active volunteers and/or donors. They are truly inspiring.

Emunah was at the forefront of becoming a welcoming community to families where one of the partners is not Jewish. Contrary to what I had been taught to expect, that practice, replicated by the larger Boston Jewish community, yielded positive results. [CJP](#) and many other



organizations including [InterfaithFamily](#) have nurtured this warm embrace which has led to a different future for our community. Nationally, only 30% of families having one parent who is not Jewish raise their children as Jews; but, [in Boston, it is twice that at 60%](#). As you can imagine, that is the difference between a shrinking Jewish community and one that is growing.

[The article I wrote](#) in support of this approach in 2009 led to my serving for four years as co-chair of the Commission on Keruv, Conversion and Jewish Peoplehood of the Rabbinical Assembly (the association of 1,700 Conservative rabbis worldwide).

In that committee, we grappled with how we could be more welcoming to intermarried couples without running afoul of *halakhah*, of

Jewish law. [I crafted the first-ever such ceremony](#) to welcome a couple who are getting married where one partner is not Jewish. Based on the [Hanukkat Habayit](#) – Dedicating the Home – ceremony, this ritual makes clear that we welcome those intermarried families who care deeply about Judaism, who pledge to build an exclusively Jewish home and to raise children, if they have them, exclusively as Jews.

These commitments are not lightly undertaken, nor is the period of study with their rabbis that precedes the ceremony. The process underscores the high esteem in which we hold those couples.



The core element of the ceremony is placing a *mezuzah* on the doorpost of the home. A *mezuzah* is, after all, something that should be on the doorpost of every home occupied by a Jew. Here, it becomes a public celebration involving the rabbi and the community – welcoming the couple and supporting them in bringing more Judaism into their home and into their lives.

Before actually affixing the *mezuzah*, there is the opportunity for the couple and the rabbi to speak, to recite both the blessing over wine and the

blessing in response to God's goodness in Hebrew and English; followed by *Birkat Kohanim* (the Priestly Benediction).

At the conclusion of this celebration, the couple and the rabbi move to the front door or another doorway to affix the *mezuzah*. The Jewish partner recites the blessing in Hebrew and both partners recite it in English. The guests join in by singing *Siman Tov*. Everyone is invited to a meal celebrating this event. It is a time of rejoicing, which Rabbi Fel and I are eager to help couples, who are committed to build a Jewish home, in this community and beyond it shape.



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But today, the debate continues to deepen and divide.

More and more Reform rabbis will officiate at intermarriages and [there is great pressure on Conservative rabbis to do the same. Some have – leaving the movement and the Rabbinical Assembly.](#)

Others have maintained the traditional stance.

[And then, there are those in the middle.](#)

I usually try to emulate Rambam – Maimonides and follow the *Shvil Hazahav* – the Golden Mean or middle path.....

I strive to be a passionate centrist in my Judaism...

Sometimes, the middle is fun; sometimes, you get a little squished.

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So, in Solomonic fashion, we will try to find the space in between these poles.

Our Keruv Committee, chaired by Denise Forbes and Jennifer Geller, continues to work with me to find new areas where we can become even more welcoming. I have also met with the Religious Committee about these ideas and we discussed them at a recent Board meeting.

For years, we have been inviting in-married couples and this summer, we began to invite intermarried couples, for an anniversary blessing at the *amud* – at the reading table. A small step to be sure, but a nice one. We started just three weeks ago, singing “*siman tov*” for a couple who are pillars of our *shul*, before the Jewish partner took the first *aliyah*. It was simple and beautiful. Growing on our practice of the parental blessing at *b’nei mitzvah*, we recited the traditional *Mi Shebeirakh* blessing before the Torah reading, when the *sefer Torah* is not yet on the *amud*.



Photo by Jodie Parmer

The next step we hope to introduce will be a blessing for all couples who have married in the past year whether or not the partners are both Jews. This will be a way to celebrate with many people in the community on a Shabbat morning in the same spirit as New Baby Shabbat, which celebrates babies born in the community whether or not they are Jewish.

So if you are celebrating a milestone anniversary – and any number can be a milestone! – and would like either to mark that occasion with an *aliyah* and/or sponsor a Shabbat



kiddush, please be in touch with me after the holidays. This will be a great new *simhah* – celebration!

And we are exploring something that is more of a change: an *aufruf* for couples where one partner is Jewish and one is not. Like the anniversary *aliyah*, this would be at the start or end of the Torah reading and would be for couples who plan on building a Jewish home and raising Jewish children. But it would be a chance for the community to celebrate with a couple and their parents.

Some may agree that this is the right next step for us.

Some may think this is way too little.

And some may think that we are going too far.

I welcome hearing your perspectives. We will offer opportunities to study together and discuss this issue as a community during the coming months.

This is a most sensitive issue – one that touches almost all of our families. Some of the partners of members of my family are not Jewish. I am sure that I am not the only one with family or extended family members who are not Jewish. That is the nature of being a Jew in America.

The question is: how can we be even more welcoming to everyone, without losing our distinctive allegiance to Jewish law? How can we, as a non-Orthodox American Jewish community, create the openness we desire, while holding onto what has made the Jewish people unique.

That is the challenge for us in this time. Thank you for exploring this most complicated of topics.

We can choose to read the intermarrying Jew out of our community, as was once done, or we can, without crossing *halakhic* boundaries, welcome them.

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Balaam blesses Israel (Numbers, Chapter 24). Published 1877. Woodcut after a drawing by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (German painter, 1794-1872)

Let me close with the words with which we open our services in *shul*:
“*Mah tovu ohelikhah Yaa’kov* – how beautiful are your tents O’ Jacob.”
(Num.24:5) These words we recite as we enter a Jewish sanctuary, were, according to the Torah text, spoken by a non-Jewish prophet: Bilaam. What a powerful statement: as we enter “Jewish” space, we pause to acknowledge a non-Jew, reminding us that we should learn with and from

all people. A balancing of our particular experience as Jews, among the universality of all humanity.

May our welcoming approach grow and may our thoughtful conversations help.