

INTERFAITH MARRIAGE: A CONCERN FOR JEWS, CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

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I want to express my thanks to Fordham University for its gracious hospitality. A special word of thanks to Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse — a rare combination of warmth, friendliness, and efficiency — for all she has done in handling the arrangements for our gathering. And my gratitude to Father Ryan for giving me the opportunity to be with you again, to again have the pleasure of collaborating with him, and especially for the challenge of turning my feelings on this very consequential subject into thoughts.

Let me begin by acknowledging that Father Ryan has, as usual, rendered any response from me extraneous by giving a thorough and compelling presentation of not only the Christian, but also the Jewish perspectives on this very charged subject. I am in complete agreement with everything that he has said. No response is necessary.

I would add, in candor that the point at which he concluded his discussion of the Jewish attitude toward intermarriage is where my thoughts and feelings begin.

In responding, I can presume to add but little factual material to what Pat has already shared. Instead I will act as what anthropologists refer to as a native informant interpreting my own particular culture as best I understand it.

Let me, however, begin by adding some thoughts about the Bible as foundational and shaping text of the Jewish tradition. Not out of any creedal orthodoxy, but out of intellectual humility I will desist from attempting to locate the date or social context of any particular verse or narrative. It's not that I would not want to know. It's just that we really don't. What we do have is the completed text as it has been handed down to us. And it is clear to me that that text does reflect an intense internal conflict between what we would call universalism vs. particularism. For instance, I do not think it irrelevant that in the book of Jonah all the admirable and engaging figures are the clearly identified non-Israelites: the sailors who do not want to throw Jonah overboard; the king of Nineveh who recognizes that he and his people have been in the wrong and all those thousands of Ninevites who understand error of their ways and repent; while the only odious character is the chauvinistic, self-righteous prig, the Hebrew prophet who gives the book its title.

And I think we see this tension between a universalist and particularist vision manifest itself most acutely in the issue of endogamous vs. exogamous marriage. This anti-outmarriage case is expressed most explicitly from the very beginning of what Jews understand as Jewish life — by the very first person identified as a Jewish parent. In Genesis 24 we find Abraham admonishing his servant, "...I will make you swear by the Lord, the G-d of heaven and earth that you will not take a wife for my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and my birthfolk and take a wife for my son — for Isaac." (24:3-4). The freightedness of Abraham's demand is reflected in the language that the text employs in expressing it, a precise inversion of the very language of the command by which G-d called him

into Canaan in the first place, “leave your land and your birthfolk and your father’s house” (12:1). So Jews hear an unambiguous and weighty anti-intermarriage appeal annually in the third Torah portion of the new year.

But the text we have received also includes contrary, if unarticulated, perspectives as well — not explicit, but no less consequential. I am thinking of the towering figure of the Pentateuch: Moses who we call Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Rabbi, our teacher. How many wives did he have? One or two? Or was it three? The text is unclear. It tells us (Exodus 3) that he married Zipporah, the daughter of Reuel, a priest of Midian. In the next chapter it tells of his father-in-law, Jethro, a priest in Midian. Perhaps he married two women who were daughters of Midianite priests. But for certain he married at least one Midianite woman. But wait. In Numbers 12 Aaron and Miriam, Moses’ brother and sister deride him for marrying an Ethiopian¹ woman “for he had married an Ethiopian woman”. Is she wife number three? Or number two? Or is this some strange identification of Zipporah the Midianite? No matter how many wives Moshe Rabbeinu had, none of them were Hebrew.

And then there is the remarkable case of the House of David, the dynasty that ruled Judah from David all the way through the destruction of the first Temple. The dynasty that established Jerusalem as its capital and built the Temple. And the dynasty under whose aegis the text of the Torah itself began the process of composition. So it is not insignificant that the progenitor David of this dynasty is described as tracing his ancestry back to Judah the son of Jacob/Israel who, in the Torah portion that Jews will be hearing again this December, is described as marrying a Canaanite (Don’t let great grandfather Abraham know!). More immediately the Biblical text seems to go out of its way in identifying his great grandmother as Ruth whose story is as Pat says “touchingly beautiful” but who was also non-the-less a Moabite — Moabites whom the Bible especially derides (Genesis 19:30ff) and execrates: “... a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of the Lord forever” (Deuteronomy 23:4). And then there is Solomon, David’s son from whom all the succeeding members of the dynasty were descended. The text, composed under the aegis of his dynasty, both tells us that he married thousands of foreign women — and excoriates him for that. More saliently, there is the fact that his mother is identified as Bathsheba whom we can safely assume was a Hittite like Uriah to whom she was married when we first encounter her — and when David appropriated her (II Samuel 11). The dynasty of rulers of the Judeans were, thus, not to put too fine a point on it, themselves descendants of multiple exogamous marriages.

And then there is Esther who gained herself a book in the Bible and earned a holiday — Purim — by marrying the non-Jewish king Ahashuerus. Of course the rabbis were loath to include her book in the canon. Perhaps because of her exogamy. I could go on. But the point is that the Bible is not as univocal on the subject of outmarriage as we might assume.

Later Jewish tradition was. The conventional reading of all the exogamous marriages in the Bible was that the non-Israelite partner “converted” to Judaism. Reading these commentaries today we recognize this as an anachronistic understanding of the text. But it reflects the value world of the commentators who were profoundly discomfited by the possibility of any of their ancestors entering a union that was anathema to them. They interpreted the prohibitions of Deuteronomy (and later Ezra) in the most general terms and proscribed any marriages to non-Jews. Nonetheless, the halachic insistence on matrilineal descent which defines one as Jewish on the basis of being born to a Jewish mother suggests not only the instances of rape that the

community manifestly experienced, but the possibility that there were sufficient numbers of Jewish men married to non-Jewish women the status of whose children raised questions.

And this remained the general attitude of the community for millennia – reinforced, it must be added, by prohibitions of various Christian rulers in Europe. The conventional Jewish attitude toward outmarriage was one of betrayal, outrage and profound sadness. While we do not find the subject discussed at length in the texts and histories that have reached us (as one would not record unseemly things), it is not impossible that there was more such outmarriage than official documents might suggest.

Surely with modernity the opportunities and the instances of it must have increased. Representative of this is the Rothschild family of international bankers. It became their family practice that sons were required to marry Jewish women, though daughters were allowed to marry “out”. As *Fiddler on the Roof*, and its source material the Tevye stories by Sholom Aleichem, remind us, this was already a recognized, if heartbreaking reality in the old country as it encountered the modern world.

Which brings us to the situation today and calls for more personal reflection. Let me begin by noting what the conventional attitude is not. I do not believe that the issue is disdain for other religious traditions. Opposition to intermarriage can even include the recognition that we have much to gain from engagement with the faith perspectives of others, and that deep engagement can enrich us. That is not what we are discussing. I do not believe that traditional opposition to intermarriage is predicated on the notion that non-Jews are somehow inferior to Jews or that Jews are somehow special or better. Simple parochialism, chauvinism, or intolerance cannot be the issue here.

This is complicated. There was a time, not all that many generations ago, when the marriage of an Ashkenazic Jew to a Sephardic Jew was considered an intermarriage. And there are, still today, subsets of the Jewish community, such as the “Syrians” of Brooklyn and Deal, New Jersey, that actively discourage marrying even Jews from other subsets. I am puzzled by sectors of the community, Orthodox and others, that oppose intermarriage but will not allow anyone to convert to Judaism. Those postures feel to me to be almost biological in their understanding of what Judaism is. It does seem almost xenophobic. And it cannot be what the issue of intermarriage is about. What is at stake, as Pat has already made explicit, is not a denigration of those who are not Jewish, but Jewish survival.

Here I can offer personal testimony. I can recall from my childhood the issue of people who married out being discussed in hushed tones – and certainly not in the presence of children. As recently as 1972 when CBS television broadcast a show called “Bridget Loves Bernie”, a sort of updated Abie’s Irish Rose, national Jewish bodies tried to get it taken off the air as offensive - or threatening. I remember when families would “sit shiva” — actually go through the mourning rituals for their children who intermarried. I have met people who literally considered their intermarried children to be dead — who never knew their grandchildren. So this is not a subject that can be discussed in bloodless objectivity.

This is a subject that has divided the Jewish community. There was a time when only renegade rabbis would officiate at intermarriage services and when such rabbis were censured by their rabbinical bodies. I was present at the convention of the Reform rabbinate when the official

policy was changed to let every man (it was all men then) follow his own conscience. Today by some estimates 50% of Reform rabbis will officiate at intermarriages. No Conservative or Orthodox rabbis do. The Orthodox and Conservative movements still subscribe to the notion of matrilineal descent which means that children of intermarried Jewish mothers are considered Jewish, but children of intermarried Jewish fathers are not. It was only in recent decades that the Reform movement adopted the policy of patrilineal descent, which means that children of intermarried fathers, no less than intermarried mothers can be considered Jewish.² There was a time when Jewish congregations would not let anyone who was intermarried serve on their boards. Today in many liberal congregations the intermarried spouses themselves hold offices. All of these actions are clearly a response to the reality that intermarriage is becoming more prevalent in the American Jewish community. What does this portend for the American Jewish future?

Statistics tell us that as recently as the 1960's the rate of intermarriage was 7%. This past year the Pew Research Center issued a study called "A Portrait of Jewish Americans". It reports that the current rate of intermarriage is 52%. There are optimists who insist that such a rate of intermarriage means that ever more non-Jews will find their way into the Jewish community through their spouses. I am afraid they are woefully incorrect. All studies on this subject are in agreement: among intermarried families only 25% raise their children as Jews. 25% of 52% is not a prescription for many more generations of American Jewish life.

I know that there is no way anyone can mandate endogamy. And I know that even encouraging it sounds like chauvinism, parochialism, and intolerance -- especially when you are talking to teenagers or people of marriageable age and especially in a community that teaches and is committed to the idea of human equality. All the more so when, happily, the mood of the age is tolerance and acceptance of people with all their differences.

As for intermarriage, I do not believe that every intermarriage expresses a rejection of Judaism. And I do not believe that every intermarriage represents a loss of a Jewish soul or a loss to the Jewish people. But I do believe that the loss of 75% of 52% of the Jewish community is bad odds. And so every intermarriage -- and the message of Jewish disengagement it might send -- worries me, and, yes, saddens me, and pains me so deeply personally, that it is emotionally beyond me to officiate at such rites³. Am I intolerant? I hope not. Am I contemptuous of other religious traditions? I reject that emphatically. Do I care that there is a healthy Jewish future? With all my heart.

So I would return to the question that remains implicit in all this -- and which Pat has addressed. Why should anyone care about Jewish survival? I would conclude with my own deepest convictions about what is called Jewish continuity. I take the subject of Jewish survival seriously. On some level, perhaps unconscious, it haunts all serious Jews. Even though *Look* magazine has long ceased publication, its cover article on "The Vanishing American Jew" is an expression of an undercurrent of anxiety that all Jews continue to share, like a nightmare erupting from the collective unconscious. The number of works of fiction that have been written about "the last Jew in the world" could fill a bookshelf. Why do we care?

The worry is hardwired into our tradition and culture. The Torah itself is focused on the subject of the future of Israel. What is the content of G-d's first promise to Abraham? "I will make you a great people... as numerous as the stars in the heavens and the sands by the sea

shore.” The Torah we read is a family-centered book in which we are invited over and over again to think of the unfolding of the divine plan in terms of a family drama. It is a book which pays great attention to who marries who and who begets who. It expresses itself in terms of continuity of the generations. And it keeps instructing us who read it “teach it diligently to your children”. So many of our celebrations are about reinforcing in our children where they came from — so that they can carry that past into the future. The thought of the end of all that is shattering.

I offer two perspectives. And ultimately I do not believe they are in contradiction. As I have argued here before, Jews are not only a religion. We are also a people. And, like any group we have it as “an inalienable right” to exist. My attention is riveted whenever I read about someone being the last speaker of this language or that -- speaking a tongue that literally no one else can understand. It is heartbreaking. The ecology of human culture is diminished. All of us are the poorer. I can envision that “last Jew on earth” experiencing the same sense of futility and profound sorrow. And I can imagine all humanity diminished for that.

And I feel this, as Pat noted, all the more keenly in the shadow of the Shoah. I am moved by what the philosopher Emil Fackenheim taught us. Jewish tradition speaks of the Bible as containing 613 commandments. Fackenheim says we should hear what he called the 614th commandment that calls to us out of the silence of Auschwitz: “no posthumous victories for Hitler.” Everything that diminishes Jewish life is a posthumous victory. Every disappeared Jew is such a victory. His or her loss is all the more wrenching in the face of that. When I read of some grandchild of a holocaust survivor who has “opted out” I am struck with a stunned sadness. So on the simple level of peoplehood the sense of abandonment is palpable and painful.

But I am a religious Jew. And I think of the loss of Jews in a different idiom. As a historian of religion I could speak of ecology again. The religious ecology would be diminished by the disappearance of any of the “great traditions”. Speaking in the context of this inter-religious exchange, more theologically, I would echo Saint Augustine in his toxic way and the twentieth century Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig in a diametrically opposite way and reflect on how the existence of Jews plays a significant role for the very viability of Christianity itself. Rosenzweig saw Jews as exemplars for Christian monotheism. And if we are that the loss of a vital Judaism diminishes Christianity too. Perhaps the “how” of that is a fitting subject for yet another McGinley lecture. So it would not be inappropriate to speak here about Jewish survival as a benefit to Christianity itself. Fifty years ago when Heschel asked Gustave Weigel if the Church believed it would “really be *ad maiorem Dei gloriam* to have a world without Jews” the answer was probably yes. In the years since then the Church has gone through profound reevaluation of Jews and Judaism. If Heschel were to ask the question today, the answer would be a resounding “no.”⁴

But as a Jew, speaking in a Jewish religious idiom, I believe that Jewish survival is, above all, of profoundly religious significance. I take seriously the notion that we are not only a people but a covenant people. We have an obligation to G-d to be faithful witnesses. I embrace the words of Isaiah, “you are my witnesses’, says the Lord” (43:10). And hearing them I feel the terrifying ramifications of its implied corollary “if you are My witnesses I am G-d. And if you are not My witnesses, I am not G-d”. For me this is the ground meaning of the bitter words of the Yiddish poet, Jacob Glatstein, challenging G-d in response to the horror of the Shoah

Without Jews there is no Jewish G-d...

The light is fading in your shabby tent

The Jewish hour is guttering

Jewish G-d!

You are almost gone⁶

Without Jews.... And so, finally, every disappeared Jew is a loss of cosmic consequence. It is against that background that I feel so deeply the implications of the question we address tonight.

NOTES

¹ Ethiopia serves, as well, as the locus of other universalist perspectives in the Bible. The Queen of Sheba (I Kings 10) is represented as a woman of great intellect and dignity. More pointedly, the prophet Amos has G-d asking the Israelites, “ ‘Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel?’ saith the LORD.” (9:7)

² There are people who feel that this decision has “split the community” and caused an irreparable chasm between Reform and other Jews.

³ And let me hasten to add, conversely I am committed to doing everything in my ability to help an intermarried Jew feel comfortable continuing their life in the Jewish community; to letting their spouse know that they are always welcome, without pressure to convert, to attend services and participate in the life of the community; and to help intermarried families raise Jewish children.

⁴ Thomas B. Morgan, “The Vanishing American Jew,” *Look* 28 (May 5, 1964), 42-46.

⁵ As exemplified in *Nostra Aetate*:

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone” (a. 4)

In a related context, the Catholic Theologian, Gregory Baum, writes

After Auschwitz the Christian churches no longer wish to convert the Jews. While they may not be sure of the theological grounds that dispense them from this mission, the churches have become aware that asking the Jews to become Christians is a spiritual way of blotting them out of existence and thus only reinforces the effects of the Holocaust. (“Rethinking the Church's Mission after Auschwitz,” in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era*, ed. Eva Fleschner (New York: Ktav, 1977), 113.

⁶ “Without Jews,” in *Blood to Remember: American Poets on the Holocaust*, ed. Charles Adés Fishman, tr. Nathan Hager (St.,Louis, MO: Time Being Books, 2007).