

Intermarriage: Of Announcements & Denouncements

By Rabbi Basil Herring.

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It was outside the post office that the anguished grandfather told me of the birth, and asked me if the bris could be held at the synagogue, as is the privilege of a member family in good standing. “How can I permit it,” I said, “the baby, like his mother, is not a Jew, and the bris is not a bris but a circumcision.” “But, rabbi, its our grandson, and we plan to raise him as a Jew.” To which I could only say “I’m sorry, but, as long as his mother is not properly converted, you can only raise him as if he were a Jew.” I walked away from the brief encounter, heavy of heart, more aware than ever of my personal failure at preventing such occurrences, saddened beyond words at the terrible toll that the accelerating intermarriage rate takes of the Jewish people, in tolerant, freedom-loving America, day after day.

And then I got home and read the story of the Connecticut Jewish Ledger, that had recently reaffirmed its decision not to publish announcements of Jewish intermarriages in its social pages, a decision that caused a hue and cry among its readership, that echoed across the North East, even figuring as the subject of an OpEd Safire article in the New York Times. Those opposed to the policy accused the paper of intolerance of others, insensitivity to the feelings of the couples and their families, seeking to make the intermarried outcasts, and a lack of realism, like the ostriches of Southern Africa who bury their heads in the sand. How did the editor, Jonathan Tobin, respond? He wrote that printing such announcements would be approval of a trend that is halving the Jewish population, and that furthermore “though getting married is a private decision, an individual’s Jew’s choice does have implications for the community. Individuals have the right to act as if the Jewish future is irrelevant to their lives. Jewish newspapers cannot afford to take the same attitude.” Of course, the battle, and the debate, rages on.

Now of course, given my position and my oft-stated pronouncements, no one here expects me to disagree with that courageous and principled editor. I only wish there were more like him, not just more editors, but more Jewish communal leaders and executives and intellectuals and trend-setters, who felt like he did. But too many of those are themselves compromised and conflicted, either through their own marriages, or those of their children, or their mistaken notions of

tolerance and acceptance in American society. And so it would be entirely superfluous for me to restate my position on this most difficult and sensitive issue. Thus, to paraphrase Shakespeare's Anthony, I come here neither to bury intermarriage nor to praise the Jewish Ledger. I would like rather to examine an irony that is at the foundation of this issue, and that is the notion of "love."

For love is, after all, what it is all about, is it not? How familiar we all are with the argument that says "How can we, as parents, as grandparents, or friends, or fellow Jews, let alone as rabbis, be opposed to the marriage of two youngsters who have fallen in love? If they love each other, are devoted to each other, make each other so happy and fulfilled—isn't that what is most important? In today's splintered, unhappy world, what right do we have to stand in the way of a couple in love who wish to marry and raise a family, with decency and honor and respect? It's not like it used to be when you could tell youngsters what to do with their lives, control their choices, and even arrange their marriages." Today, it is said, we have to accept people for what they are, rather than impose ourselves on them, especially when it comes to their choice of a life partner. No wonder that a few years ago, in the 1990 survey of American Jews, when asked whether they would oppose or accept the intermarriage of their offspring, only 22%, less than a quarter, of those who identify themselves as Jews by religion, reported that they would oppose the marriage. And among those Jews who identified themselves as secular Jews, only 4% (one in twenty five!) said they would oppose the marriage of their son or daughter to a non-Jew.

But there precisely, lies the irony: for just as Jewish parents and grandparents have come to rationalize their acceptance of intermarriage as the result of youngsters falling in love, the younger generation no longer speaks or feels in terms of love, or its equivalent, romance. As Wanda Urbanska, author of *The Singular Generation*, describes her peers in their 20's: "We do not have affairs, we have sexual friendships. We do not fall in love, we build relationships. We do not date, we see each other." A student at Vassar writes, "I don't care for the term boyfriend or lover; he is rather my special friend, with whom I spend lots of quality physical time." Peter Stearns in his book *American Cool* describes youngsters today in these terms: "we disdain intense emotions like grief, jealousy and love which leave us vulnerable, in favor of an emotional style of cool detachment." Today, feminists attack romantic love as a myth inextricably tied to women's inequality. Similarly, today's youngsters are exposed to a sex-education in school, by which they learn to rationalize and de-mystify sex, reducing it to a matter-of-fact approach that stresses the avoidance of pregnancy, disease, and emotional entanglement. And as Kay Hymowitz put it recently in the *Wall Street Journal*, perhaps the greatest enemy of love for the younger generation is the exaggerated sense of individual autonomy, which preaches self-reliance, self-creation, self-exploration. With such an attitude, you don't have a lover, or what used to be called a beloved, what you have rather is a "partner," with whom you have a contractual arrangement, while you explore your own wonderful self, until you tire of each other, and move on to your next "relationship." For this generation, in the words of Gloria Steinem, discovering yourself is much more exciting and fulfilling, than finding romance with someone else.

Blind young love? Not these days. Mindless devotion? Surely not. Passionate romance? Not for this generation. Overwhelming infatuation? Lifelong affection? You gotta be kidding! What a delusion, therefore, for Jews who accept interfaith marriage to hang their hat on the hook that uses the notion of youngsters madly in love. That's just not where it's at, any more. Were such

parents and families and communities instead to make crystal clear to such youngsters their absolute opposition to, and their rejection and dire consequences of, interfaith marriage, I am convinced that a good number would think twice before going ahead with so fateful a step. Of course many would still do what they want to do anyway; but at least some would, in rational fashion, hold back, or change their minds. Unfortunately, however, considering such a stand to be a parochial throwback to some ancient tribalism, too many in the Jewish community are not prepared to draw such lines, hence these youngsters correctly assume that they can do what they will, and they will still be accepted, and loved, by family and friends.

Now there happens to be a fascinating episode in this week's parshah that, to my mind, throws important light on the matter of love and marriage. I am referring to the story of the daughters of Zelofhad. You will surely recall that in last week's parshah they approached Moses with a request to inherit the estate, and future tribal land allocation, of their father who had died without a son. The laws of inheritance up to that point had no provision for daughters to inherit their father. In response, Moses, at God's behest, complies with their request. Now in this week's parshah, we hear the other side of the argument: the tribal leaders of Menashe, of which Zelofhad had been a member, argue with Moses that when these daughters will eventually marry, their inheritance will go to their sons; if the marriages will be to members of other tribes, to which those husbands and sons will belong, then those parts of the estate will necessarily end up removed from the tribal territory of Menashe, while enlarging those other tribes. This, they argued, would be unfair to their tribe. Again Moses turns to God, and the answer is forthcoming: This what the Lord has commanded the daughters of Zelofhad: "let them marry to whom they think best. Only to the family of their father's tribe shall they married." Nu. 36:6

Now here is a difficult, self-contradictory verse, if ever there was one! First Moses gives them carte blanche, saying le'tov be'einehem teheyena le'nashim, "let them marry to whom they think best!" If they fall in love with a non-Menashe'ite Jew, if their hearts dictate such a marital union, so be it! But then Moses continues, akh le'mishpahat mateh avihem tiheyena le'nashim, however, they may only marry into their father's tribe! How do we make sense of such a mish-mash? The gemara Bava Batra 120a answers as follows:

Said Rav Yehudah in the name of Shmuel "the daughters of Zelofhad were indeed permitted to marry into any other tribe, as the first part of the verse indicates. What then of last part? That is only by way of eitzah tovah, good advice, that they make sure they marry husbands who are hagin lahem, appropriate to them!"

Now we have to understand this gemara: the verse specifically mentions men of their father's tribe, how interpret this to refer merely to any Jew who is appropriate? Rabbeinu Gershom Meir ha-Golah, the very 11th century medieval authority whose enactments were so central to the advancement of the rights of Jewish women in marriage, explains: the Torah here seeks to ensure that the daughters' prospective husbands would be acceptable to their father's family. There is a crucial point here: when it comes to choosing a marriage partner, the Torah strikes a fine balance. On the one hand it does not dictate that a youngster accept an arranged marriage willy-nilly; the daughters of Zelofhad retained every right to find their own Israelite spouse, finding love and happiness in accordance with their romantic dreams. On the other hand, however, they, and for that matter any young Jew, were earnestly advised by the Torah to seek and find the approval of their family, to ensure that their choice of marriage partner was "appropriate." Yes, in the end it was their choice, but it was also their responsibility and burden to seek the counsel of their elders.

So then, and, I dare say, so now. Young Jews, our children and grandchildren, must be taught from their most tender years, that while marriage can and should indeed be the culmination of love and romance and endearment, as it always has been, even in biblical times, it must also be understood as a precious link in the chain of Jewish history, with larger responsibilities beyond oneself, radiating out to one's tribe and people. Marriage is not just self-fulfilment, it is also an expression of solidarity with one's past and the future. Our children must imbibe with their mother's milk the conviction that they are a distilled and endangered product of a glorious Jewish history; that they are a privileged legatee of an unequaled mantle of moral and spiritual greatness, called upon to make choices that bring honor and continuity to themselves and the Jewish community, and the people of Israel, so as to pass on the precious legacy of our ancestors to future generations. And they must be made to understand that if their choice negates that Jewish history, by marrying outside of the Jewish pale, then their marriage and their offspring will not be accepted by the family, let alone be recognized by, the Jewish community, through its newspapers, synagogues, or public places. Given such consequences, many, I believe, would desist from intermarriage. But it requires parents with a commitment and will of iron, with Jewish leaders and communities of courage.

If together we will summon up the strength and commitment to stand together, and to practice real love, or what some would call "tough love," as an expression of caring and devotion for our youngsters, as they pursue their own dreams of happiness, then I am certain that God in turn will bless our efforts, and vouchsafe that our children and grandchildren will heed our advice, and follow our own shining example, just as He did for the very daughters of Zelofhֹad, of whom the Torah subsequently says that they did indeed marry their fellow tribesmen, as faithful daughters of Menashe ben Yosef, faithful to family, to tribe, to people, to Torah and tradition, and ultimately, to the will of the eternal God of Israel. May we, and our children, our Yiddishe nachas, be worthy of no less!