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Key Jewish FAQ's

By Nissan Dovid Dubov
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What is Wrong with Inter-marriage?

We live today in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. We mix freely with, and respect, people of all faiths. Many Jews today grow up fully assimilated and comfortable in a secular society and environment. Why is it such a tragedy if a Jewish man finds a non-Jewish woman (or vice versa) with whom he feels totally compatible and decides to marry her? He claims that she is a genuinely lovely person with a fine character – often much nicer than any Jewish woman he has met. She is at home with his Jewish background and culture and both share the same values, hobbies and pursuits. A perfect match, yet not made in Heaven. Why not?

The decision to marry out is perhaps the most telling moment, when a person must consider what being Jewish actually means. Is being Jewish simply an accident of birth? Is there a difference between a Jew and a non-Jew? Can one retain full Jewish identity if married to a non-Jewish partner? What if one finds the perfect partner – loving, caring, considerate, good fun – but unfortunately non-Jewish? What means more in life – a happy marriage or one's religion? If one has found true love, does religion really matter?

Where do you come from?

No person just arrives on the scene. We are all the product of bygone generations; in the case of the Jews, descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob's family descended to servitude in Egypt and after 210 years was miraculously redeemed by G-d through Moshe, His faithful servant. The Children of Israel were subsequently constituted as a nation at the stand at Sinai – the Torah being their "wedding contract" with G-d. To date, Jewish history spans over 3,300 years. During this time Jews have had their golden eras and also have suffered severe persecutions, inquisitions, pogroms and, ultimately, the Holocaust. To be born a Jew today is not an accident of birth but the sum total of over 3,300 years of ancestral self-sacrifice, of heroes who at times gave their very lives for their beliefs. Somewhere along our ancestral line, you can be sure that a grandfather or mother had to accept poverty, hardship, derision, exile and humiliation, but stubbornly stuck to their faith. Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Nazis and Communists all tried to obliterate Jewish practice and faith, but failed. The persecutors are all relics of the past but Judaism is alive and vibrant. The indomitable Jewish spirit survived and clung to its traditions despite all odds.

And now, the very latest link of that glorious tradition wishes to sever the chain in one fell swoop! Imagine if one were able to resurrect all

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one's ancestors. They would differ in language, dress and cuisine but all would share the same Jewish tradition. What would one say to a great-great-grandfather who sat in prison for keeping Shabbat? What would one say to a great-great-grandmother who would walk for miles to buy kosher provisions? How could one possibly introduce them to a non-Jewish fiancé?

A story was told by Mr. George Rohr, an American philanthropist, at a convention for the Lubavitcher Rebbe's emissaries in 1996. Mr Rohr related how he had the privilege to meet the Rebbe on one occasion just after Rosh Hashanah. Mr. Rohr thought it appropriate to present the Rebbe with a "spiritual" gift. A short time before, he had set up a beginners service at his shul in Manhattan, and on Rosh Hashanah 120 Jews attended this new service. Mr. Rohr decided to announce this to the Rebbe and was sure the Rebbe would receive much nachas from this good news. When his turn arrived, he confidently strode up to the Rebbe and said, "Thank G-d, this Rosh Hashanah we set up a beginners service in our shul and had 120 Jews with no Jewish background participate!"

Until that point the Rebbe had a broad smile on his face, but when Mr. Rohr told him the news the Rebbe's face dropped, and Mr. Rohr searched his words for anything he may have said that had upset the Rebbe.

"What?!" said the Rebbe.

Mr. Rohr repeated, "... 120 Jews with no Jewish background."

"No Jewish background?" asked the Rebbe. "Go and tell those Jews that they are all children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

Now Mr. Rohr understood. The Rebbe objected to these Jews being described as having no Jewish background. Every Jew has a very illustrious background – they are all sons of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!

This is all the more true after the Holocaust. Inter-marriage is, in a sense, an act of treason to our people for, instead of bringing new Jews into the world by marrying a Jewish wife, one would be contributing to the decimation of our people and the "Final Solution" that Hitler and his followers began and nearly accomplished. The horrific rates of inter-marriage today constitute a silent annihilation of our people.

The Chosen People

One may ask, however, is this not a guilt trip? After all why do I have to be liable to continue this chain, to pass on the traditions and to carry the baton just because my mazal was that I was born Jewish? Who placed this awesome responsibility on my shoulders? Furthermore, there are plenty of others who will carry on the traditions. What difference does it make if I sidetrack a little and shunt

myself into a dead-end?

Every merit comes with responsibility and every responsibility comes with liability. At Sinai, G-d proclaimed us the Chosen People. Chosen for what?

Just before G-d gave the Ten Commandments he spoke to Moshe and said, (Exodus 19:5,6) "Now if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be my special treasure among the nations, even though all the world is Mine. You will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation to Me."

In these few words lies the task for which the Jews were chosen – to be a kingdom of priests. This means that every one of us must be holy in our private life, and in our association with the outside world every one of us, man or woman, must fulfil priestly functions. The priests' function is to "bring" G-d to the people and to elevate the people to be nearer to G-d. Every Jew and Jewess fulfils their personal and "priestly" duties by living a life according to the Torah.

The extent of one's duties is in direct proportion to one's station in life. It is all the greater in the case of an individual who occupies a position of prominence, which gives him an opportunity to exercise influence over others, especially over youth. Such people must fully appreciate the privilege and responsibility which Divine Providence vested in them to spread the light of Torah.

Jews are called Bnai Yisrael. The word Yisrael is an acronym for the phrase, "Yesh Shishim Ribo Otiot LeTorah" which means that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah. Every Jew is compared to a letter in a Torah scroll. Even if only one letter is missing the entire scroll is incomplete and invalid. Every Jew is an ambassador of his people in his echelon in society. That is his G-d-given responsibility and privilege. To shirk this responsibility is to deny oneself the ultimate privilege. To intermarry is an open violation of that responsibility.

Children

The Torah explicitly forbids intermarriage. The source is in Deuteronomy 7:3-4,

You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughter to his son, and you shall not take his daughter for your son, for he will cause your child to turn away from after Me and they will worship the gods of others then the L-rd's wrath will burn against you, and He will destroy you quickly.

The direct implication is that children from such a union will be torn away from Judaism. Incidentally, this is also the Scriptural source for the law of matrilineal descent. Since the verse states "for he (ie a non-Jewish father) will cause your child to turn away ...", this implies that a child born to a Jewish mother is Jewish whereas, if a

Jewish man marries a non-Jewish woman, the child is not Jewish.

Thus, in the case of a Jewish man marrying a non-Jewish woman the child is not Jewish and an unbroken Jewish line has henceforth been broken. If a non-Jewish man marries a Jewish woman the children are Jewish. However the Torah explicitly forbids such a union for “he will turn your child away”.

The truth is that a Jewish woman who has already married out and borne children should be encouraged to give them a full Jewish education. There are today thousands of practising Jews who only have a Jewish mother. However, to a couple contemplating intermarriage, the facts speak for themselves. Except in a small number of cases in which the mother is very determined and gives the child a very positive, strong Jewish education, in most cases the child grows up with a mixed and confused identity; in simple English, half-Jewish. Technically, there is no such thing – one is either 100% Jewish or not. However, in terms of identity, the child feels only half-Jewish. Even if the mother is a proud Jew, the father, whether atheist, agnostic, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim etc., does not share the same beliefs and values. Even if he is sympathetic, or even agrees to the child being brought up Jewish, there are bound to be differences. Does one celebrate Chanukah or Xmas, both or neither? Whichever one chooses is confusing or even contradictory. Many intermarried couples today celebrate both – but what sort of message does this give the child? Is the child Jewish, thus rejecting the notions of Christianity, or is the child a Christian with Jewish roots? It causes great confusion for the child and in many cases the child sees both faiths only on a superficial level, distanced by his parents from true belief.

The child is also given the test of mixed allegiances. All passages of life create a problem. Should the child be circumcised, christened, both or neither? Should the child have a Bar Mitzvah or be confirmed, marry in a synagogue or a church, be buried in a Jewish cemetery or be cremated?

And what chances are there that the child should want to marry a Jew? Even in the case of a determined Jewish mother who wishes to marry a non-Jewish partner and raise her child as a Jew, who says her child would want to marry a Jew and – most important – what sort of example has the mother set for the child?

Children learn from their parents. They cannot be taught ethics, they have to see them being practised. There is no sense in parents demanding that their child marry a Jew when one of the parents has married out!

There is another point: people are social beings. From time immemorial they have gathered in communities. One thing the international Jewish community prides itself in is the idea of Kol Yisrael Chaverim – all Israel are one fraternity, one brotherhood, one nation. If you are travelling to Bangkok and need a place for Shabbat

you can be sure that if you turn up in shul you will get an invitation. Wherever a Jew goes he will have an international support group that extends hospitality and financial help, if needed. By having a non-Jewish child one has extricated the child from that community and bequeathed alienation to him. Everybody wants to belong – it is a basic human need. Inter-marriage causes great confusion to children with regard to where they actually belong.

It's in the genes

Marriage in general, even between two people of similar background, entails a certain risk as to eventual adjustment and compatibility. Even if the two have been acquainted for some time there is no sure guarantee as to what the relationship will be like when the acquaintance is turned into a marriage, where the two will be thrown together under one roof for 24 hours a day, day after day and week after week. But when the backgrounds are entirely different, and where these differences date back for scores of generations – and are consequently of a deep and lasting quality – the chances of adjustment and compatibility are so negligible as to be almost non-existent. Especially where the differences are of a definitely antagonistic and hostile nature, as has been evidenced by the pogroms and persecutions of Jews in every land where Jews sojourned in the past 2,000 years. Moreover, modern science recognises the hereditary nature of character traits, particularly deeply rooted ones developed over generations.

Inter-marriage usually results, sooner or later, in endless friction and unhappiness. That a casual, or even more serious, kind of relationship seemed in the past to indicate compatibility, is no proof that it would be so ever after in a marriage situation. On the contrary, it is inevitable that two people of such divergent backgrounds, one descending from generations of oppressed and victimised people the other from the world of the oppressors and predacious, should be affected by hereditary forces.

No change

Who says people don't change? Even if a couple are happy with each other, deeply in love, and have decided to marry despite their different religious backgrounds, who says that future events won't reverse their feelings? There are so many factors that can change a person's feelings.

King Solomon states, "I am sleeping but my heart is awake." A Jew may be sleeping spiritually but his inner Jewish heart is always awake and, at certain times, is aroused. Years into a marriage, where much of the relationship is routine, the soul and Jewish heart may be aroused to search for the deeper meaning to life. There may be a quest for spirituality and rediscovery of one's roots.

Consider the fact that these feelings will not be shared by your spouse. They will neither understand nor feel those same emotions and you will be alone. On the other hand, a Jewish partner means a shared history and a shared destiny.

But it works!

There is, of course, the argument that the percentage of intermarriages is considerable and many of them seem to last. However, the statistics show that the percentage of separations and divorces among intermarried couples is incomparably greater than among marriages within the faith. Secondly, many married people try to put on the appearance of a “happy” marriage, being ashamed to confess failure and to reveal the frictions and indignities suffered at home. In an intermarriage the sense of shame is even greater, knowing that many friends had warned against it, while the couple had maintained that their marriage would be different.

It's simply not right

To be honest – in the plain sense of the word – one would not wish to drag another party into an alliance which is doomed from the start. If there is true love between the two parties, and not in a selfish way, one would certainly not wish to involve the other in such a misfortune, and would readily forgo the prospect of immediate and short-lived pleasure in order to spare the other the inevitable result. Otherwise the professed love is nothing but selfish and egotistic.

Should there be children from such a union, there is the added consideration of the tragedy of the children having to witness constant friction – and worse – between their parents, which is almost bound to follow in the natural course of events.

It is necessary to emphasise the point that one's personal convenience, desire or gratification is no justification for involving oneself with that which is wrong, especially to involve another person – least of all a loved one – into such a situation, even if the other person is agreeable, and sincerely so. No person has the right to harm another person.

A Jewish marriage

A Jewish marriage is called a Binyan Adei Ad – an everlasting edifice. In order that the edifice of marriage should indeed be strong and lasting, everything connected with the wedding, as well as the establishment of the couple's home, should be in full compliance with the instructions of the Torah. The Torah is called Torat Chaim – the Torah of life – it is the source of everlasting life in the Hereafter as well as the true guide to life on earth.

The analogy of marriage to an “everlasting edifice” is not merely a figure of speech but contains also an important idea and moral. In the case of any structure, the first and most important step is to ensure the quality and durability of the foundation. Without such a foundation, all the efforts put into the walls, roof, decorations and so on, would be of no avail. This is even more true of the structure of marriage; if its foundations are unstable, what tragedy could result! This is why a

Jewish marriage must, first of all, be based on the rock-solid foundation of the Torah and mitzvot. Then the blessing of joy and happiness will follow the couple for the rest of their lives.

The Torah explicitly forbids intermarriage. Such a union has no foundation and will not be an everlasting edifice. In fact for a Jewish person to marry a non-Jew is one of the greatest calamities, and not only from the religious viewpoint. Nor is it entirely a personal matter affecting only the person involved, for it concerns the whole Jewish people, and there are few transgressions that affect the whole Jewish people as an intermarriage (G-d forbid) does. It is a transgression also against one's elementary honesty, for it is exceedingly unfair both to the other party and to the respective good friends, who wish to see their near and dear one lastingly happy.

Should I marry a Jewess just because she is Jewish?

Many young people feel themselves pressured by their parents to marry a Jewish spouse and, even though the choice is wider in the non-Jewish world, they feel obligated to marry within the fold out of a sense of duty. They often ask the question, what is the difference between the Jew and the non-Jew – both dress the same, both share common values, both eat the same food? If a man finds himself with a choice between two women, one Jewish and one non-Jewish, should he marry the Jewish woman just because she is Jewish?

The answer is a resounding “Yes!” Yes, because therein lies the potential for a truly Jewish marriage. Although at present there seems to be no difference between the Jew and non-Jew, as people grow older they change and mature. The vicissitudes, strains and challenges of life pull a person in all directions. If one is at least married to a Jew, there is common ground and potential to grow. That is certainly not the case in an intermarriage.

However, as strongly as the answer is yes, it carries an equally strong piece of advice. The institution of marriage – any marriage – needs much hard work. It is absolutely imperative that two young Jewish people who wish to marry should examine the huge repository of knowledge that the Torah has to offer to guide them in their future lives together. Couples must learn about the laws of Taharat Hamishpachah – the laws of Family Purity – that enhance the marriage. They must learn of the great importance of Shalom Bayit – peace in the home – and how to run a kosher home. They should learn about the importance of chinuch – education – even from an early age. No marriage can be taken for granted. As stated above, the foundation for a good marriage must be the Divine directives of the Torah, but a man and wife must understand that they have to work very hard to implement these directives in order to make the marriage successful.

Is conversion an option?

Conversion is serious business. Ask yourself a serious question: Is the conversion being carried out from a true desire to become Jewish,

independent of any impending partnership, or is it a token conversion, done to please some parent? A serious conversion can take years and involves serious changes in lifestyle and conduct.

To undergo a “cosmetic” or “plastic” conversion is, obviously, no solution to a seriously minded person, and even more abhorrent to an honest person. A true conversion has to be such as to transform a non-Jew into a Jew, with a new Jewish Neshamah (soul), like a newborn child of Jewish parents. Such a conversion is one that is carried out in strict accordance with Halachah; anything less is only a sham and a mockery.

The Halachah is very clear in its insistence that the would-be convert honestly and wholeheartedly accepts all the mitzvot. Accepting all but one of the mitzvot automatically invalidates the conversion, and the non-Jew remains a non-Jew exactly as before. Of course, it is possible to mislead a rabbi or a Rabbinic Court by declaring one's readiness to accept all the mitzvot, but one cannot mislead the Creator who is the One who imbues the Neshamah.

There is the well known argument that it is unfair to demand more of a would-be convert, in terms of adherence to the mitzvot, than that which many born Jews observe in practice. This contention is inadmissible since it is a requirement and stipulation of Jewish Law to which the would-be convert must unequivocally commit himself.

A word of caution: within the Jewish community today one may convert in either an Orthodox or Progressive establishment. It should be clear from the start that an Orthodox conversion is accepted in all Jewish circles whereas the Orthodox do not accept a Progressive conversion. To convert in a Progressive establishment is hazardous in itself, for one's Jewish identity is not universally recognised.

It is analogous to a longer-but-shorter way. To get to a particular destination one can take a long route but it may in fact be the shortest route. One may take a short route which might turn out to be a very long route. An Orthodox conversion is the longer-shorter way. It may be arduous and take a longer time but it is the shortest way to universal recognition. A Progressive conversion may be relatively easy but, in the final analysis, it is a very long route, for the end result is not recognised. It is a source of great shock to many children who find out that, since their parents underwent Progressive conversions, the Orthodox establishment does not consider them to be Jewish.

When a person marries he must be a little long-sighted. One cannot think just of oneself. One must take into consideration the status of one's offspring. Just as all parents wish to do the best for their child so, too, must all parents ensure that their offspring will not have any problems of Jewish status. Accordingly, anyone serious about conversion should consult a competent rabbinic authority. The reader is referred to the book *Who is a Jew* by Rabbi J.E. Schochet, which discusses this issue at length.

Advice to parents

Parents often seek rabbinical advice on how to stop an intermarriage.

In truth two pieces of advice are needed. One, before the crisis, and one after. When a child is born we wish the parents “Mazal Tov”. In many cases, straight after the Mazal Tov, the parents put their newborn child’s name down to attend the best schools in the area. One often hears from parents that they want to give their children the best education possible. By this they mean that they wish to expose their children to the highest levels of academia available in the secular world coupled with a weak pre-Bar Mitzvah education in the basics of Judaism. They expect their child to be worldly, educated, modern and open minded. They then pronounce that after such a broad education the child will be able to make his own choice about who he wishes to marry. When the child decides to intermarry the parents then run to the rabbi for a quick fix. Some parents resign themselves to the situation while others seek a token conversion.

In truth, such an education does not give the child free choice at all. If their choice is between a modern well-equipped science laboratory and an old stuffy synagogue classroom with a boring teacher – for sure they will choose the lab!

The story is told of a person who was asked if he knew what a Tallit Katan was. He replied affirmatively indicating on his own body the size of a pair of Tzitzit suitable for a seven year old – probably the type he once wore at Hebrew School. He was then asked what size suit he wore. When he appeared puzzled at the question it was explained to him that, since he now wears an adult size suit, why does he see himself in a child’s size Tzitzit!

The point of this story is simple. The man’s conception of Judaism is that of a child’s because while in every other subject – Maths, English, History, etc. – he proceeded to higher education, in Judaism he stopped at Bar Mitzvah. No wonder he chooses to be assimilated since his choice appears to be between an adult modern world and an archaic irrelevant past.

If parents want to give their children a real choice, they have to give them a strong Jewish education and identity. It is only then that an informed choice can be made.

A father once came to a rabbi with his daughter and asked the rabbi to persuade her not to marry out. The rabbi asked the daughter why she didn’t want to marry a Jew. She replied that her father never took her to synagogue, never ate kosher, never kept Shabbat or the festivals – in short, lived exactly like their non-Jewish neighbours, so why now the hypocrisy in demanding that she marry a Jew! The rabbi turned to the father and said that he agreed with her. The father was dumbstruck and then said that he had brought her to the rabbi to convince her not to marry out, and not to agree with her. The rabbi responded that, in

order for her not to marry out, the father had to start living as a Jew. He suggested that the father should lay Tefillin daily and that his wife should start lighting the Shabbat candles. After a lot of persuasion the daughter eventually married a Jew.

To live as a Jew – that is the advice before the crisis, since prevention is the best cure. But what if one is already in a crisis?

Obviously parents should intensify their own efforts as well as enlisting the aid of friends to do everything to prevent the tragedy. When it comes to a Jewish heart one never knows when and how its innate Jewish feelings will be aroused. However, parents should consider the following:

All the members of a Jewish family constitute one organism and, when one part of it needs special treatment, it can be given in one of two ways; either directly, if possible, or indirectly, through strengthening other parts of the body, particularly those that govern the functions of the entire organism. The head of the family is called the Baal Habayit and the wife is called the Akeret HaBayit, corresponding to the heart of the family. Thus, strengthening the commitment to the Torah and mitzvot on the part of the parents has a beneficial effect upon all the members of the family. Of course, it may sometimes entail certain difficulties by having to make some changes, perhaps even radical ones, in regard to habits and lifestyle. On the other hand, considering the far-reaching benefits, and especially the fact that parents surely would not consider anything too difficult if it could be beneficial to their children, of what significance can any difficulty be, especially as in most cases these are often exaggerated? In any case, a Jew is always required and expected to live according to G-d's Will; how much more so when a special Divine blessing is needed.

At the same time there is the assurance that, however one's everyday life and conduct was in the past, a Jew can always start a new life through Teshuvah – which literally means returning to one's essence.

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Posted: Oct 29, 2007

I can see where equating "you" with completing the unfinished work of Hitler is offensive and hurtful. However, I believe as a people who are always trying to survive, to know that it is not the hatred of of a non-Jew who is the cause of our demise, but perhaps the love of non-Jews that's causing our core to weaken is where anger/resentment often steams. Only so many drops of water can go into a glass of wine before in fact, it is no longer wine. The hurtful remarks are filled with fear that we're now being being "killed with kindness" so to speak. I know in my own family, one of Holocaust survivors, my son has to check with me before we walk into a relatives house "Mommy, are they Christmas or Hanukkah?" My immediate family's customs are not familiar even within the homes of relatives. It's all very disillusioning and disheartening. It is wonderful that you are laying tefillin. You are doing it for you, and not for anyone else. It's a lovely mitzvah, keep it up!

Posted By Jenny, Wilmington, DE

Inter-marriage

Posted: Oct 29, 2007

I am a Jew happily married to a non-Jew for 30 years. If our souls are incompatible, it is only because mine has not achieved her level of perfection, I have no problem with your expressing your view based on your conscience and personal interpretation of Judaism. However I take issue with your bigoted polemic and lexicon. You equate all Jews with the descendants of the oppressed and all gentiles with the descendents of the oppressor. Had a Priest made a similar assertion in the converse equating Jews as descendants of primitive tribalists (for example) and gentiles as descendants of the righteous you would be the first perhaps to scream "Anti-semite." Yet you seem to see nothing at fault with your own absurd and bigoted characterization. To equate me with completing the unfinished work of Hitler is at best an intemperate remark unbecoming of a man of Torah. I have recently started laying tefillin however the thought of Jews like you makes this task all the more difficult.

Posted By Mordecai

Whom to Marry: That is the Question!

Posted: Oct 18, 2007

I'm a confused 1/2 Jew. Jewish Law says I'm Jewish since mom is. At mid-life I accept that. Dad did a token conversion to marry mom, which was decent of him in a way, but he knows he's not really Jewish. He's my dad, though, and I honor my parents. I have very mixed feelings about all this. Ultimately, people are individuals, and adults must make their own decisions. While I appreciate a lot of what Rabbi Dubov says, I do agree somewhat also with his critics; his rhetoric is very extreme and guilt-trippy. I don't know if I will ever marry, but if I do, it would probably make sense to marry a Jewess so that we can do mitzvot together, but I won't dictate to others about such things. With all the different levels of observance, though, which "sort" of Jew one marries can be an issue, too.

Posted By Rob W., Pittsburgh, PA / USA

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