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The real reason intermarriage is bad for the Jews

Discouraging intermarriage is important, but creating a meaningful dialogue about why the Jewish people need to survive is even more critical.

By Rabbi Seth Farber | Jun. 2, 2014 | 8:19 PM | 4

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Israeli brides throw up their bouquets after exchanging marriage vows in a mass civil ceremony in Cyprus in 2011.

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With staggering rates of intermarriage in Jewish communities overseas and a gradual increase in intermarriage in Israel, it is critical to articulate clearly why intermarriage is bad for the Jews.

Three basic arguments can be made against those who seek to "marry out." The first is the identity argument. It suggests that intermarriage is unnatural and essentially a betrayal of one's real self. While this argument has both social dimensions ("the Jewish character is different") and religious ones ("the soul of the Jews is different"), I find this argument presumptuous, as it makes numerous assumptions about the definition of identity that are unpalatable in

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the post-modern era.

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A second argument is the religious one. The Bible (and later Jewish sources, all the way up through Sholem Aleichem's Tevye) makes it clear that intermarriage is a betrayal not of oneself, but rather of one's God. You are prohibited from intermarrying not because your children might not be Jewish (after all, in the Orthodox community, this would preclude only men marrying out, not women), but rather because it will take you down a path that is deemed idolatrous by the Torah.

As a religious person dedicated to halakha (Jewish law), I find this far more compelling than the identity argument. But in the modern era, it too falls short, as many committed Jews are not obligated to the religious dimensions of the Jewish enterprise.

The common denominator of both these arguments is that they presume to speak to the personal implications of intermarriage for the individual, and thus negate the dominant values of multiculturalism and pluralism so prevalent in Western democracies.

The third argument doesn't fall into this trap. It recognizes that the choice of a particular mate, who happens to be non-Jewish, might well be 'good' for the individual, but it also asks the utilitarian question, "is your individual act really good for the collective?"

If we assume that the survival of the Jewish people is a desideratum (as I do), intermarriage – by this approach – threatens the common good.

To offer a gross analogy, consider the environmental movement. While I value an individual's right to leave a light on overnight, the sustainability of the climate and the environment ("the general weal") far outweighs anyone's individual choice. That's why we turn off our lights (or at least we should) when we leave a room.

What differentiates this third argument from the first two is that it doesn't place the onus of avoiding intermarriage exclusively on the couple. It demands that the community engage in different strategies to combat intermarriage. Discouraging intermarriage is important, but creating a meaningful dialogue about why the Jewish people need to survive (and flourish) is much more central to the agenda. Instead of engaging young people in negative discussions (a la the "fear factor") – we need to encourage young people to marry Jewish.

But it isn't sufficient to make Judaism and endogamy more compelling. We also have to provide more entry points into the community than we have in the past. Conversion must be realistic in its demands, and it ought to be made straightforward and uncomplicated, rather than burdensome and taxing. As a committed halakhic Jew, I believe this can be done, notwithstanding what has transpired to date.

A couple of years ago, I was engaged by MK Eli Yishai, of Shas, in a public discussion, in which he challenged me on my support of civil marriage in Israel. He stated vociferously that the greatest historical justification for the State of Israel (and for the Zionist enterprise) was that it stemmed intermarriage and assimilation. "What message would it send to the Jewish communities abroad," said Yishai, "if Israel enabled couples to intermarry?" At the time, his insight gave me pause.



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And yet, today, I think differently. I don't believe that Israel has the right or authority to use a stick to discourage intermarriage. We should not deprive individuals of their basic rights, one of which, in my opinion, is the right to marry. But, unlike almost all of my rabbinic colleagues, I don't believe that enabling civil marriage will undermine the state's Jewish character. Only we Jews can do that (and have indeed done so), by continuing to promulgate the belief that Jewish life is myopic, and that only one rabbi or rabbinate can determine what is Jewish and what isn't.

It is precisely because of this approach that I have also played an active role in both writing and supporting the new conversion bill, which would enable municipal rabbis to perform conversions. The bill is now awaiting a vote in the Knesset plenum, but is being held up by political factions with strong allegiances to the Chief Rabbinate, specifically because it will marginally decentralize conversion in Israel, and opens the doors a bit wider.

Jewish tradition and Judaism are predicated on debate, on dialogue and ultimately, on faith in both God and the future. If we are really committed to the future, we need to reconsider our present, and work together for our collective good.

Rabbi Seth Farber is the director of ITIM: [The Jewish Advocacy Center](#), and rabbi of Kehilat Netivot in Ra'anana.

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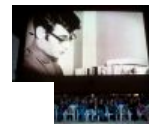
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