

Faith and Matrimony

By Dana Evan Kaplan • Friday, April 19, 2013

A controversy has recently developed within the Reform movement over its rabbinical schools' policy of barring the admission of any applicant who is "engaged, married, or partnered/committed to a person not Jewish by birth or conversion." Writing in *Reform Judaism* magazine, rabbinical student Daniel Kirzane argues that the policy is "antithetical to our Movement's essential focus on welcoming and Outreach." To prove his point, Kirzane quotes a paragraph from one of the Union for Reform Judaism Outreach brochures, which opens with the question, "Intermarried?" and responds immediately that "Reform Judaism welcomes you." The brochure then cites the prophet Isaiah: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (56:7) It deduces from this that "from the very earliest days, there have been individuals who lived with the Jewish community but who were not themselves Jewish. . . . You [the intermarried Jew] are welcome."

In truth, what Kirzane wants to see rendered permissible has been going on, behind the scenes, for a long time. I graduated from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in 1994; and even then, there were plenty of rabbinic and cantorial students with non-Jewish boyfriends and girlfriends. Most kept the relationships quiet until the partner converted or the connection ended. Occasionally, a student dropped out to marry his or her beloved, who had decided, for whatever reason, not to convert to Judaism. Others had to change their professional plans or find an alternative route. The editor of my second book had turned down an acceptance from Hebrew Union College because she was in a serious relationship with a non-Jewish man she planned to marry. I do not know if any students were forced to withdraw from programs in which they were already enrolled on account of forbidden relationships, but it is certainly possible.

Kirzane argues that the policy of denying admission to applicants engaged in interfaith relationships is both untrue to Reform ideals and injurious. The Central Conference of American Rabbis, he notes, affirmed in 1999 that the Reform Movement is "an inclusive community, opening doors to Jewish life to [all] . . . who strive to create a Jewish home." According to his line of reasoning, the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion "should be the greatest exemplar of this ideal," not an opponent of it: "I urge the Hebrew Union College to make good on the Reform Movement's commitment to Outreach by changing its policy and opening its doors to *all* who strive to create a Jewish home and serve the Jewish people."

But what about Jewish endogamy? It's a lost cause. And a commitment to the Jewish religion? Well, it is an established principle in contemporary American society that a person can have a deep and profound faith without sharing it with his or her partner. Each of us should be free to profess his or her own faith without feeling the pressure to conform to a partner's beliefs, and our partners should likewise be able to explore a broad range of spiritual options independently.

Brandon Bernstein, also a rabbinic student at HUC-JIR, carefully avoids attacking the proposal. Instead, he diplomatically calls for a dialogue before any final decisions are made. He bends over backward to express sympathy for those who have been upset or inconvenienced: "While it truly pains me to hear stories of those denied admission because of the current policy, I do not believe that the hardships they describe are sufficient to justify a change in HUC's policy." Bernstein hopes that the newly launched discussion will "open the door to a Movement-wide conversation that positively articulates the Jewish values to which our leaders and congregations ought to strive."

Kirzane and Bernstein will be continuing their debate in next month's *Sh'ma* magazine, so we will not have to wait very long to see how their dialogue develops. I expect Kirzane's seemingly principled liberalism to triumph and suspect that even Bernstein may eventually be won over.

The debate that Kirzane has launched is yet another indication that the Reform movement is swiftly becoming not so much a religious movement as a Jewish activities club. It does not matter, so it would seem, what one believes but rather how one identifies. While this serves the "Big Tent" recruitment strategy of the movement very well, at least in the short term, it undermines any claims Reform Judaism might have to represent a true and compelling ethical monotheistic faith. Rabbinical students at HUC do not have to believe in any specific theology or engage in any particular form of ritual practice. As Rabbi Mark S. Miller put it in the *Times of Israel*, until now there have only two lines that could not be crossed: a "Reform Jew could not legitimately believe in Jesus and a Reform Rabbi could not marry a non-Jewish spouse." If Kirzane convinces the movement to do away with the latter, Miller explains, there would only be one remaining taboo.

Miller, who not so coincidentally recently retired after more than 35 years in the pulpit of a Reform congregation in California, speaks bluntly. The position that Kirzane is advocating is the "logical and lamentable outcome of Reform Judaism's embrace of assimilation, of wanting to be everything to everyone, and of exalting the individual at the expense of the community. There are simply no standards, imperatives, or obligations. The adoration of autonomy led first to compromise, then to appeasement, and now to anarchy."

The rhetoric sounds familiar. When the issue of accepting homosexual rabbis and allowing Reform rabbis to officiate at gay and lesbian weddings was being debated, an earlier generation of newly retired rabbis attacked that change as a breakdown of Jewish values that represented anarchy and dissolution. Their voices were ignored. This will happen again, I predict, to the voices of the new generation of old-timers fighting for values that they themselves fatally compromised some time ago. I do not mean to say here that allowing gays and lesbians to marry or become rabbis was wrong; I do regret, however, that the decision to allow them to do so did not take place in the context of a clear and compelling Reform Jewish theology.

This did not happen, for one simple reason: The Reform movement has no central theological positions that are advocated by our leaders and/or believed in by its followers. The movement has such blurry principles that we cannot determine where our parameters are—or where they should be. The result is that sociological facts determine normative values.

As rabbis' attitudes toward the intermarriages of their congregants have evolved, they have reevaluated their own partnering choices. More rabbis have themselves emerged from intermarried families and they see how many of their Jewish friends also come from homes with only one Jewish parent. If it was good enough for my parents and my friends, some will reason, it is also good enough for me. If the Reform movement is essentially a sociological construct, then what the masses are doing defines normative behavior and legitimately serves to guide the rabbinic decision-making process. But if that is the process by which Reform Judaism continues to evolve, I believe it will fail as an American religious movement.

Dana Evan Kaplan is the rabbi of the United Congregation of Israelites in Kingston, Jamaica and former rabbi of Temple B'nai Israel in Albany, Georgia. He is the author of the forthcoming The New Reform Judaism, to be published by the Jewish Publication Society.

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