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Reform Jewry Grapples With Intermarriage Among Rabbinic Students

By Dana Evan Kaplan

April 23, 2013 thinkstock

There's a new controversy roiling the Reform movement: Can an applicant to rabbinic school be married to a non-Jewish partner? Everyone knows that many American Jews date men and women from other religious backgrounds. But rabbis? This might shock some readers — even today, when nothing shocks us anymore. But actually, the phenomenon is not new. The question today is whether to officially accept it.

It's a debate that offers further evidence that the Reform movement is losing its religious focus. We Reform Jews may be on the verge of not believing anything, but simply identifying with the Jewish people as defined by the Reform movement. If this trend continues, Reform Jews will undermine the claim they once had to representing a true and compelling ethical monotheistic faith. Rather, contemporary Reform Judaism would represent the consequence of a lifestyle choice rather than a theological process.

If we Reform Jews really saw ourselves as believers, then every policy would be evaluated in terms of whether it was consistent with our faith. If that were so, then the

partner of a rabbi would certainly have to have beliefs consistent with Progressive Judaism. They wouldn't need to be technically Jewish, and they might or might not practice Judaism as we understand that term in mainstream Reform circles, but criteria relating to religious beliefs would inform and define the debate. As it stands, those arguing to allow non-Jewish partners are advancing only nonreligious arguments. The impression I get is that the debate is so diffuse because the subject — what makes one eligible to represent Reform Judaism — is so amorphous.

The specific question involves admissions policies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform movement's central rabbinical school. Admissions requirements have a symbolic importance beyond their actual impact on the students and their families, and it is for this reason that the debate is being followed closely by those interested in the development of American Judaism.

The policy, which has attracted criticism, says that HUC-JIR will not admit any applicant who is "...engaged, married, or partnered/committed to a person not Jewish by birth or conversion." Responding to the question "Should Our Seminary Admit Students With Non-Jewish Partners?" rabbinical student Daniel Kirzane argues in Reform Judaism magazine that this policy "... is antithetical to our Movement's essential focus on welcoming and outreach."

At first glance, the question of whether intermarried Jews could apply to rabbinical school appears to be ridiculous, like wondering whether a Catholic priest would intend to remain celibate. Standing as a role model of Jewish continuity would seem to be part of the job requirement for any rabbi, an expectation so obvious that it should not have to be mentioned.

But Kirzane states that it should be open for debate. In 1999, he writes, the Central Conference of American Rabbis did indeed affirm that the Reform Movement is an inclusive community, "...opening doors to Jewish life to [every person]...who strive[s] to create a Jewish home." HUC-JIR, which is the official academic institution of the movement, "should be the greatest exemplar of this ideal."

HUC-JIR must be a home for all who "strive to create a Jewish home and serve the Jewish people." But is that the only requirement we have? I believe we should have a commitment to a theological process that is distinctively Reform, one that would help us parse these difficult question from a solid religious grounding.

Unfortunately, the Reform movement has no central theological positions that are advocated by our leaders or believed in by its followers. There may be theological parameters, but they are so wide that a Humanistic congregation in Cincinnati, whose members are atheists, could apply for admission to what was then called the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, in the 1990s. While the rabbi was (and is) a bright and erudite leader trained at HUC-JIR, it should have been obvious that the Humanists' approach would not be compatible with that of Reform Judaism, a conclusion that was reached only after several years.

But it was not obvious, because the movement passively and even actively accepted — and accepts — almost any belief system as long as it rejects Jesus. This makes common sense, because everyone knows that you cannot believe in Judaism if you believe in Jesus, but even this is problematic because it is not so clear historically that believing in Jesus is worse than, for example, rejecting the divinity of the Torah or the authority of the Oral Law.

It would certainly seem to be less serious than rejecting the existence of God, would it not? Yet, liberal rabbis such as Dan Cohn-Sherbok (Reform) and Carol Harris-Shapiro (Reconstructionist) have argued that it is not necessarily rational to accept Humanist Jews or Buddhist Jews while rejecting so-called “Messianic Jews.” While I am not personally persuaded by their arguments, it is clear that the Reform movement has such vague principles that we are in no position to determine where our boundaries lie. The result is that lifestyle choices determine our values.

The Reform movement has always prided itself on minimizing the behavioral gap between the clergy and the laity. In the period since World War II, the Conservative synagogue was jokingly referred to as a Reform congregation led by an Orthodox rabbi. This was not exactly true, but it was meant to humorously highlight the huge gulf between Conservative rabbis and their congregants. (This gap has narrowed dramatically in recent years.) In the Reform movement, this was never the case. Therefore, what congregants do will immediately affect what rabbis think and will soon after affect how they act.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.

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