

The Importance of Whom We Marry

By Rabbi Adam Morris

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The story of Jacob and Rachel and Leah thrust many questions of love and marriage before us. Why do we choose to marry the people we do? To what extent do we choose our partners? To what extent do they choose us? To what extent are the choices made for us by our society or even deeper forces that we do not grasp? What criterion do we use in making this life impacting choice?

The question of whom we Jews choose to marry receives a great deal of attention in the Jewish community, particularly when it relates to Jews choosing to marry non-Jews and how the community responds to those choices. I know that in the United States there are many synagogues and communities that are consumed, defined and sometimes wounded by these questions and responses to interfaith marriage.

I am well aware that the Denver Jewish community has responded to this issue in a manner unique to other similar communities. Suffice it to say, without embarking on a history lesson ...over the years most liberal rabbis have chosen not to officiate at interfaith weddings. It has been my practice to officiate at interfaith weddings under certain circumstances. So, in accepting the position as Temple Micah's rabbi ...I knew that this question would be one I would need to face with respect, sensitivity and integrity.

In this spirit I felt it important to discuss openly and respectfully my thoughts behind my practice. So, in addition to discussing this issue with my colleagues in the Denver area, I very much wanted to take the time to share with the Micah community my perspective on officiating at interfaith weddings.

Why do I officiate at interfaith weddings? Why there are many complexities to this question ... I can begin our dialogue, one that I hope will take place as long as I am your rabbi, by identifying three reasons that I choose to officiate at interfaith weddings.

The first reason has to do with a young woman named Amy Teitelman. I have not seen or been in touch with Amy for the last decade. Amy was the president of the first NFTY group for whom I was advisor. Amy was a special person ...deeply committed to the youth group and the synagogue. She participated in the March of the Living ... an experience that profoundly affected her. In fact I still have the poem that she wrote in response to that experience. I often use it in preparing Yom Hashoah observances. She was one of those people who we as rabbis are thankful to have in our community and as part of the larger Jewish community, too. Now, there is an important piece of Amy's story that I left out, and you may guess what it is ...Her father was an active member in that particular synagogue. Her mother was an active member in her church. Amy's father was Jewish and her mother was not.

I officiate at interfaith weddings because there are many ways to create and foster Jewish families ... and a family with one Jewish partner and one who is not Jewish IS one of those ways. Those families can create soulful, thoughtful and vibrant Jewish individuals. Amy Teitelman is living proof of this fact. Yes, there are families of this ilk whose children are not Amy Teitelman or anything like her. Remember, that there are children of families who have two Jewish parents and these children are not Amy Teitelman or anything like her, either.

In my mind the authority to officiate at a wedding results from my involvement and commitment to creating Jewish families and in turn nurturing able Jewish individuals. If a Jewish person and her or his partner make this commitment to one another ...to create a uniquely Jewish family and to foster and

nurture Jewish souls, then not only do I feel obligated, but I celebrate the opportunity to partner with them in doing so. If a Jewish person and her or his partner want the Jewish tradition to be the spiritual medium by which they plan to raise caring and compassionate children, then as a rabbi what more could I ask or expect of any family? Amy Teitelman reminds me of the potential possessed by EVERY Jewish family.

The second reason that I officiate at interfaith weddings is related to Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Zipporah, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and countless others. These names belong to women of our sacred stories ... women who in their own way exhibited courage, insight and loyalty in contributing to the experience of our people. We know Rebecca, Leah and Rachel as our matriarchs. Tamar and Ruth helped to preserve and maintain the revered lineage of the house of King David. Rahab risked her life to help the Israelites survey the land they were about to inherit because of her own belief and spiritual commitment. Zipporah partnered with Moses and supported him as he led our people on its greatest mythical journey. The women, these mythic and sacred figures to us as Jews ... were not (Jews). They were not Jews, Israelites, Hebrews ... whatever we were called at the time, they were of another tribe, another faith. All of them became intertwined with our people through marriage. All of them brought their experiences and spiritual understandings to our community ... and we were enriched because of it.

I officiate at interfaith weddings because this dynamic has always been a part of the Jewish experience. Not only has it been a part of our experience, but the inclusion of non-Jews into our community has deepened and broadened our own religious life. If we took the time to examine simply what we did tonight ...why some of the prayers made their way into our liturgy, the melodies that we sang together, the building we sit in ... the way we sit in it ...the Passover Seder (the most observed ritual in all Jewry) ...I could go on and on ...so much

of what we do, we have learned or adapted from the non-Jewish influences in the world.

I hope to avoid the anxiety that often grips our community when we question the way that interfaith marriage, assimilation or small numbers seem to erode our future. Interfaith marriage is a reality of not only the 20th and 21st century America – but of Jewish history. We can choose to demonize interfaith marriages and allow that demon to hide under our beds and haunt our dreams. Or, we can choose to recognize it as phenomenon that is neither good nor evil, but one nonetheless that we must perceive openly and honestly.

For me officiating at interfaith weddings when a Jewish person and her or his partner wish to create a Jewish home is an honest acknowledgment of this dynamic of our history and the reality of our world. These figures from our sacred texts remind me of the wonderful diversity in our tradition. Part of officiating at interfaith weddings is about remembering not to be fearful and judgmental of it and to try to understand and even welcome the gifts it may offer.

The third reason that I officiate at interfaith weddings has to do with Uncle Sam. I think of the recruitment posters that probably have given us the most prolific image of old Uncle Sam. He boldly glares at whoever dares to gaze at his likeness and without reservation demands to a potential armed forces recruit, 'I WANT YOU'. In essence this is what most liberal congregations say to the interfaith families out there ... with the same boldness and demanding feel, WE WANT YOU. We want your families to be part of the community. We want your families to attend services and study sessions. We want your family's membership dues and building fund pledges. We want your family's children to be Jewish. When did someone's military service to one's country formally begin ... when they signed the papers and made the pledge? When does a Jewish family formally begin? ...It begins under the chuppah.

I officiate at interfaith weddings because I feel it is a question of integrity. If I am going to say to an interfaith family that I want you as part of my community, that I want your kids ... then I believe that I need to be with them when their family begins, under the chuppah. If a Jewish individual and her or his partner want to have a Jewish family, then I believe that I have an obligation to sanctify the covenant to which both partners commit themselves. I hope to honor and celebrate both a potential Jewish and non-Jewish parent's commitment to fostering their child's religious education and experience. I believe that my role is to work with a couple to bring the gifts of the Jewish tradition; an openness for the presence of the divine and the idea of sanctity and holiness into their family as soon I am able ...that time is in the preparation for a wedding, that culminates under the chuppah. The immense vault of Jewish wisdom, learning and perspective on our world can serve as an invaluable asset to EVERY Jewish family.

I do not have all the answers to all the questions about interfaith weddings ... I can only do as I have tried to do, share with you why I not only officiate, but I BELIEVE in officiating at interfaith weddings when a Jewish individual and her or his partner want to create a Jewish home and Jewish family. I can also, and will also invite and encourage a discussion about this issue. Come and sit in my study with me or grab a cup of coffee or a bite to eat and let's continue learning from one another – for I am sure that we have much to learn about this issue.

The Torah teaches us that when Jacob first kissed Rachel he was so overwhelmed that he could do nothing but cry. His tears may have been of joy or even of ecstasy. I wonder though, that perhaps his tears were tears of awe as well. Perhaps in that moment – when he first knew in his soul of the love he felt for Rachel – he saw the power and potential in love, too. Each time I step under a Chuppah with a couple, as they stand in that sacred space – just the two of them and God -- I am reminded of that power and potential. I do not look and see Jew and Jew, or Jew and non-Jew, or man and

woman. I see two human beings who stand together before God – who seek to sanctify their commitment to one another and who seek to access the beauty, wisdom and vision embedded in our tradition and they begin a life together. Whenever I am privileged to stand under the chuppah with a couple, I am honored and privileged to be a rabbi and facilitate the celebration of their sacred journey.