

Intermarriage: The Jewish/Gentile Dilemma

by Mark and Cheryl Robinson

Danny and Sue

Danny was from a religiously conservative Jewish background. He always identified strongly with his "Jewishness," but since his Bar Mitzvah he followed little of the religious practices of his youth. Sue was Roman Catholic. She stopped practicing her religion when she entered high school. Although she still considered herself "Catholic" she identified more with her parents and family than her religion. Danny first met Sue in their junior year of high school. Immediately there was an attraction between the two. Danny was an excellent athlete and Sue was a cheerleader. This common interest around sports developed into a relationship that not only lasted through high school, but college. Now, both were college seniors and graduating. They had been talking about marriage for a couple of years and decided they would get married after graduation.

During their years of dating both sets of parents had generally accepted their relationship. Sure, there had been those occasional comments by both sets about marrying someone Catholic or Jewish. Overall, though, both sets of parents liked the couple and never objected to their relationship.

As Danny and Sue discussed their desire to marry two primary issues became paramount in their thinking. First, their deep love for each other led them to the strong conviction that they should marry, raise a family and share life together. Second, their love for their parents motivated them to do all they could to get their blessing and approval. Danny and Sue decided that it would be best for both of them to speak with each set of parents separately.

When the day arrived to talk with her parents, Sue was extremely nervous. She was torn between her love for her parents and her love for Danny. What would she do if her parents objected to her marrying Danny? It wasn't long after some informal talk that Sue's parents brought up the subject of their desire to marry. Danny and Sue waited with bated breath for what they would say.

"Sue, we think the world of Danny. For years we have admired his character, discipline, and the kindness he has shown toward you. We could think of no better person for you to marry."

Both Danny and Sue were taken back by this statement. They were expecting some kind of negative response and were surprised by this positive response. Sue's parents continued: "Certainly, we would expect the wedding to be in our Catholic church and your marriage officiated by Father Joe. He has been such a blessing to our family through the years. And we are Christian."

This statement was as discouraging as the first statement was uplifting. Both Danny and Sue had agreed since they came from different religious traditions they would have a secular wedding in a neutral place. The finality of her parent's statement was troubling.

"Well, we can talk about the details of the wedding later," Sue responded as she deflected what could obviously be a major stumbling block to her parent's blessing.

Danny and Sue were perplexed as to how to respond to Sue's parents. Their discussion of this would have to wait though. They had just arrived at the home of Danny's parents.

Danny and Sue were greeted warmly by his parents. After serving coffee and cake the subject of the wedding and marriage came up.

"Sue, we have always looked upon you as one of our daughters. We have seen the love you and Danny have for each other. It would be our blessing to have you as part of the family. But you must understand how important it is for us that our son marry a Jewish woman. You have

our blessing to marry our son, but we would like you to convert to Judaism. Then the marriage ceremony could be held in our synagogue. We have already talked with Rabbi David. He is ready and willing to have you attend conversion classes and then afterward officiate at your wedding."

For the second time Danny and Sue were kicked in the gut by his parents' statement. They were pleased to have Danny's parents' blessing and hear of their love of Sue but this was not what they intended for their wedding and marriage.

"Thanks for your love for my lovely lady," Danny responded. "We will get back with you on the details of the wedding later," Danny said as he also deflected what would be an obvious hurdle in his desire to have the blessing of his parents on their wedding and marriage.

As Danny and Sue drove away, both were dismayed at the "conditions" imposed upon their desire to marry. How could they possibly reconcile the seemingly unreconcilable differences between both parents and their own desires for their wedding and marriage? Was there a way to bridge this gap? Perhaps there was a middle ground that would at least meet some of their parents' desires although, obviously, not fulfilling completely their demands. "What can we do?" Danny and Sue asked each other. "Can we come up with an answer that will satisfy Danny's parents concern about the "Jewishness" of their son, his wedding and marriage? Can we find an answer for the concern of Sue's parents and their desire for a "Christian" wedding? And most important, is there an answer for us that will take into consideration our different backgrounds?"

Michael and Rachel

Rachel was brought up in Reform Judaism. The "openness" of her religious tradition helped prepare her for her marriage to Michael, a semi-regular church-going Protestant she met at college. She and Michael had developed not only a deep love for each other during their years of dating and the few years of marriage, but a great respect for one another. With their first child, a boy, due to be born in only a few months Rachel was surprised at how concerned she was with the religious training of her first child. Michael didn't seem as concerned, but she desperately wanted her child to be Jewish. How would he react to her desires to raise their child Jewish? Especially since their agreement before marriage was they would let their children decide what religious tradition to follow as they matured.

As the birth of their first child approached, Rachel knew she had to talk with Michael about her feelings. She wanted her baby to be "Jewish." Rachel wasn't interested in regular synagogue attendance but desired a minimal affiliation so she could at least have her child attend Yom Kippur and Passover services and perhaps Hebrew school to ultimately prepare for his bar mitzvah.

After dinner one evening, Rachel broached the subject with Michael.

"Michael, we need to talk about our baby."

"What is it Rachel? Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine. The baby is healthy and I am doing very well. What I want to talk with you about is raising the baby Jewish. During the past few months I have been desiring this more and more for my first child."

Michael was taken back by Rachel's request. He had thought their conversations before and during the early years of their marriage had settled this question.

"Rachel, I love you very much, but I thought we had decided not to be involved with our religious backgrounds to a great extent. Passover Seder at your parents' home, Christmas at my parents' home, but beyond that we would let our children decide what they wanted when they were old enough."

"I know Michael. But now that I am expecting my first child; my emotions and thinking have completely changed on this matter."

"Rachel, this baby is OUR child. Not just yours. Perhaps, then, we should raise our baby in the Christian faith?"

Michael's reaction was overly emotional. He had hardly given a thought to raising the child in either the Jewish or the Christian faith. Rachel's heart sank. She did not want to get into an argument with her husband and the father of her child.

"Is there some way we can solve this seemingly unsolvable problem?" Rachel thought. "Can we raise our child in such a way that both of our backgrounds can be respected and honored in some way? Is there an answer to this dilemma that won't drive a wedge between me and the man I love?"

Stuart and Mary

Stuart and Mary had been married for 14 years. They had put off having children so each could develop his or her career. Stuart was a successful attorney who had been raised in a modern Orthodox Jewish home. Mary regularly attended at her parents' church when she was growing up, but her career choice in business had caused her to stop going to church altogether.

Stuart fondly remembered the religious traditions of his family—Passover, Bar Mitzvah, synagogue attendance (primarily for the major holidays). Although Mary never objected to his practice of these traditions (she actually enjoyed the social interaction at Stuart's parents every year at the Passover Seder), Stuart's pursuit of a partnership in his firm through the years caused him to seldom attend synagogue since their marriage. Now their two children were two and three years old. Decisions had to be made concerning their religious upbringing.

Stuart and Mary were surprised at the tensions that developed when they discussed their desired religious practice for their children. They had always assumed that as two bright, resourceful, and successful people they could come to agreement on this issue when it arose. This was hardly the case.

"Stuart, I would like for us to establish some traditions for our family around the Christmas season. I fondly remember the family gatherings at home during my youth with a Christmas tree, presents, the meal, and the great family fun. It was always a special time for me. I think it would be great for our children to experience this."

"Mary, I am not sure about establishing these types of traditions," Stuart responded, trying to be as diplomatic as possible. "I never had a Christmas tree and we still had great family times together. Actually, it would be very difficult for me to embrace these Gentile celebrations about Jesus. My background taught me that Jesus is the Gentile god, and He has nothing to do with Jewish people."

"I am not saying we should bring Christ into our traditions, just that we should adopt some of these Christmas practices. Sort of a secular Christmas," Mary responded.

"Well, that certainly would be easier, but I don't see how the subject of Jesus could be avoided if we adopt all these "religious" practices at this time of year. Certainly as our children get older they will ask questions about Jesus and why we have a Christmas tree and other different Christian traditions. I think it best that we continue as we have. You do enjoy Passover Seders with my family."

"I do Stuart, but that is why I thought we could add this practice. I believe it would enrich our children's heritage."

Stuart was at a loss as to how to respond. He hadn't realized how deep his feelings about his Jewish background ran and his distaste for Gentile religious traditions. Although not expressing his concern at this time to his wife, Stuart was deeply concerned how this might affect their marriage.

"How can I resolve this issue?" Stuart thought. "I love my wife and want to honor her, but

this request goes too far. Perhaps there is an answer that will satisfy both of us. I don't know what it is, but there must be one."



Although the above scenarios are entirely fictional, the issues raised are confronted regularly by an ever growing number of Jewish and Gentile couples thinking of marriage or who are already married. Consider Enoch Wan and Tuvya Zaretsky's research on this growing phenomenon:

"Demographic studies on American Jewry reveal a trend of increased intermarriage during the past thirty years. The National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) of 2000—01 conducted under the auspices of the United Jewish Communities reported that among all married American Jews today, 31% were wedded to Gentiles. Less than 10% of American Jews were intermarried prior to 1960. Subsequent decadal surveys showed a quadrupling intermarriage rate between 1970 and 1990. The Council of Jewish Federations' 1990 NJPS reported that 52% of American Jews married during the previous five years had wed Gentiles. The 2000—01 NJPS confirmed the intermarriage rate still near 50%, but rising slightly at a stabilized level."¹

The growing rate of Jewish/Gentile marriages has raised the issues in our three intermarriage scenarios among other challenges. It is a well accepted thesis that common religious faith is a factor in marital stability. In fact,

"the literature also suggests even greater threat to marital stability and satisfaction in interfaith marriages...Call and Heaton conclude, 'Mixed-faith marriages significantly increase the rate of dissolution and couples with no religious affiliation also have comparatively high rates of dissolution.' Research comparing Jews in endogamous marriages to those who intermarry finds the divorce rate among the Jewish-Gentile marriages to be approximately double that of Jewish-Jewish couples. Religious differences also impact the couple in the education and upbringing of children and social relationships."²

Certainly, your desire is that your marriage prosper. More than likely, though, you will face issues such as those above that will bring, at best, tension and, at worst, the deterioration and dissolution of your marriage.

What is the solution to the unique issues that Jewish and Gentile couples face in their marriage? Is the answer one or the other of you converting to the religion of your spouse? Certainly this is one possible answer that could help bring harmony to the relationship and help solve the perplexing issues that arise around different religious and cultural issues in a Jewish/Gentile relationship.

However, we think there is a better answer to the dilemmas of the Jewish/Gentile intermarriage. Mark is Jewish and Cheryl is Gentile and we have found an answer that has worked for us for more than thirty-one years and required neither of us to convert to another religion.

Please consider what we have to say. What we suggest will probably require each of you to rethink some things you have accepted and taken for granted in the past. We believe not only will this answer enable you to address different problems that arise in the future, but it will be the most important and satisfying choice you will ever personally make in your life.

One Authority

There is a saying among Jewish people. "When you have two Jewish people together, you have three opinions." Perhaps the author of this thought was thinking of the inclusion of your in-laws in your marriage relationship! The point is that each of you needs to decide you will choose what is right and best for you and your marriage regardless of what your parents (or anyone else for that matter) say.

We have found the one authority that guides us in our decisions about religious matters (and a host of other issues as well) is the Bible. Is there a better source to reference than this?

- The Bible claims to be written by God.
- God is the creator of marriage (Genesis 2:24).
- God has given copious advice in the Bible on personal and marital issues for our benefit.
- Millions of couples through the years have had happy and successful marriages when their lives are guided by God's teaching in the Bible.

God wants to guide your marriage and life for you and your children's well-being. What we have found is not a religion. It is not Judaism, Catholicism, Hinduism or any of the other ... *isms* or religions you might name. What we are talking about and what God desires for you is a personal relationship with Him. Mark used to reflect on the Passover Seders he attended with his family growing up. He remembered reading in the Haggadah about Moses walking and talking with God in a very personal way. He wondered why he couldn't have the same type of relationship. He was 27 when he found out he could have the same type of relationship with God as Moses. Cheryl was raised in a Bible believing home and as a young child began her personal relationship with God. The good news is you can also have this type of relationship with God and get His guidance for your marriage.

The Bible has proved itself through the centuries. The supernatural origin of this book is seen in many ways but foremost among them are the many prophecies found in the Bible that have come to pass with 100% accuracy. We are not talking about nebulous predictions but very specific prophecies written hundreds of years before they were fulfilled. No other book in the world has done this.

Why Believe the Bible?

There is no other book in the world that tells about future historic events in such detail with 100% accuracy as the Bible. The prophecies of the Bible cover subjects such as Israel, nations, and people. One of the main prophetic topics is the promised Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world. Specific prophecy of the Messiah was the catalyst that caused Mark to consider whether Jesus was the Messiah or not and to take an independent look at what the Jewish Scriptures said about the Messiah. He was amazed to see the details of the prophecies and then the fulfillment of them in Jesus. Consider just a few of the many dozens of prophecies of the Messiah found in the Jewish Bible and the corresponding testimony of the New Testament and their fulfillment in Jesus.

The Jewish Bible tells us the Messiah would come before A.D. 70 and be born in Bethlehem.

"And after 62 weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary..." Daniel 9:26

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." Micah 5:2

The Hebrew prophet Daniel foretold with precise accuracy in Daniel 9:24-27 the time of the Messiah's coming. He stated that the city of Jerusalem and the Temple would be rebuilt, and the Messiah would come during this same time period -- the period of the SECOND Temple. It is interesting that his prophecy also told us that the second Temple would be destroyed after the coming of the Messiah, by the "people of the prince." This was accomplished in A.D. 70 when General Titus, the son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, led his people (the Roman armies) in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Thus, the Messiah would have to come before A.D. 70.

The New Testament tells us Jesus came before A.D. 70 and was born in Bethlehem.

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem." Matthew 2:1

The Jewish Bible tells us the Messiah would be rejected and despised.

"He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not." Isaiah 53:3

The New Testament tells us Jesus was despised and rejected.

"He [Jesus] came unto his own, and his own received him not." John 1:11

The Jewish Bible tells us the Messiah would suffer on our behalf and die for our sins.

"Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed." Isaiah 53:4-5

"He was taken from prison and from Judgment: and who shall declare his generation? For he was cutoff out of the land of the living: for the transgressions of my people was he stricken." Isaiah 53:8

The New Testament tells us Jesus suffered and died for our sins.

"... And they took Jesus, and led *him* away. And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called *the place* of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha: Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst." John 19:16-18

"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit." 1 Peter 3:18

The Jewish Bible tells us the Messiah would be buried and resurrect from the grave.

"And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth." Isaiah 53:9

"Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand." Isaiah 53:10

The New Testament tells us Jesus rose from the grave.

"And the Angel answered and said unto the women, Fear not ye: for I know that ye seek Jesus, which was crucified. He is not here: for he is risen, as he said. Come see the place where the Lord lay. And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you." Matthew 28:5-7

These are just a few of the dozens of prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. These prophecies and others conclusively prove that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world.

Religion or Relationship?

God's desire is that each of us have a personal relationship with Him. To enter into this relationship with Him we must listen to what He says about how this occurs. We must decide to do it His way and not ours. Our way will fail. God's way will succeed. The issue is not one or the other person converting to the religion of his/her spouse. The issue is how we can have a personal relationship with God.

A relationship with God doesn't change who we are. If you were born Jewish, you remain Jewish. If you were born Gentile, you remain Gentile. What happens is you become a child of God and start following a biblical faith.

A personal relationship with God will allow your marriage to be placed on a very solid foundation. No longer will your decisions be made on the changing mores of society or the elusive speculations of men. Your decisions can be grounded in the teaching of God's word—the Bible.

God created man to have fellowship with Him. Our relationship with Him has been broken because of our sin. Sin is the breaking of God's law. The ten commandments are just some of God's law. "Thou shall not steal...lie... covet... commit adultery" are some of the easier commands to follow although each of us has broken at least some of these in our life and all of them in our heart. The impossible commands are those that tell us "thou shall have no other gods before me." In practice each of us make "gods" out of our pleasure, work, money, etc.

The result of our sin is that we are separated from God. "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid *his* face from you, that he will not hear" (Isaiah 59:2). It is because of this separation that God sent the Messiah. His purpose in coming was to reconcile us to God.

"But he *was* wounded for our transgressions, *he was* bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace *was* upon him; and with his stripes we are healed... by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities... because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors..." Isaiah 53:5,11,12

When Jesus the Messiah died for our sins and rose from the grave he enabled us to have our sins forgiven and a personal relationship with God. To receive forgiveness of sins whether Jew or

Gentile, we must accept Him as our Messiah and Savior.

“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation...For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek [Gentile]: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Rom. 10:9,10,12,13

If you accept Jesus as your Messiah and Savior, you embrace all that the God of Israel promised. Your relationship will be strengthened as you build your marriage on the teachings of the Word of God. No longer do you need to turn to a religion for answers. You can turn to Him who is the creator of heaven and earth, and, yes, the institution of marriage.

We are ready to help you answer any questions you have about your relationship with God, the Messiahship of Jesus, and how to build a strong and satisfying marriage based on the Word of God. Please write or call us for help.

End Notes

1. Enoch Wan and Tuvya Zaretsky, *Jewish-Gentile Couples: Trends, Challenges and Hopes*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.2004): 12-13
2. *Ibid.*, 17-18