On Intermarriage, Authenticity, and the "Why" of 21st-Century Judaism
Parashat Eikev 5784
August 23, 2024

On Wednesday night, my daughter, Lindsay, and I saw an excellent off-Broadway production called *The Sabbath Girl*. It's about a young Orthodox Jewish man and a young Italian-American woman who live down the hall from each other in a New York City apartment.

They first meet when the Jewish guy, Seth, knocks on the door of the young woman, Angie, to ask her for help. See, it's a Friday night in the summer, and it's hot in the apartment because Seth forgot to turn the AC on before Shabbos. So, he asks Angie if she'd be willing to come by and flip the switch for him.

After she helps him out like this several more times, Angie's grandmother explains to her that she's become Seth's "Shabbos goy." But Angie isn't offended; she says she actually kind of likes it. And, more importantly, she kind of likes Seth.

The feeling is mutual, and soon Seth and Angie start dating. Not that it comes easy; in fact, the difficulty they face is the theme of the show.

While Angie, a modern secular 20-something who's trying to land her first client for her new art gallery, is open and eager to learn about Seth's Judaism, Seth, as you might imagine, struggles mightily between his desire for Angie and his Orthodox identity.

His sister, Rachel, makes that even harder on him. "We're part of something bigger than just us," she keeps telling him. "A tradition that's 6,000 years old. Come back to Riverdale and stay with me. Come to shul. I'll set you up with one of the women there."

It's an old and common story, in some ways a 21st-century twist on *Fiddler on the Roof* and Philip Roth. But, at the same time, it felt particularly resonant to me in light of our unique times.

It is possible that in a few short months from now, Vice President Harris's husband, Doug Emhoff, could become America's first Jewish resident of The White House.

And what I find especially poignant about this (if it happens) is that our country's first Jewish First Couple would actually be in an interfaith marriage.

That is quite amazing, if you think about it, and it says a lot about the story of Jews in America.

****

My teacher Rabbi David Ellenson (of blessed memory), a sociologist and historian, documented that as recently as the 1950s, the intermarriage rate among American Jews was less than 5 percent.

Today, for non-Orthodox Jews, it's more than 70 percent.

That's quite a change in just 75 years. What explains it?

So much literature has been written about this, but it comes down to three major cultural phenomena.

First, the barriers that used to keep Jews and non-Jews at a distance from each other in American social life broke down and disappeared almost completely.

Although Jews in the United States have always been full and equal citizens with the same rights under the law as everyone else, in practice, policies like university admissions quotas and informal practices like barring Jews from certain neighborhoods, clubs, law firms, and businesses minimized our social interaction with people who weren't Jewish.

At the same time, these things reinforced mid-century American Jews' historical perceptions that the non-Jewish world was hostile to them. So, naturally, they emphasized endogamy—a fancy word signifying "marrying inside your own community"—as a means of self-preservation.

And quite simply, if you don't hang out together, the chances are slim that you'll meet and fall in love and marry each other.

Second, beginning in the late 20th-century, American culture embraced multiculturalism—not just as a value, but as an ideal.

The sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman, who has conducted extensive studies of American Jewish attitudes toward intermarriage, points out that in promoting the multiculturalist ideal, television, film, art, and other forms of cultural expression celebrate marriage across ethnic and religious lines.

Multicultural, multiethnic, multireligious families are idealized in American culture because they seem to represent the best of who we are and aspire to be: open, accepting, inclusive—"the great American melting pot."

So, whereas the breakdown of social barriers enabled Jews and non-Jews to meet and marry, the multiculturalist ideal encouraged them to do so.

Third, American attitudes about religion, community, and family have changed.

Fishman explains that from the Middle Ages to post-emancipation Europe, intermarriage "meant leaving the Jewish community." You simply couldn't be both Jewish and married to a non-Jew; you had to choose.

This persisted as a social norm in America, too, well into the 20th century.

Remember Neil Diamond's reprise of *The Jazz Singer?* The families who would sit shiva for a child who married outside the faith? The parents who, as much freedom as they gave their kids in general, forbade them from dating someone who wasn't Jewish—so, some of the more rebellious ones snuck out of the house and did it anyway?

This was not uncommon in the Jewish community when I was growing up in the 1980s, because the conventional wisdom, even then, was that intermarriage was incompatible with raising a Jewish family and ensuring Jewish continuity.

But the world today is very different. As Fishman writes in her excellent book about intermarriage, *Double or Nothing,* 21st-century American culture "promotes the idea that each partner can maintain his or her own distinctive, premarriage identity."

I find this so interesting because it means that people are increasingly viewing religion as something that's the province of the individual—perhaps more so than the family.

And this makes sense because our ideas about belonging today are less communal and more individualistic than they used to be.

And they aren't tribal anymore, either—meaning: We don't automatically identify the Jewish community as "our people," so to speak, just because we were born into it.

Instead, driven by the social phenomena I've described, we choose our own people—for any number of reasons—and they, rather than our ethnic or religious tribe, become our primary community.

****

I want to clarify here that I am not lamenting any of this. While I know it's a complicated picture, I also think these trends highlight the success of the American Jewish project.

Some people may see it as a threat to Jewish continuity, but I don't—for a couple reasons.

One, as a rabbi for 16 years, I have seen so many interfaith families in my congregations be actively involved in Jewish life, both in the synagogue and outside it—sometimes even more so than many in-married families. It's about commitment, and it plays out in every family differently, regardless of whether one or both spouses are Jewish.

Two, I think these cultural realities present a powerful challenge to Judaism and to synagogues to evolve and to think differently about how to ensure that Judaism survives—and, more importantly, why it's important to us that Judaism survives in the first place.

Emphasizing endogamy, as the section of the Torah we've been reading the last couple weeks does so ardently, might work for a Judaism that is tribal in nature, but the research has shown that tribal Judaism doesn't really exist anymore. People don't join synagogues—let alone participate in them—just because they're Jews and that's what Jews do.

In today's world, people are seeking to live lives of meaning, purpose, and authenticity. They're looking for connection, friendship, to transcend the mundane of the everyday, to expand their horizons, and to make the world a better place.

Sid Schwartz, another prominent Jewish sociologist, argued more than a decade ago that for modern American Jews, if they believe that Jewish life can help them find meaning, purpose, and authenticity, they will happily participate in it; but if they believe that Judaism won't help them find those things, they're just as happy to have nothing to do with it.

A Christian-pastor friend of mine once said to me, "It used to be that all you needed to do to have a vibrant church was open the doors on Sunday." You could say the same thing about us.

But those days are gone.

So, we need to focus instead on creating an experience that's compelling enough that people will want to choose it—not because they're guilted into it, and not because there's some expectation that it's what Jews are supposed to do, but because they realize that they want it and need it in order to live their most authentic life.

****

At one point in *The Sabbath Girl,* when Seth is agonizing over the choice he feels he has to make between Angie or his Orthodoxy, he cries out, "Why can't I choose both?"

The point of the show is that he should be able to choose both, because to choose one over the other would be to suppress an essential part of himself.

As I watched the performance, I realized anew why Temple Beth-El is here: It's to help every member of our congregation, current and future, discover and be their authentic Jewish self.

No matter who you love or want to marry, whether you were born Jewish or drawn to our tradition later in life, whether you are Jewish in your own right or a non-Jewish member of a Jewish family—we want you to live with meaning, purpose, and authenticity, and we want to be part of your journey.

That's it. That's our "Why."

And it's a sacred calling.