

Even though my sister was the youngest in the family, she was the first to get married. Marcy had just graduated from Stanford, and I was in rabbinical school here in New York. I had never met her fiancé. But it didn't matter. Marcy knew she was never going to get my blessing. Marcy was the only one in the family to go to Hebrew High School; the only one to go on USY Israel Pilgrimage. Yet, she had chosen to marry a man who wasn't Jewish, and wasn't going to convert.

My parents were unhappy with Marcy's decision. They had been pillars of our small synagogue, and would have liked to see my sister's wedding at Congregation B'nai Israel, where they themselves had been married. But they put aside their disappointment and threw themselves into the wedding planning. Meanwhile, I agonized over whether I would even go to the wedding. On the one hand, I loved my sister and did not want to create drama in the family. On the other hand, I was a rabbinical student. Rabbis in the Conservative Movement were strictly forbidden to attend interfaith weddings. We were expected to be living symbols of our tradition's disapproval. I felt a duty to uphold these standards, even though I wasn't yet ordained. Moreover, I was angry with my sister for having turned her back on the rich Jewish life I had helped introduce her to; and I wasn't sure I could watch a man who called himself a "rabbi" perform an interfaith ceremony that made a mockery of everything I believed.

In the end, I compromised, waiting out the ceremony in the lobby and joining the celebration afterward. The compromise worked for me at the time, but my decision certainly put more distance between me and my sister. We have never been as close as adults as we were as kids. Although we have never talked about it, I am sure religion has something to do with it. For what it's worth, both of her children identify as Jews, but never had any formal Jewish education or celebrated their b'nai mitzvah. Whether their children, should they be blessed with them someday, will identify as Jews remains to be seen.

If I had to do it all over again, I would have gone to the wedding. My absence didn't dissuade my sister from marrying a non-Jew; nor did it make her more determined to live a Jewish life once she was married. Much as she might love me, when it came to deciding who she would marry, or how she would live her Jewish life, my sister simply wasn't interested in my opinion. As an intelligent, well-educated adult, she undoubtedly felt that she had the right to make her own choices, just as I had the right to make mine. My conspicuous absence from her wedding ceremony, on the other hand, probably did hurt her feelings, and deprived me of the chance to share in an important moment in our family's life. No one at the ceremony would have mistaken my presence for a global endorsement of intermarriage. They would have understood that my love for my sister was stronger than any difference of opinion or principle we might have.

Fast forward twenty six years and I have two adult children in their twenties. And I find myself standing uncomfortably in my parents' shoes. Like my parents, I provided my kids with a strong foundation. I gave them the best Jewish education I could. I raised them in a kosher home, where Shabbat and the holidays were observed. They excelled at their b'nai mitzvah, and continued to be involved in Jewish life during their high school years. They grew up in a warm synagogue community with lots of Jewish kids. And they are still involved in Jewish life as young adults. But if you were to ask me, "do you think they will marry Jews?" I would have to say "I really don't know."

I hope my children will marry Jews; I will be disappointed if they don't. And they know how I feel, we talked about it many times. But when it comes to choosing who they will marry, like most young Jewish adults, they see the world differently than we do. They believe, even more than the previous generation, that they have the absolute right to choose who they marry. They don't feel a strong sense of responsibility to answer for their choice to their rabbis or the Jewish people as a whole. Marriage is a personal choice that no one should interfere with. They will marry the person they choose, the person they love. And they will find a way to make their lives together work with or without our blessing. They are looking, most of all, for healthy, compatible partners who truly love them and respect them for who they are. And it's hard enough to find someone who fits this description in this high pressure, highly mobile, dual career kind of world. If they find the right person, and he or she happen to be Jewish, it will simply be an additional bonus.

Why do they think this way? Because we taught them to. Brought up in a society that embraces multiculturalism, young Jewish adults, like most Americans don't think in rigid categories about their identities. Previous generations may have seen choosing to marry a non-Jew as tantamount to renouncing one's Jewishness. But this generation sees it differently. Intermarriage is just becoming a Jew with a non-Jewish partner. For many inter-marrieds, in fact, the idea that they are a hybrid Christian-Jewish family makes perfect sense. Above all, young Jewish adults value the right to make their own choices and shape their own identities as individuals. This mindset is a reflection of our individualistic consumer culture, as well as our embrace of multiculturalism and equality for all.

Against this backdrop, it's hard to talk to young Jewish adults about the importance of marrying a Jew. When we suggest that marriage must be "either-or", they tell us it can be both. When we express our concern about the children, they tell us they will find their own way. And when we agonize over the future of the Jewish people, they will tell us they can't

take on this responsibility. They have enough to worry about just finding a healthy, compassionate partner who loves them and wants to make a life together. And besides, we taught them that everyone is the same underneath; do we expect them to suddenly become “racists” when it comes to marriage?

If we can't win the argument over intermarriage with our own kids, then, what can we do? How can we make sure that our grandchildren will be Jewish? There is one answer out there that we know works very well. We can, like much of the Orthodox community, reject our society's multiculturalism. We can isolate our kids in Jewish day schools or Yeshivas, ship them off to Jewish camps, and make sure they socialize only with other Jews like themselves. Instead of sending them to college at eighteen, we can send them to study in Israel. We can live a strictly observant life ourselves, and limit our contact with popular culture. We might even follow the example of Abraham in our Torah portion, and some Orthodox parents today, and ask a matchmaker to arrange a marriage for our kids. If we are willing to do this, we can be pretty sure our kids will all marry Orthodox Jews.

Most of us are not willing to make that choice, myself included. We want to retain more of our own personal autonomy. We love being Jewish. We don't want some rabbi, or some unspoken social pressure telling us how Jewish we have to be. We want to live in the secular world too. We want to have non-Jewish friends, we want to go to the beach, to the movies and to concerts. We believe in the American dream, that everyone is equal in the eyes of God. We don't want to stand out, or separate ourselves from the community. And we want our kids to get the best secular education they can, because education is the key to success.

For all these reasons, I believe there is only one thing for us to do. As parents, and more importantly, as a Jewish community, we have to stop obsessing about intermarriage. We are wasting our time lecturing our kids about intermarriage. They already know how we feel. And when they do intermarry, we are wasting our time focusing on their marital status instead of their souls. Yes, some of our kids who intermarry will leave their Judaism behind and never look back. But many of our kids will be looking to remain connected; maybe even to become a part of communities like ours. When it comes to their Jewish souls, the intermarried Jews who are willing to consider walking through our doors are not all that different from you and me. They want to be part of our synagogue community just like anyone else; without being singled out or made to feel different.

Instead of obsessing about intermarriage, it's time for us, parents and grandparents in partnership with synagogues, to get back to focus on what we can do to make a difference. It's time to focus our energies on engaging Jewish people in Jewish learning and living. It's time to focus on building a vibrant, welcoming, supportive community with lots of points of entry. It's time to focus on making sure that involvement in our synagogue community leads to ongoing spiritual growth and a feeling that we are contributing to making the world a better place.

For our children and grandchildren, we need to focus on doing whatever we can to make sure that they are living the fullest Jewish lives possible. We need to make the case for them, through our words, through our example, but most of all through the life experiences we share with them, that a deep level of Jewish engagement gives their lives meaning, joy and a sense of fulfillment. We need to show our kids and grandkids that Jewish learning is something we engage in throughout our lives; not just so we can qualify for Bar/Bat Mitzvah. We need to show our kids and grandkids that the Jewish holidays, including Shabbat, are not just ideas we learn about in religious school, but days that define the rhythm of our lives each week and each year and fill our homes with joy. We need to show our kids and grandkids that we live out our Jewish values not only in the synagogue, but in the workplace and the community. We need to show our kids and grandkids that Israel is not just a Jewish country, but a Jewish homeland that belongs to us as well.

Only when we do all these things will our conversation with them about marriage even begin to make sense. Only then will they see that when we say we want them to have a Jewish family, it is because we want them to share in the joy and meaning of Jewish life that has been so important to us, and so central in their upbringing. Such a conversation would be as natural and organic as talking to them about going to college. Even so, when we have said our piece, we will have to pray that, as they become adults and responsible for their own choices, they will see the value in our example.

All of us who have raised children know that there are no guarantees. We can drill into our kids the importance of education and they may still drop out of college. We can model for our kids the importance of family and they may still never visit or call home. We can teach our kids how be responsible with money and they may still end up broke. So too, even kids who were raised in the most committed Jewish homes, who received the best Jewish educations, who attended Jewish camps and were active in Jewish youth groups, can become disconnected from Jewish life. It happens even in Chasidic communities; it can certainly happen to us. As parents, and as grandparents, we give our kids the very best guidance. But in the end, it is up to them. All we can do is play the odds. Common sense tells us, and plenty of studies confirm, that the longer we expose our kids to Jewish learning, the more committed we are to Jewish living, the more likely

Judaism will be important to our kids. And the more important Judaism is to our kids, the more likely they are to be involved in Jewish life as adults and to raise Jewish kids of their own. And most will choose a Jewish partner because the choice will reflect their own values and priorities.

Inevitably, though, in this world that we live in, some Jews who really care about living Jewishly, will marry non-Jews. And some Jews who did not realize they cared so much about living Jewishly will discover these feelings only after they have married non-Jews—maybe only after they have had children. For these Jews, and their non-Jewish partners, we need to throw open the doors and offer a warm welcome, both in our homes and in the synagogue. In-laws can be a great resource in helping a non-Jewish spouse learn more about Judaism. Grandparents, can be great Jewish role models and sources of Jewish experiences for their grandchildren as well. In the synagogue, we need to somehow get rid of the outdated impression in our community that Conservative synagogues don't welcome intermarried couples. And we need to do whatever we can, within the bounds of Jewish law, to make sure that intermarried couples feel like first class citizens in our synagogues. We are not in the business of judging people's marital choices. Our mission is to connect Jews to Jewish life; to encourage Jews to learn, to celebrate and to repair the world. A Jew is a Jew is a Jew—no matter where they come from or who they are married to. In our synagogue, all Jews should feel welcome and included. All family members, whether they are Jewish or not, should feel like they are part of our Plainview Jewish Center family.

None of our efforts, of course, will make a difference for those Jews who don't feel connected to Judaism and are not interested in exploring a connection. We need to stop worrying about what choices these disengaged Jews make or don't make. Our doors are always open to them, should they decide to explore becoming more engaged in Jewish life. For that matter, our doors are always open to non-Jews who want to explore Jewish life; something we don't promote nearly as much as we should. But our efforts will make a difference for any Jews who carries the love of Jewish life and tradition in their hearts—no matter who they choose to marry.

We need to keep make sure our doors are wide open for these Jews, because inside these doors, we hold a treasure, a key to living a more meaningful, more fulfilling life, a key to connecting to God and to eternal truths, a key to appreciating life's joys, blessings, and coping with life's sorrows. This treasure, our tradition, is what has kept Judaism alive and vital for more than three thousand years. Generation after generation of Jews have embraced our tradition and Torah and made them the guiding forces in their lives. They have done not so much out of a sense of obligation to our ancestors, or from some perverse ethnic pride. Those who came before us embraced our tradition principally because it made their lives better, fuller and more meaningful. We have to trust that, if we passionately engage in a life shaped by this tradition, and engage our children as well, that most of our kids will grow up with a love of Judaism embedded deep in their hearts. And it will take more than just growing up in our multicultural society to extinguish this love. More than just a marital partner who does not yet share their passion. If we give our kids the kind of rich Jewish experiences they need, they will find a way to carry on the invaluable tradition we have passed down to them—by their own choice and in their own way.