

Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association
RESOLUTION
COMMITTEE ON INTERMARRIAGE

1980

- The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association is dedicated to the promotion and

perpetuation of the Jewish people and the Jewish way of life in North America. To this end, we are committed to developing creative and innovative responses to the unprecedented challenges with which contemporary Jewry is faced. We affirm our belief in the inherent value of the Jewish way of life and in the creative development of the Jewish people.

- We Believe that the best way of ensuring the perpetuation of Jewish values and

practices is through the creation of a Jewish home in which identification with and participation in the life of the Jewish people are central. We are thus determined to create programs with which to educate Jews about the spiritual opportunities available in their tradition. It is our hope that such programs will enable Jews to create Jewish homes and transmit a Jewish identity to their children. We believe that children raised in such homes are more likely to choose Jewish spouses when they marry. When a marriage occurs between two Jews who are committed to establishing a Jewish home, it is likely that his shared orientation will enrich their lives and enhance their marriage, and, in addition, will aid in the creative survival of the Jewish community.

2.1 The Reconstructionist approach to Judaism reflects an understanding that American

Jews live in two civilizations-the American and the Jewish-and that every American Jew strives continuously to balance commitment to the Jewish people with participation in the larger American society. Given the progressive integration of American Jews into the prevailing culture in which they work, study, and socialize, and in which they have increasingly come to share the conviction that romantic love ought to be the sole basis of marriage, the increasing incidence of marriages between Jews and non-Jews, however disturbing, should not surprise us. Yet we recognize that the rising rate of intermarriage, while remaining a serious matter of Jewish concern, reflects a larger issue to which we must address ourselves-the strengthening of Jewish life as a whole. We are dedicated to the revitalization of American Jewish life as the essential prerequisite for imparting a sense of Jewish identification which would, we believe, help to arrest the increasing rate of intermarriage.

2.2 At the same time as we identify and seek to confront the larger issues before us, we

cannot ignore the growing number of mixed couples who seek rabbinic counseling when contemplating intermarriage. We deem it imperative that such contact be encouraged and that direct or indirect rabbinic reprimands, which are bound to alienate the couple, be avoided. A Jew may choose a non-Jew as a spouse and not intend any betrayal of his/her heritage; in a significant number of situations the Jewish partner of a mixed couple is an identifying and committed Jew who has happened to fall in love with a non-Jewish person. Since our goal is to maximize the chance that the couple will establish a Jewish home and raise their children as Jews, the rabbi should seek in the initial contact with the couple to indicate what difficulties may be encountered in this regard. Even when the Jewish partner is positively disposed towards her/his Jewish identity, s/he may be uncertain about the logistics of Jewish observance in the home of a mixed couple; the non-Jewish partner will surely need to be acquainted with the issues involved. In meeting with the couple the rabbi ought to raise those issues which are problematic from the perspective of Jewish tradition. Such issues might include acceptance in the wider Jewish community (including the state of Israel), the identity and recognition of children and relationships with extended families. In such an exchange, it is hoped that the rabbi may determine how interested a couple is in

maintaining contact with the Jewish community and in establishing a Jewish home, and can offer the necessary guidance to nurture this spark of identity.

2.3 We believe that from the perspective of the Jewish people the most promising

outcome of a marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew results when the non-Jew is converted to Judaism. As we have stated in our Resolution On Conversion (see Appendix A) we regard favorably and encourage conversion to Judaism which is initiated for the sake of marriage. A marriage between a Jew and a convert to Judaism is not in any sense to be considered an intermarriage. The 1979 American Jewish Committee study Intermarriage and the Jewish Future indicates clearly that such marriages, which may be termed "conversionary marriages," enrich the Jewish people both qualitatively and quantitatively in the manifest and strong commitment of such couples to a Jewish way of life. When meeting with a mixed couple prior to marriage, we should indicate our conviction that conversion of the non-Jewish partner is the most desirable step if the couple has resolved to create a Jewish home and raise their children as Jews.

3.1 In many instances conversion of the non-Jewish partner of a mixed couple is not an

option. The couple may be uninterested in, or resistant to, such conversion; in other cases the rabbi may make the acquaintance of a couple only they have already been married. In all situations where such a couple indicates a desire to integrate themselves into the Jewish community, we should assist them in finding suitable channels of expression for their Jewish interests.

3.2 We believe that our synagogues ought to be receptive to intermarried couples. The

Reconstructionist movement recognizes the children of such marriages as Jewish as long as those children are raised as Jews. (See Appendix A, Resolution On Conversion.) The issue of the status of the non-Jewish partner within a synagogue community is more complex. Recognizing that Reconstructionism emphasizes the process of resolving such matters rather than the imposition of authoritative positions, we believe that issues such as the religious and membership privileges of a non-Jewish spouse are best decided by each congregation. Our Resolution On Religious Standards (see Appendix B) encourages congregations to engage in just such a procedure in matters of synagogue practice. We believe that through such a decision making process basic principles to which Reconstructionism is committed are affirmed: the rabbi as teacher and guide, the participation of laity in the formulation of religious standards, and the setting of policy through democratic and communal procedures.

4.1 As Reconstructionists, we recognize pluralism within our own ranks as well as within

the larger Jewish community. We realize that in dealing with the issue of intermarriage sensitive judgments need to be made which of necessity must be left to the individual rabbi. We respect the right of our colleagues to make their own determinations with regard to intermarriages, recognizing that each acts in accordance with the dictates of his/her conscience and out of a concern for the best interests of the Jewish people. What follows is an attempt to articulate guidelines within which we can so act.

4.2 When a rabbi is approached by a couple, one member of which is not Jewish,

requesting rabbinic officiation at their wedding ceremony, we believe that the interests of Jewish life are best served when the contact and communication between the rabbi and the couple are maximized. We do not believe that Jewish interests are well served by a rabbi who closes down lines of communication; rather, we encourage rabbis to be attentive to the needs of such a couple and to engage them in dialogue. In many instances the rabbi may find that the non-Jewish partner is interested in exploring conversion to Judaism. However, even when no such interest is evident, we remain hopeful of building on the potential commitment which is often implied in the couple's request for rabbinic officiation. The rabbi should be as sympathetic and accepting as possible without compromising his/her principled objection,

based on Jewish tradition, to rabbinic officiation at an intermarriage without communicating to the couple any sense that they have been rejected by the Jewish community. In offering his/her time the rabbi can both indicate an interest in helping the couple work through the issues inherent in their situation, and encourage their involvement and participation in the Jewish community.

4.3 We believe that insofar as a rabbi represents the standards of the Jewish people

and the integrity of Judaism's traditions and sancta, acceptance and welcoming of a mixed couple need not extend to the rabbi's officiating at the rite of kiddushin for the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jew. One carries the title rabbi and the duties and privileges that go with that title by virtue of a commitment to teach and transmit Jewish values and to work for the creative development of the Jewish people. We believe that the achievement of these goals necessitates the preservation of the essential integrity of Jewish sancta through their authentic application.

4.4 Situations may arise in which a mixed couple may be committed to establishing a

Jewish home and raising their children as Jews, but in which the non-Jewish partner is not prepared to convert to Judaism at the time of the wedding. In such cases, the rabbi may feel that it is important, in encouraging the couple to fulfill their commitments, to see them through the process of civil marriage with his/her personal support. When a rabbi comes to be reasonably assured that a couple intends to follow through with Jewish commitments in their family life, and that his/her presence at the civil marriage ceremony serves both the interests of Jewish communal survival and of the Jewish development of the couple, the rabbi may decide to attend the ceremony. His/her presence should in no way be construed as that of officiant. The rabbi may further choose to offer appropriate remarks welcoming the couple into the Jewish community and encouraging their continued involvement in the life of the Jewish people.

4.5 We Believe that in those instances in which a rabbi chooses to attend and/or

participate in a civil marriage ceremony between a Jew and a non-Jew, as described above, such presence should be in keeping with the office of rabbi. The highly symbolic presence of a rabbi at a wedding ceremony invites abuse unless we are prudent and discriminating. Therefore, the rabbi's attendance and/or participation in a civil marriage ceremony of a mixed couple should reflect the couple's expressed determination to pursue, in the course of an ongoing Jewish identification, ties with the Jewish community and the establishment of a Jewish home.

5.1 Sociological indicators suggest that in view of the high degree of integration of Jews

into American life, it is unlikely that the increasing rate of intermarriage will abate in the foreseeable future. In light of this, we believe that the rabbinic community cannot afford to turn away from the significant number of mixed couples-many of whom have sincere Jewish commitments-who seek rabbinic support and guidance. Reconstructionism has always faced boldly the challenges of living in an open society. With no less boldness and conviction must we reach out today to mixed couples, demonstrating to them that we are willing to help them find their place in the Jewish community. Although the current rate of intermarriage poses a serious challenge to the Jewish community, we believe that if we are more receptive to those already intermarried as well as those contemplating intermarriage, this challenge may yet be turned into a promising opportunity for Jewish renewal.