

## Chayei Sarah 5778

It's been said that everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it. There are things in life that we have little or no control over; we can only react to them. In addition to the weather we can add: the outcome of sporting events,

I am sometimes called upon to intervene in family situations where intermarriage is causing friction. Some intermarriages work just fine; if each partner knows what to expect and they are honest about their concerns, it is possible to live in a house with two faiths. My personal view is that it is better to have one faith in the home, but I cannot categorically state that other situations cannot work. But even when an intermarriage itself is a healthy relationship, relations with the extended family can be difficult to manage. In other words, the friction is not usually between the couple, but between the couple and the Jewish parents. Those parents can feel betrayed by the choices their adult children have made, and they may say or do things that further complicate their relationship with their children even as they struggle to accept those choices.

As a Conservative rabbi, the issue of intermarriage is a double-edged challenge. Because I am forbidden by our movement to even attend, let alone officiate at, an intermarriage, I run the risk of alienating many Jews and their potential spouses at the very moment when contact with a rabbi can determine the entire Jewish future of a family. When 70% of non-Orthodox Jews marry outside the Jewish community, that may be the same percentage that my inability or refusal to do their weddings hurts, and who make a silent vow to never be Conservative Jews. At the same time, because our movement recognizes that weddings between Jews and non-Jews are increasingly common and socially accepted, we need to be able to confront the reality of our

situation and respond with love and caring, not just talking about it, but doing something about it. We want to do all we can to keep the Jewish spouse in the fold, keep their kids in our movement and encourage conversion of the non-Jewish spouse if that is something they are interested in pursuing. We can see how these two approaches, one before the wedding and one after, are in tension: We tell couples we are opposed to what they are doing, but that if they do it anyway we would love to have them as members.

This is not a new problem. Jews in every age have struggled with the conflict between their faith and community on the one hand and their personal choices on the other, in marriage and in many other spheres. That is why Abraham and his servant go to such lengths in this week's parsha to find a suitable wife for Isaac. They want to ensure that the new nation that Abraham is establishing is as homogenous as possible, excluding potential spouses that would detract from the covenant that Abraham and God have established. But if you think that it is hard to find a Jewish spouse now, just put yourself in Abraham's sandals: There are no Jewish women for Isaac to marry; the only Jewish woman in the world had been his mother Sarah, and she has just died! So Abraham does the next best thing; he sends his servant back to their home country to find a blood relative who will complement Isaac personally and help to fulfill the sacred covenant.

Rebecca is in many ways the perfect wife for Isaac. She is kind, she is beautiful, and she later shows herself to be forceful and decisive when she needs to be. But her most important attribute may be that she is willing to enter into this family and to fulfill its destiny. Abraham's servant goes looking for someone who shares the same values and will continue to establish the same relationship with God that Abraham and Sarah did. Just as Sarah had come into the

covenant with God as an adult, so does Rebecca. No one would argue that she is any less Jewish than Sarah or any of her many descendants. So one lesson we might take from this parsha is that while arguing for marrying within the faith is not a slap at non-Jews – it is an attempt at the same kind of continuity of religious and cultural norms – at the same time, intermarriage in modern America is not the death knell for Judaism. Rebecca becomes the second matriarch by freely choosing to become one of the family, to become a Jew; she shows the same faith in God that Sarah did, and is rewarded for that faith by being the second link in the chain that reaches all the way down to our time.

There may be no way to avoid the problematic issues that we face with intermarriage. Before the fact, we can only talk about it, not do something. After the fact we cannot alter the reality of an intermarriage, and should not want to. Our best bet may indeed be to continue to argue against it before the fact but to accept it after the fact, behaving with as much love, respect and kindness that we possibly can. Many non-Jews are willing to take part in our covenant, either by converting or by raising their children as Jews so that they may do so, in effect viewing our non-Jewish sons and daughters-in-law as potential Rebeccas. Given the statistics, that's probably not a bad deal; encouraging raising Jewish children in intermarried families may be the best way to ensure a Jewish future.

I am not making a policy recommendation. This is not the time in EBJC's history to make an argument to forcefully market ourselves as a home for intermarried couples. Having said that, the statistics dictate that every one of us will confront this issue within our families, if we are not already. Intermarriage is like the weather, a reality of modern Jewish life that is little affected by how we feel about it; but it is also unlike the weather, in that our reaction to it can

help to influence intermarrieds' views of Judaism. My charge to you today is to reflect on how best to react to what may seem as immune to our actions as the weather, and to instead see it as an opportunity for shaping the future of the Jewish people. Let's remember that Rebecca was not born a Jew, but she became the second of our matriarchs. Marrying into our people, she made it possible for every future Jew to come into being. Many of the non-Jews who marry into Jewish families are inspired by our heritage and willing to raise Jewish children. Let's do all we can to model loving behavior that will encourage them to do so.

Shabbat shalom.