

Dating Non-Jews

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The latest international storm in a teacup is yet another dumb letter circulating in Israel. [This one, signed by 27 prominent rabbis' wives and distributed by the "Lehava" organization](#), calls on Jewish women not to date Arabs, work in places where Arabs are employed, or volunteer for National Service with them. They insist that it isn't about racism but about protecting the Jewish faith

Naturally this has reverberated around the world's press, including Israel's, as a further example of how awful religious Jews are. You know that I completely and unreservedly condemned the earlier statement of some rabbis (blessed neither with common sense nor with a feel for public relations) telling Israelis not to rent or sell to Arabs. In a democratic state where non-Jews have equal civil rights (though they may suffer prejudice and discrimination, of which I disapprove) such opinions are unacceptable; thank goodness the major Charedi rabbis joined in the condemnation of the less ultranationalist rabbis who signed the letter.

But this is different. It concerns the issue of marriage—a (usually) voluntary agreement, entered into freely. It is often said that Israel, allegedly an apartheid state, prevents Israelis from marrying Arabs. This is a lie. It does not. As the figures each year of Israelis (mainly women) marrying Arabs proves. Israel does not have civil marriages, it is true, and I regret that. But all religions are allowed to perform marriages; any Israeli Jew wanting to marry an Israeli Muslim or a Christian in Israel has to convert to their religion and, bingo, it's a done deal, [according to law](#).

No rabbi's wife in her right mind could possibly think this letter would have an iota of effect on a woman already convinced she is in love with the man of her dreams. Particularly if she has reached a certain age and not had any offers. The public relations snafu done by this pointless letter by far outweighs any possible gain, because the sort of women who do marry out are already way beyond the emotional influence of rabbis' wives.

The fact is that every religion I know of, does not welcome or approve of its members marrying out. Catholic priests will only allow a Catholic to marry a Jew if there is a commitment that the children will be brought up as Catholics. And any Muslim wanting to marry out runs the serious risk of decapitation, as enough cases even in Britain have illustrated. Religions want to keep their own. It is not a racial thing, because most religions are a mixture of genetic components.

I do not approve of marrying out of Judaism. Obviously, I do not include genuine conversions out of religious commitment, because the whole of Jewish history records the enrichment of Jewish life through ideological conversion. But even when a Jew marries a non-Jew with no intention of preserving a Jewish way of life I am still not in favor of cutting ties or refusing to

interact positively.

Neither do I believe that if you marry out you break out in spots and your tushy will sag and the mark of Cain will appear on your forehead. But I do believe it tends to endanger the continuity of religious tradition, and if one cares about one's tradition one will want to avoid it. I know there are exceptions, but they are few and far between, and usually in denominations where the full panoply of a Jewish lifestyle does not apply.

If the kerfuffle over the rabbis' wives is indeed a storm in a teacup, it tellingly reveals the fault lines amongst Jews. [Rabbi Gilad Kariv, the head of Israel's Reform Judaism movement, criticized the letter](#), saying, "Israeli society is falling into a deep, dark pit of racism and xenophobia."

[The former Prime Minister and leader of the Labor Party, Ehud Barak, joined the fray.](#) "The rabbis' letter and the letter by rabbis' wives are part of wave of racism threatening to sweep Israeli society into a dark and dangerous place," he was quoted as saying in Haaretz. "The Labor Party under my leadership is working to bring the Israeli people together, from all nationalities, in the spirit of the scroll of independence."

Discrimination under the law must be outlawed. On the other hand, freedom of religious practice must be a given in any society, for that is precisely why we Jews can flourish in places like the USA. What is sauce for the goose must be sauce for the gander. But the right to live one's religious life allows one to try to persuade one's children to perpetuate it. This is how religions survive.

Dating anyone of a different religion inevitably raises issues. I am not saying they can never be resolved but I am saying it is not ideal for either party. And once one gets used to dating out, the consequences are usually predictable. As inhibitions relax, commitment to one's faith, where it was weak to begin with, will be jettisoned. A date in itself is not necessarily the end. I once took a Christian girl out to a concert in Cambridge (the [daughter of a bishop](#), no less) and it doesn't seem to have had too bad an effect (depends whom you ask, of course).

But yes, I think it is right to point out the arguments and the problems and pitfalls of cultural differences. Just as even within the faith it is right to examine expectations and challenge feelings. We all put our best feet forward until we are spliced and then tend to relax. But to issue a general public letter, as those women did, just reveals the reason that Judaism is still such a small, niche market.

On the other hand, the reaction illustrates once again how hypocritical the media are in giving as much space to those rabbis wives as it did to yet another example of [Muslims massacring Christians, this time in Cairo](#). The BBC relegated the item from its front website page to the subsidiary "Middle East" after just two hours. While it left the rebbetzins on the main page, as well as the sad accidental death of a Palestinian woman at a demonstration, for 48 hours longer. We are in enough trouble without making [bigger monkeys](#) of ourselves.