

*Parshat Emor* concludes with an enigmatic scene: “And a fight broke out in the camp between that son of an Israelite woman and a certain Israelite” (24:10).

What might first strike us is how the Biblical understanding of Jewishness differs from our own. In the world shaped by the rabbis of the first five centuries of the common era, the child of a Jewish woman is a Jew. In the story before us, however, the “son of an Israelite woman” is depicted as a villain,

and I suspect that some of his villainy is due to his father being an “Egyptian” (v.10).

In short, the unnamed person who is the protagonist of this short story is considered an outsider, someone who doesn’t completely belong to the Jewish people.

Immediately, we hear echoes of this in the context in which we live. The intermarriage rate is well over 50% across the United States and would be even higher if the Orthodox were excluded from the count.

Intermarriage hits me personally, as nearly all of my aunts, uncles, and cousins are

intermarried. Throughout Jewish history, there has been an overlap between Jewishness and family; now, we can be members of the same family without sharing Jewishness. This is a monumental change in Jewish history.

Rashi says that the son of the Israelite woman went to the camp of the tribe of Dan. They (the men of Dan) said to him, “What gives you the right to come here?” He replied. “I am one of the children of the tribe of Dan”. Thereupon they said to him, “Every man [of the children of Israel shall encamp] by his

own standard, that bears the signs of *their father's* house"! "(Numbers 2:2). In other words, because he has an Egyptian father, not a Jewish one, he is excluded from the tribe of Dan.

This is one of the glaring issues that one finds when comparing the Bible to the Talmud. Whereas the Bible appears to affirm patrilineal descent; the Rabbis of the Talmud argue that one is only a Jew if he has a Jewish mother.

This argument has been used by the Reform movement to justify patrilineal descent.

That decision is one of the reasons I stopped affiliating with Reform Judaism. I simply believe that Judaism makes little sense without in-marriage, or endogamy.

The story in our parsha becomes even more unbelievable, as Rashi informs us that the Egyptian man who fathered this child was the same Egyptian that Moses killed when he saw him beating the slave. Rashi himself seems perplexed by the matter because he

informs us that he was actually a convert.

What need would he have for conversion if his mother is Jewish?!

Rashi creates a full story on top of the story that we hear about in Scripture. The act of blasphemy that the son of an Israelite woman committed was the use of the Tetragrammaton, which he had heard at Sinai.

Here, Rashi's story takes on a certain coherence. His being at Sinai established him as a convert.

In less than three weeks, we will mark the holiday of Shavuot. Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Torah. During that two day holiday, we read the Book of Ruth. Ruth is the template for conversion. She is the daughter-in-law of Naomi and chooses to accompany her from Moab to Judah, declaring, “...your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (1:16).

Intermarriage and conversion are often topics that go together, especially today.

While I don't have any statistics, my perception is that the Jericho Jewish Center

has only a few converts and even fewer intermarried families.

That strikes me as extremely interesting and leads me to wonder out loud, How did that come to be our demographic reality?

We know that much of the growth that has powered Reform congregations is the welcoming of intermarried families into the congregation and the acceptance of the children of Jewish men as Jews. While Conservative Judaism continues to affirm matrilineal descent, many congregations are seeking to welcome the intermarried.

At this precarious time in Jewish history of the Jewish people, the reality of intermarriage is unmistakably one of the premier issues. As our congregation continues to develop and transform its identity, how we integrate the intermarried will be a crucial issue.

At the conclusion of my sermon, I'd like to open up questions to the congregations about this topic.

At my previous congregation, intermarriage was much more prevalent in the congregation. The President and Vice

President were intermarried, and the most immediate past president was married to a convert.

Shavuot is the holiday of converts. To understand why, consider how it differs from Passover. Passover marks the Exodus from Egypt. Shavuot marks God's giving of the Torah. The Exodus is an event experienced by a people, and we are their descendants. God's giving of the Torah turns Jewish belonging from a familial affair into a textual affair.

Affirm the truth of this Scripture, and you are a part of the Jewish people.

As we count down the days until the end of quarantine, let us not forget to count up the days to Shavuot. What I'd like you to consider as we approach Shavout is the question of how to integrate the intermarried and converts into our congregation and the Jewish people at large. What this demands is something that we're not particularly comfortable with as Jews, and that is proselytizing. In fact, the Jewish people was a proselytizing people until the Roman Empire prohibited it in the late fourth century. The

newly Christian empire wanted the pagans for their own conversionary purposes.

Proselytizing provokes the even larger question of the place of the Jewish people in the world. We often think of the world as the large entity of which we are a part, but we also make the claim that the God of Israel is the God of everyone. Therefore, when we think of assimilation, we see ourselves as merging into a group larger than us. In reality, the world is assimilating toward the ways of the Torah. In that sense the whole dynamic is reversed. Everyone in the world is becoming

more Jewish. Recognizing that can make the prospect of proselytizing easier.

The quarrel that broke out in the camp is an opportunity for us to reflect on the moment we live in, noting how it differs from this account in the Torah and the world the Talmud created. We have to think creatively about our moment, but we also have to make sure that we do not lose our foothold in our heritage in this world that swarms all around us.

Is the low number of intermarried and converted at the Jericho Jewish Center

coincidental or do you think that this is part of our identity somehow? Should we make an active push to motivate the intermarried to join our congregation? I put these questions to you. What do you think?