Good morning and thank you for coming today.

Our gathering is the second in a three-part series that was chiefly designed to fulfill two goals during this year in which I have set out to reflect on the question of whether or not to officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies during this next chapter of my rabbinate.

The first of those goals is a sincere desire on my part to share some of the fundamental philosophical questions that I am grappling with as I proceed in my own decision-making process. And the second of those goals is to hear from you. I have had the privilege of hearing congregants’ perspectives on this issue on an almost weekly basis since I arrived here in July, and my office door remains open going forward. It goes without saying that I’d be delighted to schedule a meeting if you would like to discuss this topic, or any topic, in private.

Our time together this morning will be an additional opportunity, for those who feel comfortable in this public setting, to share their own perspective on this broad issue, as well as respond to my teaching, which will make up the first part of our program today.

(For those that were not with us in January for the first session, I would refer you to my introductory remarks that were delivered at that time – and which can be accessed online – describing some of the background behind this process. On this day, I will only reiterate that: from the rabbi’s perspective, this is not an easy question to resolve. I would, for example, invite those who are interested to track down a copy of the 1999 book *Rabbis Talk About Intermarriage* by Gary Tobin and Katherine Simon. The book does an excellent job of illustrating, by way of interviewing rabbis across the denominational spectrum, what a difficult issue this is for us.

It does a fair job of representing the philosophical grappling that I have been doing, and will continue to do, over the next few months.

At our gathering in January, my lecture was focused around the broad introductory question of whether Jewish Law can, or should, change over time. The question was absurd, on one level, because practically every Jew knows that Jewish law and practice change over time. Invoking just the most obvious example: there was a time two and a half millennia ago, when our ancestors knew only of communicating with God by way of offering animal sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. But – newsflash to all of us: we Jews stopped offering sacrifices way back in the year 70. The very definition of what it means to *be Jewish* and live a Jewish life has thus changed dramatically over the course of Jewish History.

And yet: as we saw last time, there are some boundaries that are sacrosanct…boundaries so widely observed that even the most liberal ham-and-cheese loving Reform Jews and their rabbis ardently refuse to cross them. One that we looked at in some detail concerned the proposal of Professor Alvin Reines. Rabbi Reines radically put forth the idea that Jews should be free to celebrate Shabbat on whatever day of the week was most convenient for them, in the hopes of increasing the number of Jews who would become, at least by Reines’ definition, Shabbat observant. The proposal fell on deaf ears – because by unspoken consensus, even liberal Reform Jews were able to articulate that Shabbat is not just an individualistic observance. There are also communal elements. Part of Shabbat is about reinforcing our connection to *klal yisrael*, the entirety of the Jewish People, and experiencing the surreal joy of knowing that Jews all around the world are sitting down at the table at approximately the same time to experience the same ritual, just as we’ve done for thousands of years. Reines’ Shabbat would have divorced us from that – it was too radical a change to the normative definition of Jewishness – and thus his idea was marginalized.

On my own journey towards discerning whether or not I will officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies, I will need to determine where such officiation falls on the spectrum of changes that I believe Judaism can and should….not just tolerate, but consciously, joyously affirm. Today’s conversation, surrounding the question of interfaith marriage in Jewish History, is, for me, one step toward making that determination.

In the remaining part of our first hour together, I’d like to split my time between discussing today’s subject – Interfaith Marriage in Jewish History - from the vantage point of those who are “pro-officiation” and those who are “con-officiation.”

That will leave us with approximately half an hour for us to engage in discussion together. Please do feel free to make a note of questions that come up during the lecture. I will be happy to answer them once I have concluded my remarks.

After flipping a coin in my office a few days ago, I determined that we should begin this morning with the “pro” side of the question…and in doing so, I will seek to build a narrative that will argue that interfaith relationships in Judaism are not transgressive, but are, rather, normative to who we are as a people.

Interfaith marriage as a phenomenon appears in the Book of Genesis.[[1]](#footnote-1) But the first prominent appearance of it occurs in the Book of Exodus. There, in Chapter 2 verse 21, we learn that none other than Moses was intermarried.

Moses, as it turns out, was married to a woman named *Zipporah…*and she was not an Israelite.

It seems to me that the text does not seek to hide this fact. In verse 22, we learn that some time after they were married, Zipporah gave birth to a son whom Moses consciously named Gershom, which means “a stranger there.” Moses felt like an outsider in Midian. Zipporah was not part of his people, nor was he part of her’s.

It is perhaps not widely known that Moses was a part of an interfaith family. Some might even wonder if later Jewish tradition tried to cover up or gloss over this part of Moses’ identity. But that is not the case. I want to share with you just one example of how the rabbis of 2,000 years ago wrote about the dynamics of interfaith relationships in the context of this story.

In *Mechilta d’Rabbi Yishmael*, a collection of midrash from approximately 1500 years ago, responding to Exodus 18:3 which makes reference to Zipporah and Moses and their two sons who were born in what the Torah calls “a strange land,” we read the following:

“R. Joshua says: It certainly was a land strange to Moses. R. Eleazar of Modi‘in says: “In a strange land”—where God was like a stranger. Moses said: Since the whole place of [Midian] is worshiping idols, whom shall I worship? [And the midrash answers:] Him by whose word the world came into being. For at the time when Moses said to Jethro: “Give me your daughter Zipporah to wife,” Jethro said to him: “Accept one condition which I will state to you and I will give her to you for a wife.” “What is it?” asked Moses. He then said to him: “The first son that you will have shall belong to the idol and the following may belong to God.” Moses accepted these terms. Jethro then said: “Swear unto me,” and Moses swore.

The midrash goes on, and so we will continue with it in a moment. But let’s step back for a second and appreciate how remarkable this passage is thus far.

Here we have the rabbis of 1500 years ago affirming the fact that Moses was married to a woman who was not an Israelite. And it shows Moses engaged in the kind of conversation that so many of us who are connected to interfaith families are a part of from time to time….where candid conversations sometimes take place about the kinds of compromises that are required in contemporary interfaith families today.

This text is remarkable….not just because it affirms Moses’ interfaith relationship, but also seems to indicate that Moses was willing to raise one of his sons in Zipporah’s religious tradition, instead of his own! This arrangement doesn’t last too long, as we are about to see.

But isn’t it interesting that Moses agreed to it – even initially?

Before returning to the midrash, let me take this moment to fill you in on some necessary background information. Returning back to the Torah text…at the point in the narrative after Moses speaks to God at the burning bush and sends Moses and his family back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh…it is there that we read the following, beginning at Exodus 4:24: “It was on the way, where they were camping, that the Holy One encountered him. [Keep in mind that Moses and his two sons were there so we’re not sure who the “him” is] and *vayivakeish ha’meeto*! – and – shockingly – God sought to kill him! [Again, not sure who the “him” is…] So Zipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son [the text is vague about which one of the sons, but more on that in a moment] and touched the foreskin to his feet [again not sure who the “his” is]…

And the text continues in verse 26: So he released him [the “he” here is apparently the Angel of Death] and Zipporah proclaimed: [And here I offer my own interpretive translation because the Hebrew is so vague:] The life of my bridegroom was threatened because of circumcision.”

Okay. Totally crazy that Moses’ life was apparently threatened. What was that all about?

Our midrash from *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael* fills in some of the blanks. Regarding Moses’ initial willingness to raise his first son in the Midianite religion of Zipporah, the midrash notes: “It was for this reason that the angel at first wished to kill Moses.” [In other words, Moses was being punished not just for the general infraction of not raising his child as an Israelite, but also for the more specific infraction of not circumcising his son at a proper *bris.* Thank goodness that Zipporah stepped in to rectify the situation.

She is history’s first recorded example of a non-Jewish female *mohel*, and she saved Moses’ life all at the same time.

I mention all of this here, in the first half of today’s lecture, because it is nothing short of remarkable, in my opinion, that Moses was one half of an interfaith family. And it seems, at least from the Exodus part of the Moses narrative, that no one objected to the relationship. Just the opposite. The text seems to be saying that – so long as interfaith families agree to raise their children as Jewish – than our tradition does not object to interfaith marriage.

The Torah acknowledges Moses’ interfaith family in other ways. There is the prominent role that is bestowed upon Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law. (Keep in mind, here, that we have a midrashic tradition from the rabbis of 2,000 years ago that imagines that earlier in Jethro’s career he was a chief adviser to Pharaoh…)

Yet in Exodus 18:7, when we read of Jethro and Zipporah’s reunion with Moses, the text notes: “Moses went out to meet his [non-Jewish] father-in-law, and he prostrated himself and kissed him, and each inquired about the other’s well-being…[And the text continues in verse 9:] Jethro rejoiced over all the good that the Holy One had done for Israel, that God had rescued it from the hand of Egypt. Jethro said these powerful words: ‘*Baruch Adonai asher hitzil etchem mi’yad Mitzrayim u’mi’yad Far’o – asher hitzil et ha’am mitachat yad Mitzrayim.* Praised be Adonai Who rescued you from the hand of Egypt and the hand of Pharaoh, Who has rescued the people from the hand of Egypt. *Atah yadati ki gadol Adonai mi’kol haElohim; ki va’davar asher za’du aleihem.* Now I know that the Holy One is greater than all of the other gods [that I have known in my past] because of the heinous way in which the Egyptians conspired against the Israelites.’ Jethro, the father in law of Moses, took an elevation-offering and feast-offerings for God; and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat bread with the father-in-law of Moses before the Holy One.”

And as if the lauding of Jethro in that passage is not enough, the chapter concludes with Jethro giving sage advice to Moses about the most efficient way to administer the dispute resolution system for the Israelites. Chapter 18 verse 24 notes that “Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law, and did everything that he had said.”

Notice that Jethro isn’t just received by Moses and his family, as they might receive any old relative. He is received by Moses and the entire community as a singular VIP. Indeed, I cannot think of another instance in the Torah narrative where Moses prostrates himself to anyone except God. If the text was looking to be critical of this man who was not an Israelite, it could have done any number of things to express that. Instead, Jethro is raised up as a hero. It is, in my reading, an unambiguous affirmation of interfaith marriage in the Torah.

There is a coda to this story, and we find it in Numbers Chapter 12. We read there of the dysfunctional family scandal that includes this detail: “Miriam and Aaron spoke out against Moses regarding the Cushite woman he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman.”

Why, after all of this time, are Aaron and Miriam – Moses’ siblings – talking trash about him?

Our traditional commentators read the questioning about Zipporah’s identity [or is the Cushite, according to one midrashic tradition, a second wife of Moses?] as a smokescreen. Miriam is not actually criticizing the fact that Moses is in an interfaith marriage – though certainly opponents of interfaith marriage today read this passage as being in support of their position. But historically, most commentators see Miriam’s objection as being rooted in jealousy. She, and to a lesser degree Aaron, yearned for the power and prophecy that Moses had been blessed with. And this was their way of trying to grab it.

Regardless of whether Miriam’s hurtful words are rooted in a critique of Moses interfaith marriage, or in his role as a leader: God’s response to the incident is unequivocal. In chapter 12 verses 9 and following we read: “*Vayichar af Adonai bam…vayeilech.* The wrath of the Holy One flared up against Miriam and Aaron, and God left…God abandoned them.” Rashi notes on this passage that God personally “put the ban on them” – Judaism’s version of excommunication.

The next thing we know: “BEHOLD! Miriam was afflicted with *tza’ra’at –* a mysterious white skin disease that looks just like snow…Aaron turned to Miriam and BEHOLD – he stood there frozen in disbelief – she was surely afflicted with *tza’ra’at*.”

Moses quickly intervenes on Miriam’s behalf, and she is healed. But God’s punishment serves its purpose. If we weren’t sure back in Exodus, we can be sure now: God most certainly does not object to Moses’ interfaith marriage.

We alread5swedy noted how the rabbis of the midrash stipulated their acceptance of Moses’ interfaith marriage…by having God insist that Moses’ children be raised as Jews.

As I complete this somewhat progressive reading of our sources, I want to point out one other stipulation that is attached to this story.

You might recall that the story of how Moses met and fell in love with Zipporah begins at the well of Midian. There was a conflict there…some local shepherds were harassing Jethro’s daughters. Moses stepped in and saved the day. The daughters run home to tell their father about the new hero in their midst. Exodus 2:19 has the daughters saying to Jethro: “An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds, and he even drew water for us and watered the sheep.” The texts goes on in verse 21: “Moses desired to dwell with the man [Jethro]; and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses.”

Much is made in our tradition about the fact that Moses never corrects the daughters about his true identity. He is not merely an Egyptian that was raised in Pharaoh’s household. He is also, of course, an Israelite.

His failure to share this information at the moment that he was introduced to Jethro is deeply problematic for our rabbis. One midrash notes that – for this auspicious silence “God punished him by causing him to die outside of the Promised Land. Joseph, who had proclaimed in public that he was a Hebrew, found his last resting-place in the land of the Hebrews, and Moses, who apparently had no objection to being considered an Egyptian, had to live and die outside of that land.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

So it would seem that, even within the bounds of our progressive reading of the Moses story and its strong affirmation of interfaith marriage, that a second stipulation would be a public declaration by the Jewish member of the couple of that individual’s Jewish identity. Our tradition can at least potentially imagine a sanctioned interfaith marriage, but only so long as the Jewish partner continues to embrace, with pride, their innate Jewishness so as to convey it to the next generation.

There are other prominent examples in the Hebrew Bible of semi-sanctioned interfaith marriages. But nearly all of them involve political marriages: Israelite kings married to foreign women to cement a strategic alliance. And even those are questioned for some of the reasons that we will be exploring in the second half of this lecture.

So the question before us – and before me, as I reflect on the decision that lies ahead - is to what degree the Moses story can be treated as what we might call a “halachic midrash” – that is: a story or interpretation that can justify a certain Jewish law or practice? That is an important question….and one that I am thankful that I do not have to answer just yet.

I want to fast forward straight through the Middle Ages to the dawning of the Enlightenment and what we might call Modernity. In the intervening hundreds of years, there was a certain default avoidance of interfaith marriage. We’ll learn the reason for that in a few minutes. I don’t want to over-generalize. Certainly we can find examples of interfaith marriage in the medieval period, particularly in communities that enjoyed a stable relationship with the host government, where assimilationist tendencies were recorded.

But as a widespread phenomenon, interfaith marriage does not really become an issue until the Emancipation of the Jews – first in France in the late 1790s – and then in Germany in the early part of the 19th century. In those communities, and later here in the United States and other locales, Jews were - by and large for the first time – permitted to live where they wanted to, study where they wanted to, shop where they wanted to, and work where they wanted to. And as some – particularly our non-Orthodox forbears – began meeting those who were not Jewish…social relationships inevitably formed.

Surely it does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that when social relationships are formed, romantic ones are not too far behind.

Today we American Jews live in a landscape in which approximately one of every two Jews is marrying a partner who is not Jewish.[[3]](#footnote-3) And the question before us is whether or not that statistic should argue as a mitigating factor in favor of rabbinic officiation at interfaith wedding ceremonies.

My own emotional response to that question is: yes. I have long struggled with the notion that – as a rabbi who currently does not officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies – that I am not being present, on some level, for one half of the community that I am supposed to be committed to serving. Existentially: I remain confused about what to do with that realization.

But this decision for me of whether to officiate will not ultimately be made because of emotions. It will be a decision rooted in spiritual and intellectual values.

And, in that sense, it is perhaps worth making reference at this point to the work of Solomon Schechter, who might be useful in this regard.

Schechter, the world famous scholar and architect of Conservative Judaism at the dawn of the 20th century, articulated a belief in something that he called “Catholic Israel” to explain that Judaism can and should change over time…that normative Judaism should be reflective of what most Jews are doing on the ground. The use of the term “catholic” here has nothing, of course, to do with the Church, but rather speaks to the definition of the word pertaining to how a broad swath of people behave.

Writing in 1896 on the question of authority – of who/what gets to decide what constitutes normative Judaism – he noted: “It follows that the centre of authority is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some living body, which, by reason of its being in touch with the ideal aspirations and the religious needs of the age, is best able to determine the nature of [the proper interpretation of the Bible]. This living body, however, is not represented by any section of the nation, or any corporate priesthood, or Rabbihood, but by the collective conscience of Catholic Israel.”

To be sure: Schechter was a traditionalist. He devoted his life and his writing to promoting a Jewish traditionalism to America’s Jewish community. In a thousand years, Schechter himself would have never endorsed or affirmed the notion of interfaith marriage.

Yet his philosophical approach does account for any number of progressive innovations in Conservative movement practices….perhaps the most famous one being the movement’s decision in the 1950’s to officially permit congregants to drive to the synagogue on Shabbat. There is no question that traditional Jewish law prohibits driving on Shabbat. Nonetheless, our friends in the Conservative movement, channeling Schechter’s reasoning that if the majority of your community on the ground is actually behaving in a certain way, than that already constitutes their interpretation of normative Jewish practice, rubber-stamped the phenomenon.

Does the question of rabbinic officiation at interfaith marriage fall into that same category? Should we see the practice as normative (and therefore, kosher) because such a significant number of Jews in our community are already deciding to marry outside of the faith? That, too, will be a central question that I will need to answer for myself in the coming months.

Now, let us shift gears, as we seek to examine the question of interfaith marriage in Jewish history from the “con” side of the question.

Social scientists use the term “endogamy” to refer to the phenomenon of marriage to a partner who is within the same tribe or social grouping (like a religion). In this sense, we can state that Judaism has, historically, been a civilization that prizes endogamy.

It goes back to the earliest moments of Jewish history, when the first Jewish person of all time…Abraham…has to set about finding a wife for his son, Isaac. He sends his servant Eliezer out to arrange the match.

But a close reading of the text indicates that Abraham was very particular about where Eliezer was to go about his search. We read in Genesis 24 verse 3 and following: “You will not take a wife for my son from among the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose midst I dwell. Rather you shall go to my land, my birthplace, and get a wife for my son Isaac.”

Our movement’s own official Torah commentary, originally edited by Rabbi Gunther Plaut around 1980, carries this comment to that text: “Abraham wants his son to remain a stranger in Canaan; hence he commands marriage within his own group. Here are the beginning strands of Judaism’s strong feelings about mixed marriages. […] What is at stake is religion and family tradition, not ethnic or racial “purity.””[[4]](#footnote-4)

That last sentence of Plaut’s is something that we might do well to meditate on. In the so-called culture war that is playing out in the liberal Jewish world today around interfaith issues, there are certainly any number of people who have suggested that rabbis and congregations that are not welcoming to interfaith families are quasi-racist. That is un-necessarily strong language, in my opinion, and clearly a sentiment that Plaut that does not agree with either. But I would invite you to make your own determination around that question.

The preference for endogamy in the Torah, which is also embedded in the dialogue that plays out between Isaac, Rebekkah, and their son Esau at Genesis 26:34-35, is not made explicit until Deuteronomy chapter 7.

Deuteronomy 7 is a text that seeks to explain the differences between the Israelites and the people of the Seven Canaanite Nations that our ancestors were to encounter as they entered the Land of Israel at the end of their 40 year sojourn through the desert. Those seven nations…the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites…are the “them” that is being referred to in this chapter’s fateful verse number 3: “*V’lo teet’cha’tein bam; beet’cha lo tee’tein leev’no; u’vee’to lo tee’kach leev’necha.* You shall not intermarry with them; do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. *Kee ya’seer et been’cha mei’acharai, v’avdu elohim acheirim; v’charah af Adonai ba’chem, v’heesh’meed’cha ma’heir.* For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Eternal One’s anger will flare against you, promptly wiping you out.”

There is much to be reflected on with regards to this text. Certainly we should begin by acknowledging that some in this room, particularly those who are directly touched by interfaith marriage, might find this text to be painful to hear and consider.

But we must confront it, if we are going to have an honest and open dialogue about what interfaith marriage means in our tradition.

You might be interested to know that some so-called proponents of interfaith marriage have actually used these verses to support their perspective. They argue that a literal reading of the text indicates that the *only* exogamous marriages that were prohibited were those to individuals whose ancestry could be traced directly back to the Seven Canaanite nations. All other relationships were deemed kosher and acceptable.

At the same time, the rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud, who were the ones that actually concretized the prohibition against all intermarriage, invoked these verses as their prooftext. For example, we find in Kiddushin 68b these words: “From where do we know that *kiddushin*, a kosher Jewish marriage, does not take effect when one partner is not Jewish? The verse in the Torah which states ‘You shall not make marriages with them.’”

The rabbis of the Talmud were writing well over 1000 years after the Biblical Author. And in that space of time the vagueness of whether exogamy was to be prohibited in Deuteronomy is transformed into a matter-of-fact assumption that became a standing part of Jewish religion and culture: that Jews do not marry outside of the faith, normatively-speaking.

One of the key turning points in that history is the story that is recorded in Chapters 9 and 10 of the Book of Ezra. The book describes events that were to have taken place in the decades after the return of the Babylonian Exile (around 520 or 515 BCE), though the text in all likelihood was written about a hundred years after that.

We should have some basic familiarity with Ezra himself. The rabbis of the Talmudic period describe him as being “sufficiently worthy that the Torah could have been given through him if Moses had not preceded him.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Ezra 7:5 and following describes him as a member of the priesthood and a “scribe expert in the Teaching of Moses.” He was such an expert that we credit Ezra with successfully re-teaching Judaism to the Jews who returned to the Land of Israel following 65-70 years of forced exile in Babylonia.

Ezra 9-10 contain the troubling story of Ezra and his community’s realization that during the decades of exile a substantial number of Israelites, including members of the ruling priestly class, had married exogamously. Chapter 9 verses 3 and 4 have Ezra noting: “When I heard this [i.e. the widespread intermarriage], I rent my garment and robe, I tore hair out of my head and beard, and I sat desolate. Around me gathered all who were concerned over the words of the God of Israel because of the returning exiles’ trespass, while I sat desolate until the evening offering.”

The drama continues in Chapter 10 verse 2: “Then Shechan’yah son of Yechi’eil of the family of Eilam spoke up and said to Ezra, “We have trespassed against our God by bringing into our homes foreign women from the peoples of the land; *v’atah yeish mik’veh l’yisrael* – but there is still hope for Israel, despite all of this. Now, let us make a covenant with our God to expel all these women and those who have been born to them, in accordance with the bidding of the Lord and of all who are concerned over the commandment of our God, and let the Teaching of the Torah be obeyed.”

These words are nothing short of shocking. It is not only a re-affirmation of Deuteronomy’s apparent prohibition against intermarriage. It also embraces a quasi-violent “ethnic cleansing.”

To be sure, it is not actual, physical violence…but a sort of emotional and relational violence, which requires loving partners to separate against their will. And for parents to be separated from their children – again, against their will.

How does one respond to such a text in the 21st century? With shocked silence, to be sure. But also, perhaps, with an appreciation that the text is extreme because…at least from the point of view of the Biblical Author…the issue on the table is extreme in its importance.

The author of Ezra undoubtedly took the Deuteronomic author at face value. To see what I mean, let’s briefly return to the text of Deuteronomy 7: “You shall not intermarry with them; do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Eternal One’s anger will flare against you, promptly wiping you out.”

Both Biblical authors remain convinced that intermarriage should be prohibited, because the survival of the Jewish People is called into question. The text states it: “For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods.” And the Deuteronomy passage predicts the inevitable consequence of this: that we, as a people, will eventually be wiped out.

We could spend the rest of our time meditating on all of the other historical reasons that rabbis don’t officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies. We could spend time studying in detail the passages from the Talmud and the medieval law codes that go through the different aspects of a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony, and all of the reasons why my colleagues and I were trained to presume that it would not make sense for a person who is not Jewish to participate in those rituals. And, in fact, we will have the chance to reflect on some of these themes in the next session, when we examine the question of the role of the non-Jew in Jewish ritual.

But in the meantime, Ezra’s point about intermarriage is basically the one that has shaped the conversation for the last 2500 years. Jews have not historically married outside of the faith, for fear that Judaism itself would suffer or disappear as a consequence.

That anxiety lives on, in the writing of the late Reform Rabbi, Emil Fackenheim. He writes famously of how we Jews have charted, and can continue to chart, a path forward, particularly in light of the devastating losses of the Holocaust. He argues that in a post-Holocaust world:

“We have collectively rejected the option, either of “checking out” of Jewish existence altogether or of so avoiding the present contradictions as to shatter Jewish existence into fragments.

[…]

For we are forbidden to turn present and future life into death, as the price of remembering death at Auschwitz. And we are equally forbidden to affirm present and future life, at the price of forgetting Auschwitz.

[…]

We have lived in this contradiction for twenty years without being able to face it. Unless I am mistaken, we are now beginning to face it, however fragmentarily and inconclusively. And from this beginning confrontation there emerges what I will boldly term a 614th commandment: *the authentic Jew of today is forbidden to hand Hitler yet another, posthumous victory*. […]

He goes on:

If the 614th commandment is binding upon the authentic Jew, then we are, first, commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. We are commanded, second, to remember in our very guts and bones the martyrs of the Holocaust, lest their memory perish. We are forbidden,

thirdly, to deny or despair of God, however much we may have to contend with him or with belief in him, lest Judaism perish. We are forbidden, finally, to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God, lest we help to make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted. To abandon any of these imperatives, in response to Hitler’s victory at Auschwitz, would be to hand him yet other, posthumous, victories.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

To what extent are we swayed by Fackenheim’s argument? That the future survival of the Jewish People, which would constitute a so-called “posthumous victory” against Hitler, is dependent on us remaining Jewish. It is dependent on us making Jewish choices like embracing holidays, rituals, and values. And yes, for Fackenheim, I think it meant not marrying out of the faith.

To be sure, there are proponents of interfaith marriage who argue that the best way to fulfill Fackenheim’s vision would be to have rabbis officiate, so as to do everything in our power to insure that interfaith couples and families make Jewish choices and raise Jewish children. Certainly the anecdotal data that I have heard, from many of you, leads me to conclude that there is a strong argument to be made here on those terms.

But the reality is that we have no statistical evidence to back up this anecdotal data. There is no statistical data which shows that the children of interfaith couples – where a rabbi officiates – are “more Jewish” than children where a rabbi did not officiate.

The data that we have at our disposal is as follows: among families in which both partners are Jewish, 96% of children identify themselves as Jews. When one parent is Jewish and the other is not: only 33% of children identify themselves as Jewish.[[7]](#footnote-7)

There are no words to describe the extent to which I am at a loss…in terms of not knowing what to do with that statistic. The 33% have as much of a right to know a meaningful Jewish future as the 96%. No question about it. But if, at the end of this struggle of mine, I conclude that my rabbinic principles and conscience really don’t permit me to officiate at an interfaith wedding ceremony…should I put myself in the position of compromising those principles, when the data we have available tells me that…even if I did…that there’s only a 1 in 3 chance that that home and those children will be Jewish?

Perhaps, in the end, I’ll find that the Moses story resonates deeply with me….and I won’t need to compromise on any principles, because I’ll be able to stand before you and explain that there is nothing transgressive about interfaith marriage: that it’s been a part of our people’s history for a very long time, and while today’s statistic is a new quantitative phenomenon, there is nothing qualitatively new about it.

God-willing, in a few months, I’ll know, and you’ll know.

Until then: I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for coming out today, and I welcome your questions and comments.

1. See, for example, Gen. 26:34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. * *The Legends of the Jews* (Ginzberg), 2003 Edition, p. 495.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary (Revised Edition)*, Edited by Plaut, page 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tosefta Sanhedrin 4.4, according to *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 1669. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ***The Jewish Return Into History* by Emil Fackenheim, 1978.** [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf> - see page 18 of the report. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)