

INTERGENERATIONAL ISSUES OF INTERMARRIAGE

Techniques of Premarital Counseling

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Intermarriage must be addressed as an intergenerational issue. Many individuals are in denial about their past, which is a major cause of marital dysfunction. Those who let go of their past can become uprooted, losing a significant part of themselves. Interventions and techniques used in the premarital counseling of interfaith couples are presented.

Mothers and fathers carried G-d's authority. Their task was to teach their children the laws of G-d and culture and to be sure they obeyed those laws.

John Bradshaw (1988)

The Zayde often gave up his body but kept his soul; his grandchild keeps his body but often gives away his soul.

Rabbi Meir Kahane (1977)

If there is a basic difference in the religious orientation of people, then every decision is a potential piece of disagreement. Further, it is really not only individuals who marry but families!

*Reverend William Cenne,
National Council of the Churches
in Christ in the USA (1985)*

In modern society, romantic love and attachment to one's past and family traditions are often antithetical. As Egon Mayer (1985) writes, when two individuals fall in love, "All the nuances of the other's body, gestures, moods, and attributes are objects of fascination, as are one's reaction to them. The rule that the 'past does not count'--although incomprehensible in the routine course of everyday life--is, in fact, one of

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, Oliver Scharf, who showed me the way through his own good works. He was a Jewish man of patience, principle, and dedication to his family.

the governing principles of the process of falling in love."

Yet, couples even from similar backgrounds soon find that the past does indeed count. And those from different faiths find that their different backgrounds are fertile sources of conflict. This article presents techniques that therapists can use to help couples considering intermarriage understand those sources of conflict and develop strategies to overcome them. In effect, the therapist removes the rose-colored glasses of romantic love, enabling the couple to see clearly the consequences of the planned intermarriage.

"THE UNPAYABLE DEBT"

Intermarriage must be addressed as an intergenerational issue. In premarital counseling, it is the task of the therapist to enable the individuals to understand how their experiences in their families of origin will affect the life of the family they hope to create. In other words, "The task of the family therapist is to assist the individual to come to terms with ancestral codes of justice and to understand their effects on contemporary family relationships" (Hartman & Laird, 1983). Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) developed the concept of a "ledger of life," in which individuals attempt to pay back multigenerational debts and unresolved obligations from the past in their adult lives. Alan Dershowitz (1991), in his best-selling book, *Chutzpah*, expressed this

concept well: "My Jewishness is always with me as a reminder of where I came from, and the unpayable debt I owe my parents and grandparents and other predecessors who have left me not only a legacy of Jewishness but also a legacy of family devotion and closeness."

TECHNIQUES AND INTERVENTIONS IN PRE-MARITAL COUNSELING

In short-term premarital counseling — not more than five sessions — several tools developed by family therapists can be used to organize information in such a way that individuals see the connections between their families of origin, the family they hope to create, and the world.

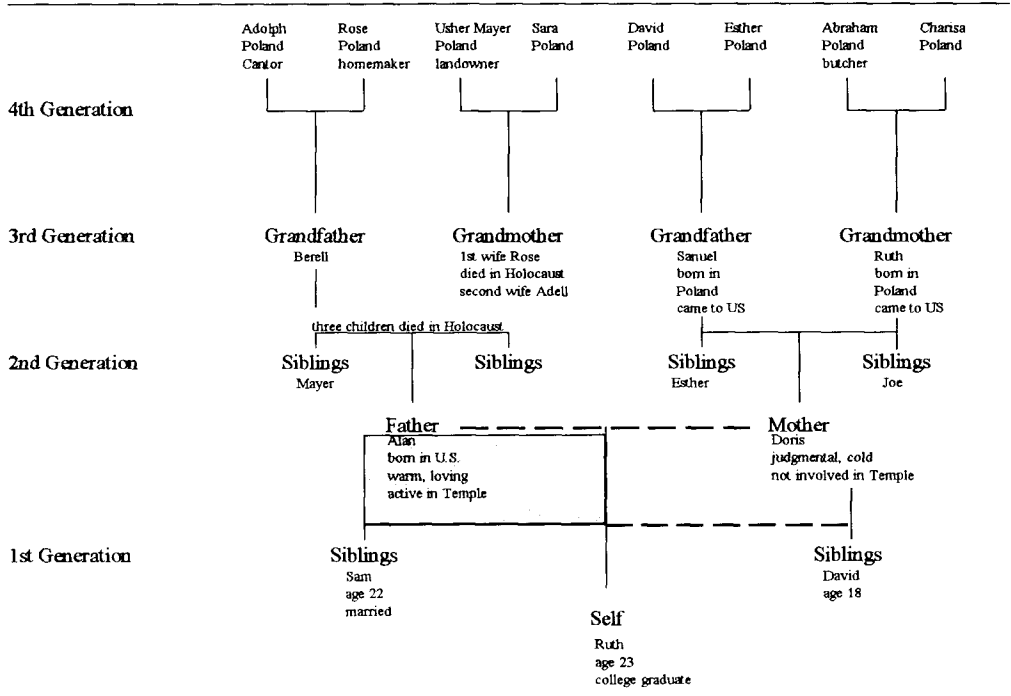
During the early 1970s, Salvador Minuchin (1974) developed the *Eco-Map* to clarify the "family organism as a structure."

For instance, a strong affiliation between a mother and son might be drawn as a double line, showing that the father is excluded. These maps are a valuable tool for illustrating how members of different generations can form coalitions with each other.

A *genogram* organizes material in a similar way to an *Eco-Map*, but it includes additional information about three or more generations. A *genogram* can be either simple or complex. It starts as a "family tree" and as the client fills it in, it tells a story. It is the illustrated account of a family, enabling a person to see the inter-generational linkages (Figure 1).

Family sculpting is a deceptively simple but powerful technique to examine how others — family and friends — could cause added stress to the proposed intermarriage. In this "art form," the family members are

Figure 1. Genogram of Ruth, in case example.



Symbols:
 - - - - - = conflicted relationship

[Box] = emotional closeness, enmeshment

Table 1: Questionnaire for Premarital Counseling

1. How religious was your family of origin? How did the family celebrate holidays? What was your earliest memory of religious holidays? How big of a role did religion play in your life?
2. Did you have any beliefs about intermarriage before you met your fiance?
3. When dating, did you discuss your religious differences? Did you resolve anything? Did you express yourself freely?
4. When you decided to marry, did you discuss your religious differences? How important did these differences seem?
5. Did you reach an agreement on how to work out these differences? Was this agreement satisfactory to you?
6. Did you discuss children and how you would raise them? What religion would they be?
7. Were these discussions shared with other family members? Who? How do other people feel about your decision to intermarry? Will other people be affected? How have family members helped or hindered the process?
8. (If you converted) What was the primary reason for conversion? Did conversion change your relationship with your family of origin?
9. Do you think your different religious backgrounds will affect your married life? How?
10. Are there (celebrations) holidays when these differences are made difficult?
11. Are things pretty much as you imagined them to be on these issues? Are some things different?
12. What advice would you offer a couple considering intermarriage?
13. What effect will having a child have on your feelings about these decisions?
14. How has your relationship with your family of origin changed after your interdating?
15. Can you draw a simply family tree (genogram)? (see Figure 1)
16. Using the above family tree, can you write something about each person? Be brief...for example: Where were they born? Were they involved with religion? How did you feel about them? What were their characteristics? What type of work did they do?

Developed with the assistance of Sharma Lynn Regensburg, ACSW.

arranged in a tableau that physically resembles their emotional relationship with each other. An actual live family portrait is thus created, enabling the individual to see how his or her behavior affects the entire family and in turn how the family affects that behavior. Defense mechanisms, such as denial, intellectualization, projection, and defensiveness, are pierced by sculpting, which reinforces the ties between the individual and the family of his or her past.

One very effective usage of family sculpting is described by Papp and her co-workers (1973) as follows:

All the members in one family had sculpted the father as the "Rock of Gibraltar" upon which the whole family stood. The 12-year-old daughter placed him literally bending over backward to support the family with one hand and hold up three businesses with the

other....When it came time for this "Rock of Gibraltar" to do his own sculpting, he threw himself on the floor and said, "I'm swimming upstream in mud."

Psychodrama is another powerful technique to focus the young couple on their family systems and to cut through walls of denial. The therapist asks the patient to enact a concrete situation, and then this dramatic presentation is commented on by other family members immediately or at later sessions. For example, a couple contemplating intermarriage can be asked to enact their proposed wedding, focusing on how Mother stands and Grandpa looks during the ceremony.

Perhaps the most important single intervention of the therapist is providing *instruction* through the use of a *questionnaire* (Table 1). Geared toward reality-based and

intergenerational issues, this questionnaire enables the couple to focus on potential sources of conflict. It is recommended that the therapist schedule about one hour to ask the questions and record the answers, or the couple can be asked to complete it as homework between sessions. They should receive a copy of the completed questionnaire. However, as noted in the following case example, not all individuals will be able to complete the entire questionnaire. It is the processing of considering these questions that is most important.

CASE EXAMPLE

This case example illustrates the use of several of the techniques described above. It also shows how with resistant patients these interventions can maintain a focus that begins to unlock doors. Yet, the therapist must be flexible and able to discard those techniques when they are no longer effective.

Ruth, a 23-year-old recent college graduate, was referred for counseling by her rabbi. At the first session, she declared that she did not want therapy or counseling, but had promised her father to attend several sessions in order to look at her decision to marry Stan, who was not Jewish. She would not commit to attending five sessions, but did agree to come in three times, for she believed that amount of time would be sufficient.

Ruth began by talking about Stan, a Protestant from the Midwest whom she had met in college, and how much she loved him. She probably would have spent the entire session telling me about Stan's attributes. I redirected her by actually holding up my hand to stop. I told Ruth that we could best spend our time by looking at her life. I went on to say that I am sure Stan was a good man; however, he was not the issue. The issue was Ruth and her decision to commit to marriage. I asked her about her father, and she readily talked about how persistent he was that she attend counseling. I asked her to focus on their relationship when she was a

child. She declared that they were very close. Ruth recalled good feelings and much warmth in their relationship. Her earliest childhood memory was in fact waking up and seeing her parents gazing down upon her. Ruth indicated that she was the oldest child so that reinforced the perception that she received love and positive attention.

Refocusing, I asked Ruth about her experiences and feelings toward Judaism. She indicated that she had been a Bat Mitzvah and had attended religious school. However, she went on to minimize that experience. At this point, she wanted to change the subject and most probably wanted to justify her feelings about Stan. I told her that it seemed that she loved her father a great deal to have come for counseling against her will. Ruth took a deep breath. I asked her if she knew why her father had made this request of her. She said that he wanted her to marry a Jew. I asked her how she felt and she stated "confused and anxious." I asked her if she would do a role play with me. She laughed and indicated that she had taken courses in drama in college. I asked Ruth if she would try to play her father. I would be Ruth. Ruth became reluctant and I asked her to explore the reluctance. I introduced an imaginary Stan sitting on a chair next to Ruth. I asked Ruth to address Stan. She was silent for maybe 20 to 30 seconds. I asked her to look at Stan (in the chair). She finally blurted out, "Stan, they are trying to take me away from you." Ruth began to cry. She asked to be excused from the session. I told her that I could feel and even understand her pain. Ruth agreed to return next week at the agreed-upon time.

The second session began like the first; Ruth wanted to talk about Stan. I asked her if she would try something different in this session. She immediately stated that she would not do a role play or talk to empty chairs. I agreed and we took a large sheet of white paper. I told her we would draw her family tree. Ruth was resistant and asked me what did this have to do with her and Stan. I asked her to trust me. I assured her that it would be helpful to write down some things

so that we could take a look at her family background. She reluctantly agreed. I asked her if she knew the names of her great-grandparents. Ruth asked me with a degree of anger, "Is this going to be used against me?" I talked about the project, and she stated that it was ironic that she felt so defensive. I indicated that, in reality, I knew nothing about her family background. Ruth's maternal grandparents had been born in Poland, and came to the United States before the Holocaust. She had been relatively close with them; they had died when she was in her early teens. I asked her to describe them and she stated, "You know, they were regular cute Jewish grandparents...what do you want me to say?" I asked Ruth directly, "What should I say about your resistance?" She looked at me and finally asked, "Why am I so resistive? All you're asking is for me to look at my history...What am I doing?" Ruth went on to say that her father's father lost his first wife in the Holocaust and then married her grandmother in this country. She began to tell me the story of her family. In fact, she wanted to "just talk" (the genogram was put aside). She was able to see the significant connection between her paternal grandfather's loss of his first wife, how important it was for her father not to lose future generations (of Jews) through intermarriage, and why her father was reluctant to take into the family someone who was not Jewish. Ruth indicated that the sessions brought into focus some issues that had been somewhat unclear. Ruth asked, "Maybe my father is frightened about losing me?" "Perhaps" was the reply, stating that we would continue to explore the situation during our next session.

In our final session, Ruth began by asking, "So, should I dump Stan because my father would be unhappy?" My response was, "What would make your life 'happy' not just this day or the next year, but for all your married life? Isn't that the issue?" Ruth asked how does anyone know the answer to that question and I replied, "Maybe by self-examination." Ruth indirectly noted that she has been fighting this self-examination. She

stated that, in reality, she has dated rather sporadically while in school. She indicated that she was quite physically attracted to Stan, and she liked his "quiet maturity." Ruth disclosed that she is concerned about marrying out of her religion. However, because she has never really practiced Judaism, perhaps "it did not really factor in too much." Ruth began to open up and declared that she knew that there were stages to a marriage, and of course, there would be a "honeymoon" phase, but what about their children? She would want the children to be Jewish, and how would Stan "really feel" years later when their son became a Bar Mitzvah? She agreed that "all of this would have to be agreed upon and talked about as soon as possible."

Ruth disclosed that Stan's maternal grandfather had been a minister, so he also had to "really consider some things." Ruth began to consider the cultural aspects of Judaism and how college life would be very different than a long-term marriage. What was, of course, significant was that she realized that there were many more issues to consider. Ruth came in for two additional sessions.

Ruth and Stan decided not to marry. She later told me that Stan began to distance himself emotionally from her — "he put up a wall." Ruth felt that it was good that they could at least salvage a friendship from their romance.

This case study illustrates several key points. A five-session treatment plan was offered to minimize Ruth's already considerable resistance to counseling; clients are generally less resistant if they see an end to the therapy process. The choice of how long counseling would last was left to Ruth. Allowing the clients to make that decision is empowering. In reality even if Ruth had only agreed to one session, I would have seen her if only to help her explore and organize data.

The therapist's job is to gather information, not to confront. Although Ruth stated that her purpose in coming was to discuss

her proposed marriage, the real issue was her relationship with her father. As are many clients who enter counseling, Ruth was confused and not in touch with her feelings. The goal of therapy was to enable her to explore her feelings.

In this process, I was very directive. Rather than letting Ruth spend the sessions talking about her love for Stan, I redirected the discussion to the real issue of the relationship with her father.

Although the techniques of the genogram and role play were introduced, Ruth did not complete them. However, because Ruth was then able to talk about the underlying issues that these techniques were designed to evoke, it was not necessary for her to complete those tasks. Requiring her to do so would only have increased her resistance. Thus, it is necessary to be flexible and to be willing to abandon these interventions as appropriate.

CONCLUSION

In our multi-cultural society, assimilation is a given. The high rate of intermarriage places Jewish survival at risk. Premarital counseling that explores the individual's ties to their family and tradition is essential in stemming that intermarriage rate.

In closing, history teaches us that Jews must have a heightened sense of awareness in order to survive. Parents must invest their time to teach their children, through their own example, by involvement in our

religion and culture. There are no short-cuts. What we do each day, week, each month, indeed yearly, imprints upon our children and their children and on all future generations of our people.

A voice is heard in Ramah, Lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children...

"Thus saith the Lord: refrain they voice from weeping...And they shall come back..."

Jeremiah 31

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