
And today, a decade later, I feel as alarmed about patrilineal descent as I did then. This is because patrilineal descent threatens the unity, challenges the fundamentals and places in doubt the very future of Judaism.

There are those in the Reform movement who have often claimed, with some merit, that the Orthodox created a chasm by making dialogue difficult. Many Orthodox rabbis, for example, refuse to speak with Reform rabbis, maintaining that this would legitimize their status.

With the introduction of patrilineal descent, however, in one act, Reform Judaism created an even greater chasm between Reform Jews and other Jews. In the past, although Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Jews might disagree on fundamental issues, their children could marry each other. Patrilineal descent, however, has made it impossible for children born to Orthodox and Conservative Jews to marry many of the children born to Reform Jews, whom they do not consider Jews. A tremendous rift has been created.

In part, because of this, the Conservative movement asked the Reform movement in the United States to reconsider its position on patrilineal descent. Indeed, the Reform movements in Israel, Canada and Australia have all rejected patrilineal descent. They recognize that patrilineal descent means the creation of a different peoplehood, a different nationhood.

In addition, patrilineal descent destroys the fundamental concept of the Jews as God's chosen people. As adopted by the Reform movement, patrilineal descent is turning the Jewish commitment of faith from an involuntary to a completely voluntary act. Patrilineal descent does not declare a child born to a Jewish father to be *automatically* Jewish at birth. Instead, it states that such a child is *presumed* Jewish, and "the presumption is established through appropriate identification with the Jewish faith."...

Patrilineal descent opens the possibility that the status of being Jewish will never be conferred automatically at birth. Jews will be free to choose, but they will never be chosen.

Acceptance of this concept is a perversion of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. In that covenant, God says to the Jewish people, "you are mine, no matter what." In the new Reform covenantal relationship, Jews tell God: "You, God, belong to us, but only if we choose You." In its extreme form, it is similar to the Christian community of faith idea. You're part of the flock if you opt for that faith community. But you're never chosen. From this perspective, patrilineal descent may express Reform's discomfort with the very idea of Jews being God's chosen people....

Further, after ten years, it is clear that acceptance of patrilineal descent threatens the unity and fundamental philosophy of Judaism without any offsetting benefits. Patrilineal descent has not slowed the shrinkage of the Jewish population by encouraging the non-Jewish spouses and children of intermarried couples to convert. The 1990 survey of the Jewish population conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations, indicated that only 6% of non-Jews who intermarry convert to Judaism. The survey also revealed that "only 28% (of children in mixed households) are reported as being raised Jewish. Some 41%," the study continues, "are being raised in a non-Jewish religion," and 31% as "nothing"....

Respectfully, I submit that Reform Judaism must shift its focus. Rather than supporting patrilineal descent, the Reform movement, and for that matter the entire Jewish community, should ask why a majority of Jews are intermarrying. The challenge must be to improve Jewish educational institutions and elevate Jewish spirituality and Jewish observance which will in turn encourage affirmative Jewish identification and thereby prevent intermarriage.

This challenge will not be met by the mistaken doctrine of patrilineal descent. If Reform Judaism continues to promote this principle, it must fear for its very future.

When brothers differ

C. Derek Fields, Princeton, NJ

I read your issue on patrilineality with great interest and deep misgivings. While I firmly disagree with the positions of your writers, I want to respond not to the content but to the premise of their arguments--that the problem with patrilineal descent is the likelihood of an increase in the rate of intermarriage. I think that this premise is faulty and therefore the rest of their arguments is equally faulty. The problem with patrilineality is that it splits *Clal Yisrael* on a point of extreme personal concern.

I offer my own situation as a case in point. I hold firmly to the traditional view of matrilineal descent with a requirement for *mikvah* for conversion. My brother, on the other hand, is an active and important member of his Reform congregation. His marriage to a non-Jew does not, in the eyes of his chosen movement, affect the status of his children. My problem is not with his marriage; as

each writer pointed out, love cannot be contained within religious boundaries, and my brother found his *b'shert* outside Jewish circles. In some ways, this reinforced his commitment to his own Jewish identity and that of his children. My problem is with his children--or more accurately, with how to relate to his children within a Jewish context.

Should his children be male, can I attend a *brit milah* in good conscience; can I attend a *bar* or *bät mitzvah* without misgivings should I find myself, G-d forbid, in the situation of being the guardian for his children, could I forego a ritual conversion so that I could continue his charge of raising them Jewishly? The Reform movement has not made his decisions more difficult; they have made mine unconscionable. I neither want to hurt my brother and the children he may have nor can I simply ignore my convictions....

The decision of the Reform movement to place all Jews in this dilemma is wrong, not because the Reform are not entitled to a difference of opinion, but because they are not entitled to tear the very fabric of the Jewish family apart.

Challenging unilineage

Jack L. Moline, *Alexandria, VA*

The defenses of patrilineal descent in *Sh'ma* 24/464 represented some intriguing takes on the matter by Reform colleagues. I won't indulge in the cheap and well-worn shots which my fellow Conservative rabbis have lobbed at Reform colleagues. To do so is to merely shout into the wind.

Instead, I want to applaud and critique my friend Danny Zemel for having the courage to admit that the lineage standard doesn't work at all. The three hypothetical situations he poses have actually happened to me (including the self-taught Judeophile from Alaska, believe it or not), and I was delighted to be able to protect the sensitivities of the newcomers *and* my congregation by relying on *halakhah*. But I am exceptionally uncomfortable with the "out" we provide to Jewish women who intermarry by requiring nothing of them to have a (mostly) Jewish family, the grandchildren of whom, if we are to believe the Council of Jewish Federations, will almost certainly be as practically non-Jewish as the children of intermarried men are halakhically.

Ten years or so ago, I proposed (in the pages of *Sh'ma*) that we abandon unilineage entirely and require a ritual of affirmation for any child of an intermarriage. Whether the ceremony occurs during childhood or as an adult, the public declaration of fidelity and principles would be more than a recognition of what has already taken place. It would be a voluntary assumption of future commitments.

Without some objective standard of who is a Jew, individual rabbis like me and Rabbi Zemel are left to decide that matter by fiat and personal preference. And even if I felt adequate to make such judgments (which I don't), and even if Rabbi Zemel could find some precedent in our tradition for such a rabbinic function (which he can't), neither of us needs the additional stress which such responsibility would put on our mosaic of Mosaic duties.

Of course, as long as some rabbi is willing to officiate at an intermarriage and some (other?) rabbi is willing to accept the offspring as Jews, any steps which any movement takes unilaterally is no more than self-indulgence. We all ought to have the honesty to look at the mistakes we have made and correct them, not write long essays denying them.

Sh'ma

99 Park Avenue, Suite S-300
New York, NY 10016-1599

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Fred Bernstein
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