

Intermarriage and Complexities of Antisemitism

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Jewish Ideas Daily

recently highlighted a fascinating gem from the Atlantic Magazine in 1939: **I Married a Jew**, an anonymous personal reflection by a German-American woman married to a Jewish American man.

The article is an amazing read, deserving of much more detailed discussion than I have time to devote in this post, but I will say in briefest summary that

the mix of sympathy for Jews as individuals and revulsion for various expressions of Jewishness which this author displays is incredible. She loves her husband and his family (unless they're all together as a family), and she will even countenance a little (not too much) Jewish pride, especially as relates to Biblical figures such as Moses, Solomon and (naturally) Jesus, but she is also very put off by Jewish cultural distinctions, favoring complete assimilation, and speaking of the world's "Jewish problem" as a product of oppression on one hand, and of Jewish (stereotypical) villainies, which she takes to be very real and very problematic, on the other.

What strikes me as so important about this article is not its being out of date, but rather its relevance to the present. If one removed the dismissive comments about Hitler being unfortunate yet not particularly unique or worrisome, and made only a little subtle revision to the terms, emphases and frames of reference, then this woman's viewpoint could just as easily have been written yesterday as in 1939. (Indeed, a few reader comments below the article reveal that some people apparently thought it *was* written in the present. Not that internet comments prove anything.) Modern American culture does not embrace all of the anti-Jewish views which are affiliated with traditional Christian anti-Judaism, but modern American culture certainly does share with this author a distaste for Jewish "clannishness" and particularism -- witness the ubiquity of **intermarriage** among Jewish characters **on TV and in movies**. Hollywood's usual portrayals of intermarriage assume that intermarriage is not only acceptable, but actually desirable. This perspective differs in many ways from our 1939 author, who blames the Jews for their own persecution during European history. But it shares with her the fundamental assumption that Jewish assimilation is the answer to Jewish problems. This reflexive sense that Jews are okay as long as they aren't *too* Jewish is very much alive in 2011.

Intermarriage as a catalyst for the exposure of uncomfortable disagreements is another

element that makes this 1939 article strangely up-to-date. These marital dynamics are echoed in **this recent blog post** by Allison Benedikt, another deeply personal reflection centering on an intermarriage, this one from the perspective of the Jewish partner. In the post, which has prompted **many strong reactions, especially** from **Jeffrey Goldberg**, Benedikt describes her unquestioningly Zionist childhood and her transformation, as an adult, into a passionate anti-Zionist, influenced significantly by the strong anti-Israel views of her non-Jewish husband. I hasten to add that I'm not making an equation or a conflation with this juxtaposition of the two articles. By comparing them, I don't mean to equate Benedikt's husband to the 1939 author of *I Married a Jew*, or to equate **anti-Zionism** with **antisemitism**. But I do mean to note that in both cases, an intermarriage has the effect of forcing the couple to take a stand on an extremely divisive issue of peoplehood. Writing in response to Benedikt's piece, Julie Wiener notes that **Intermarried Does Not Equal Anti-Zionist**. She's right, of course, but it would be folly not to admit that a marriage across the religio-ethnic divide is more likely than an in-marriage to force a conversation on these, and other, difficult topics.

Not that conversation is a bad thing. One difference between today and 1939, perhaps, is that conversations about these feelings do not tend to occur as openly. Nobody wants to be branded a bigot, and these days Americans of all persuasions tend to throw around such labels quite freely. We seem to think of antisemitism, like other forms of intergroup hatred, as a binary, all-or-nothing phenomenon. To listen to contemporary American discourse, a person is either "an antisemite" (a noun and an identity), or else a "normal" person, who is presumably completely free of anti-Jewish bias. (The same underlying assumption could be cited with regard to homophobia, sexism, racism, etc.) Reality, of course, is much more complicated, as this 1939 article reveals. Love and hate can be present in the same person. Faulty assumptions, negative emotional reactions, and prejudices can (and usually do) coexist in the same brains with genuine love and respect for the "other" group in question. Admitting as much might allow everyone to be more honest with one another, without anyone being afraid of being labeled a bigot, and without anyone else being afraid to point out when an *idea* is bigoted. The trick is to be able to criticize ideas (even quite strongly) without demonizing the *people* who hold them (except in the most extreme and obvious cases of open hatred). That would leave space for quite a few difficult -- and necessary -- conversations.