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An evaluation of the key challenges encountered by Jewish-Gentile couples during different stages of their relationship and a critical assessment of Jewish, Gentile and Messianic Jewish approaches to these issues.

Introduction

The aim and objective of this writing is to assess what are the Key challenges that Jewish –Gentile couples are likely to encounter in the different stages of their relationship and to identify the ministry offered in order to resolve or alleviate the challenges from a Jewish , a Christian and Jewish Messianic perspectives.

For the purpose of our assessment this paper will be divided in two parts with a conclusion and an Appendix:

Part 1:

- i. Identification of the key challenges and their impact for Jewish-Gentile couples
- ii. Identification of the key relational stages where Jewish-Gentile couples experience tension and their impact

Part 2:

- i. Identification and analyses of the ministry offered by the Jewish community in relation to Jewish- Gentile couples.
- ii. Identification and analyses of the ministry offered by the Christian community in relation to Jewish-Gentile couples
- iii. identification and analyse of the ministry offered by the Messianic Jewish community

Appendix :

Interview with a Jewish-Gentile spouse at verbatim

Part 1

i. Identification of the key challenges and their impact for Jewish-Gentile couples

The world, since the World-War II has undergone many social, religious and demographic changes and the Jewish people nowadays , among other ethnic groups, do not define themselves solely on the bases of either religious , racial or cultural background¹. Demographic study has demonstrated that an assimilation trend² has grown among the Jewish population, spurred by the decline of anti-Semitism and on growing tolerance for the Jewish society:

Anti-Semitism, it is leading many to assume that Jewish people are no different from anyone else , that was not the case fifty years ago.”³

And again:

“Demographic studies show that the number of Jews who define themselves by the religious practices of Judaism is declining. More than sixty-three percent of American-Jews are not affiliated with any synagogue or Jewish social institution”⁴

Today, a large proportion of Jewish people believe that in order to have a Jewish identity, there is no need to adhere to Jewish’ practices and beliefs They may do so, only because they are pressured or influenced by the family’s religious dogma and traditions.

According to a survey exercised in America by the UCLA’ Higher Education Research Institute made in 2002⁵ ,there was a significant drop in the religious attendance of religious services among the Jewish university students and also that they did attach much importance to being “spiritual” .

“Jewish students no longer define being Jewish identity in traditional terms – through appreciation for Jewish history, culture and the practice of Judaism⁶

¹ Wan & Zaretsky, *Jewish Gentile Couples, Trend, Challenges and Hopes*; 2004:16

² Zaretsky et al., *The Gospel and Jewish- Gentile Couples*;;2006:6

³ Nikki; *The Gospel and Jewish-Couples*, 2006:21

⁴ Wan & Zaretsky, *Jewish Gentile Couples, Trend, Challenges and hopes* 2004 21:

⁵ Ibid., 2004: 23

⁶ Ibid.,23

Some Jewish people think that is misleading to believe that to be Jewish one has to go to a Synagogue, or to follow the teaching of Rabbis and therefore many, young and old, rather than categorizing themselves as “religious Jews” will regard themselves “secular Jews”:

“But Jewishness is more than a religion: it is a way of life; it is a way of relating to one to another. It is good to read the writings of the rabbis, but when you compare them with the writings of contemporary Jewish novelists, you will realize that there is a gap of thinking between the ideals of the rabbis and the real life of the Jewish people today.”⁷

This ideology fosters a tolerance towards others religious beliefs and cultures opening to a Jewish person the opportunity to meet and have intimate relationships with non Jewish partners . The pluralistic religious thought of today and the tolerance that exist between the diverse ethnic and religious groups, enhances and foster the possibility for Jewish –Gentile romantic involvement, either as living- in couples or through interfaith marriages:

“And the new “pluralism”, which celebrates blurred boundaries, now teaches that multiple religious or ethnic allegiances are better than one⁸.

Today it is not uncommon for Jewish people to strike a romantic relationship with people of different faiths or to have a partner who do not profess any kind of religious belief but who nevertheless has strong attachment to their cultural background. The Jewish-Gentile couples brings to the relationship their own religious and social world-view and this can cause cross-cultural challenges and obstacles especially if both parties believe that they are not culturally, and socially understood:

“To marry an individual from another culture is to marry that culture as well. Lack of communicated interest of a partner’s assumption that a spouse is unattached to his/her culture gives rise to the gravest kind of problems.”⁹

⁷ Rosen, *Share the new life with a Jew*, 1976:21-22

⁸ Wan & Zaretsky *Jewish- Gentile couples 2004:13* quoted Jack Wertheimer, “A second Wake-up Call: Heartbreak of AJCommitte’s findings on intermarriage” JTA: The Jewish Journal of Los Angels < November 24, 2000: 10.)

According to Dr. Tuvya Zaretsky the Director of Jews for Jesus and a prolific writer and researcher who has studied and scrutinized the challenges and problems which are found in Jewish- Gentile couple relationships, these challenges are “present in five cultural categories”¹⁰ “:

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|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Confusion over Identity Differences : | Psychological, social. |
| 2. Tension over Religious Differences : | Spiritual, theological, social. |
| 3. Disagreement over Life Cycle- Differences: | Ritualistic and symbolic, spiritual, social. |
| 4. Challenges to Family Harmony: | Social, psychological and spiritual |
| 5. Discord over training children : | Intergenerational, educational, social ¹¹ |

We shall now analyse each of the five cultural categories endeavouring to understand their impact for Jewish- Gentile couples:

1. *Confusion over Identity Differences*

Jewish- Gentile couples, at times, when entering into a cross- cultural relationship do not seem to comprehend or anticipate the complexity of emotions and the challenges of living in a cross-culture household. The religious and cultural norms to which they are accustomed maybe are not valued or are avoided by their partners. They are not prepared for the impact that the cross-cultural challenges will bring to the stability and future of the relationship:

⁹ Rorhlich ,“*Dual-Culture Marriage and Communication*,” International Journal of Intercultural Relations 12:35 (1988.) p.42

¹⁰ Wan & Zaretsky, *Jewish and Gentiles Couples* 2004:introduction

¹¹ Ibid., 2004:92

“Jewish-Gentile couples described as feeling lonely and alienated from one another”.¹²

Very often the confusion over the identity differences is born from a misunderstanding of terminology¹³. A Gentile will not see any great difference between the terminology of *Jewish* and *Judaism* while their Jewish partner see them as a description of ethnicity for the first and religion for the latter; that is a Jewish person will not automatically be a religious person just because they are Jewish. Equally Jewish people cannot understand the difference in meaning between the term Gentile and the religious term “Christian”¹⁴.

My investigation of Jewish people’s understanding of the term “Christian” has led me believe that the Jewish person thinks that if an individual is not Jewish or Muslim then they must be Christian therefore all Gentile must be Christians. The Jewish person may not be aware that within this terminology there are many variations:

“Jewish-Gentile couples come together in a multidimensional life framework. Individuals from different ethnic identities and religious traditions must somehow determine or negotiate their individual and family identity as a couple.”¹⁵

2. Tension over Religious Differences

Couples who come from a Jewish and Gentile background can have disagreements and tension because of their different belief system; Jewish people find it hard to understand the Christians’ need to have Christ as the “Saviour” and the Christian concept that “none of us is “good”. Equally a Christian may feel upset that the Jewish partner is not responsive to their religious values and cannot understand the Jewish partner desire to “remain Jewish “ for reason of preservation of the Jewish race in the light of the Holocaust. The impact of tension over Religious Difference can leave the Jewish-Gentile Couple feeling misunderstood, fearful and lonely¹⁶

¹² Zaretsky et al., *The Gospel and Jewish-Gentile Couples*, 2006:16

¹³ Harley, *Louanne Occasional Paper, Christian Witness to the Jewish People*, 1980:10

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2006:15

¹⁵ Enoch & Zaretsky, *Jewish –Gentile Couples* 2004:19

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2004:94

3. Disagreement over Life Cycle- Differences

Disagreements can arise among a Jewish – Gentile couple regarding what is the appropriate cultural and religious festival to celebrate , for example in December the Jewish – Gentile couple could be in dilemma to decide if to celebrate Hanukkah Festival, Christmas or both. Also there can be great difficulty in organizing ritual, family and social events because of the pressure from friends and family. The impact of disagreement over life-cycle events can cause feelings of anger, frustration and relational damage.¹⁷

4. Challenges to Family Harmony

When Jewish-Gentile couples marry they also became part of an extended family. This can be difficult because the cross- cultural differences from the respective family, can be quite challenging, daunting , difficult to learn and follow. Some partners have described their feeling of culture-shock when entering the new extended family, their desire to “please” and never feel truly accepted and the negative impact that this has on their self- worth and identity:

“ Many spoke of having to endure culture shock, or of overcoming the prejudices and expectations of their new family as members attempted to assimilate a stranger “¹⁸

5. Discord over training children :

Jewish-Gentile couples can be truly challenged when they come to discuss and decide in what cultural and religious environment they should bring up their children. Should they be circumcised or baptised? These issues can become more complicated , painful and cause distress to the Jews-Gentile couple if the extended family places demands on them to conform to their ethical and religious viewpoints; this can have a negative impact on all the family, and has the power to bring discord in the relationships:

“Some couples describe the challenges in parenting and enculturating Jewish-Gentile children as the greatest threat to family harmony and security.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Zaretsky et al., *The Gospel and Jewish – Gentile couples* 2006:17

¹⁸ Ibid., 2006:17

¹⁹ Wan & Zaretsky, *Jewish and Gentile Couples, Trends, Challenges and Hopes*, 2004:96

According to D. H. Stern, the hope for a solution is in the “development of the Messianic Jews community”²⁰ where the parents can be helped with these issues and are aided in taking an active role in educating the children on being Jewish.

Summary of part 1

In this first section, we have assessed which are the five challenges met in Jewish-Gentile couples and we have explored some of the impact that these challenges have on the couple’s relationship. In our second part we are going to write a critical assessment of Jewish, Gentile and Messianic Jewish approaches to these issues.

Part 2

i. Identification and analyses of the ministry offered by the Jewish community in relation to Jewish – Gentile couples.

In Jewish ‘s law a marriage is a very sacred institution because it fulfils God ‘s plan in Genesis1:28” to multiply and a fill the earth”. Also marriage between two Jewish people is very important because it encourages the continuation of the Jewish race. Religious Jewish people are against intermarriage because they believe that it weakens “the essential core of Judaism.”²¹

According to Rabbi Alfred J. Kolatch ,today the consensus among the Jewish experts is that Jewish-Gentile couples and intermarriage has a negative effect on the family and on the Jewish community as a whole.:

“in our modern times experts have advanced the argument that intermarriage by and large leads to a break-down of family structure – the primary institution in Jewish life.”²²

Marriage among the Jewish people , according to Paul Johnson , is a “business contract “designed to keep the Jewish community unified, and the contract or “Ketubbah”is read and signed up in the marriage ceremony.²³The ceremony of the

²⁰ Stern, *Messianic Jewish Manifesto*, 1988: 180

²¹ Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why*, 1981:30

²² Ibid.,1981;30

²³ Johnson, *A History of the Jews*, 2004:201

Ketubah is very important because it can only be done between two Jewish partners and it underlines the continuity and the unity of the Jewish ethnicity²⁴.

According to Jewish beliefs, *Deut. 7:3-4* the Torah forbids a marriage between a Jewish person and a Gentile. God forbids it because He does not want for the Jewish nation to be enticed away from the idolatrous Gentile' nation. In the Book of Jubilees it is forbidden to marry with a Gentile (Jubilees, xx. 4, xxii. 20, xxx. 11; comp. Targ. Yer. to Lev. xviii. 21,);²⁵

“Thou shalt not give any of thy seed to make them pass through the fire of Moloch” which is translated:” Thou shalt not give a child in marriage to a Gentile by which the offspring is turned over to idolatry.”

Another objection arising from the Jewish community against intermarriage is the issue of bringing up children as Jewish. In a multi- faith environment the parent may remain Jewish, the children growing up in a Christian home may lose their Jewish identity.

Notwithstanding the opposition to Jewish intermarriages nowadays the Jewish community especially the Reformed Synagogues is responding to the challenges of marrying outside the Jewish faith by setting up workshops to help intermarried Jewish couples with their struggle. For example Rabbi Allen Maller of Temple Akiba, a reformed Synagogue ,has many interfaith couples among his congregation. He offers an eighteen weeks course on Judaism for the non-Jewish partners but his only aim is the continuity of the Jewish faith and conversion for the Gentile spouse.²⁶

ii. *Identification and analyses of the ministry offered by the Christian community in relation to Jewish-Gentile couples*

²⁴ Kolatch, *The Jewish Book of Why*, 1981:30

²⁵ Kohler, Jacobs , *Intermarriage, Biblical prohibition, Jewish Encyclopaedia .com* 2009

²⁶ Nikki et al., *The Gospel of Jewish-Gentile Couples* 2002:24

While the Jewish community is against Jewish- Gentile intermarriage as it is perceived as a threat to Judaism , the Church on the whole, is not against Jewish-Gentile intermarriage.²⁷ The Church, with sensitivity, can help the couple , to come to know who Jesus is without the Jewish partner losing their Jewish identity:

“ Sensitivity to provide the accurate gospel message must consider the different cultural perceptions of Jewish- gentile partners”²⁸

The Scriptures teaches that Jewish evangelism has to become a priority. Jesus come first of all for the Jewish people, “for the lost sheep of Israel” .²⁹The Church has been guilty of many acts of Anti-Semitism³⁰ . Many Christians agree with a document entitled ‘*Dabrut Emet*’³¹ that Jewish people do not need to be saved because they serve the same God as the Christians³² , but according to the words of Moishe Rosen :

“There is absolutely no biblical basis for that assumption... We believe in the integrity of the Jewish religion as it was revealed in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, without the fulfilment in the New Testament, that religious system is incomplete and inadequate to save anyone.”³³

The Church today does not make Jewish evangelism a priority but in the Lusanne Committee for World Evangelization the Church was called to “Restore ministry among this covenanted people of God to its biblical place in its strategy of world evangelization.”³⁴

A Jewish - Gentile couple when they join a Church can feel that they are not understood and do not belong but an increase of Jewish-Gentile couples presence in the Church is providing the Church “missiological opportunity”³⁵ to help the Jewish-Gentile couples.

The Church, in the Uk, as a whole does not provide a Ministry to help or gives much information or help for Jewish-Gentile couples. In America, Messianic Jews ministry like ‘Jews for Jesus’ and Messianic congregations dedicate themselves to

²⁷ Zaretsky, *Jewish Evangelism A Call To The Church*, 2004:54

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Harley, *Lusanne Occasional Paper Christian Witness to the Jewish people* 1980:5

³⁰ Stern, *Messianic Judaism, A modern Movement with and ancient past*, 2007:69

³¹ Zaretsky, *Lusanne Occasional Paper, Jewish Evangelism to the Church*, 2004:7-8

³² Ibid.

³³ Rosen M&C., *Witnessing to Jews*, 1998:vi

³⁴ Harley, *Christian Witness to the Jewish People*, 1980:5

³⁵ Zaretsky, *Lusanne Occasional Paper No60, Jewish Evangelism A Call To The Church* 2000:72

help the Jewish-Challenges and are able to declare that Jesus is the Messiah without avoiding doing Jewish evangelism.

iii. *Identification and analyses of the ministry offered by the Messianic Jewish community*

A Messianic Jewish believer is someone who has repented of their sins and accepted Jesus Christ ,Y’shua,” the Jewish way to say Jesus”³⁶ as their promised Messiah. Messianic Jews congregations have existed since the beginning of Christianity and according to the scholar Mohr Siebeck, many people at the time were won to Y’shua through the “exemplary life of many Jewish congregations”.³⁷

In our present day many Jewish people are coming to Christ and this will give more opportunity for Jewish-Gentile couples to form relationships. There are across the world Ministries like ‘Jews for Jesus’ who have a specific call to evangelise the Jewish community and to help the new Messianic Jew to found a Church and to establish themselves in the community of Jewish believers:

“Messianic Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people who believe in Jesus (Yeshua)as the promised Messiah. It is a form of Christianity and a Christian form of Judaism, challenging the boundaries and beliefs of both”³⁸

The Jewish – Gentile couples debate is a hot and a challenging one within the Messianic Judaism world. In America, Messianic Jews scholars such as Tuvya Zaretsky, Nikki H., David Rudolph, Michael Schiffman , have written much about the subject. They desired to locate the challenges of Jewish-Gentile couples and the impact that the phenomenon is having on the Jewish community and also to study if intermarriage can have a positive ³⁹or an adverse⁴⁰ effect on Messianic Judaism.

In my investigation I have found that in Great Britain the Messianic Jews Movement does not provide much information on issues regarding the challenge in Jewish-Gentile relationship. Not much study has been done on the subject. I have come to the conclusion that perhaps this is so because the Messianic Jews community in Great Britain is not very large when compared to the America for example.

³⁶ Rosen, Y’shua, *The Jewish way to say Jesus*, 1982 (Cover page)

³⁷ Siebeck, *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, 2000:249

³⁸ Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology* 2008:16

³⁹ Rudolph et al, *Voices of Messianic Judaism, Intermarriage can have a positive effect on Messianic Judaism* 2001:101-109

⁴⁰ Schffman et al, *ibid., Inermarriage can have an adverse effect on Messianic Judaism*,2001:111-116

I am glad to report that In the last year, the branch of ' Jews for Jesus' in London, has endeavoured to bring to focus this debate with workshops and lectures led by Mrs.Allison Barnett a Messianic Jew believer, aided by the work pioneered in America by Dr. Tuvya Zaretsk..

Conclusion

We can conclude this Paper by surmising that the issue of the Jewish – Gentile couples is strongly debated in the Jewish community and in the Messianic Jewish one. The Church, unless it is a Messianic congregation, does not give priority to Jewish evangelism or to the challenges that a Jewish- Gentile couple meet in their life and also the problems they encounter when they attend a Church.

On the other hand we have seen that the Jewish community does not approve of intermarriage because of fear of loss of Jewish identity and that intermarriage causes a reduction in number of Jewish community

“It must be recognized that through intermarriage, declining birth rate, and general assimilation, there is a continual shrinkage in the Jewish communities in most nations”⁴¹

I deem that Jews-Gentile couples have lots of challenges; every couple in the world has challenges and has to find a way to live in harmony and have mutual respect but the difference of religion and culture identity can place on the Jewish-Gentile couple an added strain:

Perhaps the greatest challenge comes from the religious question of marrying someone from another faith tradition. ”⁴²

Parents can also add to the problems when in opposition to their children intermarrying. It is easy for the Jews-Gentile couple to feel rejected by the family of their partners and in case of a Jewish individual to feel lots of pain and distress because their parents have rejected them as to act as if they were dead:

“Some parents have become so upset with the prospect of their children marrying out of Judaism that they sit *shiva* (the seven- day period of mourning) and pronounce the child dead”⁴³

⁴¹ Harley et al., *Louanne Occasional Papers, Christian- Witness to the Jewish People*, 1980:8

⁴² *Ibid.*: 2004:56

⁴³ Rudolph, *Growing your olive tree Marriages, A guide for couples from two tradition*, 2003: 5

It's important today, when divorce rates are high especially in interfaith marriages that a sensitive and Christ-like approach should be found to help Jewish-Gentile couples in their challenges and problems. I believe that the Church and the Messianic-Jewish community needs to work closely together and offer specific led courses in the challenges encountered by Jewish-Gentile couples in the different relational stages of their life.

I think that Jewish-Gentile couples can aid to dispel the Christian Church's negative attitude towards evangelising to the Jewish community while contributing positively to evangelism among the Jewish people.

Appendix:

Personal Interview with a Jewish-Gentile spouse at verbatim

London 25- 04- 2009-

For the purpose of anonymity the names have been changed with the permission of the interviewee

Rebecca and Charlie are an intermarried Jewish – Gentile couple who attend two different congregations; one an Independent Evangelical Church, and the other a Messianic Congregation right in the heart of a Jewish community. Rebecca is from a Jewish background, she is a Messianic Jew. Charlie grew up in a High Anglican Church. They have three children.

Rebecca : I was raised as a Reformed Jew. I emigrated to Israel as a child, became a Messianic believer as a teenager. Trained as a nurse and worked for British Airways as an air – stewardess. I met my husband in a Charismatic Church.

Q.: How many years have you been married?

Rebecca: Twenty-four years in October.

Q : When you first married were there any challenges because you were from a Jewish background and he from a Church of England background?

Rebecca: I was a bit naive, I was young, and it did cause a problem with my brother who refused to come to any part of the wedding, because it wasn't a Jewish marriage, the food was not Kosher, and it was on Shabbat and the groom was not Jewish.

Q: What about Charlie's family, did they accept the marriage?

Rebecca: They did accept the marriage but there was a problem later on because they did not want us to go to Israel perhaps because my mother in law was worried about the political state in Israel. My brother who previously refused to come to the wedding was very happy at the perspective of us going to live in Israel, although he had told Charlie, in the Synagogue, while putting on his Talit that he would never be "one of us" (meaning Jewish) at his own son's Barmitzva.

Q: Apart from your brother, what about the rest of your family, did they accept the marriage?

Rebecca: Well, my father was not alive, however if he had been, he would have been upset.

Q: Did your diverse Religious Holiday present any problems?.

Rebecca: Yes, it did. Especially at Christmas, because Charlie wanted to introduce a Christmas tree into our home and I had a big problem with that.

Q: Have you been to a synagogue since you been married?

Rebecca: Yes, we have, mainly to celebrate family occasions such as Barmitzva, Weddings, BritMila.

Q: Do you think that Charlie wanted at some point to convert to Judaism?

Rebecca: No, Charlie did not want to convert to Judaism, because he felt that he did not need to take on a Jewish Rabbinic perspective as he already had discovered the Jewish roots of his Christian faith. But he did feel was necessary to make Aliyah in order to present to his own children a Jewish culture identity.

Q: How about the children, have there been any issues regarding their cultural and religious upbringing?

Rebecca: Yes, when our son was born Charlie did not see the significance that he later saw in having our son circumcised. There was a lot of misunderstandings, confusion, over it until it was confirmed to Charlie by another Messianic Jew who could show him from the Biblical prospective the significance of the Covenant.

Another issue was having our son go through a Barmitzva, we never agreed on this and the misunderstanding grew into a argument because Charlie found very inadequate as he himself never had a Barmitzva, he did not feel close to anyone to share his concern at that time.

Q: Has being in a Messianic Congregation helped ?

Rebecca: Yes, having the freedom to discuss and read and be understood and mixing with people who also are facing similar issues.

Q: How does going to a Church help?

Rebecca: Because we know that we need the five -fold ministry and part of meeting that need it is attending this Church who has a Minister who is an excellent Bible teacher.

Q: You have been married for twenty four years. Would you say that you have been able to resolve all the issues relating to Jewish-Gentile couple or do you feel that there are still challenges that need to be resolved?.

Rebecca: I think for us that we have managed to resolved most of the issues that have affected us, but whether we will face new issues or challenges I do not know it is difficult to predict.

Q: Do you feel that the children are denied their Judaism because they believe in Jesus?

Rebecca: No, because they are free to express every part of their cultural inheritance.

Q: Rebecca, thank you for your time

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