

# NOT JUST TRAPPINGS

*by Rabbi Yaakov Menken*

In our Torah portion, Jacob's daughter Dina is assaulted and kidnapped, and her brothers Shimon and Levi set out to rescue her.

A straightforward reading of the verses tells us that the brothers recognized that they were not strong enough to win through military might, and tricked Chamor and his son into weakening themselves through circumcision. They never intended to permit the attackers to marry their sister, but the deception was justified in order to save her (and, in addition, they deemed kidnapping a capital crime).

The Ba'al Akeidah, however, takes a different approach. He says that the offer was genuine, but Sh'chem and Chamor didn't fully understand what they were being asked to do. The brothers said that they would consent, "if you will be like us," meaning truly like they were. Not only on the outside, but on the inside.

The people of Sh'chem would need to become like the Children of Yaakov, joining the Jewish people. The brothers were not just asking them to perform the physical act of circumcision, but that they join the Covenant of circumcision that G-d made with Abraham. If they did so, then to have Sh'chem marry their sister would be no disgrace at all.

That was the point, but Sh'chem and Chamor didn't get it. They thought that if the outer trappings looked good, that was all that was needed.

Judaism is not a religion of rituals and trappings. It is a way of life. If we attempt to offer our children the trappings of Judaism, but not Judaism as a way of life, we will not succeed. This is why Shimon and Levi correctly rejected the circumcision of the people of Sh'chem, unaccompanied by a change of attitude and beliefs.

Today, many people -- both Jews and non-Jews -- don't get it. They dismiss religious differences as unimportant, and suggest that opposition to intermarriage is mere racism.

If you ask the same people, however, whether it is fair to transmit your own values to your children, they will agree that it is. They will assuredly tell you that they do so, or plan to do so, themselves. The successful transmission of our values and mores is a source of great satisfaction to any parent - and the failure to do so usually causes great pain.

Consider this question: "I am a Jewish woman, planning to marry a Christian man. Last night he told

me that he would like our child baptized. I called a minister who told me that the child will be considered part of their denomination once baptized. What does the Jewish faith say, if the child is baptized but the mother does not plan to raise the child as a Christian?"

This is a technical question that ignores a looming, fundamental conflict. Two parents pulling in different directions will compete for the attention and interest of a confused and conflicted child.

Religions are different. No disrespect of other religions is implied -- on the contrary, let us honor those differences, rather than brushing them off. The incompatibilities mean that we respect each other, but we cannot be one person, nor can we build one child.

Furthermore, the miracle of life frequently causes new parents to become much more serious about religion. Two compatible agnostics are replaced by theists.

A few years ago, a man called me up about his daughter -- an acquaintance of mine from High School. She had married a "lapsed Christian" who had agreed to allow her to raise the children as Jews, even sending them to Hebrew school.

After several years, however, he underwent a religious transformation, and became a devout, born-again Christian. Despite his previous commitments, he now firmly believes that there is only one way to Heaven... and Hebrew school doesn't lead that way. He believed that he must act urgently to save his wife and children, or they would be condemned in the next world. Suddenly, he was inviting her to church, leaving tracts for the children and putting them to bed with hymns.

Of course, there was nothing anyone could do. The husband had simply gone back to his roots. There was no easy road out; given her own increasing commitment to Judaism, the marriage was over.

We don't need trappings, nor a forced and superficial compatibility. We need shared commitment to a common set of values -- not only in order to ensure another Jewish generation, but in order to find true fulfillment as married partners, and as parents.

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The author is the Director of Project Genesis.