

Am I Jewish if my Jewish great-grandfather intermarried?

Question: Am I Jewish if my Jewish great-grandfather intermarried?

Answer: When I hear a question like this, I always ask myself, "What is this person really asking?" Are you searching for a way to associate with Judaism? Are you wondering if other Jews will accept you as a Jew? Are you seeking a way to bring spirituality into your life? Those are all some of the reasons why people grapple with questions of Jewish identity.

According to most Orthodox and Conservative authorities, a Jew is a person who has a Jewish mother, or who converted to Judaism under appropriate rabbinic authority. (If you want to know if your mother is Jewish under this standard, apply the same rule to her.) So, according to tradition, you are a Jew even if only your mother's mother's mother's mother was a Jew -- even if you were not raised as a Jew. Jewish blood on the mother's side trumps everything.

This principle, created by the early rabbis (Mishnah Kiddushin 3:12), actually reverses the attitude toward Jewish identity in most of the Hebrew Bible. In the Bible, it is the religion of the father that answers the question, "Who is a Jew?" The early rabbis changed the biblical standard for Jewish identity because they lived in a society in which the fate of a young child was linked to the fate of its mother. They acted to keep Judaism in tune with the times in which they lived.

In 1983, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR, the rabbinic organization of Reform Judaism), adopted a resolution that is often called "Patrilineal Descent." (It can be a misleading name; more on that below.) With this resolution, Reform rabbis tried to create a new principle for Jewish identity that reflected the needs of their time.

The Reform rabbis recognized that Jewish attitudes toward intermarriage, and the attitudes of our entire society, have changed remarkably. It was not long ago -- forty or fifty years, at the most -- that a Jew who married a non-Jew was automatically assumed to have abandoned his or her faith. Clearly, that is not the case any more. Intermarried Jews today often remain devoted to Judaism and the Jewish community.

The Reform rabbis were also concerned with the tradition's distinction between men and women. Traditional Judaism assigns different roles to men and women, even forbidding women to perform some mitzvot -- like reading from the Torah. Reform Judaism holds to the principle of equality for men and women as a reflection of a society that rejects sexism. A new reality calls for a new approach.

The 1983 resolution says that "The child of one Jewish parent [mother or father] is under the presumption of Jewish descent...to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal

acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people." This generally means that Reform rabbis and communities will consider a person with only one Jewish parent to be Jewish if he or she is raised as a Jew. That means that the child is raised with meaningful Jewish experiences, like having a Jewish naming ceremony (bris for a boy), celebration of Jewish holidays, and attending Jewish religious school. Most also insist that Judaism is the child's only religion; you can't be "half Jewish."

This continues to be the standard used by most Reform rabbis and communities (although, it is not a requirement). The policy is often called "Patrilineal Descent," because it allows for Jewish identity to be passed through the father. However, people often misunderstand the term to mean that Reform Jews accept everyone with a Jewish father to be Jewish. That is not the case.

So, let me go back to the beginning and ask, "What are you really asking?" If your great-grandfather was Jewish, and you have no other Jewish parents or grandparents, then you would not be considered to be a Jew by either Orthodox, Conservative or Reform Jews until you converted. If your mother's mother's mother (your great-grandmother) was not Jewish, then you would not be considered a Jew by Conservative and Orthodox authorities until you converted, even if all your other great-grandparents were Jewish.

Does that mean that you have no place among the Jewish people? No. Judaism is not a private, members-only club. It is a rich tradition that is open to all who seek meaning in life and a taste for experiencing divinity in the world and in their souls. Find a community and a rabbi who speak to your soul, study and learn, and explore what Jewish identity means to you.