

Liberal Judaism on Jewish status and equilineal descent

By Rabbi Alexandra Wright, Co-Chair of Liberal Judaism's Rabbinic Conference

Liberal Judaism recognises equilineal descent: namely, that individuals born of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother should be treated in exactly the same way as individuals born to a Jewish mother and non-Jewish father.

The Affirmations of Liberal Judaism state that children of mixed relationships, between a Jew and a non-Jew, are to be treated alike "and considered Jewish if so brought up".

Liberal Judaism's acceptance of children of either a Jewish mother or father, provided they have had a Jewish upbringing and education within the context of a synagogue, has been held since approximately 1955. The American Reform movement was talking about patrilineality as early as 1929.

That presumption of Jewish status for a child of one Jewish parent – whether mother or father – is confirmed when the child reaches the age of barmitzvah or batmitzvah.

There is no certificate, no conversion, no Beit Din, no rabbinic determination of the status of the child, but a quiet acknowledgement that this individual teenager is a full member of the Jewish community, that they have never been anything other than Jewish and that one parent – together with upbringing and education (and not the religion of the other parent) – determines Jewish status.

In time, if the child wishes to marry someone who is Jewish, the couple will be able to celebrate their wedding underneath a *chuppah*, with a *ketubbah*, in a Liberal synagogue.

Couples and families with mixed backgrounds are welcomed and included into the life of Liberal Judaism congregations, and "there should be the opportunity for mixed couples to solemnise their partnerships with an Act of Prayer conducted by a rabbi, and, where possible to be buried together in our cemeteries."

The need to be inclusive in our attitude to Jewish identity, to welcome sincere converts and to make the process of conversion no more difficult than it needs to be, is central to Judaism's values of compassion and justice.

Liberal synagogues are places where mixed families can feel comfortable and welcome and where children are never excluded for wanting to explore and deepen their Jewish identity. Just as important, their parents – Jewish and non-Jewish – can participate in life cycle ceremonies, explore Judaism in classes and discussion, convert if they wish and help to raise a Jewish child.

These stories that follow are just several of the moving testimonies of by children of one Jewish and one non-Jewish parent. But for the support of both their parents, they would be lost to the Jewish people. The names of these individuals have been changed.

Saul is 12-years-old and has been attending religion school classes at a Liberal synagogue for nearly eight years, since the age of four. His father, Marc, is Jewish, his mother a non-practising Catholic, but supportive of her son's attendance at synagogue classes and his Jewish identity.

Sitting in my office a few weeks ago, Saul is nervous, but keen to become barmitzvah next year. Both his mother and father are present and we talk about the significance of barmitzvah and his Torah portion, which is from the Book of Leviticus. He is knowledgeable, sensitive and feels his Jewish identity deeply and with pride.

Saul's parents separated soon after he was born. There is no possibility of her conversion, but she is interested and keen and wishes to help her son celebrate his barmitzvah.

In the eyes of more traditional members of the Anglo-Jewish community, Saul is not considered to be Jewish because his mother is not Jewish, even though he has had a Jewish upbringing and education and celebrates Shabbat and the festivals with his father and his stepmother, who is Jewish. He has never thought of himself as anything other than Jewish.

In the eyes of Liberal Judaism, Saul is presumed to be Jewish.

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Benjamin, aged 30, grew up outside London with a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. Theirs was a secular home, with little knowledge about Jewish practice and observance. He was not brought up formally as Jewish and did not attend religion school or become barmitzvah.

But he did visit his Jewish grandparents regularly, and remembers going very occasionally as a boy with his father to synagogue on Yom Kippur.

Benjamin went to school in an area where there were few Jews. Even if he felt he couldn't identify himself fully as a Jew, his peers were more discerning. He was constantly taunted in the school playground with antisemitic jibes.

By one of those curious coincidences, that seems more like an act synchronicity, Benjamin has met and fallen in love with a Jewish woman. They sit in my office to talk about the possibility of a mixed faith blessing – a ceremony conducted by a Rabbi, following a civil marriage ceremony.

There is no *chuppah*, no *sheva berachot* (Seven Blessings) but the couple are able to create the service themselves and shape a ceremony that has meaning for both of them – a practice in Liberal Judaism that dates back to 2003, when public ceremonies were approved by the Liberal Rabbis' Rabbinic Conference. In the course of the discussion, I ask Benjamin about his background and the seeds of his Jewish identity as the child of a Jewish father. "I wasn't brought up in a Jewish household," he says. "Growing up, I spent a lot of time with my family and I have always been aware of my Jewish heritage. At school, I was always seen as being Jewish. I was circumcised, but my father couldn't really explain to me why I had a *brit milah*."

I ask him what he feels about conversion or affirmation of Jewish status, the former requiring a full year's programme of study in Hebrew and Judaism, the latter adapted to the needs of the individual.

He hadn't been sure whether it would be possible for him to be considered fully Jewish, but the couple leave the synagogue to think about what steps Benjamin might take next.

In Benjamin's case, he chooses to convert. He wants to create a Jewish family, bringing up children as Jews in a way that he had not fully experienced as a child and teenager.

In the case of another young man, the son of a Jewish father and Christian mother, and who has only ever seen himself as a Jew, attending synagogue regularly at festivals, never missing a Seder at home, lighting the Chanukkah candles and with a very strong sense of Jewish identity passed on to him from his father, the route is an affirmation of Jewish status.

Although he never attended religion school, never celebrated a Bar Mitzvah ceremony and did not take part in a Kabbalat Torah ceremony at 15, there is no doubt that he feels Jewish through and through and that the role of the synagogue and the Liberal Beit Din is to validate and honour that strong sense of Jewish identity. It is his heritage and no one can take it away from him.