

TORAH

GENESIS

The following are many characters in Genesis who did not have Israelite mothers:

- The children of Judah whose wife, Shua, was a Canaanite
- Manasseh and Ephraim, the sons of Joseph and his Egyptian wife, Asenath

All of these characters are pillars of the Israelite tribe. Chapter 46:8 states:

“These are the names of the Israelites, Jacob and his descendants, who came to Egypt.”

The chapter then proceeds to list the names of all of Jacobs sons and their children, a group totalling seventy. Of particular importance are Joseph’s sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Jacob speaks of them in Chapter 48:5:

“Now, your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon.”

Jacob then asks to bless them and states in Chapter 48:15-16:

“The God in whose ways my fathers Abraham and Isaac
walked,
The God who has been my sheperd from my birth to this day-
The Angel who has redeemed me from all harm-
Bless the lads.
In them may my name be recalled,
And the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac,
And may they be teeming multitudes upon the earth.”

Jacob continues to say on his death bed in Chapter 48:20:

“So he blessed them that day, saying, ‘By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.’”

There can be no question that these children of an Israelite father and Egyptian mother are children of the Israelite God. The religious affiliation is unquestionably that of the father's. At least 7 times in Genesis when a character speaks of God, he uses the reference "God of my father" or "God of your father." These occur in Chapter 31, verses 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100. These occur in Chapter 31, verses 5, 29, 42, Chapter 32:10, Chapter 43:23 and Chapter 46, verses 1 and 3.

An important story on the subject of intermarriage is contained in the book of Genesis, Chapter 34. This is the story of Jacob's daughter Dinah. She has been raped by Shechem, son of Hamor, a Hivite. The story continues in verse 8:

"And Hamor spoke to them, saying, 'My son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us: give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves: You will dwell among us, and the land will be open before you; settle, move about, and acquire holdings in it.' Then Shechem said to to her father and brothers, 'Do me this favor, and I will pay whatever you tell me. Ask of me a bride-price ever so high, as well as gifts, and I will pay what you tell me; only give me the maiden for a wife.'

Jacob's sons answered Shechem and his father Hamor-speaking with guile because he had defiled their sister Dinah-and said to them, 'We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to a man who is uncircumcised, for that is a disgrace among us. Only on this condition will we agree with you; that you will become like us in that every male among you is circumcised. Then we will give our daughters to you and take your daughters to ourselves; and we will dwell among you and become as one kindred. But if you will not listen to us and become circumcised, we will take our daughter and go.'

Their words pleased Hamor and Hamor's son Shechem. And the youth lost no time in doing the thing, for he wanted Jacob's daughter. Now he was the most respected in his father's house.

So Hamor and his son Shechem went to the public place of their town and spoke to their fellow townsmen, saying 'These people are our friends; let them settle in the land and move about in it, for the land is large enough for them; we will take their daughters to ourselves as wives and give our daughters to them. But only on this condition will the men agree with us to dwell among us and be as one kindred: that all our males become circumcised as they are circumcised. Their cattle and substance and all their beasts will be ours, if we only agree to their terms, so that they will settle among us.' All who went out of the gate of his town heeded Hamor and his son Shechem, and all males, all those who went out of the gate of his town, were circumcised.

On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword,

came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males. They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword, took Dinah out of Shechem's house, and went away. The other sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the town, because their sister had been defiled. They seized their flocks and herds and asses, all that was inside the town and was in the houses, they took as captives and booty..."

This story makes crystal clear that it was abhorrent for the Israelites to have one of their women marry into another tribe, but that it was perfectly acceptable for their males to take as wives members of another tribe.

It is important to mention that for most characters in the Tanach, the identity of the mother is not known. In the numerous geneological listings that are given, usually, only the name of the father is stated. This is because it didn't matter who the mother was. Your identity and social status was determined by your father.

EXODUS

The book of Exodus contains fewer references to the subject of miscegenation, however it does contain some important ones. Firstly, the phrase "God of my father" or "God of your father" is used several times, specifically in chapter 3:6,13,15,16, chapter 4:5, chapter 15:2 and chapter 18:4. This of course reiterates the prevalent importance of the father's religion. In several of these instances, the reference is made to the "God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" which is the basis of the "avot" prayer. It is important to note that while the Reform movement and many within the Conservative movement have added the names of the matriarchs to this prayer, the Orthodox have steadfastly refused to do so. One of the reasons they give for this is that there is no certainty that the matriarchs were actually Jewish. This renders their argument for relying only on the mother's religion to determine the child's religion totally incoherent. They acknowledge on the one hand that it was not the original intent of the Torah to use the mother's religion as identifying, but then will not follow the Torah.

The first and most important intermarriage that takes place in Exodus is in chapter 2 which details the marriage of Moses to Zippora, the daughter of a Midianite priest. Zippora had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Both are absolutely 100% Jewish and listed as part of the Israelite clan. The meaning of their respective names give a clear indication of their identity. Gershom means "I have been a stranger in a foreign land," referring to the Israelites captivity in Egypt, and Eliezer means "The God of my father was my help, and he delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." This, of course, indicates that the child is under the protection of the God of it's father.

In chapter 6, starting with verse 14, the heads of the clans of Israel are enumerated. In verse 15, Saul is listed as being the son of Simeon and a Canaanite woman and nevertheless listed as a head of an Israelite clan, clearly indicating his complete membership within the Israelite tribe.

The establishment of one mandate from God which helps our understanding of this subject takes place in chapter 12:48-49:

"If a stranger who dwells with you would offer the pass-over to the Lord, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be as a citizen of

the country. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you.”

The Hebrew word used for “stranger” is “ger” (gimmel,resh) which in modern Hebrew means convert. The Hebrew word used for “among” is “b-toch.” This is the first reference to what would today be considered a conversion. It is important to note that it refers only to the males, indicating that a female does not have to do anything to be accepted into the tribe. At this point it has no real importance, however we shall see in Leviticus and Numbers how this ties in to the concept of defining Jewish identity.

LEVITICUS & NUMBERS

I have decided to incorporate the Books of Leviticus and Numbers here because there are several passages relevant to this topic in both books that tie into one another. In picking up on the concept that we left off with in the previous paragraph, that of determining how the Israelites dealt with non-Jews in their midst, which are always referred to as those who dwell “amongst” them, let us look at several stories. The most important is Leviticus, chapter 24:10-23:

“There came out among the Israelites one whose mother was Israelite and whose father was Egyptian. And a fight broke out in the camp between the son of an Israelite woman and a certain Israelite. The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the name in blasphemy, and he was brought to Moses—now his mother’s name was Shelomith daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan—and he was placed in custody, until the decision of the Lord should be made clear to them.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Take the blasphemer outside the camp; and let all who were within hearing lay their hands upon his head, and let the whole community stone him. And to the Israelite people speak thus: Anyone who blasphemes his God shall bear his guilt; if he also pronounces the name of Lord, he shall be put to death. The whole community shall stone him; stranger or citizen, if he has thus pronounced the Name, he shall be put to death.

If anyone kills any human being, he shall be put to death. One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it: life for life. If anyone maims his fellow, as he has done so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him. One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it; but one who kills a human being shall be put to death. You shall have one standard for stranger and citizen alike: for I the Lord am your God. Moses spoke thus to the Israelites. And they took the blasphemer outside the camp and pelted him with stones. The Israelites did as the Lord had commanded Moses”

This, of course, directly relates to our topic, which is matrilineal versus patrilineal heritage. However, in order to properly interpret this passage, we must relate it to similar ones. I have previously cited Exodus

12:48-49. Others are Numbers 9:14:

“And when a stranger who resides with you would offer a passover sacrifice to the Lord, he must offer it in accordance with the rules and rites of the passover sacrifice. There shall be one law for you, whether stranger or citizen of the country.”

Numbers 15:14-16:

“And when, throughout the ages, a stranger who has taken up residence with you, or one who lives among you, would present an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord-as you do, so shall it be done by the rest of the congregation. There shall be one law for you and for the resident stranger; it shall be a law for all time throughout the ages. You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord; the same ritual and the same rule shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you.”

Numbers 15:29-30:

“For the citizen among the Israelites and for the stranger who resides among them-you shall have one ritual for anyone who acts in error. But the person, be he citizen or stranger, who acts defiantly reviles the Lord; that person shall be cut off from among his people.”

Finally, Numbers 19, after mandating the rituals for the sacrificial slaughter of the red cow, verse 10 goes on to say:

“...This shall be a permanent law for the Israelites and for the strangers who reside among you.”

All of these stories illustrate the phraseology used to refer to a person who is not a member of the Israelite tribe by birth, but that due to whatever circumstances, has come to be, for all practical purposes a member. These people are referred to as one who dwells, resides or lives “among” the Israelites. It is very important to look at the original Hebrew text in order to properly analyze them, as errors can be made in translation. In all of these passages except Numbers 9:14-16, the Hebrew word “b-toch” meaning among, is used when referring to those who live with the Israelites but were not born into the tribe. This is the same word used in Exodus 12:48-49. Additionally, in all of these passages the Hebrew word “ger” is also used to refer to these people, as it is in Exodus 12:48-49. All of these citations conclude that these people are subject to the same laws as the native-born Israelites. The story that most concerns us is Leviticus 24:10-23, concerning the blasphemer. This man is referred to as one who is “among” the Israelites, once again using the Hebrew word “b-toch”. This term is NEVER, EVER used in the Torah to refer to a clan member, but only to what we would call today a convert. He is referred to this way because his mother is Israelite but his father is Egyptian. Pointedly, his mother is described as being a member of the tribe of Dan, but he himself is not. Most importantly, the fight that breaks out is described as being between this “son of an Israelite woman and a certain Israelite.” It doesn’t say between two Israelites, a distinction is made in the status of the two men. In reading this story we must remember one concept that is always used when studying Torah. That is that every word in the Torah is there for a reason. They all have meaning. What is the purpose of this story?

The commandment against blasphemy has already been given, along with its punishment. The purpose of this story, then, is to answer the question of whether the law applies equally to one who is not a member of the Israelite tribe by birthright, but that dwells among them. While the answer to this question is yes, the blasphemer who has an Israelite mother and Egyptian father is used as the example of one who is not a member by birthright. There is no story in the Torah that asks this question of one who has an Israelite father and non-Israelite mother, in spite of the many important characters with this genealogy. It is assumed. What I find laughable is that I have actually seen this story cited in Orthodox texts as a support for the practice of exclusive matrilineal heritage. The use of the term “b-toch,” meaning among, the Israelites is definitive in drawing from this text that the blasphemer of an Israelite mother and Egyptian father is not an Israelite by birth. Also, the answer that Moses gives to the Israelites in verse 22 uses the Hebrew word “ger” when referring to the blasphemer. Only a person completely detached from reality could come to any other conclusion. Even if we wanted to say for the sake of argument that the blasphemer is a native of the Israelite tribe, it isn’t because of his mother. Deuteronomy 23:9, which I cite under the Deuteronomy heading, states clearly that an Egyptian must be allowed to assimilate into the Israelite tribe because the Israelites had been strangers in their land and that they can be admitted into the congregation of the Lord in the third generation. The blasphemer was at least a second generation Egyptian living among the Israelites and quite possibly a third generation, although it doesn’t say, so he would have been an Israelite because his father was an assimilated Egyptian. Other foreign tribes lived among the Israelites and were enslaved and not allowed to assimilate, but God has commanded the Israelites to allow the Egyptians to become members. Later, Solomon marries an Egyptian and this does not incur the wrath of God.

Another minor incident relevant to this topic is the marriage of Moses to a Cushite woman, which is recounted in Numbers 12:1. While there is no mention of any offspring from this union, it is clear that the Israelite men can marry whom they wish.

DEUTERONOMY

The previously oft-cited phrase of “God of your father” or “God of our father” appears at least four times in Deuteronomy, in chapter 1:11 and 21, 4:1, and 26:7.

The most important evidence we find in Deuteronomy, however, is in chapter 10:15:

“Yet it was to your fathers that the Lord was drawn in His love for them, so that he chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all peoples—as is now the case.”

This statement is unequivocal and requires no interpretation.

An important discussion of intermarriage takes place in chapter 23:3-9:

“No one misbegotten shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of his descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord. No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Aram-naharaim, to curse

you.-But the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you.-You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.

You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land. Children born to them may be admitted into the congregation of the Lord in the third generation.”

This clearly indicates that intermarriage with some tribes was acceptable. We must make a note on the translation here. The Hebrew word for stranger used here to refer to an Israelite in living in Egypt is “ger,” the same term used for a so-called convert in the Israelite tribe. Certain other prohibited tribes are listed in chapter 7:1-4:

“When the Lord your God brings you to the land that you are about to enter and possess, and He dislodges many nations before you-the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations much larger than you-and the Lord your God delivers them to you and you defeat them, you must doom them to destruction: grant them no terms and give them no quarter. You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out.”

This passage is used by those who follow Talmudic Judaism in support of the custom of matrilineal heritage (kiddushin 68b). If you’re asking yourself what this passage has to do with that, that’s a good question. I’ll not get into a Talmudic argument here. That can be found on the “Talmud” page of this site. However, I will state here that these people are gravely mistaken in their interpretation. Regardless of it’s meaning, the Israelites proceed to intermarry and miscegenize anyway.

The last piece of text worth examining in Deuteronomy is chapter 17:15:

“...Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman”

This is important, as we shall see in the Prophetic writings examples of Kings with non-Israelite mothers.