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Anyone who's watched Fiddler on the Roof, where Tevye says his daughter is dead to him for marrying a non-Jew, knows the issue has always been a sensitive one among Jews.



Another of Tevye's daughters, Hodel, finds love with a Jewish man, Perchik

But Dr Daniel Gordis, an author and expert commentator on Israel and Judaism, says that has changed in the past few decades, especially in the Diaspora Jewish community.

Whereas once it was greatly frowned upon for a Jew of any stream to marry a non-Jew, today, among unaffiliated (no synagogue), non-denominational (those who don't identify with any movement), conservative or reform Jews, it is not the taboo it once was. The intermarriage rates of non-denominational Jews approach 80%, he says.

But among Orthodox Jews and in Israel, it is still much more controversial.

"It's not a racial issue, it's not a superiority issue, it's not a xenophobia issue," he says, explaining that there are two reasons for the opposition to intermarriage, one of which is that it is simply forbidden in Halacha, or Jewish law.

"The other thing is that Jews have come to see that the only real way to transmit powerful Jewish identity to their children is for them to be raised by two Jewish parents. Kids raised by one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent have more tepid, more fragile, thinner Jewish identities than their Jewish parents did.

"They are statistically more likely to marry non-Jews. There's no guarantee, but statistically it's almost impossible to create a child with the same sense of Jewish passion that the older generation has if he's raised by someone who doesn't share that story."

The result, he adds, is that in America, "there's a rapidly eroding sense of Jewish commitment, a complete collapsing of Jewish literacy, and a thinning of Jewish identity".

So Israelis are petrified, says Rabbi Dr Donniel Hartman, head of the Shalom Hartman Institute of Jewish studies, because since intermarriage is so rare there, when an Israeli marries a non-Jew they view it as if he is leaving Judaism.

"When you're a small people and you lose your constituents it makes you quite nervous. We are 14 million Jews in the world, that's it," he explains. "What's changed in contemporary Jewish life outside of Israel is that a Jew marrying a non-Jew doesn't necessarily mean leaving Jewish life anymore."

This is a new phenomenon in Judaism, and Hartman says Jews must rise to the challenge. "The battle against intermarriage is a lost battle. We are a people who are intermarried - the issue is not how to stop it, but how to reach out to non-Jewish spouses and welcome them into our community," he says.

"Our outreach has to be better, our institutions have to be better, our Jewish experiences have to be more compelling, we have to start working much harder.

"Living in the modern world requires you to be nimble. Things are changing, I don't know if it's for the worse or not, that will depend on what we do. But the world is evolving, and we have to evolve with it."