

# It's complicated: Zuckerberg, Chan and intermarriage among Jews

How is it that no one mentioned intermarriage when discussing the Facebook founder's wedding?

By [Allison Kaplan Sommer](#) | May.22, 2012 | 1:37 PM | 57

Mazel Tov, Priscilla and Mark! You pulled it off: a [surprise wedding](#). What was supposed to be a medical school graduation party for a newly minted MD turned out to be an event in which she collected a M.R.S degree and also wedded a newly minted billionaire.

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The wedding was strategically timed to happen the day after the huge news of Facebook's IPO, which priced the company at more than \$100 billion. The news was still being assimilated and the world was focused on the fluctuating stock of Zuckerberg's company; not his personal life.

Reactions to the wedding have been largely confined to the gossip columns, ranging from speculation [over the existence of a prenup](#), to the designer of [Priscilla's wedding dress](#), to [who sang](#) at the reception.

In all of the coverage and commentary, however, there was no mention of intermarriage. The fact that a Zuckerberg was marrying a Chan never entered the conversation. Not only has criticism or condemnation been absent, but the fact that the bride was Chinese and the groom Jewish hasn't even been casually mentioned in any of the reports or reactions to the wedding.

What is most remarkable about this decision by America's highest-profile Jew to intermarry, is that there was nothing remarkable about it.

Part of it was that the Zuckerberg-Chan union came as no surprise. The couple has been together since college. He has been describing himself as an atheist for years and has no visible connection to Jewish life or religion. There was no reason why his longtime girlfriend's faith or ethnic background would be any impediment to marriage.

The non-reaction to the marriage is evidence of a long journey in just a few generations. American Jews have long been light-years away from the mind-set of turn-of-the-past-century Tevye from "Fiddler on the Roof" who banishes his daughter Chava from his sight after she eloped with a non-Jew. The Broadway audiences watching "Fiddler" in the 60's and 70's already viewed his reaction as extreme and outdated. Yet, they could still identify and understand Tevye's disappointment and anger, which many of them would have had to face when they brought home their first non-Jewish boyfriend or girlfriend.

By the 1980's and 1990's, when I came of age in the U.S., anger over intermarriage was already considered *déclassé*. A certain measure of parental disappointment was acceptable, as long as they quickly got over it. My parents stayed quiet when I introduced them to my non-Jewish boyfriends, but made it clear to me they were hoping that eventually I'd be standing under the chuppah with somebody Jewish, and that if I didn't, they would be disappointed - that disappointment would likely have been channeled into finding indirect ways to pressure me into creating a Christmas tree-less home and sending my half-Jewish kids to Hebrew school. It is likely that I would have intermarried [Chelsea Clinton style](#) - with an attempt to assuage everyone's discomfort with a shout-out to the religions of both the bride and the groom.

The Clinton interfaith nuptials two years ago, unlike Zuckerberg's, did, in fact, kick-start a conversation about intermarriage in the Jewish community. But the parents of the bride and groom themselves had no comment. Today, expressing disappointment when your child marries a non-Jew is more unusual. Expressing that feeling is viewed as insensitive and politically incorrect - as is any attempt to encourage conversion or pressuring the couple to agree to raising their children Jewish.

And so we've reached the stage where, in many cases, actual disappointment over intermarriage has drastically diminished, because the expectation that non-Orthodox American Jews will actively prefer and seek out fellow Jews as life partners doesn't exist.

*Do you have an interesting intermarriage story of your own? Share it with us on [Facebook](#), and it could get published on Haaretz's website.*

Jewish organizations do what they can, mainly by encouraging proximity, funding campus Hillel houses

and Birthright trips and other settings where young Jews might just happen to hook up. But they, like parents, have given up preaching or pushing. Today, convincing young adults to "stick to their own kind" - for whatever reason - feels as dated as a revival of "Fiddler" or "West Side Story." In an age of a biracial U.S. president, in an [increasingly minority and mixed-race country](#), maintaining "tradition" sounds so backwards, so 20th century.

Together with the evaporation of parental or societal anger and disapproval at intermarriage, is the absence of the sense of rebellion. There's no need to rebel if there's nothing to rebel against. Hence, this generation of American Jewish inter-dating and intermarriage is rarely a case of Portnoy-style resentment of domineering parents.

When the movie "The Social Network" came out, Zuckerberg reportedly took great offense with the way in which screenwriter Aaron Sorkin implied that he created Facebook in order to meet girls, specifically non-Jewish girls, as [Danielle Berrin noted](#) in the Huffington Post. She wrote:

"In one of the film's early scenes, Zuckerberg and friends are partying at the Jewish fraternity Alpha Epsilon Pi, on "Caribbean Night," when they observe a group of Asian-American young women dancing in a cluster. "There's an algorithm for the connection between Jewish guys and Asian girls," one of Zuckerberg's friends says wryly. "They're hot, smart, not Jewish and can dance."

I tend to believe that Zuckerberg - who met Chan at precisely such a party - didn't, in fact, intentionally set out in search of a non-Jewish girlfriend or wife. Religion and ethnic identity was and is simply irrelevant to him, and, like it or not, to most of his generation of American Jews. Sorkin - a generation ahead of him - was imposing a narrative on Zuckerberg and his friends that didn't fit.

In the new online social order Zuckerberg has helped create, we are all friends and we are all networked.

For those who cling tightly to their tribes, rituals, and traditions, this is hard to grasp and difficult to accept. Some Israelis, to whom Jewishness tends to be a more central component of their identity, did have something to say about the wedding.

Dr. Aliza Lavie, a lecturer at Bar Ilan University, [lamented after hearing the wedding news](#) (on her Facebook status, appropriately) that, "The children of another successful Jewish man will not be counted as Jews. This wedding does not bother many American Jews, and quite a few Israelis as well... Large sections of the younger generation of American Jews are no longer with us. Treating mixed marriages only as a religious matter which does not interest those who are non-religious, misses the reality that threatens us all, religious and secular alike."

"Threaten?" It's hard to view the smiling couple in the wedding photos as a threat. But they do symbolize a seemingly irreversible shift in American Jewry, one that is affecting Israel already and will in the future.

Israel must cope with the fact that it can't rely on the ties that bound American Jews to the Jewish State as they once did. This lessening of importance of Jewishness in defining their fundamental identity is the biggest factor in their feeling of distance from Israel. It is more important than whether the [Israeli rabbinate views them](#), their spouse, or their children as Jewish according to halakha, and it is far more significant than anger over any Israeli policy.

I have never bought the [Peter Beinart contention](#) that it is Israel's bad behavior is the primary factor that distances young American Jews. Yes, they are distancing. But even if Israel fully disarmed and offered the Palestinians every centimeter of land they ever wanted, the Mark Zuckerbergs, who don't actively identify as Jewish, don't join Jewish institutions, and inevitably intermarry, would still not feel that their destiny is necessarily tied to that of a Jewish state.

Israelis don't have to "like" this. But they definitely have to deal with it.