

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.

Jewish Shidduch Practice in Present-Day Britain

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Introduction

This guide is directed at religious functionaries within the British Jewish community who wish to guide young and single Jews in finding a partner. Its main purpose is to demonstrate how the values surrounding dating in the British Jewish community have interacted with the Western values of present-day Britain, so that young Jews can be aided in the sometimes challenging path of combining modern societal values with their faith. It will only focus on heterosexual dating customs, as homosexuality within the Jewish community is an issue that extends beyond dating customs and would not be sufficiently covered as a side issue in this guide.

Case Study

Howard Kleinman – ‘My Jewish Dating Problem’

‘Jewish women weren’t the problem—I was. The intense pressure I felt to date and marry within the tribe damaged my perception of Jewish women and my ability to be myself around them. I was only able to relax around non-Jewish women, because I didn’t feel the same pressure.

... I began to be bombarded with information about intermarriage—about how one in every two Jewish people would marry a non-Jew and how more than half of the children of those unions would not be raised Jewish.’

Shidduch Anxiety

Shidduch is a highly important practice within Judaism that can sometimes cause Jews like Howard to experience shidduch anxiety (Margolese 1998, p. 47). Due to the interaction

between Judaism and modern Western values, this anxiety can be increased. Boyarin (2003) contends that Jewish assimilation in Western countries can sometimes cause insecurity due to the feeling of ‘otherness’ their differing practices can evoke. This closely links to the difficulty of Jewish shidduch in present-day British society.

Firstly, *intermarriage* is an important issue within the Jewish community. Intermarriage is generally frowned upon due to the importance Judaism places on the continuation of Jewish lineage and the preservation of their culture (Rocker 2016). As Jews move closer towards modern society, they also encounter more non-Jewish potential partners. Intermarriage in Britain has increased since the 70’s. A quarter of the Jewish population in Britain is married to a non-Jew, and only 33 percent of these marriages raise their children to be Jewish (Rocker 2016).

Moreover, Judaism places great value in marriage in general. A man’s standing within the Jewish community is essential to the recognition of his masculinity. The relationality with his wife is an important factor in this (Satlow 1996, p. 40). Meanwhile, a woman needs a husband to help her restrain her desires and to create a family (Satlow 1996, p. 33). Dating as a Jew is therefore often seen as a formative, serious engagement with marriage as the implied outcome, whereas dating in present-day British society can also be seen as a casual activity.

It is however important to note that Jewish values are not static. They interact with modern Western values. Hartman’s (2007) three models for reconciling subjective experience with religious tradition can be applied to the interaction between modern British values and Jewish traditional values. Where some Jewish communities may choose reaffirmation and stay close to their traditions, other communities may find a way to reinterpret their traditions with modern values.

Orthodox Judaism

There are several Jewish communities within Orthodox Judaism, but the most important distinction is the split between Orthodox Judaism and the *Haredi*. Both regard the observance of *halacha* as fundamental. While it is difficult to define a clear split, they can be distinguished mostly by their attitudes towards modernity. Where Orthodox Judaism has interacted with and moved towards modern culture, the Haredi reject it and seek to maintain their traditions by forming a closed community (Lehmann & Siebzehner 2009, p. 273).

Haredi

There are strict rules surrounding shidduch in Haredi Judaism. People are brought together through a traditional *shadchan*. The mediation and large network of the shadchan ensures suitable matching and a protection of sensitivities when an offer is declined. It also ensures purity of Jewish lineage, as the shadchan gathers information on their heritage (Lehmann & Siebzehner 2009, p. 293). Inter-marriage is therefore not an option for Haredi Jews, nor is marrying a *convert*. Due to the classic *Talmudic* prohibition on marriage between two people who have never met, it is essential that the couple meets up before marrying. Originally, the families had the most say on the coupling between their children and there would be little contact between the couple before marriage. This has now shifted slightly, allowing the couple to meet up several times in public before the wedding (Lehmann & Siebzehner 2009, p. 290).

Orthodox

Inter-marriage is regarded as unacceptable in Orthodox communities. Previous *rabbi's* Weinstein and Feinstein stated that conversion for the sake of marriage was against the Jewish law (Ellenson 1985, p. 211). Due to the increase in inter-marriage, this attitude has eased up slightly. Orthodox conversion may take up to ten years, as the commitment to the faith must be tested before conversion (Kepler 2019). Attitudes towards the importance of the shidduch process can differ among Orthodox communities. Marriage is often arranged through a

traditional shadchan who ensures both the man and woman adhere to traditional and religious teachings. Usually the family is involved in the pairing but the couple in question makes the final decision (Margolese 1998, p. 47). A shadchan can also be found on a shidduch website (www.shidduch.im) and a small group of Orthodox Jews have been found to use a dating app (Sugarman 2019).

Conservative Judaism

Conservative Judaism is often viewed as the ‘middle position’. The halacha occupies an authoritative position in the community, but they also believe that change in law is sometimes necessary (Gordis 2000, p. 334). Intermarriage is frowned upon. Conversion is allowed, but Jewish heritage can only be passed along through the mother according to halacha. However, studies show diverse opinions on abiding the halacha within Conservative Judaism, leading to a general ambiguity in Conservative practice (Gordis 2000, p. 351). It is therefore difficult to define the shidduch process. A shadchan can be found traditionally, or family or friends can act as a shadchan. Moreover, some Conservative Jews have been reported to use a dating app (Sugarmann 2019). Overall, the most important value within Conservative Judaism is the conservation of Jewish practice and culture. It is therefore most important to raise children with Jewish values, be it with a converted or a Jewish spouse.

Reform Judaism

Reform Judaism interacts with modern society and adapts its beliefs accordingly. The Reform patrilineage law allows children to be Jewish if either of their parents is Jewish, which enables the Jewish heritage to be passed on more easily (Carpenter & Kaplan 2015, p. 917).

Intermarriage is not prohibited but undesirable. In the case of intermarriage, the “containment route” of discouragement or the “recruitment route” of conversion might be taken (Goldsmith 1996, p. 122). As traditional rituals are less important in Reform Judaism, the process of

shidduch is not strictly defined. The shadchan is less important. Many Reform Jews have been reported to use dating apps (Sugermann, 2019).

Outlook to the Future

As the overview of Jewish views on shidduch practices demonstrates, the continuance and preservation of Jewish heritage and lineage is essential throughout Judaism. As interaction with present-day British culture increases, the intermarriage issue will continue to be an issue in the Jewish community. While the reinterpretation of Jewish beliefs combined with modern British beliefs may add to the anxiety single Jews encounter with assimilation, it could also help them in their reconciliation of tradition and modernity as conversion becomes easier and the shadchan is more accessible through websites or replaced by dating apps.

Glossary

Intermarriage: The marriage between two people with different faiths/beliefs.

Shadchan: Traditionally a marriage broker, nowadays defined as match-maker.

Haredi: Branch of Orthodox Judaism. Closed Jewish community that holds the Halacha very close.

Halacha: The written and oral laws of Judaism, derived from the Hebrew Bible.

Shidduch: Literally 'pairing', the process of matchmaking with marriage as the objective.

Convert: Someone who adopts a religious belief.

Talmud: The commentaries and teachings on the Hebrew Bible that form the primary source of Jewish law.

Rabbi: Teacher of Judaism. Position of communal authority.

Annotated Bibliography:

Boyarin, D. 2003. "Homophobia and the Postcoloniality of the 'Jewish Science'", edited by D. Boyarin, D. Itzkovitz, & A. Pellegrini, *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, 166-198. Columbia UP: New York.

This article highlights the emotional aspect of Jewish assimilation. Although it generally focuses on homosexuality, the argument concerning Jewish assimilation and castration practices is useful to connect to other assimilation issues.

Ellenson, D. 1985. "Representative Orthodox Responsa on Conversion and Inter-marriage in the Contemporary Era". *Jewish Social Studies*, 47, no. 3, 209-220.

Ellenson's article is useful as its perspective is from a rabbi himself. It demonstrates Orthodox views on conversion and intermarriage, but it is quite dated. It can be compared to more recent sources to track development.

Goldsmith, M. 1996. "The Changing Face of the Jewish Family". *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 29, no. 2, 121-125.

This article demonstrates the view of the Reform Jews on the issue of intermarriage and provides information on the changing statistics around Jewish marriage. The Jewish scholar is a married Reform himself which allows an inside perspective but could also cause bias. However, as it is a bit dated, the statistics are not up to date.

Gordis, D. 2000. "Conservative Judaism: The Struggle between Ideology and Popularity", edited by Neusner, J. & Avery-Peck, A. J. *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, 334-354.

This article provides a thorough overview of the ambiguous position of Conservative Judaism from a Conservative rabbi. It highlights the differing Conservative views on many important issues within Judaism. It compares theory and actual practice and therefore manages to stay mostly objective despite Gordis's position.

Hartman, T. (2007). Facing the Legacy of the Canon, in *Feminism Encounters Traditional Judaism*, 21-44. Brandeis UP, Massachusetts.

Hartman's article provides a model to analyse the differing reactions of women towards traditional religious beliefs. Though limited by its simplicity, it is useful in analysing the movement of religion to modernity.

Kepler, D. 2019. "Why won't an Orthodox Rabbi convert me?" *The Jewish News of Northern California*. 25. Feb, 2019. <https://www.jweekly.com/2019/02/25/why-wont-an-orthodox-rabbi-convert-me/>

This article provides recent information on Orthodox conversion.

Kleinman, H. 2012. "My Jewish Dating Problem." *Tabletmag* (blog), 30 Dec 2012.

<https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/119861/my-jewish-dating-problem>

This blog provided the case study. It is especially useful as it is quite recent and combines Howard's personal experience with the dominant issue of intermarriage and dating in Judaism. While the blog is written by an American, it still highlights a universal issue among Jews, as the preservation of Jewish heritage is important throughout all branches of Judaism.

Lehmann, D. & Siebzehner, B. 2009. "Power, Boundaries and Institutions: Marriage in Ultra-Orthodox Judaism." *European Journal of Sociology*, 50, no. 2, 273-308.

This article gives an insight into the Haredi communities and their shidduch practices. Its recent publication and explicit focus on marriage practices makes it extremely relevant to shidduch anxiety. While it remains mostly objective, some statements and its use of the term 'ultra-Orthodox' highlight a slight bias due to their position as non-religious sociologists.

Margolese, H. C. (1998). Engaging in Psychotherapy with the Orthodox Jew: A Critical Review. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 52, no. 1, 37-53.

Margolese approaches Orthodox Judaism from a psychological instead of sociological angle, which is useful in understanding the emotional effects of shidduch for the Jewish community.

Rocker, S. 2016. 'Intermarriage at record high – but rate of increase slows'. *The JC*. 7 July 2016. <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/intermarriage-at-record-high-but-rate-of-increase-slows-1.60147>

Satlow, M. (1996) "Try to be a Man": The Rabbinic construction of Masculinity. *The Harvard Theological Review*, 89, no. 1, 19-49.

Satlow examines the construction of masculinity in Jewish communities in this article. It is useful in understanding the connection between the standing of men and women in Jewish communities and their marital status.

Sugarman, D. 2019. 'Generation Z are more likely to feel conservative on range of Jewish issues'. *The JC*. 2 Oct. 2019. <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/generation-z-jews-are-more-likely-to-feel-conservative-on-religious-issues-1.489582>