

Rosh Hashanah 5771 Sermon, First Day

When Circling Wagons Become Welcoming Ones: A Sermon on Keruv (Outreach)

By Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

When Shayna Mindel, a nice Jewish girl, fell in love with Patrick O'Hoolihan, an Irish Catholic boy, neither set of parents were thrilled. Still, true love prevailed and one spring morning the happy couple tied the knot. That night, the amorous bride put on her most revealing negligee and cooed, "Oh Patrick, come here lover boy!" "I can't, honey," he answered. "What do you mean, you can't?" demanded Shayna. "I really can't . . . You see, it's Lent," he explained. "Oy vay," exclaimed the bride. "To whom did you lend it and for how long?"

OK, now for a true story . . . some twelve years ago a rabbi I know faced a personal dilemma. As a member of the Conservative clergy, he would never officiate at an interfaith marriage. It wasn't simply because the standards of the Rabbinical Assembly precluded the practice, but also because he felt participation would send the wrong message about his own understanding of Judaism.

Yet this time he was confronted with a very different situation. The couple in question knew from the start he could not officiate; they just wanted him to attend . . . after all, the bride-to-be was his wife's only sister.

After agonizing over his decision for many weeks, my colleague decided not to go. The night after the wedding his wife shared with him how much his absence hurt her sister. And so the next morning he sat down and struggled to write a long letter: he wished the couple nothing but happiness; the decision not to go was a reflection of his value system, not a condemnation of theirs. If he could not attend their wedding reception it was for essentially the same reason he declined invitations to bat mitzvah parties on Shabbat or the non-kosher weddings of Jewish couples. He concluded by saying he just couldn't separate being a family member from being a rabbi -- his values as an observant Jew could not be peeled away from the totality of his life.

His sister-in-law never responded. His absence had inflicted a hurt both real and prolonged. Over the course of time they did reconcile, though they never discussed the events of that day. Subsequently, the rabbi's sister-in-law and her family joined and became active members of a

Conservative synagogue. She went on to serve on its board and edit the *shul*'s bulletin; the couple sent their kids to the local Jewish day school. Though opting not to convert, her husband has been supportive from day one of his wife's affiliation and their decision to raise children with an exclusively Jewish identity.

Years later the rabbi wondered whether or not he had done the right thing. If he'd been willing to engage them on some level, might his brother-in-law have been more open to exploring Judaism for himself? By not even attending the reception following the ceremony, had he been true to his convictions, or had he simply violated his value system in a different way by not reaching out? What had he really accomplished . . . aside from erecting a wall of awkwardness that took years to tear down?

That rabbi was me. More than a dozen years later I can honestly say that if the same scenario were to occur today, I would attend the wedding reception. And while I could never officiate, I would offer to counsel the couple about how to create a neutral ceremony that did not pretend one partner was Jewish or the other one wasn't. Above all, I wouldn't define them by the fact of their intermarriage, but would see them as two people in love, and tell them that I'd be honored to help them find a place within the Jewish community.

Do I believe that Jews should marry other Jews? With all my heart and soul . . . how can I as a rabbi advocate that we ignore what the Torah teaches in *Deuteronomy*?: **וְלֹא תִתְחַתֵּן בָּם**

כִּי־יִסֹר אֶת־בְּנֶךָ מֵאַחֲרַי וְעִבְדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים -- "You shall not intermarry . . . lest your children are turned away from Me to worship other Gods" (*Deuteronomy* 7:3,4). In a modern-day echo of the Torah's commandment, the National Jewish Population Survey of 2000 found that only 33% of intermarried couples raise children with an exclusively Jewish identity, compared to more than 90% of families in which both parents are Jewish. It would be irresponsible to pretend that endogamy, marriage within the faith, doesn't matter.

And should our children become romantically involved with someone who isn't Jewish, I believe in encouraging conversion. We need not be apologetic or hesitant about broaching the idea, though it must be framed as an invitation, not an ultimatum. Judaism is a fabulous faith and we should be thrilled to share it with anyone in search of a meaningful spiritual identity. And once a person in an interfaith

relationship becomes Jewish, it becomes a relationship between two Jews. In conversionary families, the rate of raising children exclusively as Jews climbs dramatically. Some of you may know I am in the process of publishing a rabbinic guide to conversion for the Conservative Movement, entitled *Petah Ha-Ohel; At the Entrance to the Tent*. In it I write, “There are many reasons that individuals embrace Judaism, including the desire to build a single-faith home with a Jewish identity. Far from deeming this motivation inadequate, we applaud those who wish to forge a *bayit ne’eman b’yisrael*, an exclusively Jewish home. We recognize that, in due course, those motivated by romantic attachments may discover spiritual growth through Jewish living and learning.”

These are authentic Jewish messages that no rabbi and no Conservative synagogue should apologize for sending. We have a responsibility to support today’s parents who are swimming against an assimilationist tide to teach their children that the selection of a Jewish partner and the religious content of one’s family life are very much connected. It is also our duty to cherish the many Jews-by-Choice in our midst who have invested so much in adopting a new spiritual identity for themselves. You inspire us! Heaven forbid if we ever inadvertently signal that your decision to choose Judaism didn’t matter. I wonder how many of us in this room realize that the Conservative Movement performs more conversions than any other religious stream. I am proud of this fact, and hope that you are as well.

Yet Jewish law has always distinguished between the concept of *l’khatzila* and *b’di’avad*, i.e. the best case scenarios *a priori*, as well as how to deal with situations *ex post facto*. Despite our best efforts to promote marriage within the faith and encourage conversion there will be Jews who fall in love with non-Jews who may never convert. At present approximately 22% of all the Jewish households in this country include non-Jewish family members . . . are we really prepared to close the door to more than 1/5 of our own people, to write off hundreds of thousands of born Jews, their children and their potentially supportive, even if non-Jewish, spouses?

It’s been 15 years since the Leadership Council of Conservative Judaism noted: “In the past, intermarriage was viewed as an act of rebellion, a rejection of Judaism. Jews who intermarried were essentially excommunicated. But now, intermarriage is often the result of living in an open society. If our children end up marrying non-Jews, we should not reject them. We should continue to give our love and by that retain a measure of influence in their lives, Jewishly and otherwise. Life consists of constant

growth and our adult children may yet reach a stage when Judaism has new meaning for them.ö Indeed, there are more and more inter-married families belonging to Conservative synagogues; an ever increasing number who enroll their children in Jewish day schools, and observe Shabbat and holidays on a regular basis. I know inter-married couples who maintain Kosher homes! Do we not want more of these families . . . even if the non-Jewish spouse isn't ready to convert? I sure do!

The Jacksonville Jewish Center is a warm and welcoming place in many ways. I know intermarried couples who once felt they weren't really wanted here, but do now; I know others, generally newer members, who have always felt at home here. Still, there are others who never cross our threshold, either because they assume intermarried couples are "supposed" to join a Reform congregation, or because their well-intentioned parents -- sometimes Center members themselves -- suggest they'd experience greater acceptance in a Reform synagogue.

Regrettably, misinformation abounds. Not surprising, when you consider the lack of even a single reference on our website or in our membership literature regarding families in which one spouse isn't Jewish. How many here today realize that even if one's child or grandchild is not yet halakhically Jewish (i.e., born to a Jewish mother), he or she may enroll in our schools? To be sure, it is our goal to affirm the Jewishness of such children through ritual conversion, but we are fully prepared to engage families in dialogue, and are committed to giving them the time and space to better understand the advantages of *halakhic* Jewish identity. How many of us here know that, with the integration of Beth Shalom Synagogue into the Center community, we have established a cemetery section in which intermarried couples, including the non-Jewish partner, may be buried with the benefit of Jewish clergy, or that we are fully invested in helping families with non-Jewish members avail themselves of the wisdom of our tradition in their hour of grief? How many of us here today know that supportive non-Jewish spouses are engaged in a variety of synagogue activities, volunteering on various committees, and participating at services in ways that neither violate their integrity nor that of our tradition? Nowhere do we state any of this . . . let alone emphasize it.

In the coming year, this will start to change. I am pleased to announce that Nancy Davis, an active member and school parent, has graciously agreed to chair a Taskforce on *Keruv*, which comes from the Hebrew word meaning "to bring closer."ö The members of this group will largely be drawn from the very population we seek to embrace -- the individuals and families who do not fit the

traditional definition of Jewish family, a definition that no longer describes an ever increasing population. Our mission will not be a redefinition of our basic values, but a fuller exploration of how to offer a bigger tent as a Conservative *shul*, one that not only welcomes those at the periphery, but acknowledges diversity, lowers barriers to participation, increases points of access, and creates partnerships. We can do these things within the letter and spirit of *halakhah*!

There will still be some folks beyond our reach. There are folks, gay and straight, in-married, unmarried or intermarried, who simply do not possess a scintilla of interest in the religious approach we embody; there are others who believe it possible to create families in which children are raised with two irreconcilable systems of belief simultaneously.

Yet there are many within the reach of our embrace, and no, we won't have to re-write the Torah to find a place for them (though our understanding of specific commandments has evolved over time). Consider for a moment -- we keep Shabbat in this building, we promote its spiritual beauty and potential, but we also accept the reality that a majority of congregants are not Shabbat observant. We maintain a Kosher kitchen and preach the value of the Jewish approach to diet as an expression of the holy, even as we respectfully acknowledge that many of our members don't keep kosher.

There are some well-intentioned members of our community fearful that if we become too welcoming, we will dilute our promotion of in-marriage. Since we can't be all things to all people, there's too much risk in pushing the envelope; greater acceptance may compromise our integrity. I don't dismiss their concerns -- but circling the wagons hasn't stemmed the tide of inter-marriage over the past 25 years; what makes us think it will in the next 25?

At the opposite end of the spectrum there are those who argue we must radically re-define ourselves to be truly accepting. Ironically, they are more similar to those fearful of change than they realize -- for if the former are wary that greater acceptance of difference is tantamount to a re-writing of the Torah, the second group cannot conceive of acceptance without a re-writing of the Torah. If many of our basic premises as a Conservative synagogue don't change, then we will automatically fail in reaching out effectively beyond our present comfort zone.

I lovingly disagree with both these viewpoints, and I do so on the basis of personal experience. Look, you and I both know rabbis are generally assumed to be highly judgmental. When I run into a congregant who hasn't attended services in a long time, the first thing he does is apologize for being missing in action. Mind you, that person's absence from *shul* could be the farthest thing from my mind; he simply presumes that's what I'm thinking. I bet many of you have that same association with the synagogue -- that it's an institution designed to sit in judgment on what you do or don't do.

Those who truly know me, however, realize that I'm among the least judgmental of individuals. After all, I live in a community where most people aren't as observant as I am. I counsel the in-married and the intermarried; I study Torah with those who are gay and those who are straight; I talk to parents with wayward children, and children with irresponsible parents; I interact with those who want to be more Jewish, less Jewish, become Jewish, or stop being Jewish. On any given morning, I may be on the phone with someone who wants to join a Reform congregation because we expect too much, and then receive a phone call from someone attracted to Orthodoxy because we compromise too much. Frankly, the more I see of humanity the less I am inclined to be judgmental; it is so irrelevant to my spiritual life!

In this morning's Torah reading, we read of Ishmael, Abraham's elder son, as he wanders with his mother, Hagar, through the desert. Nearly dead with thirst, God intervenes and saves Ishmael, כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׂם -- for God heard the cry of the boy *in the place where he is* (Genesis 21:17). The rabbis pick up on the superfluity of the last phrase: why not simply say "God heard the cry of the boy"? The Talmud comments that the Holy One wasn't concerned with the good, the bad or ugly facets of Ishmael's character, but simply was empathetically present in his moment of need (BT, *Rosh Hashanah* 16b).

The lesson is clear. Part of my rabbinical mission is to provide a safe space away from the accusing finger of relatives, community, or a guilty conscience; the paradox I fully inhabit is that people come to me *because* they know I stand for something *and* that I won't judge them. My role isn't to automatically validate their choices or admonish them for having made those choices. I simply accept them for who they are, *ba'asher heim sham*, in the place where they are at. As a synagogue I believe that *keruv* begins with that realization.

Precisely because Judaism has so many dos-and-don'ts, our tradition understands that no one can

do and be everything; the Judaism that I know and love, and want you to know and love, insists on personal humility as well as accountability; it accepts human frailty and connects empathetically with all of God's children; it is a Judaism that sometimes finds more meaning in the joy of a cheerful sinner than in the gloom of an intolerant saint. As the Mishnah of *Avot* teaches, הָיוּ דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּתוֹ -- Give each person the benefit of charitable judgment (Avot 1:6). Who can know the inner recesses of someone else's heart? Who can fully step into another person's shoes? Throughout these Days of Awe the theme of judgment suffuses our liturgy. But nowhere does our tradition expect us to sit in judgment of one another. In depicting God's role as judge and in calling us to self-scrutiny, our tradition asks us to be honest about our own flaws and inadequacies, not those of our neighbors.

Of course, acceptance must cut both ways. If the synagogue or its clergy can't always say, "Whatever you want, it's OK" this is not an expression of disapproval or abandonment. Rather, synagogues and their spiritual leadership live in specific religious frameworks; if somebody chooses to live within a different framework, that's OK, but I can't always follow. Acceptance requires mutual respect or run the risk of meaning nothing. Pluralism is nothing less than the right for a synagogue or rabbi to have a set of values that may not always be compatible with whatever a particular family wants from the rabbi or congregation.

If you think this is a sermon about outreach to Jews who are part of non-traditional families, you're only partially right. It's also a message of in-reach to all of us who are hypercritical of others, but not of ourselves, as well as those who do not sufficiently respect themselves while giving everyone else a pass. It's a message to all who live in a society which seesaws between the insistence of some that everything is black-and-white and unambiguous, and those who practice a kind of reverse intolerance which mistakes boundaries for bigotry. To accomplish the *Keruv* that we must, the Jacksonville Jewish Center will remain a wellspring of Jewish authenticity that neither apologizes for itself, nor makes anyone else apologize for being themselves; a community that views the spark of holiness in every person regardless of sexual orientation or marital status; a religious world view that offers Torah as an embrace, not a bludgeon to whip people into false conformities. Wherever our journey into *Keruv* takes us, we must travel with these beliefs.

If yours is a Jewish family trying to raise your children to marry other Jews, we are here to help

support this laudable goal; if you have taken the leap of faith by becoming a Jew-by-choice, we are here to celebrate your journey; if you are an intermarried family raising Jewish children we are honored by the trust you place in us; if you are a gay or lesbian couple, we accept you as a family, and not simply two individuals who happen to live at the same address; if you are single, divorced, or part of a blended family we want to know you for who you are, *ba-asher atem sham*, in the place you're at now; if you keep kosher we will help you, if you do not we will respect you; if you want to learn how, we will teach you.

No, we won't always get it right, and we are not perfect as a synagogue. All of us are on a journey, and where we were yesterday as a community is different than today, which will be different than tomorrow. We won't try to be all things to all people, but we can acknowledge the treasure embodied in each of our souls -- the moments of insight and caring, the dreams of hope, the desire to make a difference -- in-married or intermarried, single or divorced, gay or straight -- these are the things we all have to offer. In the coming year may we be a sacred space of acceptance to everyone who wishes to be here. Transformation begins and ends with a single, transcendent realization: as Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, "Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy." The rest is commentary; now let us go forth and learn . . .