

One of the most painful counseling sessions I ever had was with a young couple in my last congregation with whom I had become quite close. I met them because the woman was not born Jewish, but had been dating someone who was. She was interested in learning more about Jewish thought and practice, so came to ask me if I would sponsor her to take the local "Introduction to Judaism" class. She attended services regularly and we developed a warm rapport. After a number of months, this woman and her boyfriend came to see me. "We are so excited," they said, "We just got engaged. We have so enjoyed our meetings and would love for you to officiate at our wedding."

"I did not know that you had made the decision to become Jewish," I said, "I thought you were taking the class just to learn more."

"If we are going to be married," the woman explained, "I want to understand why it is so important to my husband, but I'm not interested in conversion."

I hesitated, because I always hate having to say what I would say next. "I'm sorry, but I do not officiate at marriages where both partners are not Jewish."

"What do you mean?" she asked accusingly. "You have always been so open to us. You welcomed me to services and made me feel a part of things here. How can you not do our wedding?"

With tears in my eyes, I tried to explain, but she would hear nothing of it. She only became angrier, and finally ended the conversation. "I'm sorry," she said, all choked up, "I've got to leave."

Throughout my rabbinate I have struggled – as have many of you – with how to deal with this reality of contemporary American Jewish life of so many who are not Jewish who are connected to us. That conversation brought home that whatever stance I took it would, for some, cause anger or pain for someone. It is one thing to talk about something in the abstract, it is another to look into the eyes of another and make a decision that seems as a judgment on their life. I did not want to become a rabbi in order to say 'no' to people. I wanted to be part of a congregation that is welcoming, warm and open, but also one that identifies with Jewish values, connected to our

heritage and rooted in being part of a *K'lal Yisrael* – the larger community of Israel. How to have both, however, is not always easy.

Over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I wish to explore with you what it means to be engaged with the “other.” It is a three-part reflection related to the Torah portion tomorrow – not the binding of Isaac that we normally read, but the traditional reading that focuses on Hagar, Sarah’s maidservant. Why is it that, we will explore, do our traditions have us read about her on this most sacred of days? What is it about her name – which in Hebrew can be read not as *Hagar*, but as *ha-ger*, “the stranger” – that teaches us how we relate to the “other”?

This evening’s focus is on those who are – in increasing numbers – connected to Jewish life, but who do not identify as Jews. Tomorrow I will offer thoughts on those who are “the other” in the struggle with the State of Israel – the Palestinians – and ways to move forward in our understanding about the Jewish State. Finally, on *Kol Nidrei* I hope to convince you that “the other” is also someone we carry within ourselves.

Tonight – the non-Jews in our midst. It is impossible to ignore the reality of the modern American Jewish community, which includes so many who are not Jewish. A recent National Jewish Population Study shows that the intermarriage rate has – since the late 1980s – been about 50%. Of all American Jews currently wed, one-third are intermarried. The number of those who are not Jewish, yet somehow connected to us, is growing exponentially. We may not want to confront this issue, but social trends are forcing our hand.

Let me try to illustrate. In a moment I will ask some of you to stand. I certainly do not wish embarrass anyone, so please understand that the purpose is to show how important is this issue. So here who is I would like to rise – any person in the room with a member of their immediate family (a parent, child or sibling) who is not Jewish or is married to someone who is not Jewish ... This, my friends, is our reality. The issue of those who are not Jewish is not something affecting only a small percentage of our community, but the majority. It is time to address openly how we confront “the other” in our midst.

When it comes to non-Jews and Judaism, is the picture one of bad news or good? As with most things, the answer is both. First the bad. In the Bible whole groups of people are excluded from the community of Israel. Thus, we read:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of Adonai; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation shall ever be admitted into the congregation of Adonai, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt ... you shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.¹

This hostility towards outsiders is a thread that runs throughout Jewish history. When the people returned after the Babylonian exile, Ezra, their leader, exhorted the men to separate themselves from their non-Jewish wives. The Talmudic sage Rabbi Helbo claims that people who convert are “as difficult for Israel as a scab.”² During the Passover *seder* anger towards gentiles is given voice in the traditional reading when the door is opened for Elijah: “Pour out Your anger upon the nations that have not known You ... destroy them from under the heavens.” Given the antipathy towards Jews in the Middle Ages, we can understand the source of this rage, but we cringe at its naked expression. I remember my own grandmother saying that if her son had married a non-Jew she would have sat *shiva* – a sign of formal mourning.

At the same time, there is a long tradition in Judaism of not only tolerance, but loving acceptance, of those who are not Jewish. In Torah we are commanded to “love the stranger” – not once, but 36 times (this need to love those who are not Jews the most oft-repeated *mitzvah* in Torah).³ The Book of Ruth reflects a Judaism open to those who choose to become Jewish (Ruth herself a great-grandmother of King David). On Rabbi Helbo’s negative comment about people who become Jews quoted above the medieval commentators, the *Tosafot* state that those who convert cause Jews to suffer only because their tendency to be more observant makes those born Jewish look bad! In the medieval period Jewish thinkers distinguished contemporary Muslims and Christians from the pagans condemned in earlier Jewish sources. By the dawn of the modern period the strictures of Torah against non-Jews were considered but vestiges of antiquity and no longer applicable

1 Deuteronomy 23:4-7

2 Yevamot 47b; Kiddushin 70b

3 Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19

to the people among whom we now live. Not just tolerance, but respect for other faiths and peoples, has become a dominant theme in much of Jewish thought.

In our own era this dichotomy of perspective on the role and status of gentiles continues. Some view the growth of intermarriage as a threat, symptomatic of a weakness in the Jewish community, a sign of apathy and assimilation, of a break with our people and faith. There are others, however, who claim that while mixed marriage is a challenge, it indicates the tremendous acceptance of Jews in the larger community. After all, if so many people not only fall in love with, but marry Jews the stigma of anti-Semitism must be losing some of its currency. My purpose this evening is not to discuss intermarriage, but a side effect of it: the non-Jews it increasingly brings into contact with our community.

What is the best way to respond to these changes? Some argue that we should focus solely on the Jewish community, spend funds primarily on internal causes, refuse attempts of individuals to intermarry, not give honors to Jews who marry non-Jews and to shun conversions, particularly those where marriage is involved. At the other end of the spectrum are those who argue that we must be completely open to those who are not Jewish in order to give the message that Judaism is a welcoming, compassionate and loving faith. Our communal energy, they say, ought to be spent on efforts of "outreach" to bring in the unaffiliated and unconnected. There should be full acceptance of those who are not Jewish, say some advocates of this position, allowing anyone who wants to be involved – at whatever level – in synagogue life be allowed to do so.

I believe that the majority of Jews prefer a middle ground between these two paths; defining a position that is welcoming, yet maintains our distinct identity as a Jewish people and faith.

If we are honest about ourselves as Jews this must have been how Jewish communities have always confronted this issue. The proof is as plain as our faces. Look at Jews from European countries. Are they not, like others in those lands, Caucasian? And the Jews of Iran or Yemen? They appear Middle Eastern. The Jews of India look like other people on that sub-continent. Nu ... how do you think they got that way? From the food? By osmosis? Whether by ongoing acceptance of conversion or, more likely, through a willingness to embrace the children of those who intermarried, we have become who we

are. Surely the openness of generations past – reflected in the diversity of our ethnic make-up – shows that we Jews have accepted, however begrudgingly or willingly, those who are “outsiders.”

However we define the role and place of those who are not Jewish in our synagogue, the underlying message must be one of our loving acceptance and gratitude that these people are with us. For all the difficulties intermarriage places before us, I cannot but believe that it is much more blessed to live in a society where the problem we face is not that people hate us so much, but that they love us so much. Instead of seeing the rising number of non-Jews in our midst as a problem, those committed to the continuity of Jewish life ought to see this as an opportunity to enlarge and enrich the Jewish community.

The first step in being more loving to others is to avoid behaviors and speech that embarrass or belittle those who are not Jewish. The words commonly used in Yiddish to describe a non-Jewish man – *shagetz* – or a non-Jewish woman – *shiksa* – are derived from the Hebrew that refers to “creepy, crawly things.” It is time to get rid of this filthy, pornographic language about non-Jews. These names deserve neither credence nor place – any more than the many derogative terms about various ethnic groups (including we Jews) that are now (thankfully) unacceptable.

We must do more, however, than avoid hateful speech. The time has come to praise those non-Jewish spouses who tie their lot with our community. I was proud to hear Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, at our movement’s Biennial convention last Fall when he gave voice to the warm embrace I would hope for from this and every congregation in the Reform movement. The non-Jewish spouses in our midst, he said, “are heroes – yes, heroes – of Jewish life. While maintaining some measure of attachment to their own traditions, and sometimes continuing to practice their religion, they take on responsibilities that, by any reasonable calculation, belong to the Jewish spouse.” Like Rabbi Yoffie, I am continually moved by the incredible dedication of so many who are not Jewish, but who are committed to raising their children as Jews/ The carpooling to Religious School, the willingness to come to Torah study with their children in 6th and 7th grade, the acceptance of the financial burden of giving a Jewish education

should never, ever be taken for granted. We ought to be grateful for the amazing ability of these non-Jewish spouses to look beyond themselves – and it is time to be more open in our expression of gratitude for the gift of Torah they give, by acquiescence or, more often, by active involvement in Jewish life. To those in this congregation in that situation – thank you. And if you have family who are not Jewish - and make the effort to be connected and to connect their children to Jewish life – do not let your gratitude be unspoken.

As a sign of congregational gratitude, I call upon us to form an Outreach Committee – its task to welcome those who are not Jewish and connected to this community, to deal with the special needs of interfaith families and to encourage the ongoing involvement of non-Jews in our synagogue life. If you are interested in being involved in such a committee, please let any of the clergy know.

In saying how grateful we are, however, let it not be misunderstood as a denial of the reality that there is a different role and responsibility that comes with being connected to the covenant of Israel. We welcome all with open arms. A Jewish community, however, is primarily defined by those willing to struggle with the demands of that covenant – the connection with God, the heritage of Torah and the identity shared as a member of the family of Israel.

In general my response has tended towards leniency with regards to ritual matters, particularly with non-Jewish spouses. At a *bris*, for example, I think that the practice of some to ask the non-Jewish parent to the side is a disgrace. To deny the same parent the opportunity to pass his or her child the Torah at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is equally counter-productive. Has the non-Jewish parent not – at worst by acquiescence, at best by active support – given the Torah to his or her child? Given this, our practice as clergy has been to allow non-Jews to participate in a ceremony or service providing they do not speak any words which indicate that they are part of the people of Israel.

But what of grandparents? What – if any – role do non-Jewish grandparents have? And should non-Jewish spouses be welcome to sit, if they are committed to the community, on the Board – the body that makes decisions about the fate of this congregation? While it is hard to define the boundaries – and there is a potential for hurt

if we do not deal with this issue compassionately and sensitively – there is a greater danger of leaving the roles undefined. Allow me to share two potential scenarios among many possibilities.

Situation One. Peter and Sarah have been members of a synagogue for over 40 years. They have three children who all became B'nai Mitzvah. Two of their children were married at the *shul*. For years Peter sang in the choir, helped the Brotherhood put up the *sukkah* and attended services at least once per month. Two years ago Peter found out that he had lung cancer. His name was placed on the list for healing and said every week. The rabbis visited him in the hospital and, when he died, were prepared to conduct his funeral. When the family spoke to the funeral director Sarah mentioned that Peter was not Jewish. "I did not know that ... and I'm sorry," the funeral director explained, "But no Jewish cemetery on Long Island allows for the burial of non-Jews. You cannot bury him in the synagogue plot." Peter's widow could not believe what she was hearing – and had no idea what to do, for she always assumed that the congregation they were such a part of would have allowed the burial of her non-Jewish husband.

Situation Two. Several years ago Josh and Rachel joined the synagogue when their daughter enrolled in the nursery school. Before *Simchat Torah* last year they decided it was time to make more of an effort to come to events in the congregation. At services, as the Torah scroll was passed from person to person, Rachel suddenly found it in her arms. She had never held it before – and was both thrilled and uncertain. Just as she started dancing with the Torah, her neighbor came over and pulled the Torah out of her arms. "The Torah can only be held by someone who is Jewish," she explained. Embarrassed and hurt, Rachel has not been able to step back in the synagogue since.

Neither of these stories actually occurred – and yet they ring with a deep reality. Much of the pain of these – and so many similar – situations could be avoided if there had been an honest understanding from the outset about what was allowed, accepted or possible for those who are not Jewish. It is never easy to talk about tough issues – especially issues with so many emotional landmines – but to avoid the conversation can only lead to greater misunderstanding and confusion.

This, then, is the second part of our task – to define the proper role and place of the person who is not Jewish within our synagogue. If we truly are a *kehilah k'doshah* – a sacred, loving, Jewish community – we should not be afraid of being honest with one another. Thus, I urge our lay leaders to bring together a committed and compassionate cadre of members to begin addressing this issue, with the goal of establishing clear, definitive policies that help make clear what non-Jewish family members (and spouses, especially) are encouraged to do and what we feel is inappropriate for them.

In the Torah we will read tomorrow the focus will be, at least in part, on a non-Jewish mother and her son. While Sarah cannot deal with those different from her being so close by, this is not the way of God. When Hagar cries, an angel comforts her, “Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.” (Genesis 21:17)

As we look ahead to a new year – reflecting on what it means to be Jewish – let us do no less. Let us be open enough to hear people “where they are.” Let us show due appreciation for the many non-Jews in our midst. And let us find a way to speak with clarity and integrity – fulfilling our responsibility to keep Jewish beliefs and values alive.