

**“From Crisis Mode to Opportunity Mode:  
Interfaith Marriage & Our Jewish Family”**

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Rosh Hashanah 5769; October 1, 2008

Congregation Beth Torah, Richardson, TX

*L’shana Tova*, dear friends. As we join together for our *fourth* High Holiday season, I feel more blessed than ever to serve this wonderful congregation. The funny thing about phenomenon of High Holiday sermons is that we rabbis know that you will go home to your Rosh Hashanah lunches, perhaps with people from other congregations, and compare notes about what each rabbi spoke about...this is a lot of pressure! Sometimes I wonder what people take away from these sermons and what they’re saying as they eat left-over brisket or munch on apple cake. But today, I really want you to talk about this sermon. Today I give you my blessing, my encouragement to talk to your friends and your family members about this, because what I am about to talk to you about is of great importance to all of us. I also think it will help you understand me a little bit better.

I am aware that for some, even after three years, I remain an enigma. I know that some of you are still trying to figure me out. On some level, I think all clergy are a bit of a mystery to their congregants...Some people think that I pray 24/7, or that nary a crass word passes my lips, or that my *kipah* is surgically attached to my head. Others wonder about my religious practices...They see me walking to shul on Shabbat and holidays, they know I only eat kosher food, and that I wear *tzitzit* and *kipah* all the time...yet I am also proudly egalitarian, I am a passionate Conservative Jew, and I’m a pretty normal person...as one Beth Torah kid who saw me at Camp Young Judaea this summer exclaimed in absolute astonishment, “Rabbi, you wear shorts?!” Today, I want to clarify a few things with you, and in a sense, to set the record straight.

Let me tell you a little bit about my family. As many of you know, my parents divorced when I was 3 years old. My father soon thereafter married a non-Jewish woman. Together they have two daughters, both of whom were dutifully raised in the United Church of Christ, and have no identification with Judaism or the Jewish people at

all. My mother, more by accident than by design, married a Jewish man with whom they have a son—a recent college graduate who was the president of his AZA chapter in high school as well as his Jewish fraternity in college. On my mother's side of the family I have 5 first cousins. They all have wonderful spouses and children which makes family gatherings great fun. Three of my five first cousins intermarried, and two of the three intermarried cousins are actively raising their children as Jews. The third is exposing her kids as both, which not only forces kids to pick a religion—if that weren't hard enough—but also to pick a parent. I, the cousin who became a Conservative rabbi, have made it a point to attend every bar and bat mitzvah of my intermarried cousins' kids. And let me tell you, they were all in either Chicago or Madison, Wisconsin, and often in the dead of winter. That's dedication. The reason that I have not missed a single one of their *simchas* is that I want to celebrate, and validate the decision of their parents to raise their children as Jews.

None of my cousins' spouses converted to Judaism, but that has not stopped them from *schlepping* them to Hebrew school and *b'nai mitzvah* lessons, or encouraging them to participate in Jewish youth groups, in their synagogues, or to celebrate Jewish holidays in their homes. These non-Jewish spouses—who by the way I love and adore as if they were my cousins by blood relation—are active partners in ensuring that their children grow up with meaningful, positive Jewish experiences.

Now my guess is that if I asked everyone in the room today to raise their hands if they have a family member who is married to someone who is not Jewish that nearly every hand would go up. According to the population surveys, somewhere between 40 and 50% of Jews who are getting married now are marrying non-Jews. The questions are: What does this mean to us as a community? What does it mean to you as parents or grandparents? What implications does it have for our synagogue? And what are the implications for the future of the Jewish people?

Many of you know that a century ago, perhaps even a half century ago, whether or not intermarriage was unheard of, it was certainly not spoken of. We all know that

some people would disown a child for intermarrying, and would say kaddish for their soul as if they had died. The world became familiar with this tradition when Sholom Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman* became the Broadway hit, *Fiddler on the Roof*. Chava, Tevye's third daughter, gets married to Chvedka, the non-Jewish town scribe. Tevye is distraught and at least for a time, forces Chava out of the house and the village, refusing even to speak to her. But Tevye is becoming a figment of the past. With the exception of a very small slice of our community, most Jews just aren't so distraught. 50% of the Jewish community finds nothing at all wrong with intermarriage, and 78% would like their rabbis, regardless of denomination, to officiate at interfaith marriages. Long gone are the days of rent clothes and mourning. So what's the institutional Jewish community so worried about? If you look around our preschool or our junior congregation or in fact at the many constituencies in our shul, you will see a palate of different religious backgrounds and practices, not to mention races and cultures. Some of those parents are Jews by choice, but many are not Jewish. And interfaith families in our congregation are among the first to become active and to be enthusiastic participants in synagogue life! Like my intermarried cousins, they are bringing their kids here, to a synagogue, a *Conservative* synagogue, for their Jewish education and to associate with other Jews. That, to quote God, "is very good!"<sup>1</sup>

What is of concern is the following...We are a people who have constantly been strategizing about our own survival. Harvard University professor Ruth Wisse wrote a potent little book called Jewish Power in which she claims that "the Jewish Diaspora is one of history's boldest political experiments..."<sup>2</sup> She describes how Jews, for two millennia deprived of a homeland, created institutions of leadership, customs and traditions, unique Jewish languages and literatures, schools and academies, all the while imagining that some day there might be a return to their own sovereign land. But think about it: The survival of the Jewish people is practically unthinkable. The Church in Europe tried to stamp us out. Islam turned us into *dhimmi*s, second class citizens with limited rights. Nation states regularly made Jews scapegoats for economic downturns.

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:31

<sup>2</sup> Wisse, Ruth R. Jews and Power. Nextbook, by Schocken Books, New York, 2007. Page 11.

Jews were pursued by Crusaders and Inquisitors, and forcibly moved from one country to another. Sometimes we fought against our oppressors like in the Hanukkah or Purim story, but much more often we negotiated with royal courts and local authorities, we paid taxes and planted roots. We seeded new Jewish life, and made ourselves an asset to the larger culture by exploiting Jewish contacts in other countries to form business relationships, trade routes and commerce. “Look up synonyms for adaptation,” writes Prof. Wisse, “and you discover Jewish communities at work: elastic, flexible, pliable, and supple, Jews tried to master the skills that would make them indispensable. These skills involved money lending, tax farming, minting, and banking; elsewhere it meant craftsmanship: They became shoemakers, tailors, carpenters, glaziers, all the trades that are turned into metaphors in the Yom Kippur prayer *ki hiney kahomer b’yad ha’yotzer*, which likens material in the hands of the craftsman to the soul of a Jew before God.”<sup>3</sup>

Why were our ancestors so adaptable, so strategic? **Because they wanted to survive**...not out of some ethnic sense of superiority or elitism, but because they felt that Judaism was vital that our covenant with God was eternal. They could have assimilated, converted, assumed new names and new identities...some did! But most were prepared to defend Jewish life no matter the circumstances. So with creativity and *chutzpah*, they made sure they survived. Friends, **we want to survive**. Judaism is beautiful, and relevant, and important to the world. In order for Judaism to survive we must meet today’s challenges with the same *seichel*...the same thoughtfulness and sensitivity as those who came before us met their challenges.

First, here are the facts: When two Jews marry each other, there is an 80-90% chance that their child will grow up and consider themselves Jewish. When a Jew marries a non-Jew only one third of their children grow up and consider themselves Jewish. Only one third...That’s why this is a serious issue. That’s why rabbis and Jewish educators and sociologists care about this. We are an endangered species...looking around the synagogue on the High Holidays may not give you that impression, but there are fewer Jews in America today than there were 10 years ago. And that trend is continuing, not reversing.

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<sup>3</sup> Wisse, Ruth R. Jews and Power. Nextbook, by Schocken Books, New York, 2007. Page 31.

In yesterday morning's Torah reading, Abraham and Sarah send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness without adequate supplies. Without enough food or water...the situation turns pretty grim. And I wonder, do we send our kids into the world with enough resources? Do they have enough supplies in their Jewish repertoire to construct meaningful Jewish lives of their own when they become independent. The American Jewish sociologist Steven M. Cohen recently published a report called, "A Tale of Two Judaisms, An Inconvenient Truth for American Jews." In this report he described the kinds of experiences that correlate with strong Jewish identities. Kids who had multiple Jewish experiences, like Jewish summer camp, Jewish youth groups, and an Israel trip intermarried 12% less often. Day school graduates intermarried 14% less. Two day a week religious school had a negligible effect, and shockingly, one day a week religious school actually made one slightly more likely to intermarry! That's why we can't rest on our educational laurels and imagine that Hebrew school is just fine the way it is. That's why at Beth Torah we are embarking upon new educational approaches like *Shabbat B'yachad*. The point is that our kids are like Ishmael and Hagar in the wilderness, unless we equip them with positive, joyful reasons to be Jewish. Telling them that they should be Jewish because of Hitler, or because of anti-Semitism is not compelling. I know people, including my own relatives, who fled Judaism precisely because of that victim mentality. Who in the world wants to live their life as a victim?!? Helping our kids grow up to make Jewish choices means that we have to give them exciting, positive Jewish experiences that they can't imagine not having in their own lives. That they would never dream of having a family without Jewish holidays, Shabbat, and affiliation with the Jewish community. And we have to retire all the ridiculous and destructive stereotypes about Jewish men as wimpy mommas' boys and Jewish women as overbearing or unattractive. My colleague Rabbi Josh Heller notes that "the funny thing is that if you want to point a finger of blame at anyone for intermarriage, you can't blame the non-Jewish spouses, they actually want to marry Jews!" But I hear Jews in their 20's tell me that they don't like to date Jews because they're snobby or JAP'y or unattractive. Yet someone just told me the other day that non-Jews can be on J-Date...non-Jews who somehow don't harbor all the self destructive stereotypes we have about ourselves, and

want to marry someone with Jewish family values, who actually think Jews make great life partners! Let's stop cutting ourselves down and start seeing all the wonderful qualities others see in a potential Jewish mate.<sup>4</sup>

But folks, I regularly have people in my office in tears because they supposedly 'did all the right things,' and gave their kids 'all the right experiences'...and still they marry out. The truth is that as long as we are two percent of the population in this country, intermarriage will *always* be a part of the American Jewish reality. But the question is: Do we send them out of the camp like Abraham and Sarah did, or do we find a way to make a home for them within it?

I want you to know from the bottom of my heart that I want interfaith families to feel at home in our synagogue and in our Jewish community. And to be completely honest, this is the first time in nearly 7 years as a rabbi that I have ever spoken publicly about intermarriage. Until now I never gave a sermon about it...because I was afraid. You know 50% of American Jews say that opposing intermarriage is racist. Racist! My concerns about intermarriage have nothing at all to do with race. God's covenant is embracing of people of all races—God is the creator of every one of us, without exception! I was afraid that you would misinterpret my overarching concern for the continuity of Jewish life as judgmental or critical of some of the very personal and real life decisions in your families. I was concerned that you would misconstrue our community's needs to have certain standards and norms of participation with an exclusionary posture. I was worried that by insisting that some roles in our synagogue community must be reserved for people who profess the beliefs and practices of the Jewish people might somehow be offensive to some of you. But I am speaking about this today because my message is ultimately one of inclusion. I know that finding companionship in this world is no easy task. Half of all marriages end in divorce, and people are marrying later in life than ever before. Having a spouse of a different religious background can further complicate the institution of marriage--Which is why I

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<sup>4</sup> Heller, Rabbi Joshua. "Discouraging Intermarriage; Encouraging the Intermarried." Congregation B'nai Torah, Atlanta, GA; September 13, 2007.

feel that we should offer more support, not less. I love and respect many of you who have intermarried, and I am in awe of your commitment to raise Jewish children. I want to say thank you to every non-Jewish spouse who is a supporter of a Jewish spouse and an advocate in raising their own Jewish children. As my friend, Rabbi Greg Harris says, “you may be 50% Jewish, but you are 100% parents.”<sup>5</sup>

Judaism, as you know, is not a proselytizing faith. But some have misinterpreted not actively proselytizing as not ever offering conversion as an option at all, not ever speaking of it, suggesting it, or encouraging it. But I must tell you that among the most powerful experiences I have as a rabbi is to stand with someone still dripping from the waters of the mikveh, who voluntarily casts his or her lot with the Jewish people, reciting the Shema for the first time before the open ark. Albert Einstein reputedly said once that he wished he wasn't born Jewish *so that he could have chosen it for himself*. To see someone become inspired by the Jewish narrative, by the mitzvot and values of our tradition, and then take it on as their own is indescribably moving. Jews by choice often bring their Jewish by birth spouses back into the fold in ways they could never have imagined. The story is told about a young Jewish man who fell in love with a Gentile woman. His father was very upset and told him, “Don't marry a Gentile, you'll regret it!” The young woman saw how important Judaism was to her fiancé's family. She started learning about Judaism and liked what she saw, so she studied with a rabbi and converted. The first week after the couple returns from their honeymoon, the son is back at work at the family business. Friday afternoon the father tells his son “I need you in the shop Saturday morning so that we can review the books.” Sorry, Dad I can't come. Tomorrow is Shabbat, so we'll be at shul.” The Dad says, “I told you not to marry a Gentile!”<sup>6</sup> The truth is I see this all the time. Conversion to Judaism is so good for the Jewish people because it re-engages Jews by birth with their Jewish lives and it adds to our ranks people who are passionate and committed to their Judaism. Not only that, Jews by choice at Beth Torah account for some of the most active, engaged, and committed

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Gregory Harris, my rabbinical school classmate and dear friend is Associate Rabbi at Beth El Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

<sup>6</sup> Leff, Rabbi Dr. Barry. “Lessons on Intermarriage from Abraham.” *United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Review*, Spring 2006.

members and leaders of our community. And let me remind everyone lest there be any inkling of doubt, that a Jew by choice is a Jew, 100%! The Talmud says that any Jew who would ever live were together at Mt. Sinai—Jews who were alive at that time, the souls of Jews who would be born in the future, and the souls of those who would become Jewish in the future. About 1,000 years ago a Jew by Choice wrote a letter to Maimonides, the great 12<sup>th</sup> Century Jewish sage and philosopher, asking whether or not he should say “the God of our ancestors *Eloheinu Vei-lohei Avoteinu*—God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,” when he said the Amidah prayer. Absolutely, replied the Rambam, they are your ancestors as much as they are my ancestors. I have heard people refer to their children as intermarried when they in fact married someone who converted to Judaism. That kind of mistake must not be tolerated. If you convert, you’re Jewish. End of story. And let’s once and for all sanitize from our vocabulary words like *shikseh*, *goy*, and *sheygetz*. They are derogatory terms and they have no place in our community’s lexicon.

I know very well that not every non Jewish spouse will convert. And that’s where our synagogue community must be a place that encourages people to make Jewish choices and raise Jewish families. We can reverse some of the statistics, right here at Beth Torah that create such fear in our community. I have seen it with my own family members who became active in synagogues that have helped them and encouraged them. If the only synagogues they encountered judged them, discouraged them, pushed them away, or closed the door on them they would most likely not have Jewish children today. Beth Torah has long had a reputation for being inclusive of interfaith families, and I am proud of that distinction. While this level of sensitivity is common in the Reform movement, Conservative Judaism has been slow to understand the needs of interfaith families. We at Beth Torah have been on the cutting edge of inclusion, and I believe we must continue in that mission.

By the way, there is another key participant in transmitting Jewish identity. The truth is I would add to the summer camp, day school, and Israel trip list, strong connections with Jewish grandparents. I would love for a sociologist to do a study on

Jewish grandparenthood and its affects on Jewish continuity. Anecdotally and unscientifically I will tell you that grandparents are indispensable. Congratulations, you thought you retired! You just got a new job—your job is to be full time Jewish educators to your grandchildren. Your job is to pass on all the flavors of Jewish culture and affinity to your grandkids, because you are as important as any other experience in planting the seeds of future Jewish commitment. Pushing them away, disowning them, cutting yourself off from them will have no positive effect whatsoever. I never tell the distraught parents who come to my office because their kids are intermarrying to cut off or disown their children—NEVER. There is absolutely nothing to be gained from that, and everything to be lost. There's nothing wrong with telling your kids that you want them to marry Jewish spouses—In fact, I hope you do. But if they choose otherwise, you must expand your embrace and make a place for them at your table and in your home.

I began this sermon by sharing with you some of my life story. I want you to understand where I come from. I became a rabbi because I love Jewish traditions, Jewish teachings, and more than anything I love the Jewish people so much that I have dedicated my life to encouraging the continuation of more Jewish life in this generation and the next. So I hope you understand why intermarriage remains a deep concern of mine and why I can't equate it with endogamy, or the marriage of one Jew to another. But what I also want you to understand about me is that I care about every single family in this shul *without exception*. If you have made a commitment to raising a Jewish family and you want to do it here at Beth Torah, I will be here for you as your family's rabbi every step of the way. There is simply no other choice as far as I'm concerned.

When Abraham dies at the ripe old age of 175 years old, the Torah tells us: *Vayikberu oto Yitzhak v'Yishmael banav*, Isaac and Ishmael were reunited, and together they buried their father.<sup>7</sup> Two very different men, who are leading very different lives with very different spouses, families, and even religions nevertheless come together to honor their father. We honor Abraham's legacy as the first Jew when we foster Jewish life and Jewish continuity so that his blessing of being the *av* the father of a great nation

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 25:9

will continue to be fulfilled in succeeding generations (that's the *Av* in *Avraham*). And we also honor Abraham's legacy when our tents, like his, are large enough and open enough to make room both for the Isaacs and the Ishmaels among us. Whatever our life choices, if they include Jewish homes and Jewish families, this tent, *our* tent, is open enough for all of us.