

KOL NIDRE 5778 – BRING PEOPLE CLOSE TO TORAH

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On Rosh Hashanah, we discussed one aspect of being an American Jew, and tonight I'd like to touch upon another. I hope that this will be an introduction to an ongoing, at times uncomfortable yet critical conversation.

As American Jews, we are among the wealthiest, the most influential, and overall the most secure Jewish communities in history. We have attained the highest echelons in politics, culture, and finance. As a result, we are widely admired. In fact, a 2017 study revealed that American adults feel more positively about Jews than any other religious group. Another indication that we've arrived as it were, is that people want to marry us, (pause) which was not the case in centuries past. Even the daughters of US Presidents and presidential candidates love us!

Our popularity should not come as a surprise – think of everything Jewish life offers. It is a celebration of family, of study and debate, of compassion, of music and culture. It

provides structure and guidance in life's most profound moments.

We should feel great that we are so popular. And yet, some assert that this success comes at a price, namely that we are diluting our practices, that we will assimilate, and that Judaism will eventually disappear. On marriage, the theory is that when a Jew marries a non-Jew, the result is a watering down and thus a loss for Jewish continuity. Intermarriage is common today at over 60% among non-Orthodox Jews married since 2000, so no matter what you think of the numbers, the need for a contemporary response is long overdue. How should we welcome interest in Judaism while still maintaining our distinct character?

As we discussed last week, America is fertile ground for the relatively high rate of intermarriage. My colleague Gerry Skolnik recently wrote that our country is “the land of radical free choice ... today's American Jew is less and less inclined to be bound by the ‘commanding Presence’ of God as expressed through religious authority. Jews like to customize their patterns

of observance and affiliation, and certainly whom and how they love.” (Jewish Week 6/28/17)

Intermarriage is an international phenomenon, but it impacts us significantly due to our numbers. After all, there are between thirteen and fourteen million Jews worldwide, which is only 0.2% of the global population. Each Jewish partnership, and each family matters, in terms of our viability.

I am a proponent of Jews marrying Jews. But given current realities, an attitudinal shift is critical if Judaism is to survive, let alone flourish. Continuing to ostracize those who marry out is not the deterrent it was once thought to be. Instead, we should encourage these couples, indeed all couples, to live Jewish lives and to raise Jewish families.

Is it possible that American Judaism, the unique blend of individualism and community, is evolving into a viable brand? The most recent survey of the Boston Jewish community, America’s fourth largest, reveals that there are almost a quarter million Jewish adults and children, and that 47% of households

are interfaith. Of the interfaith families, 57% of them are raising their children as Jews exclusively; 41% belong to synagogues, and; there are significant increases in both formal and informal Jewish education for their children since 2005. Boston's approach is to actively engage interfaith families, and it seems to have garnered positive results. Other communities are learning from this example. If we create appropriate avenues of welcome, we might nurture more Jewish households and strengthen the Jewish people!

The Conservative movement has an initiative to welcome those interested in Judaism – it's called *Keruv*, the Hebrew word meaning 'to bring close'. At MJC we have a *Keruv* committee that raises awareness about these issues through educational programs, focus groups and more.

When couples want to learn more about the Jewish way of seeing the world, I'm thrilled and will support them however I can. I want to propose today a ceremony to welcome each and every newlywed couple of MJC's extended family. I spoke to a

colleague who shared his congregation's practice. Couples stand on the bema underneath a tallis and recite the following prayer.

“God, we thank you for this precious moment. We feel so blessed to have found a partner in life, blessed to know the love of family and the embrace of community.

We come before this congregation and to this sanctuary to seek Your blessing, God, your blessing on our lives and on the home we are establishing.

Shine your light upon us that we might know harmony and companionship, that we might continue to grow together as *reiiim ahuvim*, loving companions.

Bless our home, God. May it be a shelter of peace, a welcome gathering place for family and friends where Jewish values and Jewish traditions are daily lived. Grant us, God, length of years filled with joy and gladness beneath Your sheltering presence.

Amen.” Each couple would receive a tzedakah box or some gift, and I would follow up with them, supporting their effort to live a Jewish life.

In Genesis, God decided that Adam needed a partner saying, “it is not good for a person to be alone.” (2:18) From this we understand that everyone should have a soulmate, and love between two people is sacred and should be celebrated.

I would love to hear your feedback and/or your family story as it pertains to this issue. *G'mar chatimah tovah*, may we work together to ensure the Jewish future, and may we be sealed in the Book of Life for blessings and for peace.