

Our Jewish family is an Interfaith family; What it means, and what we should do about it.
Rosh Hashanah 5775 (Day 2)
Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

This may come as a surprise to you, but it is very rare that I am just invited to attend a wedding. Usually when I'm at a wedding I am standing under the chuppah...and that includes family weddings...I am not only your rabbi, I am also my family's rabbi; and I have been called upon to officiate at weddings for several cousins, my brother-in-law, and then there are the funerals and baby namings for relatives on both sides of the family...Don't get me wrong I love this role of family rabbi and it brings me such joy to be involved in the most special moments in the lives of my precious family members. But just a few weeks ago I had truly disorienting experience of being at a wedding and sitting among the invited guests, in the audience if you will, while a cousin of mine got married in a beautiful outdoor ceremony. I was this cousin's summer camp counselor once upon a time, and she went to the same high school as I did, and then the same college. We kept in touch over the years, and our families are rather close. And she actually did ask me to officiate her wedding many months ago, and unfortunately I had to decline. The guy she married seems to be really great, in fact they were both here for Mia's bat mitzvah last year. The groom did not grow up Jewish, but he has been in the process of conversion for the better part of a year working with a rabbi in Chicago, where they live. My cousin the bride informed me a few weeks before the wedding that the conversion would not be completed before the ceremony, and asked if I could officiate any way, *I mean he's gonna convert eventually*. Now I have to tell you, I rarely question the practices or procedures of another rabbi. But I did contact this rabbi and asked why he couldn't complete the conversion in time so that this couple could have a proper, traditional Jewish wedding. He had his reasons, which between you and me, I still don't entirely understand, and so they had to find another officiant to stand with them under

the chuppah, while I sat with all the guests. The rent-a-rabbi did a fine job, I actually think he was a universal life minister, but I could have spoken much more personally, much more directly to the couple. And more importantly it could have been an authentic Jewish wedding. It felt odd frankly, to be an observer, rather than standing with them, blessing them, and helping them celebrate under the chuppah. Nevertheless I was determined to be there, even if just a regular guest, because I wanted to encourage the fact that the groom was becoming Jewish and that they have committed to creating a Jewish life and a Jewish home together.

Let me tell you a little more about my family history. You ready for this...I used to have my very own box of Christmas ornaments. Thank God I already signed the 10 year contract! It's true, I had my own box of ornaments as a kid, and I got a new one every year at Christmas. As many of you know by now, my parents divorced when I was very young—3 years old—and my father, who was never particularly enamored with Jewish life remarried a half Polish, half Italian, 100% Catholic wife. During Christmas the halls of my father's house were decked with boughs of holly fa-la-la-la-la-la-la. There were lights, there were wreaths, there were chrysanthemums, the banister going down the staircase was wrapped in evergreen garlands, stockings hung on the fireplace, and there was a *gezinteh* Christmas tree in the middle of it all. Now neither of them observed Christmas in the religious sense; there was no church, no carols (except for the Perry Cuomo record on the turntable); just the commercial, just aesthetic part of Christmas. And little not-yet-Rabbi Raskin had his own ornaments, stocking and presents under the tree.

Now turning to the other side of the family, I have five first cousins on my mother's side. Three out of five of them intermarried, but the outcomes have been very different. None of my cousin's spouses converted, but two out of the three are actively raising their kids Jewish. Their non-Jewish spouses have done something extraordinary...they have been active in raising their

children as Jews, they have made sure their children had a Jewish education, b'nai mitzvah, Jewish youth group and summer camp experiences, and now all their kids are making the rounds on Birthright as well. What will happen when they get married someday anybody's guess, but their parents have made incredible efforts, not to mention financial sacrifices, to give their kids quality Jewish experiences. And I, the peculiar, inexplicable cousin who not only became a rabbi, but a Conservative rabbi, schlepped to every one of those kids' b'nai mitzvah, most of which were in the dead of the winter in Madison, WI and Chicago (that's dedication) because, like that wedding this summer, **I wanted to celebrate the determination my cousins and their non-Jewish spouses made to raising Jewish kids.**

Now my guess is that if I asked you to raise your hand if you have a family member who is married to someone who is not Jewish, or if you now have a relative who was not raised Jewish that every single one of the 1,000 people here today would raise their hands. According to the most recent population surveys, more than half of Jews who got married between 2000 and 2013 married someone raised in another faith. And of course the Jewish community is trying to figure out, what does this mean for us? How do we deal with this? What should our response be as rabbis, as synagogues, as a community....

You know it used to be that intermarriage was practically unheard of...just a century ago, maybe even less Jews marrying out of the faith was rare, and when it happened it was very hush hush. Some people would say kaddish for children who married out, refuse to attend their weddings. Nowadays you'd be hard-pressed to find a parent who would react so harshly outside of the ultra-Orthodox community. In fact many Jews report that they don't find anything wrong with intermarriage at all, and some 80% say they'd prefer if their rabbis, regardless of denomination, would find a way to officiate at those ceremonies. 50% say that opposing intermarriage is racist!

Very few people are rending their clothes about this or sitting shiva any more. Yet there is still plenty of cause to be concerned. Let's consider the facts:

-When two Jews marry each other, there is an 80-90% chance that their children will grow up and consider themselves Jewish.

-But when a Jew marries a non-Jew, the chances of their children growing up to consider themselves Jewish plummet to only a third. That means that 66% of the offspring of intermarried parents affiliate with another religion, or no religion at all.

So you can see why this is such a critical issue for rabbis and Jewish educators and those who care about the future of the Jewish people. It's not based on some feeling of ethnic superiority. It's because we are not quite an endangered species, but we are certainly vulnerable. And if you think that Judaism has any meaning, beauty, wisdom, or relevance in this world, then you ought to be concerned too. There are fewer Jews in America today than there were 10 years ago, and that trend is continuing, not reversing as people marry later in life and as Jewish birthrates go down instead of up. I want you to know that I didn't go into the rabbi business so that I could sit back and watch the Jewish people go from vulnerable to endangered to extinct. I committed myself to this life, this vocation because I wanted to spend every waking hour devoting myself to the cause of teaching Torah, expanding God's presence in the world, and promoting the extraordinary traditions of the Jewish people.

In yesterday morning's Torah reading, Abraham and Sarah send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness without adequate supplies. Without sufficient food or water...and the situation quickly turns grim. And I wonder, do we send our kids into the world with enough Jewish resources? Do they have enough supplies in their Jewish backpacks to construct meaningful

Jewish lives of their own when they become independent? A recent report described some of the provisions they need to have so that they're more likely to live Jewishly. Kids who have 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! Oy gevalt. The point is that our kids go out into the world like Ishmael and Hagar, ill equipped and precarious, unless we fill them up 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. Telling our kids they should marry other Jews because they have to perpetuate the species does sound strangely racist. Our kids are only going to choose Judaism and make Jewish choices in their lives when they have exciting, positive Jewish memories that they can't imagine not having in their adult lives.; That they could never dream of having a family without Jewish holidays, Shabbat, synagogue life, or Jewish learning.

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 family. I never tell the distraught parents who come to my office because their kids are intermarrying to cut them 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 hope they'll 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. If there is any hope for them to one day decide to have a Jewish family, they are much more likely to do so if they aren't rejected by their own family.

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. I know that since I cannot officiate at an intermarriage, some people interpret that as a position of scorn or condemnation for those in our community who are intermarried. I am speaking about this today because I want you to know that **I am not in the business of condemning anyone.** I am speaking about this today because I know that finding companionship in this world is no easy task. Half of all marriages end in divorce, and Lord knows that having a spouse of a different religious background can further complicate the already complicated institution of marriage--Which is why I feel that as a rabbi and as a synagogue we should offer more support, not less for interfaith families. **I am speaking about this today because I love and respect all of the members of this shul, including those who have intermarried, and I am in awe of your commitment to raise Jewish children, just as I am of my cousins.'** As many of you know I stand outside every Sunday morning and every Tuesday afternoon to greet our kids when they come for religious school. **And I always feel grateful to the non-Jewish parents who are here every week taking their kids to shul and religious school.**

A few months ago, Arnold Eisen, the chancellor of the seminary where I was ordained wrote a provocative piece in the Wall Street Journal, urging rabbis to be more aggressive in efforts to covert un-churched people to Judaism.¹ It is widely known that we Jews are not a proselytizing faith, right. When was the last time someone rang your door bell and said *Hello, can I interest you in a free copy of the Torah? Can we talk about how you can accept Moses into your life?* 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

¹ Eisen, Arnold. "Wanted: Converts to Judaism." Wall Street Journal, July 24, 2014

must tell you that among the most powerful experiences I have as a rabbi is standing 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. There are few moments that are more Jewishly inspiring than that. 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. I love the story 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 eventually 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 on Saturday morning so that we can review the books." Sorry, Dad I can't come. Tomorrow is Shabbat, we'll be at shul." The Dad says, "I told you not to marry a Gentile!"² 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, and who don't take it for granted. 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 the soul 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 convert to Judaism wrote a letter to Maimonides, the great 12th Century Jewish sage and philosopher the Rambam, 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. In other words, If I converted, can I claim those patriarchs as my ancestors too? Absolutely, replied the Rambam, they are your ancestors as much as they are my ancestors. I have heard people refer to others as intermarried when they in fact married someone who converted to Judaism. That is not an intermarriage! If someone converted to Judaism they are Jewish. Period. End of story. That kind of mistake must not be tolerated. And while we’re at it, let’s retire from our vocabulary words like *shikseh*, *goy*, and *sheygetz*. They are all derogatory terms for non-Jews and they have no place in the lexicon of a community that professes that all human beings are created in God’s image.

I know very well, however, that not every non-Jewish spouse will convert to Judaism. Conversion can be complicated, and some people have deeply personal reasons (sometimes relating to sensitivities of their parents or families of origin) for not being able to take that step. 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 Har Shalom. 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, pushed them away, or closed the door on them they would most likely not have Jewish children today. It should also not be the default assumption that if you are intermarried you therefore must join a Reform temple. In my experience non-Jewish family members are not expecting to receive aliyot to the Torah or to recite Jewish prayers in the synagogue or to be treated as Jews even though they are not ...but they are expected to be treated as a full-fledged family member, as a spouse and as a parent. It used to be at Har Shalom that

only the Jewish spouse was considered a member...we now treat the whole family unit as members. Non-Jewish parents stand with Jewish parents when their child is named, or blessed at their bar or bat mitzvah. And non-Jews are even involved in some of our synagogue committees, helping make our congregation a stronger, more vibrant place for everyone. I'm not looking to blur boundaries, but I do believe that we can be much more welcoming and sensitive than we have been in the past.

I began this sermon by sharing with you some of my life story. I want you to understand where I come from, and what animates my rabbinate. I hope you understand why intermarriage remains a deep concern of mine and why I can't reckon it the same as the marriage of one Jew to another Jew. 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 Har Shalom, 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.

As for that box of Christmas ornaments, I don't know what happened to them. I stopped participating in the annual Christmas festivities when I hit the double digits...it was part of my pre-teen rebellion! The truth is that even at a pretty young age I knew there could only be one religion for me. And it certainly wasn't going to be the one that didn't go much deeper than tinsel and trees. I was much more drawn to the faith, the God, the traditions, and the wisdom of my ancestors, which is why I am here today. I am quite sure that if your children and grandchildren's lives are filled with beautiful Jewish experiences and memories—they may not end up as rabbis—but I'm pretty confident they'll feel proud to be Jews.