

Did you hear about the Jewish Buddhist (or Jubu) who went to the hot dog stand and ordered one with everything? After getting her hot dog, the Jubu handed the vendor a \$20 bill. Taking the money, the vendor began helping the next customer.

Puzzled, the Jubu said to the vendor, "Excuse me, but where is my change?"

The vendor replied, "Change comes from within."

I've been thinking a lot about what stays the same in life and what changes since becoming a *Saba* ("grandfather" in Hebrew) 10 months ago. In my mind I still feel young. Yet when I look in the mirror I wonder if, when I was a teenager, I saw who I am now, would I recognize myself. I am the same ... or, am I? Each of us embodies a sense of continuity and change.

The name for this day - Rosh Hashanah - actually reflects this duality. On the one hand, the word שנה *shanah* (meaning "year") comes from a three-letter root – שׁ נׁ הׁ *shin, nun, hay* that means "repeat". Thus, שניים *shnayim* means "two" (one twice over), while the first code of Jewish law is the *Mishnah* (literally, a "repetition" of received traditions). On the other hand, שׁ נׁ הׁ *shin-nun-hey* in Hebrew also means "to change." Thus, at the Passover *sefer* when we sing the four questions, we say מה נשתנה *mah nishtahnah* – how different (or "changed") is this night from all others? In fact, the Hebrew word for "change" is שינוי *shinui*.

A good year, then, embraces both the preservation of tradition and the need for change. Reform Judaism has always valued both these yearnings. We affirm time-honored Jewish traditions and practices that provide meaning in a tempestuous, often immoral (or amoral) world. Yet our very name – not "reformed" (as if it took place in the past), but Reform - implies a continual, ongoing "re-forming" of ancient traditions that can address contemporary needs. As Reform Jews we have been proudly at the forefront of the inclusion of women as equals. A generation ago our movement affirmed that not only the children of Jewish mothers, but also Jewish fathers, could be part of the Jewish people.

In my own Jewish life, too, I sought to keep ancient values, but being open to change (or “re-form”) when faced with modern understandings or situations. Early in my career I opposed same sex marriage. Just a few years later, however, I reconsidered my position – so much so that I led a coalition of rabbis that presented a brief to the Canadian Supreme Court arguing in favor of religious same sex marriage.

All of this is background to a decision I have made that I want to share with you as we begin this new Hebrew decade ... a change that has come from within. That decision is that moving forward I will officiate at Jewish wedding ceremonies for interfaith couples – focused on the members of our congregation.

I know that some of you will be thrilled with this and suspect others may be troubled by it. Some of you may be hurt that this is coming only now, when I said “no” to you in the past. If so, I ask your forgiveness for any pain I caused you and your understanding for why it took me as long as it did to get to this point. To those of you concerned, worried or upset by this change of heart – I hope that just as others remained connected here even though they disagreed with my stance until now, that your relationship with our synagogue and me is more durable than about just this decision.

There may be some questions that you have – so let me try to anticipate several of them: Why now? What, exactly, will I do and what will I not? And, finally, how do I think this change can actually strengthen Jewish life?

### **Why Now?**

The traditional first day reading for Rosh Hashanah tells the story of Abraham kicking out Hagar and Ishmael. There are lots of other passages our traditions could have picked for the first day of the Jewish year. Why *this* one – not even about those central to the continuity of the Jewish people? What is it about Abraham’s casting aside of his own family that is so essential and important for us to hear on this Day of Judgment? I would suggest that it is to teach us that the

choices we make – even for good cause– can have lasting, and often negative, ramifications. Might there have been a different, more open and gentler response Abraham could have taken?

Every Rosh Hashanah I have grown increasingly troubled and anguished by this story. Was I, too, turning aside those I wanted to draw close even if for reasons I felt were right? I started to wonder if what was gained by saying “no” to officiating at a Jewish wedding for an interfaith couple was not as important as were the opportunities lost for drawing others closer to Jewish life. Feeling that it was more wrong to say “no” than “yes”, I realized that a change had come within.

I did not come to this decision lightly; only after years of soul-searching, study and conversation. I also want to be clear that there has been absolutely no outside pressure – not from any congregant nor our lay leadership nor within my family – to do this. This decision was entirely my own.

The reality of Jewish life today is just not the same as when I began my service as a rabbi. 35 years ago, interfaith marriage was much less common and often – though even then not always – a path away from Jewish life. Today, anywhere from 50-80% of Jews intermarry.<sup>1</sup> Whether I say “yes” or “no”, congregants who fall in love with someone who is not Jewish and choose to marry will find someone who will officiate. Would it not be better for those who are in our community to turn to *their* synagogue – and *their* rabbi – to embrace and welcome them?

What was most influential in making my decision, however, was so many of you. I have seen how profoundly so many interfaith couples connect to Jewish life in general and our synagogue in particular. It means more than I can express to see parents (both Jews and those not Jewish) placing their hands on their children's heads when they begin in our school, offering them a blessing as they begin to come Torah. A month rarely goes by when I am not moved when

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/307> and “Pew survey of U.S. Jews: soaring intermarriage, assimilation rates”, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* (October 1, 2013)

interfaith parents shed the same joyous tears as Jewish only couples as they pass the Torah to their Bar or Bat Mitzvah child. And I have been touched by those who are not Jewish sitting *shiva* out of love and respect for their Jewish partners.

To those who are not Jewish and who have found a place here - thank you! Thank you for blessing us with your involvement and support, tacit or explicit; helping raise your children as Jews, coming to services and participating in our schools. This decision is not compensation for you being here, but please know that your commitment over the years to your families, our synagogue and to me, was, in no small measure, the reason I came to the decision I did. I hope I have been your teacher, for you have been mine.

Finally, I have been deeply influenced by my students who I have been privileged to teach and watched grow. To you, my students - being with you in school, when you became Bat and Bar Mitzvah, challenging you (and being challenged by you) in *Kabbalat Torah*, maintaining a connection with you when went to college and shared your excitement about being at Hillel or going to Israel, seeing you grow from childhood to adulthood – your bond with me has been among my greatest joys. So many of you have told me over the years that you desperately want to be Jewish and have a Jewish family. But often the one you fall in love with is not Jewish. It is knowing you – and your struggle to balance your love for being Jewish with the person you love who is not - that caused me sleepless nights and to doubt my previous certainty.

### **What will be my boundaries? What am I saying “yes” to and what will still be “no”?**

In the television series, “Transparent”, one of the most quoted lines of the show is when one character says to another, “I’m sorry if my boundary is your trigger.” I know that even as I seek to open up bridges to others, there will continue to be boundaries that not everyone will be happy that I take. No matter how open a tent, there is a place where the pegs are set in the ground – so even in saying “yes” to many, I know that I will still say “no” to some.

My guiding principle is that my officiation will not be for interfaith weddings, but for *Jewish weddings for interfaith couples*. Thus, these will be the criteria for my officiation at all weddings – whether the couple are both Jews or not:

- First, both partners must affirm their commitment to establishing a Jewish home and raising Jewish children. To me, a rabbi and/or cantor at a wedding represents an affirmation not just of the love between two individuals, but the commitment that couple makes to be part of the covenant of our people Israel. To appease a parent or make someone else happy is a lovely thing, but will not be sufficient for me to say "yes".
- Second, any ceremony will be exclusively Jewish. Neither I nor my clergy partners will co-officiate with clergy who are not Jewish nor allow the incorporation of customs, ceremonies or words not in keeping with Jewish practice and traditions.
- Third, as has always been my practice every couple will be required to undergo a process of pre-marital counseling. Couples where one partner is a Jew and one is not will likely be asked to attend one additional pre-marital counselling session with me to address the specific issues related to interfaith marriage and I will encourage those couples, in particular, to take an Introduction to Judaism class (like Judaism 101 that all three clergy will offer here this year) so there is a shared understanding of what it means to create a Jewish home.
- Fourth, in keeping with my current policy, I will not officiate at a wedding that begins until the end of Shabbat or a Jewish holiday.
- Finally, given my commitments within the congregation and out of a belief that my primary responsibility is to serve those who support our synagogue, I will (as I do now) officiate primarily for congregants and their children. I will not seek to do weddings nor solicit officiating at weddings for anyone outside our congregation.

Would I like those who are not Jewish to be part of our people and faith? If that is meaningful for them, of course. That said, I will officiate without expectation or requirement that someone fully be part of us and become Jewish – only with the promise that they support the building of a Jewish family and will connect to the larger Jewish community, however they feel appropriate.

While your three clergy may have slightly different stances about some of these points – each determining exactly when, where and with who we can officiate – we are in full agreement that when others say “yes” to God, Torah and/or Israel – somehow connecting to Jewish life - we will do whatever we can to say “yes” back.

### **How can this stance strengthen Jewish life?**

This change is not simply coming to terms with a social reality. Nor do I see interfaith marriage as an “problem”. Yes, it is a challenge for us as our community changes, but our people have – I truly believed – always found a way to accept others in. The proof is written on our faces. Do you think it is just a coincidence that that most Jews from European, Ashkenazi backgrounds look European or Jews of other places just happen to look like the people among whom they live? Somehow – either by openness to conversion and/or a willingness to look aside when people had children with those who were not Jewish – Jews in the past found a way to maintain a sense of tradition while also being open to others becoming a part of us. We need to be equally open-hearted.

Demographic studies over the past several years have shown that the presence of a rabbi under the *chuppah* at an interfaith wedding ceremony greatly increases the probability that the couple will have a Jewish home.<sup>2</sup> If I want to strengthen Jewish life, it seems better for me to be there than not be.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/noteworthy/officiation.html> and “Interfaith Families Increasingly Jewish”, *The New York Jewish Week* (November 21, 2018)

A number of years ago, a cartoon showed two members of the Jewish community in conversation about interfaith marriage. One says: "Optimism on Jewish continuity requires a small change in prepositions." The second inquires incredulously: "Prepositions?!" To which the first replies: "Yes. Instead of us [Jews] marrying *out*, just think of it as them [those not Jewish] marrying *in*!"

The switch in me about officiating finally happened when I began to ask myself, "How can I approach interfaith marriage more with love and less with fear?" Instead of worrying about it as a pathway out, I simply came to see this more as being a doorway in. It was that *teshuvah* תשובה, that turning in my soul, that allowed me to have greater faith and trust that those who seek a Jewish wedding will continue to look for ways to connect.

What guarantee is there that the couples will make good on their pledge? None. Just as there is none when two people who are Jewish marry. My openness to officiate is, like marriage itself, an act of faith, love and hope. And the support your clergy offer will not stop at the breaking of the glass, which is why we actively support a new group here called Interfaith Connections and will be offering Judaism 101: An Introduction to Jewish Life class this year. I (and all your clergy) are committed to you and believe our diversity and differences will only enrich us as a *kehillah k'doshah* קהילה קדושה - a sacred community.

A final thought. With all my mind, with all my heart and all my soul I am devoted to maintaining our traditions and people. There is much that I – and I hope you – will continue to do the same, *shanah* שנה after *shanah* שנה. But we can preserve the best of the past and enrich our people only by willing to embrace *shinui* שינוי (*change*). As I once heard someone quip, "If you can't change your mind, are you sure you still have one?" Officiating at Jewish weddings for interfaith couples who want to be with us will, I truly believe, powerfully say to everyone that if you want to be part of Jewish life – whatever your background – we want you with

usa, we love and embrace you; and having you with us makes us *all* richer and better, so that עם ישראל חי *am Yisrael chai*, the people of Israel will live.

*My thanks to Rabbi Joe Black and Rabbi John Rosove, whose writing about this topic helped guide my thinking.*