

Rosh HaShanah Morning 5783
Rabbi Karen S. Citrin
Reopening Part 2 – Jewish Community

Seven years ago, when my family was still living in Tulsa, Oklahoma before moving to Westwood, the interim rabbi at Temple Beth David reached out to me and asked if I would be willing to speak to a prospective member who had some questions. Being considerate about my time, and not yet being employed by Beth David, he told me, “I think this will be worthwhile.”

That is how I came to speak with Jackie White on the phone, who is here this morning with her family, and who is the mother of our most recent bat mitzvah, Lucy. Jackie had many questions ranging from the temple community, the how’s and why’s of religious school, pedagogy, belief, when to start young children, and if their family would be welcome. Jackie is Catholic, her husband Dan is Jewish, and she told me if they were going to do this, she wanted to commit, and that she would need a lot of support and guidance. It was clear to me that Jackie was taking a thoughtful and invested approach to raising Jewish children.

Their family joined that year as part of the temple’s introduction to religious school. I have continued to receive Jackie’s thoughtful questions especially around Jewish practice, and observed the parents’ commitment to bringing their children to Shorashim, Hebrew learning, and Double Chai, and supporting their daughter to become bat mitzvah.

Allow me to quote Lucy, who made her parents, rabbi, and community proud when she stood on this *bima* a couple weeks ago, “Becoming a Bat Mitzvah means reaching a new level of age and freedom. It means to properly represent yourself as a Jewish adult, a trustworthy friend, a kind sibling, and a helpful daughter. It gives me a new sense of pride to know that “I did it.” After all of the preparation for this moment, I finally stand here today fully counted in Jewish community. And even when this service is over, I will still have other duties as a Jew to accomplish. Like teaching Mikey Torah when it is his turn on the bima and helping out at the temple on Sundays. I will also continue to go to Double Chai on Wednesdays to be an active member in my Jewish community.”

I share this story because I know *there are many Jackie’s here in our congregation and in Jewish community today*. Our congregation is made up of people from different backgrounds, all of whom have decided that being part of Jewish community matters. We are living at a time of reopening our communities, along with COVID as our new normal. I spoke last night about reopening our ideas and language about God. Today I would like to reflect with you on the importance of reopening our Jewish community. Specifically, opening our doors wider.

On Rosh HaShanah morning we read about the foundational stories of our patriarchs and matriarchs in the beginning of the Torah. While today we heard the more harrowing recounting of the near sacrifice of Isaac, just a few chapters earlier, we learn of Sarah and Abraham’s surprise that they will have a child in their old age. As Abraham sits in his tent, he sees three messengers on the horizon and runs to greet them while Sarah prepares food for their arrival.¹

¹ Genesis 18

Jewish tradition describes Abraham and Sarah's tent as open on all sides with its occupants eager to welcome guests coming from all directions.² These messengers will bring news of the child, the potential of new life.

Our communities were not always open places. This is understandable, as the Jewish community struggled with the question of continuity. America has offered both opportunity and challenge. On the one hand, the success of American Jewry is phenomenal. Although we constitute only two percent of the nation's population, we enjoy influence and esteem in nearly every facet of American life, including higher education, science, law, the arts, entertainment, politics, business, and philanthropy. There is no greater sign of our acceptance than the growing rates of interfaith marriage from the 1950's until today. And yet, all these blessings showed a particular challenge about the future of Jewish continuity.

Fears about Jewish continuity are hardly new. There have been multiple publications about "The Vanishing American Jew," from the post-World War II and Holocaust 1960's through the 1990s, as Jews experienced more and more freedom and openness with our Christian neighbors. Intermarriage was seen as one of the threats to Jewish continuity in America, and the numbers bore this out. Studies showed how a majority of children of interfaith parents did not identify as Jewish and the statistics were more extreme for grandchildren. However, more current trends suggest otherwise.³

Recent surveys by the Brandeis Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies and the Pew Research Center show that 7.6 million Americans identify as Jewish, a 35% increase since 1990.⁴ A main cause? Intermarriage. According to these studies, about two-thirds of intermarried couples now raise their children Jewish. This means that in a typical intermarried family with two kids, the Jewish population doubles in a generation. This steadfast intergenerational transmission of Jewish identity is all the more remarkable given that Pew has noted a decline in the numbers of Catholic and Protestant Americans. At Brandeis University up the road, the new thinking is that Judaism and Jewish culture are flourishing, including intermarriage.

But how could the same factor blamed as a threat to Jewish continuity now be the driver of it? The answer is in our attitudes and our outreach. Like Abraham and Sarah's tent, over the past generation, Reform synagogues have opened their symbolic tent flaps for those on a journey seeking spirituality and community. Since the 1980's the Union for Reform Judaism has been explicit about welcoming and wanting interfaith families to be part of Jewish community rather than shunning them. Our outreach, education, and open doors speak to the relevance of Judaism and inviting all who seek it to connect.

I think that Rabbi Micah and I were the first rabbis at Beth David who were open to officiating at Jewish weddings for interfaith couples. As a rabbi, a most sacred honor is being able to stand under the chuppah to unite loved ones in marriage, according to Jewish tradition and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. As a rabbi, I officiate at Jewish wedding ceremonies.

² Midrash Bereishit Rabbah

³ *The Jewish American Paradox, Embracing Choice In A Changing World*, Robert H. Mnookin, 2018.

⁴ "Keeping the Faith – Is intermarriage threatening American Judaism or renewing it?" Lawrence Goodman, Brandeis Magazine, Summer 2022.

Reform rabbis, unlike our Conservative and Orthodox colleagues, are given the opportunity to choose whether we will officiate for interfaith couples. Early on in my career, I engaged in a deep process to decide whether or not I would. Now seven years here, I have received a lot of questions and pleasant surprise about my openness to officiate. I would like to share why. Nineteen years ago a couple sat in my office in California and asked if I would officiate at their wedding. Their names are Deena and Rob. She was a committed Jew; he was raised Catholic, though no longer practiced his religion. They grew up in the same town and knew each other since middle school. Judaism was always a strong part of Deena's identity. Rob's love for Deena included embracing her as a Jew and extended further to their mutual desire to establish a Jewish home. I met them both in the Introduction to Judaism class that I was teaching. As they sat before me, I had to decide.

It is a big deal because the Jewish wedding ceremony assumes two Jews, male and female. And yet, people and traditions change and evolve. Jewish identity, and love, do not always fit neatly into a single box. The foundation of a Jewish marriage is the creation of a new Jewish home that adds to the life of the community. For an interfaith couple that is genuinely committed to establishing a Jewish home, I believe that the wedding can be an important step along this journey. I believe that a rabbi should be present, playing the role of *mekarev*, drawing them closer to Jewish community. It is a leap of faith for any couple. For a person not born Jewish, conversion is a greater guarantee, and I encourage this choice. However, conversion is a very personal decision when the time is right. My decision to officiate starts with a conversation, an open door.

I was delighted to receive the following message from Rob last year: "With the global pandemic, political uprising, and the ever growing list of "oy veys" in the world, I'm excited to pause and share a bit of good news: after 18 years of living Jew-ishly, I chose to convert to Judaism (officially plunging into the warm mikvah waters back in December). You are an instrumental figure in my journey to Judaism, and it brings me so much joy to share this news with you. I remember years ago when you agreed to stand under the chuppah and officiate our wedding, you asked if I would consider converting one day. My answer at the time was something like, "I'll never say never, but I do struggle with my belief in God, and wrestle with my faith." As I reflect on the formation of my Jewish identity, I now understand that my conversion began the very moment I acknowledged my struggle with God; this was the very beginning of my spiritual journey as a Jew. I cannot thank you enough for all the knowledge, guidance and support you have provided my family throughout the years. I look forward to sharing many more *simchas* in the years ahead."

Deena and Rob are active participants in the synagogue, their eldest daughter just started high school, and their younger daughter will become bat mitzvah this spring. By the time I arrived at Beth David, there was no doubt in my mind about the need to open the doors to Jewish community wider. *There are many Robs here in our congregation.*

When Ally Fiorino who had grown up at Temple Beth David and her fiancée Sean Stanton asked about their wedding, Rabbi Micah and I met with them and said yes. Ally recently shared that they are thrilled to be welcoming a new addition to their family this spring and cannot wait for their child to receive their Hebrew name at Beth David.

Soon to follow was another child of this congregation, Liz Watsky and her now husband Rob Valois. Looking back on that day, Liz commented, “Being able to be married by a Rabbi meant that I felt like my faith got to be a part of my marriage, and my marriage acknowledged by my faith. It felt very special to have a Rabbi working with both me as a Jew and my husband as an agnostic, and have us be guided during the experience by someone open minded and welcoming. We live in a combined household, with me observing my holidays and sharing them with my husband and after the Introduction to Judaism class he is more knowledgeable about what each holiday and tradition means.”

I believe that all of us here today are faced with questions about Jewish identity and what it means to be part of Jewish community. Those of us who were born Jewish could learn from the non-Jews in our midst, and from those who have made the formal commitment to choose a Jewish life. Jewish tradition (*midrash*) considers the convert to be more precious to God than a person who is born a Jew. Because people who are newer to Judaism don't take their Judaism as a given, they ask questions, and choose freely to go to temple or to observe a holiday. This is far from a demise. This is an opportunity for all of us to open up our understandings of Jewish identity and our notions of belonging. Jewish identity is diverse and multi-faceted.

I have the privilege of talking to nearly all prospective members of our congregation. I have noticed a pattern in recent years of apology. The conversation typically goes something like this: I am interested in Jewish community, religious school for my children, there are not many Jews in my town... BUT... The but is often followed by – “I'm sorry I'm not religious, my husband is not Jewish, we are really busy, I am not sure.” I would like to suggest a reframing for all of us. Rather than but, yes...and. Yes, I am interested in Jewish community. And, I have some questions about where we're coming from, my beliefs, how to get started, how to support my family, how to learn for myself and model for others.

I would like to take this moment on the first day of this New Year to acknowledge and praise all of you who are making up the diverse tapestry of our community. We see you in our congregation today.⁵ I would like to invite you to rise, in body or in spirit, if the following applies to you. You are not Jewish, yet you come to this sanctuary, even when it feels strange and confusing. You are the non-Jewish parent who gave your child a Hebrew name. You are the non-Jewish parent who drive your kids to religious school each week. You are the non-Jewish parent who blessed your child on the *bimah* when he or she became bar/bat mitzvah. You chose to convert and become part of the Jewish people after years of questioning and wrestling. You try to make matza balls, and you try to like the taste of gefilte fish (it is an acquired taste). You struggle with Hebrew. You are committed to learning about Jewish customs and heritage. It is important that you know how much we respect and admire the choices you have made to build a Jewish home. Your choices are the choices that inspire all of us to strengthen our Jewish lives.

For everyone else: Please rise now if you seek meaning for yourself in Jewish community. Please rise if you are here to seek meaning and pass on Jewish tradition to others in your family or to this community. Please rise if Jewish community is important to you. Lastly, please rise if you have questions about your own identity.

⁵ Inspired by Rabbi Janet Marder's Blessing for Non-Jewish Spouses, Yom Kippur Morning 5765.

This blessing is for all of you, our holy community: ***“Baruch atah Adonai, Ha’mekarev et neshamot l’kehillat Yisrael – Blessed are You, Holy One of Blessing, who draws souls near to the community of Israel.”***

Every Jew alive today, whether born to Jewish parents or not, is faced with decisions about how to be Jewish. It is no longer a given that our children or grandchildren will be Jewish. We are all Jews by choice. According to the local author of *Choosing a Jewish Life*, Anita Diamant, “Today, this definition is not unique to converts alone... All Jews today must make the choice about what kind of Jew we want to be.”

We are here today, part of Temple Beth David, because we believe in the value of Jewish community. Our doors are open regardless of religious background, gender, race, and ethnicity. The tapestry of our congregation is brighter with your diverse colors. It is time to reopen.

Perhaps you have noticed how the *mezuzah*, the ritual object on the doorposts of our homes and temple, which contains the *Shema*, the central prayer of our people, leans in. The *mezuzah* is affixed at an angle, pointing into the entrance to Jewish community, welcoming us in.

On this New Year, let us resolve to open our doors a little wider, to those who are seeking, to those who have questions, to those who are committing to being the next link in the chain of Jewish tradition, *l’dor vador*, from generation to generation. Our people’s future is bright.

Anthem: L’dor Vador by Josh Nelson