

## Yom Kippur Day 5779 - Shalom

Anyone who knows me, knows I don't love conflicts, I am the peacemaker and the one who likes to find middle ground. I was just recruited to be part of a new program where I'll be trained in DC as part of the Peacemaker Rabbinic Scholars cohort.

But today, I'm going to share some ideas that are different than the ones I heard in synagogue and from my own family when I was growing up. I'm going to disagree with some of my teachers, and mentors. So, it might be a controversial sermon, and I've got enough humility to know that I might be wrong, but I've also got enough courage to speak today, despite my fears of this being controversial.

You know what's not controversial? Confessing that I'm a fan of Ryan Gosling. \*Hold up picture of Ryan Gosling\* And while I can't unfortunately give a sermon only about Ryan Gosling, it's a good place to start.



In 2001, a young Ryan Gosling played a young man who grew up in a fundamentalist Orthodox community challenging all the assumptions of his teachers. The movie is called "The Believer" and I highly recommend it. He rebelled in such an extreme way that he became a skinhead and Neo-Nazi. His character rises through the ranks and he finds himself presenting a novel idea to the suit and tie nazis that are gathered. He begins his presentation by reciting the Shema. He

then offers is that in order to annihilate the Jews, you have to love them. “The Jew is sneaky, he says, and thrives on enmity. Thus you cannot pretend to love them, the Jew will see through any deception. You must love the Jew sincerely. Only then will they be annihilated through assimilation and cease to exist on the earth.

This idea, the idea that we will ultimately lose Judaism through assimilation is precisely what I grew up hearing in Conservative synagogues. For decades, the movement tried to walk a fine line of maintaining a distinct culture and traditionalism while we became increasingly accepted into American culture, all the while warning of the dangers of this acceptance.

We worked hard for that acceptance. We valued education, were successful in business. We built beautiful synagogues modeled after the best style of the day. We engaged in the public sphere, creating art, music, and laws. One could make a reasonable argument that the Jewish community of the United States is one of the most successful Jewish communities of all of our recorded history. Is it any wonder that we became loved and accepted into American society?

But this acceptance also was a double-edged sword. Intermarriage became the tangible enemy of religious Judaism and Jewish leaders. Our approach and the debate has been well documented.

### **A brief timeline of the Conservative Movement’s Approach to Intermarriage**

Beginning in the 1960’s the Conservative movement embarked on a program to oppose intermarriage, and encourage endogamy. In 1963 the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards stated that Conservative Rabbis were, ”mandated to dissuade any Jew who is contemplating marriage with a non-Jew from this course. He shall further consider it his duty to cooperate with the family that seeks his help in bringing all legitimate pressures and influences to bear upon the young man or woman in order to break up the proposed alliance.

In 1984 many considerations were written to consider how to **exclude** the intermarried couple from the Jewish community. They went as far as to even discourage Rabbis from publishing congratulations of mixed-marriages in Synagogue bulletins. The stated intention was to actively sanction in order to promote conformity to group norms and standards.

In 1990 a national Jewish population study reported that Jews were intermarrying at the rate of 51%. Articles written projected the future demise of the Jewish people through assimilation. Parents fretted over their children’s dating choices.

In 2004 the Executive Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement approved a code of conduct for Conservative Rabbis. Within it is a line that states, “Rabbis may not officiate at, participate, or attend an intermarriage.” Violations of Religious Standards generally result in expulsion from the Rabbinical Assembly. And while today it continues to be true that when a Conservative Rabbi officiates an intermarriage, that act usually results in an

expulsion from the organization, I know of many many Conservative Rabbis who have attended intermarriages of family members and close friends. These Rabbis are traditional Rabbis, they are committed Rabbis, and the Conservative movement would be sorely lacking without these dedicated and passionate teachers of Torah.

In 2013 the Pew survey of the US Jewish Community demonstrated the results of these efforts to coerce in-marriage through pressure and fear tactics. Among non-Orthodox marriages since the year 2000, 72% of them were intermarriages. Remember, in 1990, it was 51%. That means that after almost 20 year (or going back to 1963, after more than 50 year) of trying to scare and socially pressure people out of intermarriage, it just wasn't working. That also means that today, here, almost every person in this very traditional, yet non-Orthodox congregation is connected by a close relative who has intermarried, or is married to someone of a different faith than Judaism. I am included in this group.

Our approach of social negative sanctions and standards of practice have not diminished the rate of intermarriage. Proponents of continuing the status quo will quote more statistics. For example, it's statistically much more probable that a child with one Jewish parent is less likely to choose a deeply committed Jewish life than a child with two Jewish parents. But I'm not convinced by the statistics that intermarriage is the only or even the primary reason why many children of intermarriages choose the fast growing religion of no-religion. People aren't statistics.

Fighting intermarriage has been framed as a battle to maintain the integrity of the Jewish people. But even framing it as a battle has caused deep pain, and I believe has been the wrong approach. The primary mistake we as a community have made is not presenting a vibrant enough Judaism that is worth choosing, regardless of the partner in life you choose. In order for Judaism to continue to thrive, we must do more to share the wisdom and beauty of Judaism. We've got to have more focus on how we are wise, why we practice what we do, we have to demonstrate that Judaism adds value to life, that Judaism is worth dedicating precious time and resources toward.

On Yom Kippur, I think it's important to say, that in this effort to maintain the integrity of Judaism, we have often forgotten to teach what the very values we were seeking to protect, and we hurt many many people in the process. As a Rabbi in the Conservative movement, for my part, I am so deeply sorry for the pain we have caused, and I'm hoping that in the future we will act in better ways for the sake of all our Jewish family members, and all those who have chosen to love us regardless of faith and are also a part of our collective family. It's time for fighting to be over. Our time is too precious to waste it fighting assimilation, when we can spend it instead telling our compelling story.

The Torah forbids intermarriage in a few places explicitly because of a lack of confidence that the generation raised in the wilderness would be able to maintain their tradition, and because of fear that this generation would worship other Gods if they were to mix.

This idea is found in one of the more violent scenes in the Torah. The Israelites are on the precipice of finally entering the land of Israel, they find themselves on the border of Moab when the Israelite men have promiscuous relationships with the women which is one of the ways that the Moabites worshipped their God, Baal-Peor. After all all the warnings about worshipping other Gods, that's exactly what these Israelites do through these illicit relationships. God commands that those who attached themselves to Baal-Peor be publicly impaled. Pinchas, Aaron's grandson, sees an Israelite man and a Moabite woman in the full sight of the community go into a tent. He follows them into the tent, and stabs them both through the belly. For this act, he is given a "Covenant of Shalom for all time."

If you're troubled by this story, you're not alone. I am too. But there is a redeeming message in the story, hidden in the tradition of the reading and writing of the Torah scroll itself. The Masorites were a group of scribes and scholars who are directly responsible for the vowel and trope system that tells us how we're supposed to read the Torah. They are also responsible for the lectionary, how we split the weekly cycle of Torah readings throughout the year and they gave us the tradition of how to physically write the letters in the Torah scroll. We read the act of violence that Pinchas commits one week at the end of the Parsha, and the covenant of Shalom is at the beginning of the next week's reading. You see, the Masorites broke up the act of Pinchas and the reward he was given. I don't think that was accidental. Moreover, the Masorites chose a very particular way to write the vav of Shalom, different than other vavs in the Torah. When we write the word Shalom in this story, this is how we write it



There is more than one way to get to Peace. The way of Pinchas was through violence, and the annihilation of the other. The Masorites were trying to tell us that peace through violence is ultimately a broken peace.

The letter Vav is perhaps the most powerful letter in the Hebrew Alphabet. Every column of the Torah scroll begins with Vav. Vav is a conjunctive word in itself. When found at the beginning of a word, Vav means “and.”

The broken Vav of Shalom means it's a shalom that can't hold us, “and” another. It is not full Shalom.

Shalom has long been understood as a value between the Jewish community and all those who we interact with. Our tradition has statements like, the entirety of the Torah is for Shalom. We are directed in our tradition to care for all those in our midst, whether they are part of the Jewish community or adjacent to it, *mipnei darchei shalom*, for the sake of the ways of peace.

I had the unique childhood experience growing up in Pensacola, FL, where my religious school class was 5 kids, and that was two grades combined. I was the only Jewish kid in all my elementary school classes. I was often the first Jewish kid my peers encountered. Yet, I had a strong Jewish family in Pensacola, with grandparents, an Aunt and Uncle, and many cousins who all valued Judaism and our small congregation there. When kids in my school class colored in Christmas trees in December and I was coloring a Menorah, I wasn't jealous - I was special. I was able to share my traditions, my stories to their curious ears. I was proud to be Jewish, and my family gave me the education I needed to teach.

I believe that Judaism is more than strong enough to maintain itself in our pluralist society. It's time to have more confidence in our content and traditions.

It's time to have Shalom Bayit - Peace in our home. We have spent far too long without sharing the universal beauty, wisdom, and practices our tradition has developed over millennia. Our stories and our communities add meaning and value to life. My proof is not only in our longevity, it is in our vibrancy to this very day. Those that predict the end of traditional Jewish communities or synagogues simply don't see what I see every day here at Shearith Israel.

I recently had the opportunity to be the rabbi on a trip “Honeymoon Israel Atlanta.” Honeymoon Israel is a Jewish organization that provides trips to Israel for couples with at least one Jewish partner. Many couples on our trip were intermarried. We traveled around the country together, taking in the great beauty, history, and spirituality of this Jewish homeland, and diving deep into important conversations with each other about tradition and building for the future. Each and every person on this trip found meaning and community together. They desired Jewish community, and we created it on this trip. When we sang songs welcoming Shabbat overlooking the old city of Jerusalem, after experiencing so much of Israel together, many were moved to tears by the power and beauty of Judaism and Jewish community. I'm deeply grateful I was able to be a part of creating community and deepening Judaism with this wonderful group of couples from Atlanta, many of whom are here today. Many of them will go on and deepen their connection with the Jewish community around Atlanta. Shearith may or may not be the right choice for these couples for all kinds of reasons, but if we're not ready to

welcome every person for who they are, we will miss out on many connecting with so many wonderful souls.

We have a lot of work to do as a congregation to know how to best welcome every person, but this is the work we must do. We've got to think about the language we use to talk about one another. For example, I have not used the word "non-Jew" once in this sermon, defining a person by what they are not in relation to me. But language is just the start.

This process of welcoming every person for who they are will look different at a traditional congregation like ours than less traditional congregations, for example, my understanding of the Jewish wedding ritual is only something I'm able to do for two people who identify as Jewish. I can't officiate a ceremony where someone is an outsider. I'm grateful that we are not forging this path alone. With the guidance of our President Rick Kaplan, we have joined a cohort of congregations in partnership with Interfaith Family as part of the Interfaith Inclusion Leadership Initiative. We are just getting started, and in a way, we'll always have to continue the work ahead, but if we're successful, we'll be one step closer to bringing Shalom to the world that we hold up at Shearith Israel.

The great Rabbi and musician Shlomo Carlebach once said that "There is one precious thing that I cannot ask God just give it to me and not to the rest of the world, and that is peace, for it is for the whole world or it isn't there. Because peace comes from such a high place in heaven, it is only given to the whole world, it's not given to individuals, because it's God himself, Everybody knows everybody knows (whenever Rabbi Carlebach said that he was about to say something that most people didn't know" Everybody knows, that we daven Shmoneh Esrei three times a day. We ask for all our needs, but at the end we say, Please Almighty Sim Shalom, Let there be peace. And then we say, "Barcheinu Avinu" Bless me, but Kulanu K'Echad - all of us like one."

At the end of that blessing during the year we say a blessing that is particular to the people of Israel, "Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam - blessed are you Adonai Our God, Sovereign of the Universe, Ha'mevarech et Amo Yisrael B'Shalom - who causes Blessing to His People Israel with Peace. But on these special days, when the gates of Heaven are open, when God is closer with the world than any other day, we simply say, "Baruch atah Adonai, Oseh HaShalom" Blessed are you Adonai, who makes universal peace." May we join together, as partners with God, to bring about this peace