

You can lead them to the Mikvah  
A Sermon for Kol Nidrei 5767  
Rabbi David Jay Kaufman

For me, Reform Judaism teaches:

- \_That what we believe is one truth among many potential truths;
- \_That our Jewish decisions should be informed choices; and
- \_That we should be respectful of our differences.

Regarding Interfaith Families in particular, Reform Judaism encourages:

- \_That we honor and deeply appreciate those parents in our congregations who though not Jewish, have chosen to help raise, or have already raised, the next generation of Jewish leaders;
- \_That the Jewish identity of children in interfaith families is strengthened when they see that we respect and love BOTH of their parents and BOTH of their parent's extended families; and
- \_That we actively promote the involvement of interfaith families as families in our congregations, not only seeking to involve the Jewish members of those families; because we know that our community is strengthened when our families are treated as unified entities.

I have spoken and written more than a few times about ways in which Reform congregations could be more welcoming of interfaith families. I wrote my rabbinical thesis on the role of the non-Jew in Bar and Bat

Mitzvah services, a life cycle ceremony that in my view should involve extended family members and friends. And I have written a service for Bar and Bat Mitzvah services that is specifically designed to be welcoming of interfaith families, while creating a meaningful and joyous Jewish experience for all in attendance.

How I as a rabbi, we as a congregation, and Reform Judaism as a movement reach out to interfaith families and encourage them to raise their children as Jews is of vital importance to me. How we make a spouse, connected to the Jewish community, though not Jewish him or herself, feel cared for, loved, and a functional part of our congregational life is a priority. Interfaith families must feel comfortable in the midst of our Jewish environments and, it must be said, that our congregation with its strong history of outreach, does an exceptional job of this. On a national level, I wish it were so.

Last year, I, along with a number of members of our congregation, sat in an assembly hall in Houston, Texas at the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial Convention, listening to address of the President of the URJ to the General Assembly. Rabbi Eric Yoffie spoke about a number of topics, but one caught my attention more than the others. He spoke about the need for Reform Jews to, in his words, "ask potential converts in our midst if they are interested in conversion."

I was and continue to be significantly bothered by the sentiments expressed, some of which were included in his column printed in the Summer 2006 Reform Judaism Magazine.

Rabbi Yoffie wrote:

In recent years, the number of non-Jewish spouses who convert to Judaism has declined, and anecdotal evidence suggests that interest in conversion has waned in our congregations as well. What happened? Perhaps we've forgotten the advice of my predecessor and Outreach initiator, Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, z'l: "We need to ask. We must not forget to ask." Following his lead, in the early years of Outreach, many of our congregations actively encouraged conversion and made conversion ceremonies part of regular worship services. Such ceremonies are far rarer now. Perhaps, by making non-Jews feel comfortable and accepted in our congregations, we have inadvertently signaled that we do not care if they convert.

Less than half a year before Rabbi Yoffie uttered those words in Houston, worried about a lack of interest in conversion to Judaism, our congregation had brought TEN Jews-by-choice before this very Ark over a span of three months. While that number was and is quite high, we have had significant numbers of people choosing to become Jewish, choosing to become involved in the life of the congregation, and even choosing to become leaders in the Jewish community before and since that time.

Interest in conversion to Judaism in Des Moines and at Temple B'nai Jeshurun in particular is extremely high. I do, as Rabbi Yoffie suggested, regularly hold conversions during Friday night services with few exceptions. One Friday night last year, five Jews-by-choice came before this congregation during one very memorable evening. I do not remember asking a single one of them if they were interested in

conversion. They came to know that we saw them as valued members of our community, loved, desired, and respected for their views, before they chose Judaism. Public conversion ceremonies may serve as confirmation of that feeling, but they are not its cause. Jews by choice come to me, not because it is important to us, to our congregation, or to our movement, that non-Jews convert to Judaism, but because it became important to them.

Do we care if people choose Judaism?

Of course, we care if people choose to be like us. We care if for no other reason than that it makes us feel good to be who we are! Knowing that someone has consciously chosen to join us has a profound effect upon us. Watching someone weep and listening as they read the words "I am a Jew because" brings tears to OUR eyes, tears of joy and happiness. Oftentimes, we do not appreciate the value of Judaism in our own lives, or do not appreciate it enough, and hearing that value uttered by others reminds us. It is great to be a Jew, despite the challenges our people face and have faced for generations! We also care because we know that Jews by choice can have a profoundly positive impact upon our congregation, adding their skills and their energy to our own.

Rabbi Yoffie also answered the question of whether or not we care if people choose Judaism. He said that:

In fact, we care a great deal (whether or not someone converts)... Because it is a mitzvah to help a potential Jew become a Jew-by-choice...

Wait just one minute! In what text from the Jewish tradition do we find the commandment to help a “potential Jew” become a Jew? In fact, in what text are we taught to look upon those around us as Jews and “potential Jews?” There is not a single place. On the other hand, the Torah teaches us that “God’s house shall be a house for all peoples.” The prophet Micah teaches us that while “All the peoples walk each in the name of its gods, we will walk in the name of Adonai, Our God, forever and ever.” If anything, our tradition teaches us that we should see those who are not Jewish as created B’tselem Elohim, in God’s image, worthy of our respect, caring, and love.

The commandments of which we need to be reminded are that we should be welcoming of difference, embracing of those who come into our midst, respectful and even nurturing of their spiritual journey. Regardless of whether or not they walk upon the very same footsteps on their path, they join us on the road less traveled in the modern world; walking with our community, with our families and our friends.

Rabbi Yoffie points out that raising children in a multi-faith household can be confusing, something with which I agree. However, it seems to me that conversion to Judaism should be a process of the spirit and the soul, a journey of emotions and not a purely rational decision based upon what would create the best Jewish household and the least confusing for the children. Conversion should be an instrument of faith and not a new coat of paint that goes better with the décor of the household.

Those who are thinking about choosing Judaism should do so because they feel that they have a Jewish soul, not because choosing Judaism, while they themselves do not feel Jewish, would help their children feel more Jewish. The mitzvot should be in welcoming everyone who enters our congregations, something that benefits all of us, and in aiding those driven by the yearning of their spirit to become Jewish to do so, for their sake, not for that of our movement or our congregation.

The Jewish Outreach Institute and Rabbi Kerry Olitzky posted a response to Rabbi Yoffie's speech at the Houston convention. He noted some things with which I strongly agree:

People who have joined synagogues have taken major steps in joining the community and casting their lot with the Jewish people. They are raising Jewish children... Part of being a warm and nurturing community is understanding people's needs at different points in their lives, and providing meaningful experiences at every point along the way. If conversion is part of that journey, terrific. If not, there's still a place in our community for warmth and growth without judgment or coercion.

From my perspective, there is no problem of a lack of spouses interested in conversion to Judaism. Our congregation has a very high number that have chosen to become Jewish including many recently and more are in the process of doing so. A good number of those have chosen to convert years into their marriage and many, after having already raised their children as Jews. Yet those who have

not chosen this path are appreciated for their role in ensuring the Jewish future through raising Jewish children, through supporting a Jewish spouse, and in many cases, for their efforts in assisting the well functioning of our congregation.

In my mind, their choice to choose Judaism is an honor for me, for our congregation, for our community, for their spouse and their family; as is their choice to raise their children as Jews regardless of whether or not they choose to become Jewish. It means that they feel welcomed and a part of us. In most cases in which a spouse has decided to become Jewish, conversion was a matter of simply deciding to formalize a relationship and an identity that had already developed. Jews by choice and Jewish parents by choice warm our hearts, raise our hopes about the future, and make us feel good about being Jewish ourselves. If that choice were simply one of practicality, I'm not sure that I would feel the same way.

From where does this anxiety about the conversion of spouses who are already part of the Jewish community arise anyway? It comes from those rabbis who believe that the survival of the Jewish people is dependent, not upon Jews, but upon Judaism. What do I mean? Rabbis who believe that the survival of the Jewish people is dependent upon Jews do whatever is in their power to encourage that children of interfaith families be raised as Jews, meaning that they will identify themselves as Jews.

On the other hand, some rabbis believe that we should not allow the forms of Judaism practiced by the next generation of Jews to be, for lack of a better description, less Jewish. There is a belief that

children of interfaith marriages do not feel as connected to Judaism and therefore are less likely themselves to raise Jewish children of their own. The result is that these rabbis put up barriers to involvement in the community, clearly treating non-Jews, even those raising Jewish children, as something other than part of “us.”

I believe that the anxiety concerning these families has occurred primarily within Conservative Judaism and among those Reform rabbis who are among the more traditionally oriented in our movement, those opposing intermarriage. They see the survival of Judaism as dependent upon the next generation of Jews not practicing what they consider to be a “watered down” or “assimilated” form of Judaism. This battle for the Jewish future can be summed up this way:

“Judaism requires Jews” versus “Jews require Judaism.” Which alternative should be given the priority?

The Executive Vice President of the United Synagogue, the organization of Conservative Congregations, Rabbi Jerome Epstein, recently wrote:

The Jewish community’s ongoing loss of interfaith couples and their children testifies to the failure of past strategies designed to keep them within the fold. If we are to reverse this – and we must to stabilize Judaism’s future in North America – a new and creative response is needed immediately. Moreover, this new response must recognize both Jewish values and the reality of the situation...

For too long Jews discouraged non-Jews from seeking to convert. Even in this modern era that outmoded policy lingers in our psyches. The effect has been to limit our ability to passionately encourage those closest to us to convert to Judaism. That has been to our detriment.

We can no longer afford that complacency born of an historical insecurity. Not as a movement, a people, or a religion. Not if we truly care about survival.

Sound the alarm!!! Sound the alarm!!! Wait a minute!

Reform Judaism is flourishing, not only nationally, but worldwide. Judaism as a whole in North America may not be growing by much, but that probably has something to do with the fact that North American Jews have a birth rate that is quite a bit less than adequate to replace the existing population. Just about the only warm blooded creatures out there with a lower birth rate are pandas! More than a few Jewish leaders point out that we should not be worried about intermarriage or pressing for conversion, but instead actively promoting fertility treatments!

Let all Jewish families have three or four children or more and this issue will rapidly vanish. Our community does a pretty good job of replenishing the next generation, by the way: there are twenty one students in the pre-school class on Sunday mornings!

One of the greatest joys of my rabbinate is standing before this ark, handing the Torah to someone who has chosen to become a Jew, and hearing them utter the Shema.

In fact, I would offer that one truly converts the moment that saying those words, “Shma Yisrael,” one considers him or herself to be “Yisrael.” When we perform a conversion ceremony, we are recognizing a change in identity that has already taken place. Another of my favorite moments as a rabbi is this: standing before the congregation trying their hardest not to tear up, the joy, the power of the moment of recognition is overwhelming. The words come forth full of emotion:

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel demands of me no abdication of the mind.

I am a Jew because the faith of Israel requires of me all the devotion of my heart.

I am a Jew because in every place where suffering weeps, the Jew weeps.

I am a Jew because the word of Israel is the oldest and the newest.

I am a Jew because the promise of Israel is the universal promise.

I am a Jew because for Israel, the world is not complete, we are completing it.

I am a Jew because Israel places humanity and its unity above the nations and above Israel itself.

I am a Jew because, above the image of humanity, image of the divine Unity, Israel places the unity which is divine.

How appropriate, on this night, when we uttered the words of the Kol Nidrei, words that were the refuge of our ancestors who were compelled to swear oaths in which they did not believe in order to feel a part of the communities in which they lived; how appropriate for us to remind ourselves of the spirit, the power, the essence, the joy of being Jewish; and to be thankful for all of those who of their own free will have chosen to enter the eternal covenant between God and the people of Israel.

Hazak, Hazak, v'Nithazeik. Be strong, be strong, and may we all strengthen one another.

Good Yom Tov!