

Distinctiveness and Judaism Rabbi Kaufman's View of Inter-marriage

I recently saw the movie *Watermarks* which is a documentary about the HaKoah Women's Swimming Team. HaKoah was an organization in Vienna, Austria founded for the purpose of allowing Jews to participate in sports. Other teams did not allow Jewish members.

In 1936, just before the Berlin Olympics, the top ranked female swimmer in Austria was a Jewish woman on the HaKoah team. She was asked to represent Austria at the Berlin Olympics. She refused, not only wishing to not subject herself to the Jewish Hatred of the Nazi crowd, but wishing to protest against the Nazis. The Austrian Swimming Federation then not only banned her from future competition, seeing her action as an insult to Austria, but also removed all of her records from the swimming record books.

Not long after that, a parade was held, in which all of the sports teams paraded through the city of Vienna along with the Olympic flame. HaKoah followed behind the Nazi party's team which was cheered with shouts of "Heil Hitler" as it passed. It was said that as HaKoah passed, there was absolute silence, a frightening silence full of hatred and loathing. The members of HaKoah ran from the parade back to their club worried not only about the future of HaKoah in competition with the other clubs, but about the safety of its members in 1936 Vienna.

In the movie, one of the women states that she had no real connection to Judaism before she joined HaKoah. She simply considered herself, "Austrian." Suddenly, events made all of the HaKoah members feel very Jewish. Religion was suddenly their defining characteristic.

Perhaps one of the most telling scenes in the movie occurred in modern day Vienna, where surviving members of the HaKoah swim team were gathering for the making of the movie, sixty years after the events of the Holocaust. One woman, Greta, I believe, who had lived in the United States since the war was having a chat with the Austrian driver bringing her to the hotel.

It came up in the conversation that she had left soon after the Nazis took over Austria. The driver said, "Those were terrible times. Particularly for non-natives." Greta immediately and rightly took offense. "I was born here, my parents and my grandparents were born here." In fact, Greta's family had lived in Austria for 400 years. The driver's response was essentially, "Yes, but you are not Austrian."

What does it mean to truly belong somewhere? What does it mean to be at home? To be welcome? Clearly the driver in the story believed that he was being welcoming of Greta. He seemed happy that she had come to visit his beautiful city. Only a generation or two earlier, Austria certainly was not welcoming of Jews. How different he was, as an Austrian, to be driving her around Vienna.

Yet Greta did not feel welcomed at all by this man. He had deeply routed prejudices against Jews. Jews could not be Austrians, even Jews whose families lived in Austria for four centuries. When the driver said those words, "Yes, but you are not Austrian," he demonstrated how much farther there is to go. Those prejudices which brought about the horrors of the Holocaust are still present. In our world, there is still too great a willingness to see differences and too little willingness to find similarities.

Even with that, if differences were seen as enhancing the world rather than corrupting it, if diversity of opinion and belief was seen as healthy for the advancement of humanity instead of as foiling it, and ethnic characteristics mattered less than our moral and ethical qualities... even then, even with minds focused on difference, the world would be a far better place.

Interestingly, Reform Judaism in this country has fought the battle at different times FOR and AGAINST difference. During that time when Jews were severely discriminated against, when they could not belong to the vast majority of Country Clubs, Dining Clubs, and Athletic Clubs American Jews created their own, just as the Viennese Jews created Hakoah. Synagogue Centers, Jewish Community Centers, and Jewish Country Clubs sprang up around the country in which Jews could swim, play sports, and dine without worry of discrimination.

Throughout the 19th Century and for the first half of the 20th Century, Jews were encouraged to assimilate. Rabbis regularly gave sermons, not on the Torah or Jewish history, but on secular subjects, even giving book reviews as sermons, that helped the members of their congregations learn how to be more like other Americans. Many Jews on the Classical Reform end of the spectrum went so far as to bring Christmas Trees into their homes, almost none of which contained Christian family members, as intermarriage rates were very low, for the purpose of blending in with their neighbors during the holiday season.

Jews worked very hard to learn how not to appear to be Jewish. There is of course the joke about the Jewish man who wanted to join the elite country club:

Harry Moses Abramovitz wanted to join the Greenvale Country Club, a place known not to admit Jews.

First, Harry went to court and had his name changed to Howard Trevelyan Frobisher. After that, he flew to a plastic surgeon in Switzerland who transformed his Semitic profile into a Nordic one. Next, he hired an elocution tutor from England to teach him to speak like a native Brit. And finally, Harry worked his way into the graces of several well-established members of the Greenvale Country Club.

Two years after embarking on his project, Howard Frobisher appeared before the committee.

"Please state your name," the chairman said.

In a clipped Oxfordian accent, Harry replied, "I'm Howard Trevelyan Frobisher."

"And, tell us, where were you educated, Mr. Frobisher?"

"Eton and Oxford."

The chairman beamed. "And what is your religious affiliation?"

"Goy."

The sad thing is that for much of the last two hundred years, Jews spent a great deal of time and effort to appear to be anything but Jewish.

Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver was perhaps the leading American Rabbi at the end of World War II. He was one of the most prominent spokesmen for Israel and for Zionism long before most Reform Rabbis were anything but hostile. Abba Hillel Silver was a visionary, a rabbi who at once could see the scope and causes of a problem and offer its solution.

At the end of the war, Judaism faced a crisis, not only because one third of the world's Jews had been murdered, but because those that survived faced an increasing threat of assimilation and the continuing subjugation of Judaism and religion in general to other priorities. There

was a fear that the persecuted Jews having witnessed their brethren's fate in Europe might be willing to give up some of that uniqueness that separates the Jews from those around them, to give in to those who decry their difference and wish the Jews to be like those around them. Abba Hillel Silver took umbrage with that.

He wrote, "Any movement for good will which demands of me self-abnegation is a hostile attack. The man who would be my friend only if he can convert me to his way of living and thinking and believing, is not my friend. He is my enemy. He does not like me for what I am. He would like to see his own reflection in me."

This is how we react when confronted by those who would have us cease to be Jews and to become something else. Rabbi Silver had something to say about the trend toward assimilation that led Jews like Harry Moses Abramovitz to act as if they were not Jews as well:

He said, "There is much which all religions have in common and much which differentiates them. Their common purpose in the world will not be advanced by merger or amalgamation. Were all arts, philosophies, and religions cast into one mold, mankind would be the poorer for it."

In other words, our goal should not be to pursue commonality at the expense of maintaining our distinctiveness as Jews. We will not benefit from a blurring or elimination of those differences since inevitably it will be those things that make us truly exceptional that are lost. Would it have been better for Jews to have said, "You know, we really have so much in common with Christians, let us just disregard those things that separate us from them." Would the world have been a better place if there never were martyrs of any religion who stood up for what they believed in face of persecution?

In the Jewish world, it would be easier for us all, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox to get along if we all just followed the Rabbinical Tradition according to the Orthodox interpretation. If only, Reform Judaism did not allow women to lead prayers or read Torah in the presence of men, if only Reform Judaism did not allow gays and lesbians to be clergy, if only Reform rabbis did not perform intermarriages, if only Reform Judaism did not recognize as Jews those whose father was Jewish, but whose mother was not, if only all of us kept Kashrut, if only... If only there were no differences, we would get along much better. But we would not be Reform Jews. If only we did as the Orthodox Jews do, we would certainly get along better, but we would all be Orthodox Jews.

Instead, it is up to us to find ways to work together to benefit our community without conceding those distinctive characteristics that make us exceptional. Whether we are working in an interfaith coalition with Christians and Muslims or in cooperation with other Jewish congregations and organizations, we must stand up for what we believe in. That said, how do we act as Reform Jews in such a way that we do not make demands of others to conform to our desires which we ourselves would reject if demanded of us?

We respect the distinctiveness of every individual. One reason that I perform interfaith marriages is because I believe that by reaching out to the family to be, by embracing them, I show them that Reform Judaism cares about BOTH OF THEM, Jew and non-Jew, and that Reform Judaism will maintain that respect and caring for their individual distinctiveness all through their life together.

Does mandating the conversion of the spouse prior to marriage not smack of what Rabbi Abba Hillel Silver stated, that "Any movement for good will which demands of me self-abnegation is a hostile attack. The man who would be my friend only if he can convert me to his way of living and thinking and believing, is not my friend. He is my enemy. He does not like me for what I am. He would like to see his own reflection in me."

Would we not be demanding exactly that of a non-Jewish fiancé(e) if we pushed conversion under the guise of the rabbi saying, "I cannot do your marriage unless you change who you are and accept what I believe." Integrity requires that we respect them for what they believe, not demand that they believe what we do.

Nor do I want to force someone to lie to me or even to himself or herself, to falsely become Jewish to satisfy a requirement for marriage. It seems to me that people who become Jews solely for that reason are likely to have animosity toward the tradition and may pass that animosity on to their children. It is precisely in line with the words of Rabbi Silver, "The man who would be my friend only if he can convert me to his way of living and thinking and believing, is not my friend."

If we are to instill a love of Judaism in the generations to come, it will be by embracing every member of each family. It will be because we see everyone who is part of a family in this congregation and this community as part of our strength and because we have let the children of interfaith families know that Judaism considers both of their

parents important and their parents' marriage worthy of God's blessing.

I wrote my Rabbinical thesis on non-Jewish participation in Bar and Bat Mitzvah services. Having spoken to many rabbis about issues surrounding services for children of interfaith families, I knew that there was a desperate need for new a creative ways to embrace not only non-Jewish parents, but grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends. Based on what I learned in researching my thesis, I created a new liturgy for Bar and Bat Mitzvah services, the second edition done at Temple B'nai Jeshurun was finished in the last year, which allows for the significant active participation in the service by friends and family members of the celebrants who are not Jewish and encourages participation in a way that allows every participant to maintain their religious integrity, not needing to recite language with which they do not agree. Whereas in other arenas, the mother's and father's families might never be able to participate in a religious service of any kind together, our Bar and Bat Mitzvah services allow for a sense of family cohesiveness and enable all members of the family, even of the extended family, to experience the joy of Judaism in an environment embracing of their diversity and their individual distinctiveness.

At Temple B'nai Jeshurun, your family and friends are our family and friends. This house is a house of prayer for all peoples. The threshold of this sanctuary enters into a warm and welcoming home.

On this atonement day, may we be forgiven for those times we insisted that others become like us, for those times when we demanded self-abnegation from others, and for those times when our respect for the beliefs of others was dependent upon their willingness to alter them. May we be forgiven for those times when we played holier than thou, elevating ourselves in an attempt to denigrate others. And may we be forgiven for those times when we did not embrace others because they were different, when the hand of welcome was not extended far enough, nor words of welcome spoken with ease.

May we all continue to do our best to embrace every member of every family in our community that they too may feel at home. Let us take pride in our distinctiveness and cherish those qualities that make each of us exceptional.

Rabbi David Kaufman