

Rabbi Jonathan Roos
Yom Kippur Evening 5775
Audacious Hospitality: An Open Tent at Sinai

I was surprised by Michelle Boorstein's article about interfaith weddings in the Washington Post this summer. I wasn't surprised she wrote it; she had interviewed me. I was surprised by your reactions which told me that many of our members did not know our current practices. I learned that many of you did not know that every member of our current clergy team will officiate at interfaith weddings. In retrospect, that shouldn't have surprised me because we never announced it. We didn't announce it because it just happened naturally. It evolved.

The temple's core principle has always been that individual clergy are free to decide for themselves regarding officiation at weddings. The question of clergy officiation has been kind of big deal at the temple over the years, it's a topic that has been addressed from this bima by all of our senior rabbis. There have been special commissions, town hall meetings, and reports to the board and the membership most recently in 2006. While there have been strong feelings expressed, there has not in the past 30 years been a policy or requirement that impacted clergy hiring or tenure. The question of officiating at intermarriages was not a deciding factor in hiring any of our recent clergy including me. So there never was a process or an incident that necessitated an announcement. But Michelle's story reminded me that this is an important component of our ritual practices that you should know about – both for practical purposes in your lives and as one piece of what we mean when we talk about an open tent philosophy at Temple Sinai.

The other thing that initially surprised me was the story itself. When Michelle called me over the summer to ask about all the dramatic changes going on at Temple Sinai, I told her that I didn't think there was much to the story because it felt like such a natural evolution that there was no drama. But while talking to her, I quickly realized how greatly things had changed.

The changes here at Temple Sinai had not stood out to me partly because we reflect the evolution that has occurred in the larger Reform Movement. At last fall's Biennial convention, the President of the URJ, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, spoke about our movement's need to adopt "audacious hospitality."ⁱ I'm going to quote him at length. First, he noted that this needed to be a cultural shift, not just a passing buzzword. He said, "Audacious hospitality isn't just a temporary act of kindness so that people don't feel left out; it's an ongoing invitation to be part of a community where we can become all that God wants us to be - and a way to transform ourselves in the process." Then Rabbi Jacobs turned

explicitly to interfaith marriage and the involvement in our congregations of people who aren't Jewish. He traced a proud history dating back to the leadership of Rabbi Alexander Schindler when the Reform Movement chose a path unlike any other synagogue movement at the time. He reminded us, "We were to welcome interfaith families by insisting that instead of closing our doors, we should warmly embrace these families and draw them close in all aspects of Jewish life.... it is an axiom of Reform Judaism that we do this work of inclusion every day." That is as true here at Temple Sinai as it is anywhere. On our temple board, on committees from Religious School to Social Action, on our staff and in the daily interactions of our families, this congregation is better for that open tent approach.

Rabbi Jacobs also noted that there is more to be done and he made a bold statement: "Incredibly enough," he said, "I still hear Jewish leaders talk about intermarriage as if it were a disease. It is not. It is a result of the open society that no one here wants to close.... In North America today, being 'against' intermarriage is like being 'against' gravity; you can say it all you want, but it's a fact of life. In any event, we practice outreach because it is good for the Jewish people. Interfaith couples can raise phenomenally committed Jewish families, especially when they do it in the Jewish community that is offered uniquely by the Reform Movement."

Until Boorstein called this summer, it had been a few years since I really thought about the dramatic nature of this position. Like Rabbi Jacobs, I know colleagues and congregants who see interfaith marriage in the way he had described. I also read some of the published responses that ridiculed his speech or saw it as the clearest self-indictment of a movement that had been leading Jews to their own destruction since the Hamburg Temple installed an organ in the early 1800s.

I had already been down that path myself and remain convinced it is right. As a newly ordained rabbi, I would not officiate at interfaith weddings under any circumstances. It turned out not to be an issue since my senior rabbi also did not officiate and that temple's policy did not allow it. Then some of my friends – college roommates, childhood friends, my cousins - began to get engaged. They would ask me to do their weddings and I would decline. I had reasons that were well thought out, grounded in Jewish tradition and my understanding of social scientific research. I was quite confident and proud of my explanation and in my belief that I was welcoming, open and supportive of all people.

One of my college roommates said my explanation was great except that I saw his marriage was somehow lesser than other people's. "I didn't say that," I told him. "Sure you did," he responded. "You'll do weddings for all kinds of people who you don't even know and you'll never have any idea about the extent to which they'll have Jewish homes or do anything Jewish. But just because my fiancé is not Jewish, you have deemed our marriage to be less worthy than theirs." I was flustered. I hate when he

acts like this. “I haven’t deemed yours less worthy.” He cut me off, “You have, Jon, you can tell yourself whatever you want. But you have.” We left it at that. I went to the wedding, we celebrated fully. He and I never spoke about the officiation question again. But I never did have a good rebuttal for him.

I had similar conversations with members at my temple. I always offered and truly wanted to meet with couples to learn about their wishes and their plans. I supported them with temple membership, invitations to join our classes, to invite them for a blessing – an *aufruf* – before the wedding. But mostly, the couples and their parents didn’t take me up on the offers. They felt like my friend felt. Their children had grown up in the congregation, their families had been members for decades and our refusal to officiate at the actual wedding made them feel like all the years of attending school and services, volunteering, and establishing a spiritual home and yes, all the dues they had ever paid to support us, amounted to nothing. There was an emotional toll that wasn’t soothed by our rational, academic and textual explanations.

There is probably nothing harder or more disappointing to Reform rabbis of this time than to receive the anger and sadness of those whose weddings we wouldn’t perform. There is probably nothing that got more of our intellectual energy, research and time than learning and then taking a position about intermarriage. I don’t know a single Reform rabbi who wanted to do anything but welcome people into their congregations and encourage a love of and commitment to Judaism in the hopes that the world could be a better place. And nothing would shake your sense of yourself more deeply than hearing somebody you knew tell you that you had not only failed to do that but that you had done harm; that in your most sincere and learned efforts, you had actually driven them from the community and beautiful traditions of Judaism.

I have to admit: I don’t think I did anything wrong when I held that position and when I would not officiate at interfaith weddings. It’s hard to make a case that thousands of Jewish traditional sources, thousands of years of history, thousands of pages of current sociological research, and thousands of voices of concerned colleagues supported anything other than a case for endogamy. I also confess that I don’t know if the rate of intermarriage among Jews today portends our eventual disappearance. I also confess that despite my belief in audacious hospitality, I don’t believe that anything goes – there are limits to what should be allowed in a congregation that adheres to a particular faith like we do. But I also recognize that those boundaries are subjective and changing.

So when a couple wants to marry and they are interested in carrying forward the Jewish traditions of one of the pair and they love each other and their families are pleased and the future looks

bright when you talk to them, the Reform Movement says their children are presumed to be Jewish. That marriage is something that I'm happy to bless and make legal and lasting.

When a child comes to this bima for a bat mitzvah and one of her parents is not Jewish and that child has already attended years of religious school and dozens of services and their family have been temple members for years, she stands before the Torah and chants its ancient message. I don't know how we could refuse to allow her parents to participate fully in the rituals of the day. This is a proud mother or father who is living proof that you don't need to be Jewish to be a shlepper who ensures the Jewish future by driving temple carpools. And you don't need to be Jewish to be a kveller, because they cry with joy on the bima just like Jewish parents and often feel great about learning the Jewish prayers and teachings along with their child. The parents remind us that you don't have to be Jewish to be a mensch or a macher. I know this: statistics aside, without shleppers, mensches, kvellers and machers, we don't have much of a Jewish community.

I am not the child of intermarried parents but I personally understand the negative impact we have on people when we keep them from participating fully in important life cycle events. When I had my bar mitzvah, the rabbi wouldn't let my grandfather on the bima - not for an Aliyah at the Torah and not for anything. This was my grandfather, Jack, whose own father had come alone to America after losing his entire family in the Ukraine at the turn of the century. The grandfather who taught us the aleph bet in preschool by telling us it was the Spanish alphabet. He was as Jewish as the rabbi was but, for whatever reason - I never asked him and he's since passed away - but he wouldn't put on tefilin. My bar mitzvah was on a Monday (Memorial Day) because my parents were so committed to the temple they wouldn't think of having the luncheon anywhere but in our social hall. The only way to do that at our conservative synagogue and still serve hot food and have a band playing music was to do it off of Shabbat. So there I stood, 13 years old awkward, chubby little guy with weird black straps and boxes on my head and my arm, having learned to daven the full weekday liturgy - none of my friends had to do that - because God forbid we didn't do the whole thing at temple. My dad had been a president of the temple, my mother a national leader in Hadassah, my brother and I attended the intensive extra day of Hebrew school - we went four days a week for two hours a pop. Still the rabbi wouldn't let my grandfather on the bima with me for a moment that the rabbi himself had described as one of the most important in my life. It was ridiculous and it shaped my understanding of Judaism forever.

There are rules, halachah, Torah, tradition. There are also people of tremendous character, commitment and learning who keep those traditions and pass them on to others. And there's also real

life and no reason why we should separate loving family members from each other at the very moment that we should be elevating their spirits.

I have a poster in my office that says, “Tradition: Just because you’ve always done it that way doesn’t mean it’s not incredibly stupid.” I hope you’ll read tomorrow’s Torah and haftarah portions closely because they don’t say it so directly as that poster but they authorize and encourage us to make the important changes that reflect real life and help us keep our tradition alive and thriving.

There are a lot of people with lingering resentments about how they feel they and their family members were treated around a life cycle event: lots of weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs, Hebrew namings, even some funerals. There’s a lot of people who felt hurt because of the way a clergy person, or a congregant or a teacher or an office worker or a temple policy responded to them regarding the involvement of somebody not Jewish in their life and their life cycle event. I’ve heard from a lot of you about your stories and I’ve got plenty more than the two cases I told you about in my past. I know that you have been hurt and that you still feel hurt. I am asking you tonight to turn the page and move past those feelings. None of us wants you to feel angry or upset anymore and I don’t think you really want to keep those resentments forever. I don’t do interfaith weddings as an act of repentance, I do it because I came to see it was the right thing for me and my beliefs. We also can’t go back and undo the past but I ask that you consider where we are today and to know that you belong here. This is an open tent that truly welcomes everyone seeking to be part of the Jewish community and Jewish life. All of us are better when we are together than when we are apart and whatever the future holds for the Jewish community it’s going to require an open tent and a constant effort to be audaciously hospitable.

Gamar Chatimah tovah. May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.

ⁱ http://uri.org/about/union/leadership/rabbijacobs/?syspage=article&item_id=109240 Rabbi Jacobs’ Biennial Address