

## Welcoming Interfaith Families Challenge, Opportunity, Mandate



On *Kol Nidre* night, I spoke to the congregation about how changes in the general community over the 150 years of AJ's history have found expression in the Jewish community as well. I focused on the revolution of inclusiveness and autonomy in both communities. As a result of this revolution, involvement in the Jewish community is now the consequence of choice. No one can force anyone to identify or participate. The openness of the larger society beckons. For that reason, I believe that it is imperative that we write no one off, and seek to make our congregation and the Conservative Movement as inclusive as possible.

That is why I think the Conservative movement needs to think urgently and creatively about our approach to the intermarried. On Friday night, November 14, following *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, our recently formed *Keruv* Committee, chaired by Sheva Cohen, will sponsor a casual Interfaith *Shabbat* Dinner chaired by Lisa Cooperman Kolar. This program will be part of AJ's participation in Interfaith Family *Shabbat* Weekend, sponsored by InterFaithways, the Interfaith Family Support Network of Greater Philadelphia, formerly sponsored by the Jewish Family and Children's Service. Look for more information on this program. There is a modest \$5 per person charge for dinner, and babysitting will be available. The goal of the evening is to discuss ways of making AJ a more welcoming place for intermarried families. It is a wonderful beginning and I am grateful to Sheva and Lisa for spearheading this important initiative.

The decision to intermarry is an individual decision, and not one that can be banned or controlled—not by parents, though in the past some sat shiva for children who intermarried; not by rabbis, though none in the Conservative and Orthodox movements will officiate at intermarriages, and many in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements similarly will not; and not by congregations, even though some in our movement still will not publicly acknowledge intermarriage even in their newsletters, much less from the pulpit.

Why do we care who our children marry? Why do we care about intermarriage? Many couples see our opposition as nothing if not prejudice. But for those of us in leadership positions in our Movement, it is not prejudice against anyone, but preservation, the preservation of a critical mass of Jews that will make the American Jewish community viable. That is our concern.

But, the vast majority of couples planning an interfaith wedding will tell us, we don't want to abandon Judaism. We just want to marry the person we love. This is not a rejection of our heritage, our family, our congregation, or our people. It is an individual choice and expression. Rabbi, they will tell me, I am the same person I always was.

Of those of our children who intermarry, most see themselves as Jews. In fact many learn more about Jewish weddings when they are planning their interfaith weddings than they knew previously. I am often amazed at how couples work creatively, study and plan, in order to incorporate Jewish symbolism in the ceremony. More often than not there is a *huppah*, seven blessings, wine, breaking the glass, even a *ketubah*. And where once the incorporation of this symbolism was just to please their parents, today it is their own free choice. It comes from within them. It often surprises even them.

So what do we do? Do we hold back and stand away, as if embracing the intermarried couple will make us guilty of capitulation? As if we were aiding and abetting the weakening of the Jewish people? Or do we grab them, and hold the door open to their continuing connection to the Jewish people, not knowing which couples will raise Jewish children and which not; and not knowing which of those children will one day claim their Jewish roots and become a creative force in the renewal of Judaism.

I'll be candid with you. As a movement, we have tried to have it both ways. We won't perform the intermarriage, or even validate it before it happens. Then we say we will do *Keruv*, bring them near and invite them in as a couple. But those we push away on Saturday night by making the wedding off-limits, a non-event, are not so easily swayed to come back on Sunday morning when we are ready to welcome them. They have to be really motivated, and really committed, to get over the initial sting of rejection.

As a result the Reform Movement has the renewed vigor that comes from "religious immigration" and we are demoralized by "religious emigration." I believe that the Conservative Movement is in need of an open and frank discussion about intermarriage, without preconditions, where all options are on the table; a discussion that acknowledges the reality of the American Jewish scene today, not the fictional one we construct blindly for ourselves. I do not know what the result might be. But I am convinced that open and respectful discussion, both within the congregation and within the movement cannot help but bridge a growing gap between us and our children.

We have the future at stake. We cannot have the luxury of writing anyone off. We all know anecdotal evidence of interfaith couples who have Jewish homes, raise their children as Jews, and are devoted to their synagogue. I believe that if we extended ourselves in a more welcoming way, more such couples would elect to be involved and seek the spiritual nourishment that comes from Jewish commitment.

The age of inclusiveness and of the autonomous individual presents us with a challenge. We can accept it as an opportunity. Indeed, it must be a mandate to deal creatively with the challenge. If we do not, Conservative Judaism and the synagogues affiliated with it, will become increasingly marginal and irrelevant to many of us, our children, and grandchildren.

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