

HHD Sermon Two

The Evolution of Temple Beth-El

My parents, Allan Altman and Pam Steinhardt, were married in 1953. The Altmans and the Steinhardts had been distant acquaintances for years, and in the summer of 1952, both families – by chance - were on holiday in Loch Sheldrake, in the Catskills. As the story goes, my mother – age 20 – was bored and asked her father if there was anyone her age to hang out with. As luck would have it, he said, “I hear the Altmans are staying nearby. Why don’t you see if their son Allan is with them?” And so their romance began.

Although my parents’ wedding was officiated by a rabbi, he was a complete stranger to both of them. Neither the Steinhardts nor the Altmans were ever affiliated with a synagogue, nor were any of my eight great-grandparents. There were no warm memories of walking to the shul on Shabbos morning with a beloved grandfather, no family stories about what happened at Cousin Morty’s bris or even my father’s Bar Mitzvah. Still, their family, their friends, their neighbors, their classmates – everyone who truly mattered in their lives – was Jewish. And so, despite generations of secularism and conscious resistance to Jewish life, it would have never occurred to my mother or my father even to go on a date with, let alone marry, a non-Jew. It was simply...unthinkable.

I've shared this story with you to remind you of a world that once was, the world my parents grew up in; a world of restricted clubs and closed neighborhoods, of job discrimination and university quotas – a world many of us can recall, and yet a world – with its anti-Semitism and insularity - seemingly unrecognizable to contemporary Jews. This was the world our Reform rabbis lived and worked in in 1962, the year its Special Committee on Mixed Marriage offered its first report on this small, yet emerging trend.

Although the statistics they had were primitive and incomplete, a survey of the Washington D.C. area noted that the highest incidence of interfaith marriage were among the more educated (that is, beyond high school...oy, how times have changed), the more professional, the native born, and the children of the native born. Not surprisingly, the men and women who had more exposure to the new world, and fewer generational ties to the old world, were much more likely to inter-marry. The survey noted that more than 80% of such families were not affiliated with a synagogue, and most disturbing of all, “70% of the children were being raised as non-Jews.” And the rabbis’ committee, just to underscore the gravity of the problem, noted that these statistics – from Washington D.C. - reflected not just a few families, but four thousand families and many more thousands of children.

And yet, the report's author, Dr. Eugene Mihaly, – even then – recognized that we were on the cusp of a new world, a world open to our people in ways we could not have even imagined. He asked his colleagues not how we might turn back the clock, but rather how a liberal, non-doctrinaire Judaism should respond to the challenge of an open and free society. If only, he lamented, like our traditional colleagues, we could be free from the burden of having to choose; if we could know the law and apply it to all situations. “But ultimately, he wrote, “our chosen liberal commitment must reject [that] alternative. The hard, demanding road we have chosen as Reform rabbis leaves us no option but to embrace the struggle and to ask again and again with fear and trembling: What must I do in this concrete instance? What is the imperative here and now?” The question Dr. Mihaly posed in 1962 is the same question we ask fifty-three years later. What should we do today?

Our movement has never been afraid of change, never been afraid to confront the complexities of modern life. In 1972, the Reform movement ordained Sally Priesand, the first woman rabbi in Jewish history. In 1990, our movement's seminary, the Hebrew Union College, made the historic decision to admit and ordain gays and lesbians as rabbis, cantors, and educators. And in the year 2000, when not a single state law had been passed, and virtually no one was clamoring for the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, the Reform movement declared its

full support for rabbis and cantors to officiate at same-sex weddings. In response to changing times, our leadership refused to bury their heads in the sand of tradition; rather, they heard the cries of the disenfranchised, the call of the stranger in our midst, and affirmed the dignity and equality of every human being created *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God.

And our willingness to confront tradition was never more evident than in 1983, when the head of the Reform movement, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, announced the adoption of patrilineal descent, thereby recognizing the child of a Jewish father as a Jew. By doing so, our movement not only altered established Jewish law, but also made a bold statement of outreach to interfaith families: as long as **one** parent was Jewish, and Judaism was the religion of your home, your children were Jewish. This was the watershed moment – the moment when Reform Judaism declared that interfaith marriage was a trend that would not be reversed: that the most conscientious parents, the very best educators, the most charismatic rabbis and cantors in the world – could not perform a miracle; they could not put the toothpaste back in the tube.

Interfaith marriage was, to put it simply, a reality – a consequence of a completely open, pluralistic, and egalitarian society; a society where our children are blessed to live out the dream of unfettered Jewish acceptance. They go to school, play music and sports, share a room at college, go to graduate school, and

work in the same law firm, hospital, or school with...everyone. And instead of circling the wagons, turning inward, and creating barriers, our synagogues have opened our doors ever wider, and reached out to interfaith families in search of a place to express themselves as Jews, a place to celebrate, a place to mourn, a place to raise their children in the warm embrace of a Jewish community.

In part, this is about numbers. In the South, the Midwest, and the West, the interfaith marriage rate is significantly higher than in the Northeast. Why is this? Well, now that I'm a rabbi in the Northeast, it's clear to me that we – and our children - are simply better Jews. Alas, this is not the case. The reason for the lower rates is the inescapable truth that there are simply more Jews here to meet. In contrast, the city of Calgary (where I used to hang out) enjoys a population of just over a million people, but only about 8,000 Jews, for a grand total of less than one percent. With these numbers, and virtually no social or cultural boundaries between Jews and non-Jews, should we be surprised by a high rate of intermarriage?

For the most part though, this is about the kind of community we want to be. During my thirteen years in Calgary, I officiated at dozens of interfaith weddings, and dozens more where the non-Jewish spouse converted. During that time, the number of synagogue families nearly doubled, with most of that increase from interfaith families who had never been or were only marginally affiliated. Indeed,

the evidence suggests that when we publicly extend our hands by reaching out, those hands are taken – and held – by those who wish to be welcomed. When we say “yes,” to a young couple seeking a Jewish ceremony on the most important day (up to now) of their lives, we are not only increasing the likelihood of a new Jewish family, we are also sending a message to the greater Jewish community: our synagogue doesn’t just talk about inclusion and diversity, we live our values through our deeds.

In contrast, when we say “no,” to a young couple, we do so at our own peril: peril to the Jewish partner, who may begin to doubt the veracity of Reform Judaism’s open, universalist message that is a pillar of our movement; peril to the non-Jewish partner, whose potential interest or attraction to Jewish life may be diminished; and peril to the Jewish people, who may lose the couple’s child or children to the ever-widening abyss of “the nones,” those who grow up with no religion whatsoever. And finally, peril to the synagogue that may lose a new family. Surely, when a young couple hears the message “we’d love to welcome you as members...**after** you’re married,” it is the social equivalent of saying to an acquaintance, “we don’t have enough space to invite you to the party, but please feel free to send a gift.” Sometimes, even our noblest principles can be misconstrued.

I recognize that neither Rabbi Braude nor Rabbi Gutterman ever officiated at an interfaith marriage, and that I will be the first Temple Beth-El rabbi to do so. Please know that I have the utmost respect for the choices they made. Such choices were inseparable from the social and historical context in which they worked, just as the choices that I have made reflect the circumstances we confront today. As the Reform rabbis of 1962 painfully debated this issue, they asked, in light of the circumstances we find ourselves in today, what must we do to strengthen the Jewish people? I believe the decision to officiate is the right one for our people.

Of course, such a decision requires judgment and critical standards. First, I will never co-officiate a wedding with non-Jewish clergy. My authority as a rabbi extends only to Jewish ceremonies and rituals, and accordingly, readings and messages from other faiths are strictly prohibited. Second, I will only perform an interfaith marriage after extensive counseling, a conversation about conversion, and assurances that the couple plans to establish a Jewish home and raise Jewish children. Third, my decision to officiate does not, in any way, bind Rabbi Mack or Cantor Seplowin. The decision to officiate is a highly personal one, and I will fully respect and support my colleagues in their choices. Finally, although I believe that many members of our synagogue will understand and support this change, some members may not. Please know that the community will be invited

to a town meeting (or two) to discuss the issue in greater detail. I look forward to an honest and open conversation.

I want to conclude with a story about a young Jewish man who fell deeply in love with a woman raised as a Presbyterian. She had long since stopped practicing, and they both knew they wanted to have a Jewish wedding. They found a rabbi who would officiate, and when he asked them about their future, the couple said they planned to have a Jewish home, but they weren't exactly sure what that would look like. The rabbi was open and encouraging, and even permitted the couple to plan a lengthy and unconventional ceremony. A few days after the wedding, on their honeymoon, the woman said that when they returned, she wanted to sign up for the Reform synagogue's conversion class. Her husband joined the class as well, and immersed himself – once again - in the tradition he had not known since his teenage years. Shortly thereafter, the man decided to change his life and go to rabbinical school, and today, that man stands before you as your rabbi. Rabbi Eric Bram, *alav hashalom*, officiated at our interfaith wedding, and through his kindness and generosity, enabled me to see Judaism in an entirely different light. I feel certain that without his initial support, without his openness, and without his “yes,” Annie and I could never have made this rabbinic journey together.

It is a new year and it is...a new time. Let us welcome our young people both before and after their wedding. Let us encourage – through our deeds – our

support for Jewish homes and Jewish children. And may we continue to be a diverse and vibrant people, secure in our knowledge that Judaism's message of inclusion will not dilute our principles or our people, but instead give us strength as we embrace the universal values that are inseparable from our beliefs. Shanah tovah, good yuntif, and may our synagogue and our Temple family go from strength to strength.