

ROSH HASHANAH
5770

I want to begin by sharing a brief conversation between a rabbi and her congregant. The rabbi is not me and the congregation is not ours, but this exchange could easily have happened here or at any Reform congregation in America.

This discussion took place during a rehearsal for a bar mitzvah. The rabbi was assigning the parents their parts. To the non-Jewish father the rabbi gave the honor of carrying the Torah around the sanctuary. “Thank you for that honor,” the father said sincerely, “but I must ask, why is it that I can carry the Torah but not offer the blessing for an aliyah?” The Rabbi translated the prayer and explained the theology. “One who reads these words is affirming his or her commitment to the covenant between the Jewish people and God.” The father followed her logic, but continued, “Rabbi, you misunderstood my question, what I am really asking is: ‘Have you no blessing for me?’”

This story moved me deeply. Have I considered whether the members of this congregation who are not Jewish would want a blessing from me, from a rabbi? I am always aware of the need for classes, visits in the hospital or life cycle events, but have I not realized that there is a greater need, a simpler need - the need for a blessing?

A long time ago, when our ancestor Isaac was at the end of his life and almost blind, his younger twin son Jacob dressed up like the older twin Esau and tricked Isaac into giving him the blessing of the first born. Esau had been out hunting while Jacob carried out this act of deceit. When Esau returned and heard how his father had given away the blessing intended for him, intended for the first born, he wept and cried out to his father, “*Halo atzalta li bracha? Have you not reserved a blessing for me?*” The reader feels Esau’s pain. The angst and the anger that fills his tears and his words and his soul is palpable. “Have you no blessing for me?” I guess no question is ever entirely new.

Perhaps this need has been off the radar of most rabbis because of the sensitivity that surrounds and clouds the issue of intermarriage. Some clergy do officiate, some do not; the Outreach Institute says yes, the Union for Reform Judaism says maybe, the

Central Conference of American Rabbis says no; the Jewish community is definitely getting smaller but conversion is on the increase. Really there is no issue more complex, more emotional, more personally or communally charged than this one.

Our discomfort has led to an unnatural silence about the non-Jews who are in our community – a large number of wonderful people in this very sanctuary right now. We have been silent for many reasons. We have been silent to avoid causing hurt. We have been silent in fear that we will somehow undermine the efforts of many who are trying to guide their children to marry Jews. We have been silent because we worry that we might possibly diminish the sincere effort and the meaning that so many people who have chosen Judaism through conversion have experienced.

I have been guilty of this silence. I may not have sorted out all of the complex issues around intermarriage and our shrinking and changing community, but that should not prevent me from responding to the question at hand, “Have you no blessing for me?”

Two thousand years ago, the rabbis who wrote the Talmud and other great books somehow understood this issue. Consider this Midrash, this creative story with some contemporary embellishments, which those rabbis wrote about Moses and his wife – and remember the Midrash is about two thousand years old.

The story begins when Moses married the daughter of a Midianite Priest, which is to say that he married a non-Israelite. Let’s assume she was Tzipora.

There were 600,000 Jews in the desert but somehow Moses falls in love with the one non-Israelite in the group. (Can you hear his mother saying that?)

In any case, one night, a few weeks after he had married her, Moses notices a small idol that Tzipora had placed in the corner of their tent. Moses does not know what to do. He knew that Tzipora’s family and entire community had worshipped idols. He knew that she was sincere when she agreed to enter the community of Israel with a full heart and that she intended to cast her faith toward the one and only Adonai. He wakes her without thinking and whispers, “I love you Tzipora but how could you?” “What?” “How could you bring an idol into my tent, I am the leader of the people of Israel?!” “Moses, I left my home for you, my land, my family, my community, my people. I have agreed to raise my children, to be different from myself. Do you understand what

sacrifice I have already made for you? This statue was given to me at my birth by my father, who I will probably never see again. If it needs to leave this tent, then cast me out as well.”

That night, Moses cries more than he sleeps. Curled into a ball he sobs in pain. Some say he howled so loud that every tent of Israel was awakened by his sorrow. Tzipora holds him until sunrise, but she is unable to soothe him. A couple of days later, Moses notices the idol in the pile of trash at the end of the encampment. That night, he finds Tzipora crying more than she sleeps. Some say her cries were so loud that they awakened the heavens. And then it rained that night, in the desert, a soft, gentle rain to echo her tears. “Are you sure you can do this?” Moses asks his wife as he comforts her. “I must,” she answers, “and Moses, understand something--this is bigger than you and me.”

I share this story with you to illustrate that the phenomenon of the foreigner who dwells among us, is not new; that the incidence of non-Jews living in Jewish tents, even in the tents of some of our leaders, is as ancient as the Torah itself. And that the journey into our community by the non-Jew is not always, but is sometimes, laden with enormous personal sacrifice. This sacrifice may be private but other times the entire community can hear the cry. There are many non-Jews in our own congregation raising Jewish children. And since some are doing it as quite a sacrifice and with a bit of pain, we must be empathetic and supportive and deeply grateful.

For me, the experience of serving as the spiritual leader to non-Jewish members along side Jewish members is most often both humbling and inspiring. It is also challenging because in rabbinic school I was not taught exactly how to be a rabbi to anyone other than a Jew. And, I must admit that serving as the spiritual leader to our non-Jewish membership can also be – once in a while - frustrating and confusing.

I am humbled and inspired by so many of you who choose to do so much more than drive carpool; you light Shabbat candles; you take Hebrew lessons; you help explain to your kids why it’s important to get up on Sunday mornings to learn to be a Jew. You

learn to make kugel and latkes; you try to like gefilte fish; and you set a beautiful Seder table. You come to services, even when it feels strange and distancing. You hum along to those Hebrew songs. You tell your children on the day of their Bat or Bar Mitzvah how proud you are and how much you love them, and how glad you are to see them grow into young Jewish men and women. I am humbled by your commitment and inspired by dedication to Judaism.

Sometimes you are a non-Jewish father, I'll call Mark, who, after his divorce, came to me and said: "Teach me how to raise my children as Jews. I agreed to do this along time ago for my then-wife, but now I want to learn more about Judaism for their sake and perhaps some day for my own." Sometimes you are Barbara, an involved Catholic who insisted that she and her Jewish husband join the Temple to bring a more well rounded sense of spirituality into their home. Sometimes you are Rona, a mother who brought her son to every bar mitzvah meeting, who during the ceremony was mouthing the words of the blessings along with him, having memorized them from so many repetitions on the car stereo as he studied on the drive between school and soccer practice.

Sometimes you are the Jewish parents of intermarried children – which of course can and will be any of us and many of us. I struggle along side of you and applaud your ability to put love first while trying to ensure that your children and your grandchildren stay connected to our tradition – it is so hard to imagine that there may not be another generation of Jews in your family. Each year, each holiday, you navigate that sensitive and fine line and I want to walk along side of you.

I am humbled and inspired but I will admit, at times I want to cry out like Moses. Sometimes I see families trying to blend Judaism with other religions and I see confused children, who do not know who they are or what they believe. Sometimes I feel like Moses in the Midrash looking at the idol in our tent, unsure of what to do.

I believe Moses was blessed to have Tzipora, a role model who, not only supported him, but surely taught him many things about passing on traditions and bringing spirituality into their family. Moses had another teacher from his desert days,

another model of the gift that we have received from the non-Jewish members of this community.

While the Israelites were in the desert a King named Balak sought their demise. He hired a non-Jewish prophet named Balaam to curse the Israelite community. The story in the Torah explains however, that each time Balaam came to our people's camp, he failed in his duty. He saw goodness there and so instead of curses only blessings came out of his mouth.

It was this non-Jewish prophet who spoke the words that open almost every morning service. *Ma tovu ohalecha yisrael – How beautiful are your tents O' Jacob, your dwelling places O' Israel.*

Sometimes we need an outsider to help us to see the beauty that is already within our own tents. Sometimes we need a Balaam of today to remind us and teach us not to take our Judaism for granted. We, who only see the length of services or the cost of dues or a Jewish investor who's immorality shames us, we can learn from Balaam and so many who are sitting right next to us at this very moment, people who do see the beauty and richness of tradition, who sense that at the core of Judaism is love and tolerance and a commitment to do that which is right. All of the other challenges which so often occupy those of us who were born into Judaism are mostly superficial, tangential to our essence as a people which has miraculously survived for thousands of years. We have so much to learn from you, our non-Jewish spouses and neighbors and friends. We must learn to praise and celebrate and value this tradition. We Jews by birth often think that we don't have to do a thing to deserve this inheritance, nor do we have to work to preserve it. This is not true. Our Judaism is not handed to us on a silver platter, we must work for it and once we have, we must strive to keep it bright and beautiful. I am grateful to everyone who has embraced this heavy responsibility.

Some of you may be wondering what message this sermon is sending to you, a committed Jew or a Jewish – Jewish couple who is raising Jewish children whom you hope will make the effort too, (and have the good luck of) falling in love with another Jew? What is this saying to you beyond a reminder not to take your Judaism for granted?

What am I saying to myself as I work to raise my own children as committed Jews in this very Christian society? What do I say to the many people whose great-grand-parents died because they were Jews? What do I say to person who made an amazing commitment by converting to Judaism?

Am I somehow suggesting that your efforts don't matter? I hope I haven't sent that message. Your efforts do matter. Am I diminishing your hopes? Am I implying that there is little value in working toward the goal of Jewish continuity? How do I respond, you might be wondering, to the statistics that tell us that the majority of Jews who marry non-Jews do not choose to remain within the Jewish community? How can I speak so openly about supporting our non-Jewish members when I don't perform intermarriages while all of the other clergy at the Temple do?

What do I say to the Jewish voice that wants to preserve boundaries, the person who asserts that certain things should be and are reserved for those who formally commit themselves to being part of the Jewish covenant? To that voice I say, you are right. Judaism has its boundaries but it also has its doorways and its gateways in. I myself have boundaries as a rabbi, but the doorways matter just as much and that is what today's sermon is about.

More and more, I understand that Judaism recognizes that the world and the decisions we face are not so neat and tidy as we would like. The real world is a bit messy and the choices we make are often found in the grey areas. Black and white answers, one size fits all answers don't usually work.

Perhaps someone who understood this well was the prophet Isaiah. He said: "As for the outsiders who attach themselves to Adonai... and who hold fast to God's covenant...*Ki vayti beit tifilla yikareh l'chol ha-amim – My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people.* Indeed we want this congregation to be not only a house of prayer but a spiritual home for all who come here.

As a step in that direction, I've made a proposal to our staff - one which affects us probably more than you, but one which I think is critical. Instead of identifying our members as Jewish and non-Jewish, I have suggested that we change our language from

‘non-Jewish’ to the phrase *k’rov Yisrael*. *K’rov Yisrael* means someone who is close to or related to the Jewish people. This so much more accurately describes our non-Jewish spouses and others who may be our supporters or currently in the process of conversion. I choose this term because I feel it’s important to define all of you wonderful people by your affirming acts, rather than by what you are not, as in “**non**-Jewish.”

Rabbi, do you have a blessing for me? For me, a person who has chosen to draw close to Judaism? Is there a place in your tent for me? I, the Christian making a Jewish home; I, Balaam, who has blessed the tent of Israel; the Hebrew homework manager, the Bat Mitzvah preparer; I, the one who reads the Temple mail, the one who insists on having the challah each week, the one who upholds the promise... *halo atzalta li bracha* - have you no blessing for me?

To the members of our congregation who are *k’rov Yisrael*, I say I have many blessings for you. Although there may be times when I fall short, my hope is to be able to shower you with blessings and love and with gratitude. Let this be your house. Let this be your home. Let this house be a house of prayer for all people.

Allow me offer a blessing for you, moms, dads, spouses and partners, even children who have chosen to be *k’rov yisrael*. I hope that you will not be embarrassed or upset that I am singling you out in this way but I want to tell you how much you matter to our congregation, and how very grateful we are for what you have done. You are a very diverse group of people. Some of you are living a Jewish life in virtually all respects. Some of you are devoutly committed to another faith. Some of you do not define yourselves as religious at all. You fall at all points along this spectrum, and we acknowledge and respect your diversity.

What we want to thank you for today is your decision to cast your lot with the Jewish people by becoming part of this congregation, and for the love and support you give to your Jewish partner. Most of all, we want to offer our deepest thanks to those of you who are parents, and who are raising your sons and daughters as Jews. Every Jewish

boy and girl is a gift to the Jewish future. With all our hearts, we want to thank you for your generosity and strength of spirit in making the ultimate gift to the Jewish people.

Perhaps I could invite those of you whose family members are k'rov Yisrael to take their hands as I offer this blessing to them on behalf of all of us here.

Y'virechicha Adonai v'yishmerecha

May God, the source of life and love for all humanity, bless you as God has blessed this Temple by bringing you into our midst.

Ya'er Adonai panav elecha Ve-hunecha

May God's face reflect the kindness, the sincerity and the love that you have so generously offered to our congregation.

Y'sa Adonai panav elecha va'yisem l'cha shalom

And may God grant you a sense of shalom; a sense of peace and blessing that lives in your heart and is nurtured by your participation in this sacred community.

Amen and Shana Tova

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Temple Rodef Shalom

5770-2009