

BEYOND INTER-FAITH MARRIAGE, EREV ROSH HASHANA, 5774

It's a glorious Sunday afternoon late in June,
And as I settle into our twin Adirondack chairs in the front yard,
A very welcome respite from a customary week of rabbinic craziness,
opening my favorite section of The Times—Sunday Styles,
I am immediately enmeshed in a core question confronting
our collective Jewish tomorrow.

It's the last few pages that I'm drawn to,
What used to be known simply as "Weddings," but with recent revamping,
And a sensitivity to the spectrum of varied unions, it is notably known as "Vows."
It is much more than a foray into what was the most far-out wedding destination,
Or which couple looks the cutest/quirkiest...
With rabbinic spectacles I scan each entry conducting a professionally minded
yet very personal survey: So just who is marrying whom?
And the underlying question you may well be thinking: WHY does it matter?

This past June's Aspen Institute—a week-long gathering of some of America's
greatest social & political theorists—aiming at leading the way
to looking at the most critical issues of our day, focused on what it terms "Principled
Pluralism." Acknowledging our nation's demographics of diversity, the Institute's
"Inclusive America Project" presented pathways to "harness the energy from every corner of
the earth to build a nation both indivisible and strong wherein difference does not break us
apart." [Principled Pluralism: Report of the Inclusive America Project, June 2013, pgs 7-8]

Foremost among the key presenters was Prof. David Campbell, co-author,
Along with nationally known political scientist, Harvard Prof Robert Putnam,
of American Grace: How Religion Divides & Unites Us.

Affirming through the book's extensive survey statistics that a sizeable majority
of Americans maintain that "religious diversity is good for America,"

[and that over 80% of the population believes that "basic truths can be found in many religions,"]

Campbell cautions in the face of such widespread tolerance.

"Since the vitality of many religious groups lies in their distinctiveness,
any "blurring" of religious boundaries, some observers argue, risks weakening American's
commitment to their own faith, and thus to the contributions that religious tradition makes to
America's social fabric." [Principled Pluralism, June 2013, pg. 46]

SO my Sunday Styles Vows survey brings a double-edged blessing:

Celebrating the harmony we seek by our integration in a religiously pluralistic nation,
while sustaining that which distinguishes our particular faith path as unique.

It's a push—pull, this dialectic; embracing diversity while affirming difference.

And, if for 21st Century American Jews, it's the identity struggle which forges
our faith frame of reference, it is also meant to be the backdrop for this very holy day.

Because, traditionally speaking, on RH, we read the wrong Torah.
To be true to the Sages assignment, we need to turn one chapter back, [Gen 21]
For it is there that we find a tale somehow meant as a mirror
As we gather—our eclectic, mish-mash collection of generations this moment.
It's a saga of family tension, of children at odds, their parents—or at least their mothers,
convinced that there's not room for the two of them in the same house.
One kid will be raised in Covenant—the other child cast out,
As, at Sarah's urging, her handmaid Hagar and son Ishmael are lead into the wilderness,
Mind you, with God's blessing...But the man in the middle,
Pushed and pulled, is more than a bit unsettled by it all.
"VaYera ha-davar m'od b'eynei Avraham—the situation greatly distressed Abraham."[Gen 21:11]
In the Akedah, our regular Reform reading on RH, Abraham's emotions don't much
show, or, at the least, we never really know his inner feelings
as he takes his son Isaac up the mountain.
Yet here, its profoundly personal.
For the progenitor of our people was likewise the father of a family
we could rightly call blended, but even more importantly—interfaith.
[And figuring it all out, even way back when, was no walk in the park!]

In her important, insightful book of a few months back,
Former Wall Street Journal editor and journalist, writing on the social, religious, cultural issues
of the day, Naomi Schaefer Riley offers both a societal overview and a personal perspective on
the consideration of interfaith marriage in America.

Till Faith Do Us Part paints a picture of faith-transformation,
viewed through the prism of inter-religious marriage.

Drawing on in-depth interviews with inter-faith married and once-married couples,
Clergy across the spectrum, counselors and critical thinkers,
Schaefer Riley recognized that she needed discernable data.

So, commissioning an Interfaith Marriage Survey,
she demonstrates the impact of an issue somehow
surprisingly central to our being who we are...

Now, you may be wondering...I've never been married, or, I'm happily divorced,
Or, my husband's a kohen, or I'm single and gay. Not to worry—that's all OK.
For though, in immediate terms, this is a question of Jewish marriage,
The ramifications speak not alone to our identity today,
but to the religious community we are creating for tomorrow....

Its happening across the board, regardless of education or income level,
though with some regional differentiation. Enhanced by a broadening religious
diversity, our endorsement of the American multi-cultural mosaic
has helped mixed-faith marriage skyrocket, from 15% just 25 years ago
to around 42% of all American marriages today.

The increase is a strong indicator of the trend, not only toward religious tolerance, but trans-denominational religious acceptance.

In fact, data suggest that a sizeable majority of mainline Protestants, even Catholics, did not even rank it as “somewhat important” to their parents that they marry within their own faiths...

The numbers rose considerably, however, to over 50% of Jewish parents, And nearly 60% of Mormon parents, that their kids “marry in.”

Which brings out a compelling [if not telling] contrast...

Who are the least likely [based on Putnam’s American Grace] to inter-marry?

If you guessed members of the Church of Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, you win.

But why?...

Perhaps, because the motivation is, theologically speaking, so high stakes.

For Mormons are not simply married but “sealed” in sacred ceremony,

A special rite reserved for Mormons only that labels their bond a “celestial marriage,”

Sanctioning that couple [and any kids that come] to live together for all eternity.

Marrying another Mormon carries with it afterlife benefits which, for the believer, underscore the import of finding a partner within the family of faith.

And who is most likely among religious groups to inter-marry?...That would be US!

Though the issues certainly run the gamut for, let’s say, a Methodist marrying a

Seventh-Day Adventist, for the American Jewish community, they are writ large!...

NOT because we—barely ¼ of 1% of the world’s population put up walls of separation.

On the contrary, the majority of Jews today measure societal success

by our level of ‘blend-in-ability’ ...Rabbi Daniel Gordis speaks the irony:

“Back in the good old days, when Jews were mistreated and prevented from participating fully in the culture around us, we didn’t have to make a conscious choice to remain Jewish. Now, confronted by unprecedented accomplishment and boundless acceptance...many Jews wonder not how to survive but why...” [Does the World Need Jews, Gordis, pg. 18]

Schaefer Riley frames the question in high-definition,

based on our altered association with the Jewish community.

“The approach to marriage has shifted, from something that was supported, if not

arranged, by Jewish communities [think, ‘Matchmaker, Matchmaker make me a match]

To something based entirely on personal preference...In this sense, [the author suggests]

interfaith marriage is a striking case-study of the tensions between American

individualism and the search for sacred community.” [Till Faith Do Us Part, SR, pg. 7]

If insularity was once our “Jewish Continuity Insurance Card,”

It is, today, much more like a joker—still part of the deck but, for the most part, out of play...

In a day and age when religious diversity reigns, it naturally follows that we, as a Reform Jewish community, expend such great effort in welcoming the interfaith.

Thanks to the pioneering, if not prophetic work of Rabbi Alex Schindler,

Then President of the UAHC, inaugurating the national commission 40 years ago,

[our own Mel Merians, *alav ha-shalom*, a founding member]

Outreach has become a mainstay of our movement.

Over 70% of interfaith couples who enter our doors across the country say they feel “very welcome.”

Here at Larchmont Temple, we aspire to create a connection for every family, every member, that feels like home...And if you happen not to be Jewish, the hope is that you’ll feel the embrace and, depending on your personal religious affiliations, find a place that brings comfort, and affirms your connection.

The open-tent attitude permeates so purposefully that a few years back, After being the recipient of a Bellin Award for recognition of our Outreach efforts, HUC asked us to host the Schusterman weekend, where a model congregational program in working with interfaith is shared with all of the 4th year Reform rabbinic students nationally. Needless to say, we were honored, and thrilled to share our successes and our struggles With the 2 dozen rabbis to be, knowing that they compelled us to self-critique...and growth. From the conversion the HUC students witnessed on Friday at noon to the teen-panel on growing up “interfaith,” we engaged in honest, challenging, heartfelt conversation. Yet our Saturday evening panel was the one that blew me away; the push—pull seemed, to me, somehow out of whack.

Unlike all of the other program pieces, this one was closed-door; Just the senior students and a panel of rabbis sharing positions on Interfaith Marriage. I was honored to present alongside Rabbi Dena Klein, who does not officiate, And Rabbi Jerry Davidson, who does. In preparation, I revisited the textual sources for my rationale, how it is my understanding of the role of rabbi as “*m’sader kiddushin—orchestrator of that holy ritual exchange*” and key commentary on the wedding vow, pledging a life in the Covenant of Israel, makes interfaith officiation a ritual non-option for me.

But the rabbinic students gathered in our library wanted none of that textual nuance. They wanted *tachlis—brass tacks!* Their concerns were largely socio-economic, Centering around how a rabbi shares his/her position...even, who decides!

[Despite the CCAR’s statement that the decision is a rabbi’s alone...]

Indeed, the first response after I presented was a male 4th year from Cincinnati, Who hypothesized: ‘Well...practically speaking, with the given job market and the limited assistantships I am applying for, if a congregation suggests that, for the job, they want a rabbi who does interfaith marriage, then I guess I’ll be doing interfaith marriage.’

My colleague and teacher next to me could see the steam coming out of my ears, And so placed his hand on my clenched fist to temper my response...[Didn’t help]

“So, let me get this straight. Your rabbinic position on a core question of theological understanding will be dictated by the job market? Let’s say a good majority of your new congregation’s members decide they want Shabbat on Wednesday...”

Realizing how snippety I was sounding, I stopped myself, and was saved by Rabbi Davidson, who took a not-so-random poll:

“So how many of you are leaning towards interfaith marriage officiation?”

A solid 2/3 of the students raised their hands; not a surprise, having seen the same trend over the past few years at Senior Seminar.

But for me, it was not at all a matter of yes or no, rather how these soon-to-be rabbis arrived at their positions...If spiritual integrity leads the way, and a rabbi or cantor's position is processed with deep consideration—from the foundational texts of our tradition to the historic precedent of how our forebears grappled to how the best current-day data can play a part—so long as that push/pull is operative, the struggle apparent, the dialectic between 21st century affirmation and age-old distinction, whatever a colleague's actual position might be, it's OK with me.

After about 2 hours of heartfelt talking, our panel concluded.

But in the schmoozing, a wonderful 4th year woman approached and, trying to thank me for an awesome Shabbat, asked the operative question without ever voicing it.

"This is such an amazing model of Outreach you've created, but...ummm"

I took her pregnant pause as invitation for me to fill in the gap.

"So Sirkman," you are asking..."IF you are such a staunch supporter of ecumenical activities, if, for a quarter century, you have built bridges with the Presbyterians and the Pentecostals; if you are willing to preach in a church and teach in a mosque, with this integrated Outreach model, if you so respect your co-religionists of other faiths, wouldn't it just follow that when it comes to interfaith, you'd officiate?..."

To me, actually not...On the contrary, to a great degree, because I care not only about all we share, but about what distinguishes us—the marks of distinction that set each faith system apart as uniquely worthy of being followed.

The Mass celebrated at a Catholic wedding is no more akin to the Quranic Faticah recited at the signing of the Muslim marriage contract than it is the vow exchanged under the chuppah.

As practical a seeming solution as syncretizing the sacred might appear, To create a combo, or obviate the particular rite of any singular religious affirmation could be seen as a diminishment of how it represents the Divine; Unprincipled pluralism, to my mind.

This is not to intimate that the beautiful interfaith ceremony you attended, or your marriage, or your parents', or my sister Rhonda's almost 40 years ago to a brother-in-law I could not love more, is in any way less sweet.

On the contrary! I celebrate the love two people find together, and always try to tell them that, face to face. Only that, when it comes to ceremonial affirmation, mixing religious metaphors sends too much of a mixed message for my rabbinic playbook.

The Rev. Steven Greenenbaum begins Sunday morning services in a curious way. Clad in vestments with more than a dozen religion's faith-symbols emblazoned, He lays out the Koran, the New Testament, the Book of Mormon, the Hebrew Bible, Sufi Mystic Rumi...and then, interspersing readings from each with African American spirituals, Hindi meditation, Rabbinic chanting...conducts what he calls a "holy mashup" For the 30 members of his "Living Interfaith Church."

"Now, I'm not here to try to convince anyone that there's no such thing as a right or wrong way. But I am here to say that there is no us, and no them."

Greenenbaum, who grew up a Reform Jew in L.A., dissolving all denominational lines, Boils down all faith systems to one word: Compassion.

Problem is, the mashup tastes like mush...As B.U. Prof of Religion Stephen Prothero put it: "For all religions to be one religion, you need to elide all the elements that were central to religion in the past: the Hajj to Mecca, Jesus dying on the cross, Moses meeting God on the Mountain—different ritual moments representing some very different religious beliefs."

Our consideration of Interfaith Marriage goes far beyond the honeymoon, for growing out of it is the meta-question: how that push-pull makes us who we are. Consider 3 encounters with that 21st Century Jewish Identity Dialectic; the force/tension that somehow forges our faith.

Dialectic 1: The KIDS...

Ages ago, OK—20 years or so—sitting round the Outreach table for a meeting in the Temple Library, the Jewish member of an interfaith household shared her hopes: 'I'd like there to be a sign over the entry door that says "BOTH." Before I could respond, another Outreach member replied: 'I think that the Temple has its hands full just trying to teach Judaism. Isn't that enough?' I believe it's as much as we can hope for...

But the push—pull is apparent, for many of our kids' primary teachers of what it means to live the holidays, to make Shabbat are themselves, great parent partners, not Jewish. Nationally, among interfaith families, just under 1/3 are raising their kids as Jews. But when they do, like here at LT, it is no secret: many non-Jewish spouses are the push that brings their Jewish partner to greater congregational connection, and often the pull of observing Judaism to a greater degree at home.

Strange then, of all the things interfaith couples consider prior to getting married, The question of raising the kids comes up in less than half of those polled.

Schaefer Riley theorizes:

"The modern emphasis on personal spirituality, even when it is part of organized religion, may suggest that what you believe is between you & God. It is also conceivable that young men & women don't view religion as an important element to explore in their relationships." [SR, pg. 55]

To our average 14 or 15 year old, being Jewish falls somewhere between blissfully ignored and painfully tolerated...But come 28, or 32, or 36, and all those annoying holidays morph into fondly held family traditions, times together, maybe round that

same dining room table, to eat those recipes, shares the same tales of generations past, and even hold up a holiday value, like the gift of freedom or the power of forgiveness. What we eventually come to feel, oft-times propelled by the advent of children, is that sooner or later, religion matters...And for Jews, that faith is lived out not primarily through a private, devotional spiritual practice, but publically shared family traditions. If our parents are in the position of creating primary Jewish memories for their kids, We must equip them with the Jewish tools to do so... And, if our temple community is typical, seeing the spirit-filled enthusiasm many of our dual-faith families bring, what a gift that some of our most impactful teachers of living Covenant happen not to be Jewish, and yet, models for imparting Jewish tradition to a new generation...

Dialectic 2: The WELCOME

The Welcome Mat is always out...

Yet a “Faith Matters” survey suggests that whereas 67% of same faith couples found our congregations “very welcoming,” only a slightly higher 68% of interfaith felt embraced.

Considering what might be a not-Jewish couple or individual’s first encounter with congregational life, at services, with a language barrier, unfamiliar music and crazy choreography to boot, you’d think many would be scared off!

Yet, from the moment a new face enters, just ask Honorary President and greeter par excellence, Meg Fienberg, we do all we can to ensure a comfort level that puts newcomers at ease. And, warm as we aim to make worship, the real extended hand at the Oneg goes a very long way.

When RJ Magazine did a feature-piece on ‘What Your Oneg Says About You,’ Rabbi Nathan extolled the virtues of our third Friday Pre-Oneg, wine & fruit & cheese for half an hour prior to kabbalat Shabbat, as she said: “It certainly makes our members feel warm and welcomed.”

When an old time member or a cantor or a rabbi reaches out a hand, it matters little whether the person reaching back is Jewish or not. The welcome is one & the same.

Yet the pull comes with a push, for as we say, most sincerely, come on in, We may have to, at some moment, make it clear—but only up to here.

For though the list is highly circumscribed, there are rites/ritual moments in which someone who is not Jewish does not share.

Often, they are framed by a coming Bat/Bar Mitzvah, which we review with families years before, ensuring they realize that the non-Jewish parent is very much a partner, sharing in blessing their child, in witness to their child’s Torah reading, opening the Ark...

It is the Torah passing alone in which they do not partake.

Of course, how you communicate is key. Heightened sensitivity makes for inclusivity.

A friend of a dear congregant called me at the start of summer with a loaded question. “Rabbi, is there any reason a Reform congregation would ban a never converted Bat Mitzvah’s grandmother from going up on the bimah, especially knowing she raised two very connected Jewish sons?”

“I’m guessing this is your wife?”

“Indeed she is.”

“And did the rabbi of this far-away congregation explain why...?”

“No discussion. All he said was: Its synagogue policy.”

“No kidding...[I was stalling] Truth is, I can’t really think of a reason...”

“Thought so. Thanks!”

BUT when there *is* a reason, whether it is the dictates of revered ritual, or the guidelines of governance, being up front, and, in keeping with who we are as Reform Jews, explaining why helps everyone understand.

For even with that extended, outreaching hand,

being Jewish carries with it added core commitments, as well as particular privilege...

Dialectic 3: The QUESTION...

When Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the URJ told the General Assembly back in late 2005:

“By making non-Jews feel comfortable and accepted in our congregations, we have sent the message we do not care if they convert. But it is a mitzvah to help a potential Jew become a Jew by Choice...” he certainly stirred the pot.

As many of us well remember, when the NY Times Sunday feature-piece in early Feb 06 featured us, with the unfortunate headline: “Reform Jews Try to Un-mix Mixed Marriage.”

Needless to say, we were not pleased with the Times reporter who, after having spent Outreach Shabbat here, tried to imply that a Reform Revolution was underway, with Rabbi Yoffie having fired the first shot.

Yet, even though it is much more of an evolutionary process, the push—pull is clearly evident. Conversion is not the answer for all. Many find a meaningful connection to congregational life without ever making that leap. For some who do, the choice feels simply like the next sacred step...Either way, Brandeis sociologist of the American Jewish scene, Sylvia Barack Fishman reports in her research: “Most senior rabbis did not, as a rule, actively invite non-Jewish members to consider conversion...even when the rabbi observed their growing engagement with Judaism.” [SR, pg. 177]

Truth be told, I am guilty. But with reason...You see, here at LT, potential converts keep coming...For when push comes to pull, it is ultimately about [sacred] relationship...To understand,

hear a snippet of the powerful Conversion Statement of LT’s newest Jew By Choice, Nina...

“...There were definitely times when I didn’t think we were compatible. But like many a good partner, Judaism encouraged me to ask questions, to voice my concerns. It is this open dialogue that I think is the most integral aspect this relationship....It is through the study of Judaism and through engaging in deep conversations with friends and family, That I have started to understand my purpose. I always struggle when people ask me why I decided to convert. The questions usually are: Is my fiancé or boyfriend Jewish? No. Well, what are your parents? They’re supportive...[But] today, as I watch more of my friends pair up with the partners they’ll be spending the rest of their lives with,

I feel that I have similarly found a partner for life. This partner is Judaism....It does not walk ahead of me and dictate where I should go...it walks beside me and holds my hand... We talk things out, and Judaism guides me....This day marks the continuation of my spiritual journey, but also the day I officially say “I do” to being a Jew.”

It’s all about relationship...the covenant that our commitment makes real. For the more we celebrate Jewish life with spirit, the more engaging our learning, the more purposeful our world repair, those who want it--will choose... But because I seldom say it emphatically, let me officially extend the offer: Come on in...The water is wonderful! Can’t swim? Not a problem. Judaism is a life preserver that’ll help you stay afloat...

Entering this Covenant community, you cannot help but feel the warmth: the sincerity of care, the outreaching spirit that links us in pursuit of a more sacred planet.

Yet, it is that dialectic—the tension [as that 4th year rabbinic student was struggling to comprehend]—the reaching out and in at one & the same that reminds us who we are... ‘...SO, when all is said and done, Sirkman...

You reach out magnanimously with the right hand and limit with the left ;

You share the blessings of being Jewish with all takers

Yet reserve certain rights only for those who are....*Exactly*.

Does it make for an at times challenging balance?

Do some take the apparent dialectic as a contradiction in spiritual terms?

Do others think that, not due to religious diversity alone, but the changing demographic of a multicultural society, you should alter your approach on interfaith marriage?...

In her conclusion, Naomi Schaefer Riley, 13 years and 3 kids into her marriage to her wonderful Irish Catholic agnostic husband reflects:

“Ironically, interfaith marriage may awaken people to the fact that religions are not all the same, and that the particulars of practice and belief do indeed matter.

...The truth—that marriage is a struggle between the desires of another and the demands of a community, with each deserving careful consideration—is an idea that the old can still pass on to the young.” [Till Faith Do Us Part, pgs. 207-209]

May the dialectic that defines us—the push/pull that frames our faith move us to understand: even as we celebrate what makes us different;

wonderfully sacred mosaic of a congregation we are,

that reaching out to embrace our diversity

likewise brings us closer to the Divine...

AMEN.

