

Honoring the Intermarried  
Rabbi Daniel Gropper, Community Synagogue of Rye  
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I've recently come to the conclusion that a good deal of my Jewish identity comes from Fiddler on the Roof. You remember the story. In a little village of Anatevka, Tevye the Dairy man tries desperately to hold onto traditions as the world changes around him. He's poor but so is everyone else. He finds joy and comfort in the Jewish traditions he has known his entire life: how to eat, how to sleep, how to wear clothes. In fact, as he puts it, the reasons we do things are simply: Tradition. People marry in Anatevka, not for love, but to fulfill the duties placed on us by tradition. And because of that tradition, each one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do. It is how we keep our balance on this unsteady rooftop called life. It's predictable.

In one of the plays most touching scenes, Tevye turns to his Golde and asks,  
T: Do love me?  
G: I'm your wife!  
T: I know but do you love me?  
G: Do I love him?  
For twenty-five years I've lived with him,  
Fought with him, starved with him.  
Twenty-five years my bed is his,  
If that's not love what is?

Tevye knows what he's asking. He knows that something has changed. Something new has blown into their lives and has altered everything. That something is called Modernity. And though it may have been authored by Spinoza and Jean Jacques Rousseau, by the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, it was carried into the lives of Tevye and Golde by their oldest daughter, Tzeitel. Tzeitel, you remember, received the good news that her marriage had been arranged with the butcher, Laizer Wolf. Tzeitel doesn't want to marry Laizer Wolf. She wants to marry her childhood sweetheart, the tailor Mottel Kemzoil. Why would you marry a skinny, poor starving tailor when you can marry the wealthy, powerful, prestigious Laizer Wolf? Because, Papa, I love him. I love him. To which Tevye quotes the great rabbi, Tina Turner, "What's love got to do with it?"

One thread running through the play is how the marriages of Tevye's daughters push the boundaries of tradition. Tzeitel marries Mottel and Yenta the matchmaker is out of a job. Don't worry about her. She moved to America and founded J-date. At least Mottel is from the same village. He's Jewish. His traditions are the same as ours. Next it's Hodel's turn. She pushes the boundaries farther by falling in love with Perchik a Marxist revolutionary. They decide to marry. We might not know his traditions but at least he's Jewish, there is a common heritage. Finally Chava, the red head, runs off to marry Fyedke, the Russian. Here Tevye cries out, "If I bend further, I will break." For him, Chava has pushed the boundaries too far.

Fiddler on the Roof is my life. It is the life of any thinking caring Jew because it begs the question, how do we balance tradition and modernity? How do we live in this

world and be Jewish at the same time, especially when Judaism says “turn left” and secular society so often says “turn right.” And when it comes to the question of boundaries, especially in the area of marriages, how far can they be stretched? This is the question I want to explore this morning. Where are the boundaries?

My family is really not that different from Tevye’s. My guess is that yours is not either. My great-grandparents immigrated to Canada from Shetl’s like Anatevka. Each of them married a Jew. Their children married Jews. They couldn’t imagine otherwise. They lived in a small Canadian city called Saskatoon. Their community was Jewish. The synagogue, the Jewish country club, the various organizations like B’nai Brith and Hadassa were focal points. Tradition was upheld albeit with a North American twist. Owning a shoe store, my grandfather worked on Saturday. So Friday night complete with Shabbat dinner and Synagogue worship became Shabbat. My parent’s generation married Jews. My grandparents sent my mother to the University of Minnesota to get a Jewish education and to find a nice Jewish boy. It was the early 60s. That was part of the college experience. What did she do? She came home and married my dad who lived three doors away.

Then in the early 70s something happened. Maybe it was the pill or Roe v. Wade which gave women far more social independence. Maybe it was Watergate that shattered our confidence in conventional institutions. Maybe it was because as Jews we stopped seeing non-Jews as this great demon, out to persecute and call us Christ killers. If we could go to school with non-Jews, work with non-Jews, eat with non-Jews, and befriend non-Jews why couldn’t we marry non-Jews? It was Portnoy’s dream come true. In the 70s my parents divorced. My dad married a woman who chose to become Jewish. My mom, a non-Jewish man who still makes matzo balls for the Pesach seders. Of my generation, two of us married Jews and raise our kids as Jews. One married a non-Jew and together they are raising their kids as Jews. The jury is still out on the rest of my cousins but as Sociologist Bruce Philips points out soon the majority of American Jewish families will have one non-Jewish parent. In my family, none of the kids from the next generation question their Jewish identity. None of our parents responded the way Tevye did to Chava. No one sat shiva. All of a sudden the question of “tradition” gets stretched even farther. On this unsteady rooftop called American Jewish life we struggle to find a new balancing point as we live in a much larger ocean.

For centuries one’s Jewishness was defined by blood. You were Jewish because your mother was Jewish or because you converted. In 1983, the Reform movement changed all that. Passing a resolution known as Patrilineal Descent, the Central Conference of American Rabbis stated that a child of one Jewish parent raised as a Jew with formal acts of identity such as religious education and bar or bat mitzvah would render that child Jewish. Jewish identity, this resolution stated, is much more than biology. Being Jewish becomes dependent on what you do, not just on who you are.

Of course, patrilineal descent acknowledged a reality of Jewish life, one that the Conservative movement is only now addressing in earnest and that the Orthodox tragically denies – that intermarriage is a reality, one that requires a response that is sensitive, welcoming and inclusive.

Of all the Jewish movements ours went the farthest. Nearly 30 years ago, Rabbi Alexander Schindler, president of the UAHC proclaimed that we would not sit shivah for our children who intermarry. We would welcome them into our synagogues, our families,

and our homes. We would do this in the hope that the non-Jewish partners would ultimately convert to Judaism; and if not, that they would commit themselves to raising their children as Jews. We created a department of Outreach to create programs and classes and discussion groups for the already marrieds, the soon to be marrieds and those contemplating conversion. This was not an endorsement of intermarriage, but rather a refusal to reject the intermarried.

Judaism is not morally neutral. We have always encouraged endogamous marriage. We still do. Abraham sent his servant back to the old country to find a bride for Isaac so that he wouldn't take a wife from among the Canaanites (Gen. 24:3). When Esau married Hittite women they were a source of distress to his parents (Gen. 26:34). The Torah forbids us from marrying an Ammonite or Moabite. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century b.c.e., upon returning from Babylonian exile, Ezra and Nehemiah forced the Israelite men of Judea to send away non-Israelite women they had married. Thankfully we have moved far beyond this form of exclusion even though tragically it still exists in much of the Jewish world.

Given my druthers I want my kids to marry Jews. My guess is that many of you share this feeling. Why? Because I know that a Jewish-Jewish marriage holds a better chance of creating a Jewish home. Statistics bear this out. Only 1/3 of intermarried couples raise Jewish kids, which is depressingly low if you care about a Jewish future. While I would be disappointed if my kids married non-Jews I would not sit Shiva for them. I would welcome their spouse into my home with open arms and I would encourage them to build a Jewish home together. I would want them to be part of that minority, part of that 33%. If my child married someone who was not Jewish, I would want them to be like those of you here who are thankfully part of that 33%. I would want them to be like those here who raise Jewish children and create Jewish homes where only one adult in the home is Jewish.

In my time as a rabbi I have witnessed time and time again the dedication of non-Jews who are committed to raising Jewish children – sending them to Hebrew school, to Jewish summer camp, taking them to Israel.

You are, in my opinion, the real heroes of Jewish life. You are raising a generation of Jews often at the expense of your own religious upbringing. As a community we need to include you and to honor you for your commitment and even for your self-sacrifice.

Allow me to share a few vignettes of this heroism in action.

We are standing atop Masada. The boy now a man has just finished reading his Torah portion. His father who attended Catholic Parochial school steps forward. Tears in his eyes he hugs his son, tells him how proud he is, tells him how much this moment means and charges his son to keep Torah and Mitzvah and Jewish living a part of his life for his grandparents, for his siblings and most importantly, for himself.

We stand on our bima, the father lovingly cradling his new daughter in his arms, her mother lovingly wrapping her in the talit she, the non-Jew, picked out for this occasion. The mother reads a blessing to her daughter, how she is named after her grandmother a woman of valor, of strength, of passion and compassion. And then the mother says, just as we have brought you into the covenant, so too may we bring you to a life of Torah, to the Huppah and to a life of good deeds – and I know this non-Jewish mother will do it!

It is weeks before his daughter's Bat Mitzvah. The father emails me a program he has put together explaining the customs and rituals associated with a Jewish service, "just to be sure," he says, "because as you know rabbi, I am not Jewish and in Germany, my father was a Calvinist minister." Once we determine everything is alright, he translates the entire thing into German for his relatives who will make the trip to watch his daughter, a Jew, read from Torah.

The college student sits at dinner with his non-Jewish step father. He confides that he does not know what to do after graduation. He really isn't interested in law or business. "What about the rabbinate?" his step-father asks. "The Rabbinate? Are you nuts?" "Ever since I've known you I thought you should be a rabbi. You have a kind heart and a warm soul and you light up every time you do or see or hear something Jewish. Don't waste what you have on law or business. Give it some thought, seriously."

All these stories are true. The first three I witnessed as a rabbi. The fourth one happened to me. I was that student. My step-father, Hamish Cameron is not Jewish. He told me to become a rabbi. I am grateful for his advice.

At the same time I wonder if we made it too easy. Have we worked so hard to create a sense of inclusiveness that the non-Jew does not feel a need to personally explore Judaism? Have the boundaries become so malleable that we've taken the emphasis on conversion out of the equation? If you can be on the bima for your child's bar mitzvah, if you can talk to him from that sacred space, why change your status? Why become a Jew if the only tangible benefit you receive is the opportunity to bless the Torah, the opportunity to chair a committee, the opportunity to become synagogue president? It's like asking, why become an American if the only benefit you get is to vote?

The situation of the non-Jew in the synagogue community is one I can relate to first hand. I am a Canadian citizen. I have a green card. This gives me certain rights and many more responsibilities. I can do almost everything an American can do. I can travel freely, I can practice my religion unencumbered, I can pay taxes. I can even serve in the military. I also know that my status comes with restrictions. I cannot vote, cannot serve on a jury and cannot run for public office. I sing the national anthem but I know it is not mine. I pledge allegiance to the flag and question the appropriateness of doing so. But when I sing "God bless America" I feel an affinity to that hymn as I want God to bless this country where I live and raise my family. At some point in time I might choose to become an American citizen. Until that time, I understand that my status is different.

I know that this is a great country, just as the non-Jews in our midst know that Judaism is a great religion. Just as I am not yet ready to become an American, I know that people have good reasons for not wanting to convert. Some folks don't feel strongly enough about religion in general to pledge their faith to another religion in good conscience. Conversely, others may feel powerfully drawn to Jews and Judaism, but feel that converting would cause untold familial upset and disappointment. Still others, while they may be ready to marry a Jew and raise Jewish children, find themselves in possession of a particular faith that they simply cannot deny or give up.

Still, I know that there are many in both our community and the community at large who would love to become Jewish. All that's missing is an invitation. When I was a rabbinic student serving a small Nevada community I became close with a young couple, Steve and Leeann. Steve grew up in Skokie, Il, which, if you know Chicago is

like being from Great Neck. Leeann was not Jewish. Over dinner one night I blurted out, “Leeann, have you ever thought about becoming Jewish?” And she said, “You know, no one has ever asked me.” A year later I escorted her to the mikva in the final step of her conversion.

Why not put that invitation on the table? In fact, as Rabbi Eric Yoffie pointed out, “Most non-Jews who are part of synagogue life *expect* that we will ask them to convert; they come from a background where asking for this kind of commitment is natural and normal, and they are more than a little perplexed when we fail to do so.”<sup>1</sup>

So with great humility I say to the potential converts in our midst: “We would love to have you.” And, in fact, I owe you an apology for not having said it sooner.

Why consider conversion? Just ask anyone who has made this affirming choice, a choice that I invite you to explore. Consider conversion because Judaism is a great religion. Why consider Judaism? Because as Rabbi David Wolpe teaches, “Judaism can teach us how to deepen our lives, to improve the world, to join with others who have the same lofty aims. Judaism can teach us spiritual and moral mindfulness, a way of living in this world that promotes joy inside of us and also encourages ethical action. Why be Jewish? Because Judaism gives us the inspiration, energy and will to ensure that even from the midst of a valley of darkened shadows, a promise of Eden survives.”<sup>2</sup> Why consider Judaism? Because we want families to function as Jewish families. While intermarried families can surely do this, there are advantages of an intermarried family becoming a fully Jewish family, with two adult Jewish partners. And people should consider conversion because at some point in time, after living long enough in a community, you might say, if this is my community, then let me be a full fledged member of it.

Still, I appreciate that there are those who, for a variety of reasons are not ready to make the commitment to become fully Jewish. So what if there was a third way? What if there was a way to achieve some sort of status as a committed fan of the Jewish people, a Jewish Green Card if you will?

The world of the Torah saw the non-Jew living amidst the Israelite community as a reality. While there were exclusive tendencies that saw a need for separation from gentiles, the overall thrust was an attitude toward inclusively. We came by this honestly. As Jews, we know what it is like to be the other, to live as the outsider. We are commanded, “Be kind to the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt”. No less than 36 times in the Torah are we commanded to leave the corners of our fields for the non-Jew. We know what it feels like to be other, to think that everyone is looking at you, to be too embarrassed to ask where you might sit, if you should read a prayer, if you should drink the wine or put on a kipa. We know what it feels like because we were strangers.

As long as the non-Jew in our midst was willing to take upon themselves what are commonly referred to as sheva mitzvot b’nei Noah, the seven noahide laws, this person was called a ger toshav, a “temporary resident,” “landed immigrant,” or “resident alien.” He was, according to the rabbis, a gentile who lived among the Jewish people, happy to be part of the Jewish world and supportive of the religious and social frames of Jewish life. Agreeing in the presence of a Jewish bet din or court to follow some basic Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Eric Yoffie, URJ Biennial Address, Houston, TX. 2005

<sup>2</sup> Wolpe, David. Why Be Jewish? Henry Holt and Co. New York. 1995. p. 92

principles, the *ger toshav* was granted permission to live in land controlled by Jews even if he could not own land himself. Not fully a convert but not fully a non-Jew either. The *ger toshav* could eat *tref*, but was not permitted to publicly worship other gods, and if he was circumcised, he could even partake of the Passover sacrifice. In antiquity, he was the non-Jew at the *seder* table.

In referring to the *Ger Toshav*, Maimonides said, “Anyone who accepts the seven Noahide commandments and is careful to fulfill them is counted among the *hasidei umot olam*, the pious of the nations of the world and has a place in the world to come (MT Kings 8:10). In many intermarried homes today, this characterization would aptly describe the feelings and commitments of the non-Jewish spouse.

What if we did that today? What if we helped to secure the Jewish home by creating a contemporary *ger toshav* -- not a convert to Judaism, but a gentile who actively chooses to live among Jews, a Fellow traveler? Just as we have standards for those who choose to convert, what if we created standards to become a *ger toshav*? What if we created classes and discussion groups led by trained facilitators who could discuss what it means to be a *ger toshav* and what it means to be a fellow traveler in the Jewish community? (Promote Judaism 101 class starting in January)

When I applied for my green card there were many hoops to jump through; ones I was willing to do because I wanted to live in this country, even if I was not ready to become a citizen. What if we said, we want you in our community and we understand that you are not yet ready or willing to convert. We hope you will some day but we understand that time is not now. Instead we want you to study Judaism, to make a commitment to creating a Jewish home replete with Jewish symbols and artifacts. We want you to take on obligations like *tzedakah*, synagogue affiliation and a willingness to raise Jewish children by giving them Jewish experiences and participating with them in their upbringing – not merely to be the one in the hall or the one providing the childcare but to share equally in that role. By following certain standards and making certain commitments you will take on a title of *Ger Toshav*. How might that help to foster a deeper sense of belonging?

Many of us are familiar with the passionate love story of David and Bathsheba. David, the king of Israel spies Bathsheba bathing on her roof. He call for her, sleeps with her and she becomes pregnant. But what of her husband Uriah? Uriah was a Hittite and a trusted commander in David’s army. Though he was a non-Jew, he was an insider in ancient Judea, with his home opposite the palace of the king. His name Uriah means “God is my light” and apparently was his not by accident. He was so morally upright that, despite David’s urgings that he go and sleep with his wife Bathsheba so as to obscure the fact that she was pregnant by the King, Uriah refused to sleep in the comfort of his own bed while his men were in the battlefield.

For the great non-Jewish souls who find themselves, like Uriah, drawn to the Jewish people and ready to stand up and even fight with us in our battles, we must find ways to formally recognize and embrace them. It is a sign of our success that we ought to celebrate rather than to mourn.

We read in our Torah this morning, *Atem Netzavim Hayom Kulchem*. You stand here this day, all of you. Everyone is included in this list – from the leaders of the community to the children to the non-Jew, even those who were not there that day. The word choice for standing – *Netzavim* is strange. The more common word for standing,

the one used when the people actually accept the covenant is *Omdim*. So if *omdim* is standing in acceptance, perhaps *Netzavim* is standing ready to spring into action. This Yom Kippur day is a day for springing into action, for choosing the type of life we want to live. My hope is that we do not merely accept the status quo of our larger Jewish community but instead, spring into action to bring Jews, Jews-by-choice and potential *Garei Toshavim*, potential fellow travelers closer to a rich and meaningful Jewish life.

On this day where we all stand before God acknowledging life's most ultimate issues, I want us to return for a moment to publicly acknowledge those non-Jews in our congregation who are creating Jewish homes because they made choices that those of us in Jewish-Jewish marriages maybe never had to make. They are part of Community Synagogue because, somewhere along the way, they happened to fall in love with a Jewish man or woman, and that decision changed their life.

I want us to do so on this Day of Atonement because we haven't appreciated the non-Jews in our midst enough. That is why I am talking about this on this day instead of any other. In this era where most, if not all our families have non-Jewish members, this is something worth atoning for.

*Aveirot ben adam l'makom, Yom HaKippurim mechaper*

*Aveirot ben adam l'chaveiro, Yom HaKippurim Lo mechaper*

For Transgressions between humans and God, Yom Kippur atones  
For Transgressions between people, Yom Kippur does not atone.

You have to ask for it.

To the non-Jews among us, I ask your forgiveness and your understanding.

In this new world we are like a fiddler on the roof trying desperately to balance tradition and modernity without falling off.

I hope that you are not embarrassed or upset that I am singling you out in this way. The last thing I want is to make you feel uncomfortable. What I do want is 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.

Taking a cue from my colleague Rabbi Janet Marder, we want to thank you.

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 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.

In our generation, which has seen shrinking Jewish populations, every Jewish child is especially precious. We are a very small people. Our children mean hope, and they mean life. So 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.

And borrowing Rabbi Marder's blessing, please, carry this blessing with you:

You are the moms and dads who drive the Hebrew school carpool and bring the refreshments to J-life and other synagogue functions. You help explain to your kids why it's important to get up on Shabbat morning and to learn to be a Jew. You take classes and read Jewish books to deepen your own understanding, so you can help to make a Jewish home. You learn to make kugel and latkes; you try to like gefilte fish; you learn to put on a Seder; you learn to put up a Sukkah. You join your spouse at the Shabbat table – maybe you even set that Shabbat table and make it beautiful.

You come to services, even when it feels strange and confusing at first. You hum along to those Hebrew songs, and some of you even learn to read that difficult language. You stand on the *bima* and pass the Torah to your children on the day of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and tell them 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.

We know that some of you have paid a significant price for the generous decision you made to raise Jewish children. You have made a painful sacrifice, giving up the joy of sharing your own spiritual beliefs and passing your own religious traditions down to your kids. I hope your children and your spouse tell you often how wonderful you are, and that *their* love and gratitude, and *our* love and gratitude, will be some compensation, and will bring you joy.

In solidarity with the fellow travelers in our midst, I ask all of us to rise, to honor you with this ancient blessing from the Torah so that we may stand as one, strengthening and supporting one another.

I ask our congregation honor you as we offer you this ancient blessing from the Torah... (ask everyone to rise)

May God bless you; may God keep you; May the light of the Holy One shine on you; And may God grant you the precious gift of peace.

Sing: Hinei Ma Tov U'ma'naim – music by Rich Recht.