

“In Different Words”
Jewish Identity, Interfaith Marriage
and Rabbinic Officiation
Message from Rabbi Michael L. Feshbach

[In order to save an additional mailing, these excerpts from Rabbi Feshbach’s Yom Kippur morning sermon are being included here, along with an invitation to the November 9 Town Hall Meeting referred to below. To see a full text of the sermon, please go to our website, www.templeshalom.net, under “Sermons and Writings”]

My friends, I stand before you this day, and I face the most challenging task I have ever taken on in a sermon. What I am about to share with you is deeply personal – for many of you, as well as for me. It is something which hits home, which relates in a fundamental way to the lives of many, many members of this congregation, and our families.

I have come to an important conclusion, concerning one of the most difficult decisions a Reform rabbi has to make. I believe that I stand for the same goals I have always stood for. But I have come to the conclusion that I can reach those goals...in a different way.

And how I frame what is to follow... how I say it, and how you hear it... that, too, matters. So much so that I take an unusual step, and issue an invitation. My topic this morning is too important to be a one-way street, a monologue, words that flow from me to you. No, it must be a dialogue, and an ongoing conversation, to make sure, amongst other things, that we hear each other in the right way even if – in fact, especially if – we disagree with one another. And so at the conclusion of my remarks I am going to **issue an invitation, to carry on the conversation**, in a way in which we can speak with each other.

“Atem nitzavim hayom kulchem lif’nai Adonai Eloheichem,” we read this morning; “You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God – your tribal heads, elders and officials, all the Israelites: men, women, children... *v’geircha asher b’kerev machanecha*...even the stranger within your camp.” An inclusive vision is held out before us: we all stood at Sinai! The whole community – all of us – entered into God’s covenant that day.

But this is more than merely an ancient echo of a world that was. This is a mythical, mystical vision. It is a temporal prism which is not primarily about the past, but rather the present. These words transcend time: *“V’lo itchem l’vad’chem anochi koreit et habrit hazot...* It is not with you alone that I make this covenant... but with those who are standing here this day with us... and those who are not with us here this day!”

These words are about personal spiritual commitment. They are about entering into the Jewish covenant with God. And I still believe that this act matters... a powerful statement of solidarity, of identification, of reading oneself into the Jewish story.

But there is enough ambiguity here... to make us think. Who might we mean? Who might be meant by those who were not standing there that day? And who... who are the strangers within the camp?

The customary view is that “those who were not there that day” refers to all Jews, of all generations... a kind of primordial precommitment, a sense that we are all bound by the commitments, and the promises, our ancestors made for us. Like the television program from the 1960’s: “You Were There!” And established interpretation has always viewed the *ger* referred to here as a *ger tzedek*, a Jew by choice, someone who converts to Judaism, who joins the Jewish people.

But, as I said... there is ambiguity here. Ambiguity about who is meant, who is included. Ambiguity about identity.

And we... we live with ambiguity as well. For there are those among us – there are many – who have come to our community through association, through family ties, through the bonds of love and life, even... even without having stood at Sinai. To what extent are these individuals meant... in this expansive, and inclusive view? And might not our answer to that question, our understanding of it, might that not change... over time?

Mine has.

At this time I am announcing a change in my position on the issue of officiation at interfaith marriages. After many years of wrestling with this question, I am now prepared to perform interfaith marriage ceremonies, under certain circumstances and conditions.

Now, for some of you, to hear that a rabbi will perform an interfaith marriage ceremony is no big deal. For much of the history of this congregation, there have been rabbis here who have done so, all with their own sets of conditions. Many of you might not have known that I did not, and will potentially be retroactively upset – how I could hold such antiquated and narrow-minded views? Certainly there are those who do not understand why this is a close call, and a difficult one.

In order to understand why it is, in fact, *such* a big step that a minority of rabbis and cantors choose to officiate at interfaith marriages, one has to understand why the vast majority of Jewish clergy, of all denominations, do *not* do so. To answer this adequately is beyond the scope of what I can accomplish today, except to say that this position has to do with both the content of the ceremony, and the concept of continuity. Let me remind you of my remarks on Erev Rosh Hashanah, in which I described Judaism as a folk as well as a faith, a community and a people as well as an expression of individual spirituality. And so this is not simply a question of clergy catering to personal needs, to the sanctification of the consumer, a world in which we expect clergy to *do whatever we want them to do*. Clergy are here to serve, we do respond to need and desire – but not *only* that. We are not merely an assemblage of individual opinions; we are a group. We are called to be *ethnic*, as well as ethical. Please do not position yourselves so far away from the concept of peoplehood that you *cannot understand*, that you do not even “get” what a radical step this is, in the context of our communal history!

And it is neither inherently racist nor necessarily chauvinistic for a group to want to survive. It’s just not.

But today the question of Jewish survival can be seen from many angles. And it may be... it may be... that a wider welcome... will serve the same end... in a better way.

I am not sure, precisely, what the exact “tipping point” was, in this decision to change my position. It might have been the influence of other colleagues, whose positions I have seen evolve over time. It might have been the words of an Israeli Orthodox rabbi a few years ago, speaking to a convention of Reform rabbis, who indicated that were he Reform, he probably would perform interfaith marriages under certain circumstances. He said that at the time of the Bible, marrying an Israelite, marrying a Jew was simply a way into the Jewish community, and he thought that this might be true in many cases again today. It might be the experience over time of working with so many devoted, deep, sincere individuals exploring Judaism and possibly willing to take the final step of joining our people – but who do not like the fact that they “have to” for the sake of a ceremony. Finally, it might have been the question of same-sex marriage. For I have been willing – and have performed – same sex ceremonies, and I even though I see the issues of interfaith and same-sex marriage as apples and oranges, unrelated decisions, still I have been unable to convince even the brightest and most thoughtful of friends of why there is a difference. People have responded that one should be fully traditional in both cases, or fully flexible. I did not agree, until I realized that there is an emotional connection here, even if no rational or logical link exists.

I was in Buffalo when a colleague in the community, Rabbi Barry Schwartz, once our Rabbi-Educator, then of Temple Sinai in Amherst, New York, and now in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, gave a sermon to his congregation on Yom Kippur, announcing his change of position. He reminded his congregation that a Jewish marriage is called *kiddushin*, holiness, and he concluded that he could no longer deny that some sense of holiness – *even as understood in Jewish terms* – could well be present in a marriage between partners with different spiritual backgrounds.

Even if we can all say – and always see – that there is a kind of general holiness in all healthy marriages, still, of the minority of rabbis who do perform interfaith wedding ceremonies, the *vast majority* – 90-plus percent – do so only under certain and highly defined conditions. I confess that I feel somewhat vulnerable on this point, because once we step into this territory at all, these conditions are both necessarily subjective – and, for me, subjectively necessary. On the one hand they have the feel of making couples...jump through hoops of my own devising. And yet I could not imagine performing such ceremonies without any parameters, guidelines which help promote what Rabbi Hartman referred to as a pathway into a Jewish family, even if not the Jewish people. So it then becomes a question... of what these conditions are.

Here are mine. [Based partly on Rabbi Barry Schwartz’ approach:]

I would agree to officiate at an intermarriage for couples who can agree to:

A Jewish wedding – modified to take into account the spiritual identity of the participants, but without co-officiation by clergy of other faith traditions.

Jewish learning – that both partners study Judaism together, not with an intent to convert, but with an openness to the traditions they will bring into their lives.

A Jewish home – with honor to the holidays and celebrations, the culture and traditions that reflect why they would ask for a Jewish wedding in the first place.

Jewish continuity – a commitment that, should the couple be blessed with children, they raise those children as Jews.

And **Jewish affiliation** – a commitment to practice Judaism as a family actively, within the context of a spiritual community, which, to me, means as members of a synagogue.

My friends, I am a rabbi. I see my role as promoting Jewish community, faith and folk. I will continue to teach, as I have before, and to act, as I have before, both in what I consider to be the best interest of our people and with integrity, as I understand it, vis a vis our tradition. It has been many years, already, if ever, that I felt honestly able to tell our children, our students, our youth, that they must marry Jews – although I blame no parent who does say this to their children, and, as I said earlier, I simply do not consider it racist or chauvinistic to make such a statement. Let me repeat this, though: I do *not* teach our youth that they must marry Jews, as if they would listen to such a statement in any event! What I do tell our young people is that I hope they will be advocates for Judaism – in any relationship they are in. And you know, and I know, that sometimes such advocacy is necessary... even when two Jews by birth marry one another.

I will teach and I will preach, then, in the best interest of the Jewish people as I see it. It is just that the way I see those interests... has changed. And the time calls out, perhaps, for us to open up. At least, the time came... for me to do so, in the way I understand that I have been called to serve our people and our God.

In many ways I find it hard to imagine... a more controversial topic. It is, then, not fair, that all that is said on this subject... is my speaking, well, at you. **At this time I issue a call for a congregational meeting, a Town Hall format, on Sunday afternoon, November 9, at 2pm, for interaction and discussion, questions and clarifications, on how this change will affect you, the congregation, and our community.** I will send a letter to the congregation several weeks from now, with either a copy of these remarks or similar background information, and a more formal invitation to that meeting. *[NB: These excerpts serve instead of that additional mailing.]* I look forward to being with you, to working with you, to exploring the ways in which our community can balance the integrity of the tradition, and the needs of the present time.