

Gerei Toshav and Inter-marriage

I am sitting around the Rosh HaShana table with family and friends.

Uncle Max is here for TRADITION! He wants Matzah ball soup and brisket and Manischewitz wine.

Cousin Samantha loves family gatherings but doesn't care much for religion. She isn't coming to services, she has too much work to do, but wants to be at the meal. She is eating the vegetarian options.

Barry is going on about his social justice work and how meaningful it is to go register voters in NC with Netzavim, the Reform movement's voter registration initiative.

Julie and Vicki have just been to Budapest and Prague and are feeling a deep connection to the Jewish people and have just started working on a family tree.

Aaron is here with Annamarie, his new girlfriend. It is her first Rosh HaShana ever, as she is not Jewish. She asks great questions and makes all of us think about why we are doing the rituals, like eating round challah.

The grandmas are analyzing the kneidels and the soup, comparing it to last year, as if they are the judges on Chopped.

The football game is on until the last minute, and that's not until Sammy arrives from a soccer game.

Finally, everyone sits down. We say the blessings over the candles and the kiddush. Dip the Apples in Honey. And have a lovely dinner.

We all feel connected to each other even though, we are all here for our own reasons. It doesn't matter in that moment that our connections to Judaism vary from deeply committed to nominally aware. At this moment each of us has a seat at the table.

And isn't that true for each one of us. At different moments in our lives our connection to and our need for Judaism ebbs and flows. At the time of a death, the most non-observant Jew wants to know the exact way you're supposed to cover the mirrors and how many days you are supposed to sit shiva. Sometimes we feel totally immersed and that we are sitting at the table of Judaism and other times feel alienated and our chair is in the other room.

That is our internal struggle, but there are also boundaries that have been established by the Jewish community to say who is inside and who is outside. We tend to think those boundaries are well established, solid borders. But history will show us that the lines have changed over time.

So let's ask the question - Who is a Jew? Who is sitting at the table?

If we ask the Torah, we learn from Genesis, **anyone whose father is Jewish**
 But then in Deuteronomy it answers – **anyone who is standing at Sinai.**

If we ask the Rabbis in the 1st and 2nd C – they say the answer we are most familiar with **-anyone whose mother is Jewish**

But they also would include a person who **converts to Judaism – In modern parlance – A Jew By Choice.**

What if we ask the Nazis in the 1930's - their answer **-anyone who has one Jewish grandparent is Jewish.**

If you ask me, a Reform Rabbi,

Anyone who has a Jewish parent, whether father or mother and the child is raised Jewish. Loosely defined as a Bris or bablynaming, attending Religious School and becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, then the child is Jewish.

So, it is not such a simple question. And depending on the context – all these answers are true and right.

But today I want to reframe the question and not focus on who is a Jew but **Who is a member of the Jewish Community?**

Everyone at my table in the beginning considers themselves a member of the Jewish Community at that moment. Not necessarily a Jew, but a member of the community.

So, **Who is a member of the Jewish Community?**

The obvious answer is people who were **born** into Jewish community, whether they choose to sit at the table or not.

And then we include Jews by Choice or Converts.

I am in awe of people who decide to leave the faith in to which they are born and throw their lot in with the Jewish people. I love working with conversion students.

They ask challenging, thoughtful questions and make me a better teacher.

They enrich our community in so many ways. Hopefully they feel so included that you don't even realize that they are converts, but you know they are Jews by Choice by their actions and contributions.

But the Torah brings us another category, one with which you might not be as familiar **Gerei toshav.**

This phrase can be translated as strangers who live among Jews. Someone who resides within the community and is treated as a member of the community. I like to think of them as **"friends of the Jewish community."**

The Torah sets out mitzvot -obligations, specifically for the ger Toshav. They must rest on Shabbat, as they are part of the community. They have to eat matzah on Passover –why should they get off any easier than the rest of us! The gerei toshav are listed

among those who received the Torah at Sinai. They are protected as members of the community.

Who are our gerei toshav today?

-Dutch workers who volunteer on a Kibbutz

-A scholar I studied with this summer, Dr. Christine Hayes. She is Christian and a professor of Talmud, midrashic studies and Classical Judaica at Yale University.

-A non-Jewish friend who directs the annual show at a synagogue in her neighborhood which provides the bulk of their fundraising budget.

They are gerei toshav – not Jews, but members of the community.

And what about the Righteous Gentiles – who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

Someone like Gertruda Babilinska who is a Polish nanny for the Stolowickis Family, a Jewish family in Warsaw. In 1936 they have a little boy, Michael. Three years later, when the Germans attack Poland, Mr. Stolowickis is in Paris, and is never returns home. Mrs. Stolowickis dies in 1941, but before she dies, she begs, “Gertruda, please take care of my son Michael. And after the war, take him to the Land of Israel.”

Gertruda manages to keep Michael alive, at great risk to herself. And they finally do make it to Israel, where she raises Michael as her son. She struggles to get by, living in a small room and cleaning houses for other people.

She remains a devout Catholic until her last day, she fulfills her promise to his mother to raise him as a Jew.

On June 4, 1963, Yad Vashem recognizes Gertruda Babilinska as Righteous Among the Nations.¹

I would count Gertruda Babilinska as a ger toshav, person whose actions and loyalty make her a member of the Jewish community.

In contrast to Gertruda’s hardships, many gerei toshav are just supporters and friends of the Jewish Community and are able to be a part of it without any sacrifice or risk. But still today, others have *to give something up*.

Last Spring, we had five B’nei Mitzvah in a row, at which one parent was not Jewish. In these cases, a parent is Christian.

I found myself in awe. It is beautiful to be standing on the bima and holding the Torah while they are speaking to their son or daughter about how proud they are of their child, and of their child’s commitment to Judaism and to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience.

These Moms and Dads feel have done a great job in helping to raise Jewish kids.

All of them attend PACT programs in our school, drive religious school carpool, force their kids to practice their Hebrew and even learn the Torah Blessings themselves.

Their children receive a united message that their entire family, the Jewish side and the Christian side, is thrilled for them on their special day.

They are not the first non-Jewish parents raising Jewish kids that we have had on the bima, I’m proud to say that TBT has been welcoming for as long as I can remember, but

to have 5 services back to back, it made me stop and think. It gave me a chance to marvel at how amazing these parents are.

You are **our** gerei toshav. People whose actions and loyalty make you a member of the Jewish community. We want thank you today for casting your lot with the Jewish people by becoming part of this congregation. 70 years ago the Shoah took one third of our people. You have helped us to grow again by raising your child as a Jew. I'd like to offer to you a blessing. A blessing to you who fell in love with a Jewish partner and allowed your lives to go in a direction you never imagined. To those of you are living a Jewish life in all respects. To those who are devoutly committed to another faith. To those of you are not religious at all.

This blessing is adapted from one written by my colleague Rabbi Janet Marder.

- You are the moms and dads who drive the Hebrew school carpool and organize the mitzvah projects.

- You help explain to your kids why it's important to go to more school after a full day 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 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.

- 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.

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.
 May you always know you have a seat at our table.

Ger Toshav is not just a biblical concept. As I have shown you, we have gerei toshav today. But the fact that it is a biblical concept, reminds us that the Jewish Community

has always had porous borders and has been welcoming to people who choose to identify with the community through their proximity and their actions.

--

But what happens before they become parents of Jewish children? When they want to get married.

For many years, intermarriage was taboo. People sat shiva when their children married outside the faith. Think Teyve from Fiddler on the Roof. Teyve disowned his daughter Chava when she married a Russian peasant.

I don't know too many people who do that today, at least not in our community. But intermarriage is still heated topic.

Sometimes, two people decide to get married and one converts to Judaism. Their wedding is a Jewish wedding. But other times, conversion is just not right for them. Maybe they are committed to their own faith. Or they are not interested in religion at all. Some people don't feel a connection to the teachings of Judaism. Others choose to live a Jewish life, but out of respect to their family, don't feel right actually converting.

Regardless of anyone's feelings, Intermarriage rates are growing, up from 52% in 1990 to 58% in 2013. Some studies show that this is hurting the Jewish community but more show that it is strengthening the community. The Pew survey found that 61 percent of intermarried households are raising their children with some Jewish identity. ..., the percentage of children of intermarriage who consider themselves Jewish has also increased dramatically, putting the lie to those who would claim that "intermarriage" is synonymous with "assimilation out of Judaism."ⁱⁱ

We also see that the number of intermarried households is increasing much faster than the number of in-married householdsⁱⁱⁱ That is based on the fact the 2 Jews who marry each other make one Jewish home, and 2 Jews who marry people of other faiths, can make 2 Jewish homes.

I've always tried to be as welcoming as possible to interfaith couples, but I didn't officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies.

Three years ago I took a look at the statistics, talked to colleagues here at TBT and across the country, and talked to many of you. I saw the sea change in the culture and felt like I should consider officiating.

2-1/2 years ago I officiated at a wonderful wedding. It was a Jewish wedding but the groom wasn't Jewish. It felt right.

One of the pleasant surprises is how welcoming and warm his family was. They were so excited that a Rabbi, that I, was officiating. I love that his Catholic parents come to services when there are special events in their family or just to support their daughter-in-law. I love that I have a relationship with them because I officiated at this wedding.

Now that I officiate at Jewish ceremonies, for our congregants, even if one of the partners is not Jewish, I have had the added bonus of being invited in to be part of the

discussion as they build their lives together. As I meet with couples to plan the ceremony we talk about ways that they can explore each others religion. And I suggest ways that they can bring more Judaism into their homes and why they might want to. I work with them to see how they can sit at the table.

I get to ask deep and meaningful questions. Ones that the couple either hadn't thought of or had been avoiding.

-How are you going to raise the children?

-Are you going to do a Bris/Jewish Babynaming or a Baptism?

-Will you go to synagogue or church or a mosque or a Hindu temple?

-Which holidays will you celebrate in your house as yours and which with the grandparents? What will this look like?

They may not have realized the challenges they will face, and I am able to help them navigate some of the issues early on. I am able to build connections in way that I was not able to before. I hope this will open the door to further conversations and put a welcoming face on Judaism.

What brought them into my office to have that conversation? The fact that I now officiate at interfaith marriages.

I know some of you will be very happy with this decision. And are saying, its about time. Or some of you are saying, better late than never.

But I also know that this will not feel right for everyone and that some of you will disagree. I understand that, and hope you know how much effort and thought has been put into this decision.

In exploring these issues of boundaries and of points of entry, we are challenged to think of how do we create seats at the table for everyone?

I hope we will all think about what needs to be done to create a Jewish community that everyone who wants to, can feel a part of. As always we wrestle with maintaining tradition while innovating to meet the needs of the times in which we live.

Judaism is constantly changing. Reinventing itself. Or more accurately being reinvented, depending on who is in the community. I find it invigorating that non Jews want to be part of the Jewish community. It is inspirational. And reminds us we need to create multiple points of entry for all the members of the community to help them feel that they are at the fully at the table.

We need to worry less about boundaries and more about ways in which to bring people in. Tonight I have spent a lot of time talking about who are "friends of the Jewish community." But I have not forgotten the question: How do we bring today's Jews in? How do we create a Judaism that all Jews feel committed to?

If we go back to my holiday table, or think about the people seated around your table. How can we help everyone to find their seat at the table and to overflow into the kitchen with commitment, joy and excitement about Judaism?

We need to create a Jewish Community of which we can all be proud to be a part.

One that makes people want to join our circle.

One with content and meaning.

One with rituals that inspire action. And actions that improve the world.

One with care and compassion for the less fortunate.

One with Justice at its center.

A Judaism that is filled with learning, with connection to Israel, with worship that touches our souls.

Like Gertruda and our modern day *geri toshav*— may our righteous actions be what gives us a seat at the table.

ⁱ <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/stories/babilinska.asp>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial-opinion/opinion/just-how-big-intermarriage-you-dont-really-know>

ⁱⁱⁱ Read more at <http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial-opinion/opinion/just-how-big-intermarriage-you-dont-really-know#KQXJW2i7M3Wv4Stz.99>