

You stand this day...all of you

Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker, Kol Nidre 5769, October 8, 2008,
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There are times, after years of relationship, when some straight talk is necessary. I want to talk to you without the filter of the mainstream media, straight to Yosef Six Pack and all you Hockey *Imas* out there.

I needed one light moment because seriously, I do want to speak tonight about an important topic....about marriage, about the partners we choose for our life journey and about nothing short than the future of our Jewish people.

This is a topic that touches us all deeply--whether or not we are married--stirs passions and at times causes divisions. We all have opinions, and though no one speaks with a prophetic voice knowing what will be, listen now to the words of one man who was deeply concerned about the future of the Jewish people knowing that he himself would not be part of it:

"You are standing here this day, all of you, before Adonai, your God—your tribal chieftains, your elders and your officers, everyone in Israel, men, women and children, and the strangers in your camp--from the woodcutter to the water carrier—to enter into the sworn covenant which Adonai your God makes with you this day." [Deut 29:8 ff]

These are the words of Moses that we will read tomorrow on the holiest of days. He knew the deep challenges about the future, including the Canaanites who would lead many astray from their people, and what did he do? Moses set a covenant with all of the people who happened to be in the camp, all of them named, from the Israelite man, woman and child to the non-Israelites traveling with them. All of them were part of the covenant with God to create a vibrant Jewish people.

Every time I stand under a chuppah with a couple entering into a covenant with each other, I think about Moses' model. The focus is on the future, not on the brief ceremony, but God-willing on the life-long commitment. The ceremony reflects the couple's decisions about the years ahead—as unimaginable as they might be, as challenging as it is to predict what will be.

If the couple can commit—after many discussions and study—to a shared vision of the marriage and creating a Jewish home, then I believe both people need not be Jewish standing that day under the open wedding canopy.

This reflects a position that I arrived to four years ago. After a long period of my own study and discussions with colleagues and congregants, I decided to officiate at weddings for members of our congregation or children of members where one partner might not be Jewish, when there was a commitment to creating a Jewish home.

In part, my decision came from years of working with confirmation classes where we explore challenging issues thoughtfully. When I asked the students in each class to imagine their future partners, only a few believed that they would marry someone Jewish. But when I asked them to picture someday having a child—if they chose to and were so blessed: Would they want that child to have a bar or bat mitzvah? They all raised their hands.

Like Moses speaking to all of his community, Jew and non-Jew, ready to enter into covenant, we need to shift the focus of our conversation in the Jewish community. Instead of talking about intermarriage, we should talk about how we help our children, our grandchildren, and our community's children make Judaism a meaningful part of their future with whomever they choose as a partner, whether a heterosexual partner or same-sex.

We need to do this because we should be under no illusion that in our open society, where almost all barriers to Jews have come down, that any admonition from this *bima* would change the dynamic for a couple in the moment of their first crush or make a difference in whom one chooses as a life partner.

If we say what is spoken from many synagogue pulpits around the country: that you must marry someone Jewish, the only thing that would happen is that if our children fall in love with someone not Jewish, they may feel a twinge of guilt and perhaps ambivalence or anger about their own Judaism, and even estrangement from the Jewish community.

How different that moment could be if, instead of guilt, we offer the message: be proud of your Jewishness. Make it clear that Judaism is important to you and see if the person you are with--early on in the relationship--is willing to join you in this journey of creating a Jewish home. This is equally true if your partner is Jewish. While in general, having a Jewish family is easier when both are Jewish and therefore it is still desirable, this is not always the case. Two Jews can still have a mixed marriage through differences in religiosity, choices in observance and decisions about the Jewish education of the children.

Four years ago, I sent a letter to all members of Mount Zion about my position on officiating at wedding ceremonies. I have waited to speak from the pulpit until tonight because I wanted to have the experience of standing under the chuppah with many couples, to see the impact of my position at Mount Zion and beyond and to have the time during a sabbatical when I could view our Jewish, Midwest American community from a distance and reflect on the survival of the Jewish people.

Over these past years, 1/3 of the weddings I have performed have been between a Jew and non Jew. Let me acknowledge that I am uncomfortable with the term "non-Jew"; it is most frequently used because it the most accurate and inclusive, yet I do not like labeling a person with a negative attribute. This though is for another sermon.

In almost 1/3 of the ceremonies I have performed, the non-Jewish partner has decided to convert before the wedding. Conversion is a transformative process that should be seen as separate from marriage; that is, not done for anyone but oneself, based on ones' own beliefs. At the same time, we need not be shy about inviting conversion. Many have wondered why they were never asked, as if it were not possible, too difficult or perhaps they were not wanted. Every year, up to a dozen people choose Judaism at Mount Zion, some after years of marriage to a Jewish partner. These Jews-by-choice inspire us all by their commitment.

The final 1/3 of the weddings—it turns out to be even in this way—have been between two born Jewish partners. For all of the marriages, there was study, counseling and a commitment to creating a Jewish home and raising children--if they choose to have children and are so blessed--as Jews.

I try to meet in person with any couple who calls about marriage, to have a meaningful conversation and make a connection even if I do not end up officiating. There have been several couples who have decided, after our meetings, that they could not in good conscious be married by a rabbi because they were not ready to or interested in making these decisions or because they felt it most appropriate to have a justice of the peace officiate.

Some of these couples have continued to work with me on pre-marital counseling and become part of our congregation. Regardless of whether or not I officiate, all of them have been offered a blessing for their life together during a Shabbat service. This is in keeping with our congregational vision of being welcoming to all. Blessings are meant to be offered freely and joyfully. Marriage, as its name implies in the Hebrew, *kiddushin*, sanctification, has boundaries and must be selective. It includes those who choose to honor the meaning of that Jewish sanctification by creating a Jewish home.

My position on officiating at marriages is mine alone; not necessarily the other clergy at Mount Zion, nor necessarily of our lay leadership.

One last note about my position: because it is based on commitment to a Jewish home, it is important to have a formal place for discussing what this means. I have created a three part class: "Creating a Jewish Family; Building a Jewish Home" that focuses on the study of texts, of personal examples of observance and of central questions of being Jewish: What will Shabbat look like in our home? What will be done around Christian holidays? What Jewish holiday traditions will we create? What books, magazines, cook books will we have in our home? The couples answer these questions for themselves, not only for where they are today, but where they imagine themselves to be in a month, a year, in five years. Throughout the weeks together, I make it clear: We have so many models in this congregation of couples, both same faith and interfaith, who are successfully raising Jewish children and creating Jewish homes.

Tonight, I know that each person here will have listened to my words with her or his own filter of experiences, beliefs and choices. Not everyone here and not all of your children have made the choice to create an unambiguously Jewish home. Let me be clear. I recognize, of course, that there are differences of opinion on this topic and different ways interfaith couples make their decisions. And surely one can just as easily fall in love with a person committed to another faith making it harder to choose Judaism, and in some cases making Judaism not the right choice for the couple.

I do believe, and the research has borne out, that when it comes to raising kids, a clear commitment to one tradition for the children is the most developmentally healthy path, not putting the decision on the children who then have to choose between parents. Truth is, you never know what a child will choose as they get older, but a firm foundation in one tradition provides stability and identity formation that is so necessary. And, as a rabbi, I of course hope couples will choose Judaism as that one tradition, even though there have been times I have counseled choosing a different tradition when the circumstances merited it for the couple.

As a rabbi, I need to stand in moments of holiness, such as marriage, with integrity balancing the needs of the Jewish people as a whole--past, present and future—with the needs of every couple I meet. Inclusion should not override integrity; but our value of inclusion demands clear boundaries, reasons for all decisions and multiple paths for participation in our community for all. I pray that if you disagree with my views, you will respect my integrity, Please know as well, that I appreciate that every couple's circumstances can be different – there are so many dynamics involved; I welcome you

joyfully at Mount Zion however you have resolved things. There is no contradiction between articulating a position and then being welcoming to all who want to have Judaism, and Mount Zion, be a part of their lives.

When Moses invited everyone, Jew and non-Jew, into a covenant as they braced for the uncertain future, he offered a path of discussing the future of the Jewish people.

So too, I say again, I believe that the conversation about intermarriage needs to move away from the “problem” of intermarriage to the possibilities of commitment. To be more clear: we need to encourage our youth to say, with whomever they are dating, I want to have a Jewish future.

We have to worry less about the troubling facts that close to half of the marriages involving Jews are with non-Jews or the fact that only a third of children of intermarriages are raised as Jews here in St. Paul and surrounding areas. We have to worry less about the fact that before the Shoah, there were 7 Jews per every thousand people in the world; immediately after there were 4.7 and today only 2 Jews per every thousand in the world, 13.5 million Jews total in the world.

We have to worry less that when I type the word “Jewishness” in my computer, the spell check tries to replace my Jewishness with the word “Jewfishes.”

Ok, we can worry a little.

There is natural fear and trepidation for any minority in a majority culture. And it is clear that a significant part of our broader Jewish community for all intents and purposes is lost to the Jewish people in any meaningful way. We should focus on our diverse, broad segment of the Jewish population right here.

We can more productively worry about what kind of Judaism we are instilling in ourselves and our children, about the quality of the Jewishness of our homes.

We should worry that only 25% of Jewish households in St. Paul and surrounding areas light Shabbat candles and fewer make any distinction in Shabbat observance. We should worry that financial costs and at times desire still prevents many kids from going to Jewish camps and to Israel proven ways to develop healthy Jewish identities. For all of us, whether questions of marriage affects us directly, we should be concerned about creating, sustaining and nurturing the Jewishness of our homes and of the children of our community.

Why do we need to shift the conversation? Intermarriage has always been part of our reality. Moses himself was married to a Midianite. We bless our sons to this day in the name of Ephraim and Menashah, Joseph’s sons whose wife was Egyptian. Not to mention that all of Jacob’s 12 sons, who became the tribes, married outside of our people.

Ruth, a Moabite, whom we call the first convert, was first married without any problem or mention to her Jewish husband Boaz. It was not until the 5th century BCE that Ezra made the radical law to forbid all intermarriages, the time when Jewish status moved from being passed on from the father to the mother. This remained the test of Jewishness by birth until our Reform Movement’s 1983 decision to recognize children as Jews when born of one Jewish parent, whether father or mother, and raised as a Jew.

Intermarriage continued throughout the centuries: Why else do Eastern European Jews look Eastern European; Chinese Jews look Chinese, Iraqi Jews look middle eastern and on and on?

It seems that every millennia or so, radical shifts in understanding marriage are necessary. So it was with Ezra in the time of the 2nd Temple, forbidding intermarriage as a way to bring Jews back to monotheism; as well at that time creating a ketubah, a wedding contract, to give a woman legal rights in the marriage. Around 1000 years ago, in Germany, Rabbeinu Gershom went against all previous Jewish law and forbade polygamy based on his reading of Torah. Today, our circumstances are radically different than ever before. We live in an open, tolerant society and have significant numbers of people who are willing to be fellow travelers on this Jewish journey. It used to be, a century ago, when a person intermarried, he was trying to get away from Judaism; today it is almost entirely.... to simply get married.

And just as intermarriage has always been part of our community's reality, so too the worry about our survival as a people. Every generation has decried that we are the last Jews. The late Simon Rawidowicz, first chairperson of the Department of Near Eastern and Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, in a famous essay entitled, "Israel, The Ever-Dying People," wrote: "He who studies Jewish history will readily discover that there was hardly a generation in the Diaspora that did not consider itself the final link in Israel's chain....Each generation grieved not only for itself but also for the great past that was going to disappear forever, as well as the future of unborn generations who would never see the light of day."

In June of 1964, the cover story of Look Magazine was, "The Vanishing American Jew," predicting the disappearance of American Judaism by the end of the 20th century, not as a function of anti-Semitism and persecution, but rather as a result of assimilation. If you have never heard of Look magazine, it is because, yes, Look Magazine has vanished and we Jews are still here.

Yes, there is cause for worry, but let's focus that concern positively, in ways that generate excitement and inspire commitment.

Sociologist Steve Bayme writes: The single most effective response to the possibility of mixed marriage is to create a Jewish community and home life so attractive that children will perceive it as worth maintaining and transmitting.

Then when a couple stands under a chuppah, they will know it is not simply a nostalgic cultural symbol—a dressing up of a ceremony. The chuppah signifies the *mikdash m'at*, the small sanctuary of the Jewish home being created.

You stand here this day, all of you, before Adonai your God—Jewish men, women and children, and the fellow travelers who are part of your community who stand beside spouses, partners and children, all of you stand here to enter into sworn covenant with Adonai your God.

May this covenant be a covenant of life and blessing for our people.

Hotmeinu b'sefer hayyim, May we all be sealed in the Book of Life.