

Keruv - Strengthening Jewish Families - What's the Next Step?

Many of our synagogue community commented favorably on last month's bulletin column, in which I advocated removing impediments to making Jewish families with non-Jewish members welcome and comfortable in our synagogue.

Part of this process involves changing of the perception not only of Beth David, but of much of the Jewish People as being unwelcoming to non-Jews in our midst. We have such a long history of oppression, persecution and defamation by non-Jewish governments, host countries and neighbors, that we developed a "circle the wagons" mentality, feeling safe only among our own.

World events have done little to change that feeling in our own day. And in addition to external the menace is the ongoing threat of disappearance of the Jewish people thru cultural hemorrhage here in America - through apathy, blending in with the general culture, and ignorance because of lack of Jewish education, - all of which are the flip side of greater acceptance of Jews as individuals in our society. These issues continue to worry us, and, seen as a threat by "traditional" Jews, to cause many of us to draw further tightly into ourselves, and shut out what appear to be breaks in the chain.

Intermarriage can be a break in that chain, but it doesn't have to be.

Two Jews marrying each other have the greatest logical and statistical likelihood of continuing meaningful Jewish identity in their offspring. We encourage in every way possible, the chance that our children will marry other Jews. We tell them to marry Jews, we tell them why we want them to marry Jews, we send them to summer camps and colleges and graduate schools where there are potential Jewish mates, and hopefully, we surround them with so rich a Jewish life that they will of course want to recreate that life with a Jewish spouse in their own adult lives.

But the reality is that that is not the only way. Our children fall in love with non-Jews, many of whom become wonderful helpmates and spouses and parents to our grandchildren. And if we have succeeded in implanting the "I want my family to be Jewish" gene in our children, their spouses support and often push them towards that goal. Sometimes the non-Jew will convert before the marriage, sometimes they convert along the way, sometimes they don't convert at all. But if our own Jewish children lead the way, and we encourage and embrace and welcome them, then we can still help them create Jewish families. Sometimes these families have a greater degree of Jewish engagement than their parents. The proof is in looking around our own congregation to see that many of our most involved and observant families have a parent who was not born Jewish.

This is what Keruv – "bringing close" - is. But Keruv is more than welcoming, more than having or not having a non-Jewish parent on the bimah with his child, more than announcing a marriage in the bulletin. That may be a first step, to remove slights, or impediments to greater connection. But we need to go further. Real Keruv is active education, encouraged involvement and growth, and engaged mentoring of families to teach them how to be Jewish.

Non-Jewish spouses who are willing to make Shabbat need to be taught how to light candles , and say the berachot and how to bake challa and how to bless their children, and how to create a Shabbat atmosphere in their homes. Non-Jewish spouses who want to create Jewish families need to be paired with other families who come regularly to shul, to learn Hebrew and to learn how to follow the service and how to find it meaningful and spiritually transforming.

Young Jewish families, whether they have a non-Jewish spouse or not, need to learn how to put their children to bed Jewishly, how to put up mezuzas, how to keep Pesach, how to give tzedaka, how to name their children, how to give Jewish answers to the questions their kids ask them about God, and about life and death, and not just about why Santa doesn't come to our house.

And that is what I hope that this Keruv initiative that our congregation is beginning will grow into. I hope that we can create a whirlwind of Jewish activity and Jewish education and Jewish engagement that will sweep up families with non-Jews and families with Jews alike, and excite and inspire them to grow in their Jewish knowledge and their Jewish observance. Isn't that, after all, what the goal of our synagogue really is?

As always, I welcome your comments and feedback.

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