

Not All Jewish Heroes Are Jewish

January 17, 2014

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Last month, Reform Jewish leaders from across North America gathered at our Biennial assembly in San Diego. As is customary, the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Rick Jacobs, offered a keynote address. Rabbi Jacobs called upon congregations to practice “audacious hospitality,” to be welcoming to all who might enter our portals. Specifically, Rabbi Jacobs urged us all to open our arms to every kind of marriage and family in our midst. Unafraid of controversy, he even said that, in today’s world, “Being against intermarriage is like being against gravity.”

Rabbi Jacobs reminded us that the Jewish community in the United States had sought and achieved acceptance unparalleled in the history of the world. Jews share our neighborhoods, our schools, our friendships, and so many other aspects of our lives with a diverse array of our fellow Americans. As Rabbi Jacobs said, none of us wishes to reverse our acceptance, to go back to the ghetto. And if we live together, we will eventually choose one another as partners. As sure as gravity pulls us to the Earth, intermarriage is a reality in our congregations and communities.

But Rabbi Jacobs went further: He suggested that intermarriage isn’t a bad thing, a harsh reality to be endured. Instead, he insists that you, non-Jews who have joined our community, add to our strength. Admittedly, studies indicate that children with two Jewish parents are more likely to be active Jewish adults than children with one Jewish parent and one non-Jewish parent. But likelihood is not destiny. We, Jews and non-Jews raising Jewish children together in our congregation, can tip the scales in favor of a Jewish future. Children who attend Jewish camps are more likely than those who don’t to identify strongly as Jewish adults, as do kids who are seriously engaged in Jewish education into the teen years, who are in a Jewish youth group, or go to Israel.

Rabbi Jacobs emphasized that non-Jews who enter our portals become part of our community. Happily, some eventually see themselves as Jews, and formally enter the covenant as Jews. Most, though, will remain non-Jewish. Still, as you attend a Shabbat service or help build the Sukkah, drive Religious School carpool or chaperone a youth group event, participate in preparing the Passover Seder or cook with the Temple group at Our House, our non-Jewish members add to our numbers, augment our service to the community, and enhance the holiness of our synagogue.

Rabbi Jacobs isn’t the first President of the Union for Reform Judaism to encourage congregations to honor non-Jews raising Jewish children in our midst. Several years ago, at a similar Biennial Convention, Rabbi Jacobs’ predecessor, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, asked a woman to stand. Her name is Helen Dreyfus, and she is a member of Congregation Emanu El in Houston. Helen’s late husband was Jewish, and Helen is not. Helen faithfully raised her children as Jews, during her husband’s lifetime and after he died, when the children were still at home. As it happens, I knew Helen’s husband, as he had been an associate in my father’s law firm. I was so moved, as Rabbi Yoffie honored Helen in the presence of Reform Jewish leaders from across North America, and he encouraged all of us to honor parents like Helen similarly in our own congregations.

In response, I created a program called, “Not All Jewish Heroes Are Jewish.” Heroes. I chose the word carefully. I knew that not every non-Jewish spouse had initially been welcomed with open arms, either by their partner’s relatives or by the congregation. I suspected that many had drawn the inference that they, the non-Jewish partners, were somehow doing something terrible to Judaism or the Jewish people, as though they were villains.

Nothing could be further from the truth. You who are not Jewish, but who are raising your children as Jews, have made a tremendous sacrifice. Your Jewish congregation and family should celebrate your gift to Judaism and the Jewish people. You are the heroes, going way out of your way to assure the Jewish future.

Some of you will protest: "It's not a sacrifice," I've been told. In some families, the non-Jewish partner is more active in the Temple than the Jewish one, and is thrilled to have Jewish children. That's particularly true for those who were raised with little or no religion yourselves, or who have rejected the religion of your childhood. Still, the reality is that you are raising your children with a religious identity you do not personally share. That, my friends, is a sacrifice: for your spouse and for your children. It's also a sacrifice that benefits our congregation and the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Even Rabbi Yoffie, who preceded Rabbi Jacobs, wasn't the first rabbi to honor non-Jews who helped to raise Jewish children. No, Moses, the very first rabbi, holds that distinction, as he honored his father-in-law, Jethro.

This week's Torah portion is named for Jethro, the star of the story Luke read for us tonight. But that story isn't the only remarkable feature of this week's Torah reading. In fact, the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, including the Ten Commandments, is found in this portion called "Jethro."

Our rabbis of old puzzled: The revelation of Torah is arguably the most important section in the entire Torah. How could it go by the name of a non-Jew? To make matters more complicated for the ancient rabbis, Jethro isn't merely a non-Jew. He's called "the Priest of Midian," in other words, the religious leader of an idolatrous sect.

The rabbis, of course, have an answer to their own question. The Ten Commandments are included in a portion under the heading of the name of a non-Jew to convey an important message: These injunctions are not for Jews alone. Indeed, the Ten Commandments have been embraced by Christian and Jew alike, and analogous moral codes are found in other religions as well.

I would like to suggest another answer. The Ten Commandments are included in Jethro's portion in honor of Jethro. No, he isn't an Israelite; but his grandchildren are. Moreover, like many non-Jewish grandparents of Jewish children growing up in our congregation, Jethro is supportive of his grandchildren's religious heritage. He praises the God of Israel, and gives thanks for the favors that God has bestowed upon our people.

This week, I received a hand-written note from an older member of our congregation, who had received my letter about tonight's service. She and her husband don't get out at night, so she couldn't plan to be here, but she wanted me to know how pleased she was to be recognized. She wrote, "My children and my grandchildren are my legacy." Similarly, Jethro's daughter and son-in-law, and his grandchildren, his Jewish family, are his legacy. Heroically, Jethro makes no attempt to indoctrinate them to the faith of Midian. Instead, he praises and supports them. Indeed, like you whom we honor tonight, Jethro makes the Jewish future possible.

Jethro is a Jewish hero, and so is each man and woman we honor tonight.

Amen.