

Blessings In Our Midst
Rabbi Mona Alfi
Yom Kippur Day – October 9, 2008

I stand today under this beautiful chuppah – a constant reminder of our values at B'nai Israel. A chuppah is modeled after Abraham's tent, open on all four sides so that no one who needed shelter would have to look for the way in, but rather, no matter what direction they were coming from, they would find an entrance right in front of them, an open invitation to find refuge from the heat of the day, and the dangers of wandering in the wilderness.

Abraham was known for his hospitality, for going out of the way to welcome the stranger, to offer them sustenance, and to make them feel at home. So important is the mitzvah of welcoming the stranger into our midst, that the Talmud teaches us that "greater than the reception of God is the practice of hospitality."¹

This belief is central to who we are at B'nai Israel. From our inception, our members would strive to welcome newcomers into our midst, and to reach out to them and make them feel at home.

Sy Opper, of blessed memory, used to love to tell a story of when he was a young man living in his parent's home. There was an open house every Sunday at the Opper home, and no one ever left without first having something to eat. One day a man came to their house for dinner, ate, and then left. Someone asked Sy's dad who he was, and Sy's dad said to his friend "How should I know, I thought he came with you!"

This open door policy was not unique to the Oppers, and was reflective of the values of our community here in Sacramento.

Over time, the value of hospitality, of welcoming people into our midst has expanded to include not only Jews who have moved here from other places, but also different types of families and individuals who have not always felt welcomed in synagogues.

At B'nai Israel, we are single and married, straight and gay, with children and without. We are Jewish, and we are the ones who have chosen to pitch our tents with the Jewish people.

We are people who seek shelter and community under this chuppah, and yearn to experience the sacred and to find inspiration so that we might live lives imbued with meaning and purpose.

One of my favorite descriptions of our community comes from the book of Exodus (Ex. 12:37-38) at the time when we left Egypt. The Torah says: "The Children of Israel

¹ The Torah, a Modern Commentary, p. 125, based on Shev. 35b, and Sab. 127a

journeyed from Raamses to Sukkot, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children, and a mixed multitude went up with them...”

A “mixed multitude” is understood to be those Egyptians who wanted to escape the same oppression that we suffered, and they were willing to take a leap of faith, and follow us into the wilderness, into the unknown.

We are like the mixed multitudes who left Egypt, diverse in our background, joined together by shared values and dreams of a better tomorrow, not sure where our path is taking us, but nonetheless, Jews and non-Jews going down that path together, hopeful, and full of faith.

As I have often taught, we have *never* been a homogenous people - that is a myth that we like to perpetuate. I know that to be true even in a family with two Jewish parents - each of my own parents came from Jewish families that practiced Judaism in radically different ways - each spoke a *mamaloshen* – or a Jewish dialect, the other could not have understood, each had a different set of religious practices, one side ate gefilte fish, the other rice and corn at Passover - but both were authentically Jewish.

As we are reminded by the Torah, we have been from our inception a mixed multitude, a people comprised of Jews by birth, Jews by choice, and those who have chosen Jewish partners, and in turn married their lives to ours, they establish Jewish homes and raise their children according to our customs and rituals.

People tend to think that each religion is monolithic and dogmatic. That there is a right way and a wrong way. That everything is black and white. However, Judaism is far from monolithic, and continues to lack uniformity either in our practice or makeup.

We have always been an immigrant religion with new people choosing to join our fold formally through conversion, and others who have not converted, but who have joined their lives with ours. And the fact that in Israel we have not one, but two chief rabbis, one Sephardic and one Ashkenazi, reminds us that even amongst the Orthodox, we have diversity.

A mixed multitude. That is what we are. Look around you. Each of us has a different story, a different set of religious practices, a different understanding of what it means to be a part of the Jewish community.

And it is from this diversity that we have drawn strength and nourished our intellectual vibrancy, and exercised flexibility throughout the centuries.

One of the things I love about our movement is its name. We are “Reform” Jews, not “Reformed” Jews. The very name is a reminder to us that Judaism is not a static religion. As Reform Jews, we are constantly called upon to examine our beliefs, to search for meaning in our faith, and to consider, and re-consider what we believe and what we do.

I have gone through many different incarnations as a Reform Jew. I have adopted and discarded, and adopted again different practices. I have wrestled with my faith and continue to examine my core beliefs.

Over the last 15 years God has put before me countless families that have made me reevaluate my role as someone who officiates at weddings, as well as what it means to be part of a *k'hillat kodesh* - a sacred community.

One of these beliefs is about whether or not I would officiate at the marriage of two people, one who is Jewish, and one who is not.

When I was ordained, I was sure that I would not officiate at such a marriage. I believed that it was possible to welcome families into our midst without my officiating at their wedding. Over time, and because of my personal experiences with so many of our families here at B'nai Israel, after teaching your children, and being part of your celebrations and sitting with you during times of loss, I began to reexamine my beliefs.

How could I turn a couple away when they come to our doors, asking to stand under our chuppah, to have a Jewish ceremony, and ready to raise their children as Jews? And then say to them, I cannot marry you, but I welcome your family into our midst.

Recent studies done by the Steinhardt Institute at Brandies University showed that the biggest threat to Jewish life in the Diaspora is not the fact that Jews fall in love and marry non-Jews. Rather it is that the Jewish community has not created enough of the kind of meaningful experiences needed for our traditions to be passed on to the next generation.²

I believe that when *any* couple comes to us and wants to raise their children as Jews we have an obligation to help them create those meaningful experiences that provide spiritual nourishment and joyous expression that is central to Judaism.

And we as a synagogue should strive to make B'nai Israel a welcoming environment for the parents and families of all of our children, and find a way to support all of our members in having a richer Jewish experience.

In a country where we are given so many choices – including the choice not to affiliate with the Jewish community, we should take the time to thank all of our members for choosing to be a part of this congregation – but in particular, we should thank those who truly out of choice come to B'nai Israel.

How often do we take the time to appreciate the gift we have been given?

Often it is our non-Jewish spouses, and their families who are the ones that remind of us our obligations to our community and our faith.

² Op-Ed: Putting intermarriage in perspective, by Leonard Saxe, Fern Chertok, and Benjamin Phillips, JTA, March 17, 2008

Perhaps one of the most famous intermarried families in the Torah is that of Moses and Tziporah, she is not only not Jewish, but is also the daughter of a Midianite Priest. Imagine what it was like for her to bring Moses home to her parents! How thrilled they must have been to see a non-Midianite who was on the lam for murder courting their daughter!

And yet, it was Tziporah who reminded Moses of his obligation to circumcise his sons, and she supported him when he said he needed to go back to Egypt and free his people, and it was her father Jethro who shlepped out to the desert to offer Moses help and advice when his job was overwhelming him.

Moses could not have been Moses had he not had Tziporah or Jethro helping him and backing him up.

We have many Tziporahs, and many Jethros in our congregation. Many individuals whose contribution to our community is invaluable. Men and women who are dedicated not only to their family but also to our congregation, and our community. They volunteer at events and chair committees, serve as *shameses* on Shabbat and the High Holidays, they volunteer in our office and they sing in our choir. We have people who sit at their partners side at services, even though our services can oftentimes feel foreign or alienating to them. We have parents who schlep kids to religious school, and fundraise so their children can go to Israel with the confirmation class. We have parents who have learned Hebrew so they can help their children prepare for Bar and Bat Mitzvah. And we have members who are active adherents of other faiths, but who have made the very unselfish gift of raising Jewish children and having Jewish homes.

I am in awe of the generosity that lies behind these actions.

Over the course of the last year we have been engaged in a congregational dialogue about the role of members of our congregation who are not Jewish. We have striven to clarify as a congregation what are the roles of different committees and ritual responsibilities.

And I believe that as a Reform congregation it is important for us to periodically revisit our beliefs and to question if our practices are in sync with our ideals, and to see if we are communicating our ideals in a clear and understandable fashion. The goal of this committee was not to diminish the contributions of our members who are not Jewish, but rather to find a way to make B'nai Israel as an open and welcoming as possible in the context of being a religious Jewish institution.

But in all of our discussions, I think there is one thing that we cannot say often enough to our members who are not Jewish, and that is simply this. Thank you.

Thank you for all you do to raise Jewish children and grandchildren. Thank you for supporting your spouse, and being at their side at services, at committee meetings, and helping renovate our sanctuary. Thank you for pushing your own comfort level and joining us in holiday celebrations, life cycle events, and facing down anti-Semitism.

Thank you for all you do to enrich the life of our congregation. Your energy, your support, your participation is an important part of what makes B'nai Israel as special as it is.

And I would like to say thank you for the blessing you have been to our congregation by inviting you up to the *bimah* to offer a blessing on you. If you feel shy about coming up, and would feel more comfortable coming up with your partner, feel free to do so, or if you would prefer to stay seated, that is alright as well.

But I invite you up, not to embarrass you, and not to single you out, but for the same reason I invite up the many different groups and individuals that are called up during the course of the High Holidays, it is to say thank you, and to recognize your contributions to B'nai Israel.

(Invite up members who are not Jewish)

May the Holy One, the Creator of all people, bless each of you as you stand on our *bimah* today. We thank the Holy One for the blessing of family, of community and friendship, and we pray that we always be like Abraham and Sarah so that all who join us find welcoming hearts and open minds.

May the Holy One bless you and keep you.

May the Holy One always turn towards you with kindness and compassion.

May the Holy One grant you lives filled with joy, happiness and love. But most of all, may the Holy One grant you peace.

And let us say: Amen!