

Chosenness: How Far Can we Open our Tents? On Interfaith Involvement in the Jewish Community

Parashat Ekev

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I love being an M.O.T. Because I'm an M.O.T., I have a wonderful job, I get to speak in front of all of you, study Jewish texts with you, pray with you. Yes; I love being an M.O.T. Oh, excuse me, am I speaking in code? M.O.T., you know, "Member of the Tribe," a "Jew" a "chosen one." So yes, suffice it to say that I love being an M.O.T., a Jew. As Jews, we have been given the designation the "chosen people." But just what does this mean regarding how we relate to others?

In our Torah portion this week, *parashat Ekev*, we learn about the benefits of being God's chosen people and observing God's law. As part of the chosen people, we are committed to safeguarding our *brit*, our covenant with God. But this does not come without warning. Regarding our "chosenness" to receive the Promised Land, The Torah reads (Deut. 10:6):

ו וְיָדַעְתָּ, כִּי לֹא בְצַדִּיקוּתְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
... נָתַן לְךָ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַטּוֹבָה הַזֹּאת—לְרִשְׁתָּהּ... 6 Know therefore that it is not for your righteousness
that the LORD your God gives you this good land to
possess it...

What exactly does chosenness mean? Well, this passage is a reminder that being "chosen" does not mean "better." It is not a statement about our comparison with other people, but a statement about our obligations to others and to God. It is not because we are exemplary and can be a "light unto the nations" but rather, because we might *strive* to be a light unto the nations. We are humans in progress, just like anybody else.

In our own modern communities the issue of chosenness certainly comes up regarding our relationship with other faiths. One of the first questions I am asked by many people here as the new rabbi of this community is "Rabbi, we have a really strong relationship with the local churches and temples in the area. It's really important to us that you become involved in our interfaith council, that you work with other clergy people in our town. Tell us, rabbi, is this a priority to you?" Indeed, it is.

But, I might ask you, if we are cordial and collegial and create joint partnerships with members of other religious faiths, in a safe environment, in non-denominational interfaith services outside of our existing services, should we not also strive, with as much fervor, to be welcoming of members of other faiths, people who are not Jewish within our services and programs? Are both interfaith efforts important to us? Or, does one type of interfaith involvement cause us to feel proud, while the other type of interfaith involvement causes us anxiety?

I am well aware that not everyone in our community is an M.O.T., that not everyone is Jewish. But I'd love to begin a conversation with you about what that means to you.

What does that mean to you? When I use the words "interfaith" or "intermarriage" or "mixed marriage" or "non-Jewish parent," I realize that to some of you those words cause "red

flags.” You might defer to the Jewish [quote] “tradition,” you might want to look at our existing “policy.” Of course it’s probably normal that some “mixing” or “blending” of religious faiths, yes, even if our shuls, doesn’t feel “right,” that it doesn’t feel “normal.” That’s because for thousands of years it, indeed, was not the norm. For thousands of years, it was socially only appropriate, and sometimes only permitted to marry someone of the Jewish faith. Some of you may say that this is still the case.

But for some of you, when I use the words “interfaith” or “intermarriage” or “mixed marriage” or “non-Jewish parent,” I am speaking your language. You feel welcomed. You, yourself, might identify in this way, or once identified in this way, or are married to someone who is not Jewish or your kids are married to someone who is not Jewish and therefore you are connected with someone who identifies in this way. When I use this language, at first you might fear what the answers to my questions will be: “Will you officiate at my son/daughter’s wedding? Will you officiate at my funeral? But my use of this language speaks to you, it shows you that I am not afraid, that I will be welcoming of you and your loved ones.

The issue of how to involve non-Jewish spouses or family members in our community services is not a new one. And yes, people have asked me this question already. Yes, it is one that is deeply important to me. But my answer is normally “involving non-Jewish family members in *what?*” Are we talking about a non-Jew wearing a tallit? Reading from the Torah? Sitting in our service? Standing on our bimah?

Let me be clear: It’s one thing to be so welcoming that we violate Jewish law completely. For a non-Jew to get up on the bimah and read from the Torah, a sacred text that has only been dedicated to our people, and wear a tallit, a garment that is reserved only for Jews, well, now...that is something that is just not in sync with our Jewish tradition. Not only am I sure that most of us would probably agree, but I’ve never heard of a non-Jew who actually wanted to do that. I wouldn’t doubt that there is someone out there...I have just never met them...(Although I have seen many non-Jews wear a tallit after a synagogue usher assumed they were Jewish and gave them one!) But yes, that’s one thing, to be so welcoming that we violate Jewish law completely. In my line of business, violating Jewish law is...well...not something that goes over so well.

But it’s another thing to say: “well, I’m not sure that we should involve someone who is not Jewish there...because...well...it just doesn’t “feel right.”

To say that something doesn’t “feel right” is to ignore our Jewish tradition and to rely merely on our guts to give us the answer. Sometimes, in very specific cases (you know, like saving a life and laws like that...) I think it’s warranted to use a gut-check to make our decisions. But, I do think we are doing an incredible disservice to our greater Jewish community when we base our decisions on the inclusivity of interfaith families merely on a “gut-check” without much basis in Jewish law.

Let me be clear regarding how this plays out in our own community. In many ways, our synagogue is quite welcoming in this regard. We, of course, welcome anyone into our services, Jews and non-Jews. We involve non-Jews at our lifecycle celebrations to lead us in English prayers. And, we have members who are not Jewish! So we are doing a lot of great things to make interfaith families feel welcome. But, I think we could do more within the confines of Jewish law if we are able to set aside our “gut check.” So that’s why I’m coming to you. Because I want you to share with me what you think.

One could say that we have two choices. And that's what most people think when they ask me, "rabbi, what do you think about interfaith involvement?" (Quite the open-ended question that it is!) When they ask about interfaith involvement, they think that I'm either going to say to them "sorry, no way" or "sure...I'll do it all..." So, yes, most people think that we have just two choices – to keep to the [quote] "tradition" and to change the [quote] "tradition."

Our choice is not to choose between the tradition and the realities of our modern world. Those are not our choices. We have only once choice. Our one choice is how we thoughtfully and with integrity to both tradition and change come up with ways that balance both of these important values. We are part of the Conservative Movement, and even before the Conservative Movement was created, for thousands of years, rabbis have constantly been re-tweaking Jewish law given the realities of their time. I invite you to privately share your thoughts with me about this matter. We, too, are part of this conversation.

And I hope that you will be open-minded in listening to others discuss these matters. For those of you who support interfaith involvement without restrictions, please sit down with someone who can explain why involving a non-Jew in different parts of the service violates their understanding of Jewish law. For those of you who identify with tradition, please speak with someone who is hurt when we will not allow them on the bimah to watch their child become a bar/bat mitzvah.

In the past, conversations regarding interfaith involvement have had the tone of "where do we draw the line?" But I would love for us to change our question from "where do we draw the line" to "Where can we open our tents?" Doing so changes the tone of the conversation from one focused on policy, to one focused on people. I hope we are in the business of the latter.

"Know therefore that it is not for your righteousness that the LORD your God gives you this good land to possess it..." (Deut. 9:6a)

Yes, this passage reminds us that as M.O.T.'s, as chosen people, we are not any better than any other group. Rather, we should *strive* to become moral exemplars for the world around us, even if we ourselves are not yet perfect.

But there is actually a second part to the verse. Reading on, we learn that not only should we understand how lucky we are to receive the Promised Land – despite our shortcomings, but we also should be reminded (ibid):

כִּי עַם-קָשָׁה-עֲרָף, אַתֶּה.

for you are a stiffnecked people.

Now most understand this as a negative trait: that people who are "stiffnecked" are inflexible, not able to see things differently, they never want to make "changes." But others see this as a good quality, claiming that it was our "stiffnecked" nature as a Jewish people that helped us endure persecution throughout the centuries.

It is our sacred task as a Jewish community, as M.O.T.'s, as chosen people, to not already assume we are, but to *strive* to be a light unto the nations. And in doing so, let us carefully examine when we need to be stiffnecked in keeping to our Jewish traditions and when being stiffnecked is getting in the way of warmly and widely opening our tents to those other nations around us.