

Parashat Lech L'cha
HUC-JIR Senior Sermon
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What they don't tell you when you apply to Rabbinical school, is that waiting to hear back from the committee will take, give or take a day or two, *forever*. Okay, technically it may not take *that* long, but for me, having quit smoking only a month prior to applying, the waiting seemed especially long. Finally, when the acceptance letter did indeed arrive, I was just about the happiest, most relieved person that ever walked the face of the earth. Then came the forms. There was a sheet for choosing a campus, a sheet for getting your vaccines, a sheet for a thorough physical to get the doctor to sign, and even a sheet to ensure no criminal charges were ever brought against you. And then there was the blue sheet. The blue sheet, for those of you unfamiliar with HUC jargon, is a policy consent form which states: ““I understand that it is the policy and practice of HUC-JIR that any student currently engaged, married, or partnered/committed to a person who is not Jewish by birth or conversion will not be ordained or invested.” In other words – interfaith marriage is a no-no for Rabbinical and Cantorial students.

At the bottom of the blue sheet stretched an empty line, waiting to be covered by my signature. We stared at each other, the form and I, for a long while. All sorts of impossible questions filled my mind. If I signed it, would that mean that if I met that special person, and they weren't Jewish, that they would *have* to convert in order for me to be ordained? Is that even a worthy motive for conversion to Judaism? If making a Jewish family is at stake, can't I have one with a non-Jewish spouse? What if my spouse was Jewish, but disinterested? Would that then be okay? As an education student, already at HUC for three years, I was fully aware that some of my classmates were born and raised in families where a Jew and a non-Jew wed; if I signed, what would that say about these unions? That they are regrettable? If I signed, what would it say about

my classmates, the children of those unions? What if by signing this sheet, I was signing away an important spiritual tenet of mine? Which is – it is love which binds a family together, and it will be through love that I will make a Jewish family, a new Jewish family, a unique Jewish family, no matter the obstacles? If I signed, what kind of rabbi would that make me?

Over 2 decades ago, the Reform movement, keeping up with a long and proud tradition of adapting to the flow of life and the varying needs of the Jewish community, decided to adopt a policy of outreach towards interfaith families. “Intermarried? Reform Judaism Welcomes You – yours, mine, ours: Every couple begins with two individuals from different backgrounds”¹ this, at least on paper, is what the movement stands for. Understanding that if it kept shunning these families, that they could be forever lost to the Jewish people, the Reform movement opened its arms and synagogue doors wide to interfaith families.

But by the same token, the movement did not, and still does not condone intermarriage. Embrace intermarried couples – yes. Condone interfaith unions – no. We don't go that far. Well, if you think about it, why not? Why don't we go that far?

Because we all know the statistics. We've all heard the grim predictions. Interfaith marriage. “the single greatest threat to Jewish continuity today,”² so we're told. Almost 50% and rising. Who wouldn't be scared? Despite that, I would like to state my thesis right up front, just so that there's no confusions or misunderstandings. I am for interfaith marriage. I really am.

Even saying this out loud is a scary thing. It feels like going far, too far. Which is exactly what's at the heart of parashat Lech L'cha. Lech L'cha is the quintessential story of going too far, but in the best possible sense. The story of Avram the ultimate believer who went far from all that he knew, all that was safe, and comfortable and familiar, and took a leap of faith, following a voice. God says “lech”, and Avram “holech.” Certain. Determined. Fearless. Really? The truth is,

1 URJ Department of Outreach and Synagogue Community pamphlet.

2 A Tale of Two Jewries – The Inconvenient Truth for American Jews / Steven M. Cohen

fear dominated Avram's every step, as it does those of any self-reflective iconoclast. Four separate times in the course of the parsha God sends reassurances Avram's way. Four times. *Avram, I will make of you a great nation. Fear not Avram, I will make your offspring as countless as the dust of the earth. Really, Avram – look to the heaven and try, if you can, to count the stars; 'so shall your offspring be.'* Believe it Avram, I will make you exceedingly numerous, exceedingly fertile, I will make nations out of you! Avram's fear you see, as he looks to the future, is the same as ours. His concern mirrors ours with perfect clarity – continuity. "הָרַחֵם לִי לֹא נִתְּתָה זָרַע". “You have given me no seed.” How will I know, Avram wonders, that my essence will survive me? How will I know that I am leaving something behind in this world? How will I know that I won't simply disappear? How will we, the Jewish people know?

It is not mere insignificant repetition – God reassuring Avram four times that his seed will be numerous. Four times is necessary. Four times isn't even enough. When we reach the particular point in the parasha which we have come to know as the covenant between the pieces, we are told that after cutting up the animals, Avram falls asleep. As he sleeps, וַיִּהְיֶה אֵימָה חֲשֵׁכָה גְדֹלָה נִפְלֵת עָלָיו; we are told; “and a great dark dread descended upon him.” By this particular point in the parasha, Avram has already been reassured three times; why the darkness? It is unclear what this darkness is exactly. But I believe it is the single greatest darkness all of us, as individuals and as peoples, have to face; the dread of being finite.

On some level, all Jews live with this dread. The survival of the Jewish people concerns us greatly. Jews are a minority in America, and we, present and future Jewish leaders, are trying hard to keep it from disappearing. If interfaith marriage is the single greatest threat to Jewish continuity today, then Jewish leadership is focused on doing whatever is possible to craft a response; to either keep it from happening or to minimize the damage. Some clergy refuse to perform interfaith marriages. Some clergy who do perform intermarriages, try to act carefully; they set up criteria for

such couples; an introduction to Judaism class is involved, a promise to have a Jewish home, a promise to raise the kids solely as Jews (no xmas!), sometimes the non-Jewish spouse must be perceived as “convertible” as a condition for the couple to be wed by the Rabbi. And it is clear that all of them, both those who perform interfaith marriages and those who do not, act out of a conviction that every decision they make affects the future of the Jewish people. The Jewish people with an intermarriage rate of around 47%. How will we know we won't just disappear? - And a great dark dread descended.

Avram was far more fortunate than we. God, understanding full-well the deep human need for self-continuation, aware of how utterly overwhelming fear of disappearance can be for a finite creature, decides to take action. God knows that Avram cannot live up to his spiritual mission, cannot follow the path of his soul if he is consumed with existential anxiety. God therefore takes the matter wholly and completely out of Avram's control. 'Avram,' says God, no good can come of you seeing the world through the lens of this fear. Listen to me, this matter is out of your hands, it is in mine; 'I shall make you exceedingly numerous,' *you* worry about everything else.

And so it goes for Avram. But what about us? What about our great dark dread? Who will take it away? Who will solve the problem of intermarriage? Who will give us a promise that we will be numerous so we can be free to follow the path of our souls and live up to our spiritual mission?

I think we will have to do so ourselves. Because in our great fear and concern about Jewish survival, all well-meaning and good, and authentic concern, we lost track of what we should have been looking at all along, which is that intermarriage *is not* the single greatest threat to Jewish continuity today; irrelevance is.

The Reverend Barbara Lundblad³ often teaches about fear. Fear unnamed,' she says, 'does

3 Transforming the Stone / Barbara K. Lundblad (p. 18)

not go away. It lingers inside. It turns inward as depression or outward as verbal and physical violence. Transformation,' she teaches, 'cannot happen if fears are discounted or denied.' And I believe the fear the Jewish community is not really naming, the fear denied, hidden, tucked away and yet always present, always there, is that fear of irrelevance. We named *intermarriage*. We did not name *irrelevance*.

Intermarriage is “easy” to pick on. It seems so doable, so simple; if only we could get everybody to marry Jewish, our synagogues would be packed to the gills, our religious schools would be places children rejoice at and beg their parents to take them, people would quote from Talmud in daily conversation, and everybody, everybody would have wall-to-wall pious, liberal (and committed) Jewish grandchildren. Right? Maybe not.

Rabbinic Judaism constructed a system which served Jews excellently especially in the middle ages, the goal of which was ultimately to keep the Jews separate from other peoples and give them some sense of pride. Emancipation in Europe changed all that. America changed all that. It has been a long long time since we existed as a hermetically sealed group. But the struggle to adapt, to rethink, to regroup, to redefine – that struggle is still very much alive and well. Interfaith marriage shapes anew the membrane of our organism. Interfaith marriage forces us to change. Interfaith marriage calls upon us to define for ourselves who we are: a people, a religion, a culture, or a nostalgic dream? Interfaith marriage demands that we take a long hard look at ourselves, redraw our boundaries, and examine our relevance. - And a great dark dread descended?

So to go back to my initial point – embracing interfaith unions – let's assume for a moment that we're up for the challenge; Reform Jews have not been traditionally known to shy away from a good challenge, after all. Let's assume for a moment that we really went for it, that we really did a “lech l'cha” not just any lech – a lech, jump, spring, leap-as-high-as-you-can-and-touch-the-sky-l'cha, and really took that extra step. Let's say we stopped dancing at two weddings – embracing

the couple but not the union. Let's say we opened our arms wide, stopped mourning interfaith marriages, and instead fully embraced them? We're already so close!

We may be close, but still, change is hard. Major change is near impossible. I want to share one example with you of a Jewish community that decided to make some changes⁴. I won't tell you what the changes were up front, but I will quote the response recorded by another part of the Jewish community, who disapproved of the changes (to put it mildly): “these people have done an abomination.” “they are faithless people.” The document goes on to use language such as “traitors,” “evil,” sinning.” “wickedness,” “heinous darkness,” “A cry for generations,” and “A bitter venom that like a viper, will secrete [its fluid] to destroy the faith, and the governance of the state, and the existence of the world.” Tough stuff. The year: 1819, the venue: Hamburg, Germany. The crime: changing the order and content of the prayer service, playing instruments in the synagogue on shabbat, having men and women sing together, praying in a language other than Hebrew, and referring to the synagogue as “temple.” The founding moments of what we now know as Reform Judaism, the spiritual descendants of which are sitting in this sanctuary today. The prediction was the destruction of the faith, and the governance of the state, and the existence of the world. Well, today is Thursday, and we've just read from Torah as we do every week, twice a week, and we prayed as a community as we do here every day, and I think, correct me if I'm wrong, that we Reform Jews are doing pretty well. The world also, to the best of my understanding, did not come to an end.

But how do we know, to ask the same question again, that if we take the big leap, and embrace interfaith marriage, that we don't put an end to the Jewish people? We don't. Like Avram, we just have to trust that sometimes, just like in the case of the Reform movement, when a change is a genuine answer to genuine needs, an entirely new way of understanding ourselves and our

4 Eleh Divrei Habrit - קובץ החרמות ופסקי ההלכות נגד ראשוני הרפורמים בהמבורג : כולל אגרותיהם של גדולי הדור, החתם סופר, רי עקיבא איגר, ושאר חכמי ישראל.

relationship to God and humanity can result from it. From where I stand, that is positive change. Positive also is the hope for addressing our unnamed fear of irrelevance.

We enjoy the consequences of past changes every day; both small steps, and large leaps. In truth, we've come so far so fast that we don't even pause to notice the great distance we've traveled. To prove it, I will use as an example a speech⁵, this time more recent, about interfaith marriage. In this speech, more than once intermarriage is referred to as a “*tide*” that is running against us, a *threatening reality*, something we must *wage a battle* against. This, I would wager to say, is language that makes most of us quite uncomfortable. So you may be surprised to know that the speaker of that speech is none other than Rabbi Alexander Schindler, זכרו לברכה, then President of the UAHC, now the URJ, in the famous speech which founded the commission on Outreach. Alex Schindler had the foresight and the magnitude of spirit & vision to see that we “must do everything possible to draw the non-Jewish spouse of mixed marriage into Jewish life.” And yet the kind of language of “tides” and “battles” he used is no longer fitting for us. It's a bit like hearing an instrument out of tune; like hearing the screech of chalk as it scrapes against blackboard. This language is no longer good for us because we *have* changed. It was good enough for 1978, when converts to Judaism were thought of as “other”, let alone interfaith couples. But now we can do better. We should do better. We have come far. We need to come further. And coming further means going back to question our most basic assumptions about interfaith marriages and the future of the Jewish people. It means thinking anew of who we think of as Jewish. Of *what* we think of as Jewish.

It's all nice and well, but there's one more thing; statistics. Statistics say⁶ that if you compare the intermarried to the in-married, you will find that only half as many intermarried observe Passover, Hannukha or Yom Kippur, only 7% of them have close Jewish friends, only a

5 Schindler Establishes Outreach - <http://urj.org/schindler/>

6 A Tale of Two Jewries.

handful of them attend services at least monthly, light shabbat candles, keep kosher at home, volunteer in Jewish organizations, and the bottom line: fewer and fewer of them stand a chance to have Jewish grandchildren in two generations. Well, there we have it. Can't argue with statistics.

But I am Israeli, and I will argue with statistics if I so please. Because statistics don't tell me what would happen to these families if we stopped being ambivalent about them. Statistics don't tell me what would happen if we welcomed their unions just as we do Jewish/Jewish unions. Statistics don't tell me what would happen if we really took the challenge and told ourselves to ourselves anew, because we have come far, but the language of fear and discomfort still dominates our discourse.

The “Problem” of intermarriage, the “products” of intermarriage. We've all heard that. And it is language that creates and perpetuates fear And we sometimes forget, when we call those marriages “problems,” and when we call their children “products” that they are people with stories, and histories, and struggles and victories and failures and hopes and dreams, they have faces and they have names, and their names, to name just a few, are Jillian, and Sarah, and Heather, and Andrew, and Rebbecca, and Jo, and Rebbecca again, and Karen, and Leah who has just chanted Torah for us, and Claire, who is leading us in prayer today. . . And simply put, and on the most basic level – if there were no intermarriages, they would not be here today. And I for one, am glad that they are, and am grateful for their existence on this campus and in my life, for all the complexities that they bring with them precisely BECAUSE their path into Judaism has been a mixed one. They bring with them new experiences and new voices to our community. They challenge us to be more honest about who we are and what we really value. God says to Avram - “and you shall be a blessing.” They *are* the blessing.

I signed the blue sheet eventually. I signed it, and plan to abide by it, not because I wanted

to, or believed in what it stood for, I do not. I signed it because in the time spent here in America and at HUC, I grew to love Reform Judaism. I grew to have faith in the movement and in this institution, and to take comfort in the knowledge that even when the paths we travel seem contradictory, we are really only at different points along the same road; taking different detours to get to the place we need to be.

We live in a period where the boundaries that define us as a community have blurred. It is a challenge, but it doesn't have to paralyze us. May we find the strength of spirit to do the Lech L'cha which is called for in this generation, so that we can truly live up to our mission of being an - "am segula"⁷; not an "עם לבדד ישכון"⁸ - a people that shall dwell apart, but an "עם סגולה" - a people secure about its culture and its roots which therefore takes pleasure in those individuals and peoples that accompany us on our journey; a people that does not perceive of a different influence with a different creative message as a threat. It will be this "am segula" which will ultimately survive in the universe because it understands that the most constant thing in the universe is change⁹. ---Boker Tov

7 Exodus 19:5

8 Numbers 23:9

9 Al Ruach V'Chomer / Ilana Rogel