

'Opting In' to Judaism **by Rabbi Arnold Saltzman**

The New Year, 5774, begins today.

Today begins a time of reflection, prayer, family gathering, and celebration. We sound the Shofar!

The New Year, 5774 represents a time of new hope, beginning of school years, entering college, starting a new job, or a new and promising relationship. It might even bring a new family member :)

When meeting with couples prior to their marriage I almost always ask them if they have been married before, or if this is the first relationship they have had. Why am I intrusive with these questions? I believe that when we have been rejected or suffered a broken heart, that that might make two people appreciate each other all the more. Life without any suffering or difficulty would not be life as we understand it. Our prayers mirror that idea.

There are those lucky ones who meet, fall in love, and never have to consider another love, another relationship - this is a blessing. As rabbi I meet people who are married thirty years, forty years, fifty years, sixty years, seventy years...They are lucky and blessed. I believe that that has so much to do with our beliefs and traditions. There are others who out of unforeseen circumstances find themselves without a partner or with just a memory. This can be very painful. Not everyone has the same blessings in life, however we need to recognize that life itself is a blessing.

When we begin the New Year, we seek the gateway to a better life, a good life, a life filled with promise, and a life that will allow us to move on from a difficult past or even the bitterness of the moment. Naomi, the mother-in-law of Ruth, is very bitter in the book of Ruth when we read of her having lost her sons too soon and not having a grandchild, she does not see what there is left for her in life. Her situation inspires Ruth, her daughter-in-law, to seek out Boaz, Naomi's kinsman, and gives God a purpose to fulfill in turning her grief and sorrow into joy and laughter as she will become a grandmother, and the ancestor of King David.

Years ago a young woman sat in my office, bitter about her situation in life, that even though she was a dedicated Jewish person, she could not find a person to share her life with who was Jewish. She asked what I thought of Interfaith marriage. What did I think about being a single parent or having a child out of wedlock? People make compromises due to their circumstance.

Once someone met with me to announce that they were becoming Christian because they lived on an Army base in Texas where there were no other Jews, and everyone went to church on Sunday, and therefore, she did not wish to be an outsider. She was becoming Christian to be part of a community. On another occasion I officiated at a funeral for a Jewish woman who no one knew was Jewish because she attended church, yet, in death, she asked for a rabbi.

What can a rabbi say? I would not wish that someone leave the Jewish faith, yet, I would not condemn them to isolation. Only the strongest individual can make a life without a community. So here 'we' are, 'this' is our community. I am happy to be here.

I have come to the conclusion that different religious beliefs should not be a reason to refrain from marrying someone, even when the religious aspects of life are the single most important factor. For me that was important, yet, I believe that welcoming people of other faiths into the Jewish community is healthy, essential, and in so many ways and incumbent upon us. This is our religious tradition!

The trend in marriage is that now less than 50% of couples living together are married! Yet, I am constantly receiving calls for weddings. Why? I welcome Jews and those who are of other religious beliefs into our community. I do not chase them away or say this is something which they should hesitate doing, which is the traditional rabbinic admonition.

Why am I so welcoming? Love is precious and a blessing. Two people who love each other need to resolve questions and tensions in a relationship on the path to marriage and after the wedding as well.

Some couples know they wish to be together, they have even discussed that they would like to raise Jewish children, have a Jewish family. What is it some are worried about?

Here are a few typical issues: How will my Christian family understand what I am doing? How will they be included?

Will they say to me: Do you want to be part of a religious group that has been and still is persecuted in many parts of the world?

What are you doing to us? Why?

So it is important to reach out to parents and siblings and assure them that even if 'I' have a Jewish family, 'you' are important and will be included. We want you involved in our lives and our children's lives. Another way of saying this is we are

not making a Jewish family to create a barrier, rather to transmit good beliefs, values, and traditions to our children.

Now in some cases that it is not the agreement. A couple can decide not to make any decision and say: When our children are old enough they will make up their own minds, and in the meantime we will teach them both religions.

This is not as common an approach, yet, it creates hurdles for the couple. Can you have a baptism and a Jewish baby naming? Does your priest and rabbi need to be part of every religious milestone? Can a child have Bar or Bat Mitzvah and still not have to make up their mind about their religious identity? All of these situations I would have been skeptical about, except that I have seen them work out so that as families grow together, as children grow, they make choices based on the love and joy they have felt associated with their religion not just on the severity of the the restrictions. This is not always true, yet, i am happy to say that in my experience it is almost always true.

There is definitely a school within Judaism which I would call the 'You are not a Jew' school. Self appointed people have little reluctance in announcing to someone that they are 'not' Jewish because they have a only a Jewish father, and no other conversion has taken place.

The Reform movement made a difficult choice when they recognized both matrilineal descent and patrilineal descent. Science can tell us what our genetic make-up is and who we are descended from. Yet, even that, is not the central issue. Your belief system is the central issue which has little to do with genetics. Ruth was a Moabite which means genetically King David is descended from non-Jews.

What are Jews and non-Jews? They are the same.

Belief systems make one Jewish -- not blood lines.

Sh'ma - Hear of Israel, the Lord our God The Lord is One.

Love your neighbor as yourself.

Today I place before you the blessing and the curse - choose the blessing that you may live and prosper.

Honor your father and mother...Keep and guard the Sabbath Day.

Do not ignore your neighbor in their time of distress...leave the corner of the field for the poor, fatherless, the widow, and the stranger.

Treat the stranger with respect, for you were strangers.

Proclaim the New year in the Seventh month, and on the tenth day you shall have a solemn service or repentance and fasting.

We see Jewish children and adults rejecting Judaism. In contrast we see people who knew nothing of their Judaism becoming interested and dedicated, giving them a new identity and purpose. We see people choosing to be Jewish, learning, going to a Beyt Din , a rabbinic court, and a ritual pool known as a Mikveh, as a sign that they wish to join this great great tradition. We are blessed with many families where one partner who is not Jewish, supports the growth and development of a Jewish identity out of love, even while retaining their own religious belief. We applaud them and love them! Sometime it is a grandparent who transmit the beliefs and the love for these traditions.

These are all blessings in our community, and each helps us to be a diverse people constantly being enriched by ideas, with diversity, with new questions. There is something very great and worthwhile in our religious tradition which teaches us to chose life, 'to remember us to life' in the coming year, and which encourages us to act justly and charitably, and that through these beliefs and practices we will be saved for the New Year. We will be better people, human beings.

Why the New Year? We celebrate the love of life and relationships. Some of us celebrate the memory of such relationships we hold on to and cherish.

We celebrate elevating the human experience,
ascending the steps to a temple of belief and action,
making life worth every effort, mood, difficulty,
while noticing the beauty of those around us,
and the gift of the earth itself, God's creation.

As we celebrate this 5774th birthday of the world, we pray that it may it usher in a truly wonderful new year, a new beginning, a spiritual cleansing for all of us so that we may enjoy the gift of life. Zochreinu L'chaim - Remember Us for Life in the New Year! May we continue becoming a community by continually welcoming those who wish to be part of this great legacy, and transmitting its wonderful message.

May you be inscribed in the Book of Life, Love, Prosperity and Peace in this New Year of 5774.