

Yom Kippur 5774:

About a year and a half ago, I received a most unusual request: I was asked to write a letter of recommendation for a Beit Shalom member to enter an Orthodox conversion program. It was not hard for me to come with plenty of criteria to recommend Elinor: she had taught Cheder at Beit Shalom prior to departing on Shnat Netzer for a yearlong intensive Israel experience. Upon her return she had helped to found Adelaide's youth group JAZY. She had been a passionate JAZY leader for three years while also travelling interstate to staff federal Netzer camps. She had been a beloved member of the choir ever since high school. She was fluent in Hebrew and well-versed in Jewish traditions. She was also comfortable enough with Orthodox ways that she had fallen in love with a lovely man from a Orthodox family, which is when she was confronted with the reality that, in the understanding of many Jews, she was not actually Jewish at all. Elinor told me of the inner conflict she endured as she decided whether to undergo an Orthodox conversion years after her entire family had become Jewish under the auspices of Rabbi Leonore Bohm here at Beit Shalom. Ultimately, she decided to go ahead with it because she did not want a daughter of hers to land in the same situation in which she had found herself.

Those of you who have followed this drama will know that the story is nearing a very happy ending--or, to be more precise, a happy beginning of a different sort. Elinor was fortunate enough to link up with Rabbi Netanel Friedler, one of a handful of truly modern Orthodox rabbis serving in Australia, who has assisted her in moving quite quickly through the rigorous Orthodox conversion program. She is close enough to ending that process that her engagement was recently announced in *The Australian Jewish News*--as close as we get in Australia to an official guarantee of coming events.

I wish I could tell you that this was an isolated event, but it is not, and in all likelihood it will not be in a country in which Jews who identify as Orthodox outnumber Progressive Jews by a factor of nine to one. In the last two years, a number of Beit Shalom members have celebrated the weddings of their children to fellow Jews, and in every case they have married young people from Orthodox families. Orthodox rabbis who preside over these weddings now have a standard practice of requiring proof of Jewish identity from those they marry, and as we know, their definition of who qualifies as Jewish is much narrower than our own.

As I tell potential converts to Judaism, the reason why Progressive converts are not considered Jewish by Orthodox rabbis has very little to do with the students themselves and everything to do with us rabbis who oversee the process. I do not anticipate that I will ever be fully recognised as a rabbi with standing by my Orthodox colleagues, no matter what I do. Conversion standards within the Progressive community are far stricter than they were fifty years ago. I would go so far as to say that a significant number of potential converts decide not to enter the process once they learn how demanding it will be. But as our standards have grown stricter, the Orthodox movement has hardened its position even more.

And, of course, this problem afflicts not only those who convert to Judaism. The same is true for those with a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother. It has been thirty years since the American Reform movement made the visionary decision to accept as Jewish any person born to one Jewish parent who was raised as exclusively Jewish. That definition covers a significant number of people in this room, as well as many children growing up in our congregation. As with Progressive converts to Judaism, there is absolutely nothing I can do to render patrilineal Jews sufficiently Jewish to be recognised by Orthodox rabbis. They potentially

face the same dilemma that Elinor confronted--the possibility that if they should find a partner from an Orthodox family, a lifetime of faithful Jewish practice will count for very little, and they will need to convert under Orthodox auspices to be fully accepted.

In recent years, a whispering has begun in the congregation, a wonderment that so many people are finding their ways to our door and choosing to become Jewish. In contrast to many other synagogues, the majority of conversion students at Beit Shalom have been either single people or people in long-term relationships with non-Jews converting for no other reason other than that they have fallen in love with Judaism and the way it approaches the world. The whisperings that I hear appear to question the sanity of those who undertake this process, which generally lasts at least eighteen months and makes significant demands of students. Why would anyone wish to become Jewish, the whisperings say. Don't they realise how difficult it is, how counter to Australian culture? Don't they know that most Australian Jews won't recognise or honour the commitment they have made? Do they know that their children will not be seen as Jewish? Do they understand that their choice affects not only them but the next generation? Why would they want to make life so hard for themselves?

I do tell every person in their first-time meeting with me that they will never be recognised as Jewish within the Orthodox world unless they undergo an Orthodox conversion. The candidates respond by insisting that they can't imagine modifying their lives to the extent required to live an Orthodox lifestyle. Very few of us can. To so restrict our activities on Shabbat that we couldn't have a morning shower or drive our cars, to restrict ourselves to strictly kosher products even as we try to live sustainably and buy locally, to practically tear our kitchens down the

ground in preparation for Pesach--how many of us are honestly ready to so dramatically alter our lives?

I have lived my entire life as a Progressive Jew, and I have never for a moment thought that life would improve if I were to make the jump to become Orthodox. In my fifth year of rabbinical school, I traveled to Jerusalem to spend a year studying at the Hebrew University. When I arrived in this magical city populated by an amazing array of Jews, I formulated a plan: I would visit a different synagogue each week, thereby experiencing a range of Jewish practice, from the ancient Italian rite, to Yemenite worship to a wide range of Hassidic sects. My resolution lasted for exactly one week. On my first Shabbat, I visited the Italian synagogue in central Jerusalem and dutifully walked upstairs to the women's gallery. I found the entire experience of watching the men pray to be utterly alienating. I realised that I could only attend a synagogue that would incorporate me fully as an equal partner in the Jewish venture, rather than relegating me to second-class status upstairs and out of the way. I do know that there are a handful of Orthodox congregations, including one in Melbourne, that are committed to pushing the envelope on women's inclusion. There is even a seminary now training women to serve as Jewish leaders. But the fact remains that Orthodox Jews still understand women and men as having different ritual roles to play, and that just will never work for me.

Since coming to Australia, I have been increasingly aware of the challenges that Progressive Jews face in this country. Such a contrast to the United States! American Reform synagogues do not ask prospective congregants to provide evidence of their Judaism, and most Conservative synagogues do not either. A few synagogues now are happy to extend membership to anyone who feels Jewish, regardless of whether they have any Jewish heritage or whether they have ever studied for conversion. In

the U.S., where non-Orthodox Judaism dominates, there is little concern that the Jewish community is rapidly dividing itself in two. There are enough non-Orthodox Jews to go around, so the assumption is that it all will be well.

In Australia, Progressive Judaism is still struggling for full recognition and respect, more than eighty years after the first non-Orthodox synagogue was founded. In Melbourne and Sydney, I've encountered passionate Jewish leaders of Netzer, the Progressive youth movement, who feel constantly embattled in their efforts to demonstrate that Progressive Judaism is a legitimate alternative to Orthodoxy. I once suggested, tongue mostly in cheek, that perhaps young Australian Jews from Progressive synagogues should spend their gap years in the U.S. rather than in Israel. That way, they would learn what it feels like to be in the majority, not to have to be on the defensive all the time. Progressive Jews often forget how much we have to feel proud of: we are a fully egalitarian movement, honouring both men and women for our unique contributions to Jewish religious life. We are in a constant dialogue with modernity, and we are not afraid to wrestle with the more challenging issues that confront us. I have been especially impressed by how readily Beit Shalom members have looked at the concept of ethical kashrut, and how we might have to break with traditional practice to develop an approach to food which is sustainable and kind. We are welcoming; our Shabbat siddur is fully translated, which allows non-Hebrew readers to participate in Shabbat services without barriers. In another two years or so, a new High Holy Day prayerbook will also be published, which will be just as accessible. We offer a path to conversion which is rigorous, but not, I hope, overly intimidating. We are not afraid to question, even if those questions may lead us in uncomfortable directions. As marketers

say, we have a terrific product. I only hope that Progressive Judaism will become more popular and more accepted in years to come.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, my family and I hosted a small dinner for students who are in the process of converting. I lit the festival candles, and then I went over to each of my sons and blessed them as I have at all Shabbat and festival dinners since they were born. For each one, I recited the blessing in Hebrew, "May God make you like Ephraim and Menasheh," and then I offered the priestly blessing, with a kiss for each of the three blessings. I admit to being a little embarrassed at putting what is usually a private moment on display. But then I stood back and put myself in the shoes of those watching. The blessing of children by parents at festive occasions is a magical moment, and to my knowledge it doesn't exist in any other tradition. So many of our practices are completely unique to Judaism and many of them are just glorious. We have the majesty of Kol Nidre and the hilarity of Purim, the pageantry of Pesach and the earthiness of Sukkot.

A conversion student of mine wrote in her essay, "I don't understand why everyone doesn't want to be Jewish." I agree completely! If I hadn't been born Jewish, I believe I would have converted. Judaism shapes my days, my weeks, and my years, and not just because I'm a rabbi. It brings meaning to important moments and infuses celebrations into all times of the year. I'll admit that this month of Tishri is perhaps a bit too packed with celebrations, but of course there are ample opportunities for joy at other times of the year too. And every Shabbat offers us an oasis in time to escape from the world and just be.

I realise that I've been talking for a while and have yet to solve the problem of what happens to non-halakhic Jews when they fall in love with Orthodox Jews. No, I do not have an answer. We all probably need to realise that our Judaism is suspect, simply because of where we have

chosen to affiliate. Even I might not be able to prove my Jewish identity beyond a shadow of a doubt. It may well be that not longer after our children affirm their membership in the Jewish people at the time of bar/bat mitzvah, we will need to warn them that they may encounter bumps on the road ahead. I understand how painful it is to feel Jewish all the way to the bottom of your feet but to know that some in the Jewish world do not acknowledge you as Jewish. Even more painful to have to share that information with your children. But just because our Jewishness is not good enough for the Orthodox should never in any way discount how wonderful it is to be Jewish.

Dozens of people have chosen to become Jewish at Beit Shalom over the fifty years of its existence. Many of those are among the most active in the life of our congregation. Their commitment, their passion, are an inspiration to me, who had the good fortune to be born into the Jewish people. I also am filled with admiration for the non-Jews in our congregation who are raising Jewish children. I honour you for your unselfish dedication to nurturing Judaism into the next generation. We all recognise the investment of time, effort and love required to sustain a Jewish community in a corner of the world where we are such a tiny minority. It couldn't happen without every single one of you.

I served on a beit din once with a colleague who began each interview with the words, "There is no greater privilege for a rabbi than to assist someone in becoming Jewish." I deeply believe that. I am grateful to look out at this congregation and see the faces of those whom I have helped through the conversion process, who now are bringing their own gifts to Beit Shalom. For all the trials and tribulations we face, I believe there is no better place to be than as members of the Jewish people. I am delighted to have all of you here to travel along this path with me. Shana tova!