

YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5772

What does a Jew look like? When I was growing up in a suburban Detroit neighborhood, with lots of Jews and lots of Christians, I was often told that I looked Jewish, because I had a big nose. Most of the Jews I knew had dark hair. Some had large noses, most did not. Yet as I grew older and moved out of my neighborhood, I met lots of Italians, Armenians, Iraqi-Christians known as Chaldeans, Russians, and others who have what was called “a Jewish nose.”

I used to watch the TV show “Make Room For Daddy,” starring Danny Thomas and assumed that, since he and I had the same first name and pretty much the same nose, he must be Jewish. Then I learned that he was Lebanese. I saw clips on TV of the famous old-time comedian and actor Jimmy Durante, who used to talk about his Italian shnozzola. That, plus the fact that lots of Jews I met did not have large noses made me realize that this supposed connection between nose size and Judaism was a pretty ridiculous stereotype.

Sure, some Jews have big noses. Some Jews are rich. Some Jews have mothers who will never let go. However, most Jews are not wealthy. Most Jews do not have big noses. And most Jews have mothers who do let them live independent lives. Similarly, some non-Jews have big noses. Some non-Jews are rich and some non-Jews have mothers who don't let go.

What does a Jew look like? When I was seventeen, I spent the first semester of my senior year studying at an Israeli high school. My host family for that semester was a Dutch, Jewish family with reddish brown, curly hair and

freckles. They looked nothing like the typical Israeli I had seen in books and, in fact, they didn't look, speak or act very Jewish. They were not involved in a synagogue and, while they lived in a nice home in a good neighborhood, they didn't have large noses and the mom of the family was actually quite laid-back.

From that semester and a dozen subsequent visits to Israel of varying time periods, I realized that even though nearly 80% of the population of Israel is Jewish, a large percentage of them don't "look Jewish."

Back in the early 1980's, Israel coordinated a heroic exodus of Ethiopian Jews. To this day, Israel is the only country in the history of the world to take large numbers of blacks out of Africa for the purpose of bringing them freedom.

Over 100,000 Ethiopian Jews are now Israeli citizens, making them about 1.5% of the population. It is said that when the Israelis connected with them, the Ethiopian Jews couldn't believe that light-skinned people could be Jews.

During the past forty years, the look of the Jewish community has changed dramatically. The first Orthodox rabbi whom I studied with had a long red beard. He, like many other Jews in the 70's and 80's, had converted to Judaism. Every year, thousands of Americans do so.

When Ruthie and I lived in Massachusetts, one of the best-known kosher caterers was a Korean woman who had become Hasidic. Her take-out place "Ruth's Kitchen," quickly grew into a regional favorite for thousands of people.

Between conversion, adoption and now the natural-born children of those who converted or were adopted, the Jewish community now sports a significantly more Asian appearance than only a few decades ago.

This trend towards a changing appearance of who we are is bound to continue as our community welcomes in those of all races and ethnicities. We may even be the last generation to actually use the phrase that someone “looks Jewish.”

When I was in high school, the local bowling alleys were not real receptive to Temple bowling leagues. This was not because of anti-Semitism. They all knew, however, that Jews were not big drinkers and the bowling alleys don't make their money on bowling, but rather on booze from the bar.

Sadly, this stereotype has been shattered as Jews have fallen ill to social ills like alcoholism, drug use at rates close to those of the non-Jewish community. Large numbers of Jewish teens drink very regularly. Their parents may be blind to the reality but it is a well-known fact and a serious problem here in Rockland and Bergen Counties and elsewhere.

Speaking of not recognizing reality, the presence of gays and lesbians in the Jewish community is nothing new in certain big cities. However, in the suburbs, it is still a fact of life which many still do not speak of openly. Though Michael and Dwight of “The Office” tried to order “Gaydar” online, the truth is that one cannot tell who is gay by looking at them, any more than one can tell who is Jewish by looking at them.

Of course, some gays and some Jews make it very obvious. When some gays come out of the closet and when Steven suddenly becomes Shlomo, speech patterns and mannerisms sometimes change.

However, most gays and lesbians are indistinguishable from their straight neighbors, friends and colleagues, just as most Jewish people are. In an age of so many negative social developments, it is a positive step forward that our nation is becoming more progressive when it comes to allowing gays and lesbians to legally wed the one they love. Since the year 2000, I have advocated their right to marry and stated on this bimah that I would officiate at their marriages if, of course, both parties were Jewish.

The issue, however, is not officiating at their wedding as much as it is recognizing them as valued parts of our community. We need to let all of the gay, lesbian and transgender members of our community know that it is all right for them to come out of the closet. They are not new to our community, but it is time for us to publicly acknowledge them, accept them and welcome them as valuable assets to our community. They, like the rest of us, are just the way God made them. On this day of personal challenge we call Yom Kippur, we are all reminded to fulfill the potential which God has put into each and every one of us.

Speaking of acknowledging, one of the most sensitive issues in the Jewish world for several decades has been interfaith marriage. Like most Reform rabbis in the Northeast, I never officiated at a marriage when one partner was not Jewish.

However, about five years ago, I made a small, but significant change in that policy. I announced on Yom Kippur that I would officiate if the non-Jewish partner was completely non-religious, meaning that they did acknowledge any religion other than Judaism in their life and agreed to raise any children exclusively as Jews.

I felt comfortable making that change and, after having officiated at five such ceremonies, I am pleased with the results. These families have committed to being part of the future of the Jewish community. There is no other religion being observed in the home 365 days of the year, though there certainly may be visits to non-Jewish family members who observe another religion.

However, what of the non-Jewish spouse who does observe their religion, either minimally or maximally? It is no secret that over 40% of American Jews marry non-Jews, though the percentage is lower in our part of the country. It is also no secret that the majority of children of such marriages are not raised as Jews.

Teaching at a local college, I meet many of these students with one Jewish parent and no discernable religious identity. Their connection to Christianity is very limited and their knowledge of Judaism is extremely minimal. Regardless of whether it is their mother or their father who is Jewish, they have essentially been lost to the Jewish community.

The numbers vary slightly from region to region, but 40% of the children of interfaith marriages do not identify with any religion. About a third identify as Christian and a little over 25% identify themselves as Jews.

Parents who fail to give their child a religious heritage are shortchanging and, in many cases, psychologically harming their children. While I clearly prefer for the children of an interfaith marriage to be raised as Jews, virtually all clergy and professionals in the field agree that it is healthier for children to be raised with one definite religious identity than to be raised with none or with two.

It isn't easy to raise any child in our society today. It is more difficult to raise a Jewish child, with Jewish values because, even in our area with a large Jewish population, we are still a definite minority, which emphasizes how difficult raising Jewish children is in other parts of the country, with significantly smaller Jewish populations.

However, it is harder still when one is not a Jew and, in fact, is still connected with the religion of their youth. And yet, in over a thousand congregations in this country, including Beth Am Temple, we have many adults who practice, whether to a large or a small degree, their Christian or other faith, yet dedicate their lives to raising a Jewish child or Jewish children.

I think that we all need to take a few minutes to try to comprehend how difficult this has to be. These people fell in love with and married a Jew. OK, lots of us have done that, but these people are not Jews, yet they have made the commit-

ment to raise children in a religion other than their own. This act of unselfishness is one which many of us would not be capable of performing. And so, I believe that it is time that we recognized this special part of our Jewish community for all they contribute to our present and to our future.

Since over 70% of the children of interfaith marriage ARE NOT raised Jewish, these non-Jews who do raise Jewish children are, quite literally, extraordinary. Some of this group follows the rhythms of Jewish life in synch with their Jewish family and others are supportive, but not as much a part of it.

However, they drive to Religious School and serve pizza in Hebrew High. They are part of the discussions at home about differences in religious identity and they perform tricky balancing acts with as much regularity as a circus performer. Just as their child can celebrate at another child's birthday party, so these parents teach their child that they can attend a family member's Easter or Christmas celebration and still be Jewish.

Our non-Jewish Temple members are involved in most aspects of Temple life. They participate in committees, classes and programs. They attend our services though, like many Jews, they can't read Hebrew. They do not have all of the same ritual privileges as their Jewish family members, but they participate and are involved out of love for their family and, sometimes, for their temple and for Judaism, though they have not and will not change their religion.

In the Torah, the Ger Toshav was a community member who participated actively in the life of the community, but was not a Jew. The Ger Toshav is an active part of our Reform Jewish communities and is increasingly becoming a larger part of the Conservative Jewish community as well.

And so, on this Yom Kippur, to all of you Ger Toshavs out there, I just want to say “thank you.” I know that it isn’t always easy and that there are sometimes hurt feelings, tensions and misunderstandings. However, I want you to know that you are appreciated for all that you do and we consider you to be a most valuable part of our Jewish community.

In raising Jewish children, you are making it a priority to do something which many Jewish parents did not succeed in doing and, frankly, which some never considered to be a priority: passing the Jewish heritage on to the next generation. This is a mitzvah of giving and self-sacrifice and on this Yom Kippur, it is an unselfish act which deserves to be publicly acknowledged.

Our Jewish community has changed. What does a Jew look like? Well, we don’t look the same as we looked fifty years ago and we will probably look very different fifty years from now. However, from Biblical times through the present day, our community has always been absorbing new communities and welcoming non-Jewish spouses committed to passing the Jewish heritage on to future generations.

One of my favorite readings on the High Holy Days is part of the second day of Rosh Hashana service. It begins “Each of us enters this sanctuary with a different need” and proceeds to talk about those whose hearts are full of joy and gratitude, others whose hearts ache with sorrow, those whose hearts are embittered and others whose spirits hunger. It is a recognition that our one community is composed of a diversity of individuals, with varying emotions, needs and hopes.

In the same way, we are one community with a variety of looks, lifestyles and family structures. Yet we are all created in the image of God. On this Yom Kippur, may we always remember that the term “community” embraces diversity and rejects uniformity. We may not always see eye to eye with one another, but may we always see the image of God within one another. **AMEN**