

Shabbat Ki Tavo 5779
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Shir Tikvah Congregation
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At the turn of the 19th into the 20th century 120 years ago, as the great waves of Jewish immigrants came to the shores of our nation from Eastern Europe by the thousands, including my Great Great and Great Grandparents Rubin and Rose and Abe and Thressa and Mike (for who I'm named) and Ruthie, the Lower East Side of Manhattan was transformed into an urban Shtetl. Throughout the neighborhood, the tenements were filled with the chatter of Yiddish as chicken soup was cooked and Jewish peddlers pushed their carts from street to street, trying to sell their chotzkes to feed their families. Between 1880 and 1924, more than two and a half million Eastern European Jews crowded into the Lower East Side.

As you might expect, new Jewish immigrant families built synagogues to serve their families. These small communities were often centralized around where the families came from in Europe. The Bialystocker synagogue was for the Polish Jews, the Lutowisker shul for Lithuanians, Bnai Jacob Anshe Brzezan for Southeast Galician Jews... You get the picture.

But while the synagogues differed in their Yiddish dialects and religious practice, they were more than a place to pray; they were, for virtually all of the men and many of the women of the community at the time, ad hoc community centers. And many of them had the express goal of helping mostly poor, Eastern European Jews—most of whom lived in tenements that lacked running water, plumbing, and electricity—how to become “American.”

In fact, it turns out, the synagogue's religious schools taught what language? Yiddish? Hebrew? Well there certainly were classes in Hebrew and Yiddish—but most kids spoke Yiddish at home and learned Hebrew from coming to shul every Shabbes morning. The language synagogue religious schools taught? **English**. It was part of their effort to help families—children specifically—make it in America—the *Goldene Medina* as Tevya called in the epic, “Fiddler on the Roof.”

During those first waves of immigration, Jews almost exclusively married other Jews, worked in Jewish businesses, lived in Jewish neighborhoods, had Jewish friends, gave to and were supported by almost exclusively Jewish social service organizations, like the Hebrew Free Loan Society, the Jewish Family Service, and the Jewish Welfare Board. In part, this is a reflection of the Antisemitism of the era: Even Jews with advanced degrees and professional careers weren't able to get jobs in non-Jewish firms and while Tevya and Golde's daughter Tzeitel did marry a non-Jew, it was not a wide spread phenomenon—in part because Jews—both by choice and historical circumstance—didn't interface with the non-Jewish world socially and because we were not considered marriageable candidates.

My parents, Larry and Judi, were born in the brief years between World War II and the founding of the Modern state of Israel, in 1946 and 1947. They, too, lived in Jewish neighborhoods on the Northside of Minneapolis and in Highland Village in St. Paul.

In 1963, as my folks were in high school, the intermarriage rate between Jews and non-Jews was between 5-7%. Synagogues were starting to move from the cities to the suburbs as Jews started our migration, undeniably influenced by white flight. But Jews began to be more accepted. Children and grandchildren from those immigrants on the Lower East Side no longer spoke Yiddish. Yes, they still lived in Jewish enclaves, but colleges and universities were starting to open. The kids and grandkids of those immigrants spoke English. Jewish life was still centered in the home and synagogues created the supplemental religious schools we have today: Often two or three afternoons after school each week, in addition to Shabbes morning and Sunday morning, Jewish kids went to religious school to learn Hebrew and Jewish text. The synagogues created these schools to supplement what was happening at home—not to replace it.

I was born in 1970—solidly GenX. My folks moved us to the northern suburb of New Hope. We had mostly Jewish friends, celebrated Shabbat every Friday at my grandparent's home with my aunts and uncles and cousins, attended religious school on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and Sunday mornings, where our parents dropped us off and they went on their way. My dad worked in Jewish businesses, but my mom got secretarial work in companies not owned by Jews.

My brother and I attended public school in the suburbs—our joke used to be that they were so white they didn't serve wheat bread—and while we experienced some episodic and interpersonal antisemitism—the mother down the block who felt my head for horns in 1st grade is particularly memorable—there weren't antisemitic structural barriers to our participation in the broader society. We both went to college and graduate school; and while I work here at Shir Tikvah, my brother is a teacher for the Minneapolis Public Schools.

By 1990, the year after I graduated high school, and two years after the founding of Shir Tikvah, in the first comprehensive Jewish population study (by the way—there is one going on now in the Twin Cities and if you're contacted, please respond!), the intermarriage rate had jumped to 52% nationally. By 2013, the Pew study reported that it is 71% for non-Orthodox Jews.

Now, in case you were concerned that I find this problematic, let me assure you: I'm describing historical trends. Personally, I've officiated at 437 weddings and more than 300 of them have been between a Jew and a non-Jew. Here at Shir Tikvah, we know that a majority of the students in our religious school have a non-Jewish parent. In fact, in my child's current B'nei Mitzvah class, there are 26 kids. 3/4 of them have a parent who wasn't born Jewish.

Let me be really clear: This is AMAZING! That non-Jewish parents are here and supportive of their children being raised as Jews is, to me, nothing short of miraculous. And that this change occurred in only a few generations. I wish my grandparents would be alive to see this. Truly.

But here's the thing: The parental drop-off structure of our religious education for children still operates like it did when the model was created for my parents in the 1950s and makes the same assumptions about who are families are: Two Jewish parents who were both themselves raised in Jewish households, who observe Shabbat, have large extended Jewish families, work in Jewish businesses, and where Jewish community is the center of social and communal life. That just isn't who the vast majority of our community is today.

Let me highlight an example. For many years, our kindergarteners have made a Shabbat Box: Students bring in a shoe box that is decorated, and then kids made a kiddush cup, a challah cover, and a Shabbat candle sticks. The kids would take the Shabbat Box home with the instructions to the families: Try Shabbat at home.

A few years ago, a non-Jewish dad came to me holding his daughter's Shabbat box, his heart in his throat as he spoke to me: "Rabbi, I'm not Jewish. We've been here for Tot Shabbat the first Shabbat of the month since our kid was three months old. I'm committed to raising them as Jews. But we do Shabbat here. I don't know how to do this at home." He wasn't angry—but the message was clear—he needs his synagogue to support him and his family to live a Jewish life. The assumptions of who are families are, what they know about and have experienced with Judaism, and how they grew up, don't work today like they did for my parent's generation or even for mine. There's a disconnect between who we are, the assumptions we've made about our community, the structure of religious school, and the way we engage in Jewish learning. **We as a synagogue must adapt to the new realities of our community.**

Why am I sharing this with you tonight? I offered these remarks on Sunday morning to parents at the opening of

religious school. We've begun an effort to transform religious education here at Shir Tikvah and we're asking some big questions:

- 1. What are the core Jewish values that animate Jewish living and learning at Shir Tikvah?**
- 2. What are our goals and practices in our educational program?**
- 3. How will the structure of our Jewish education support our families, our students, and our values as Shir Tikvah moves forward?**
- 4. How do we integrate all of who we are and all of whom we hope to become—from education to worship to our justice work to caring for one another as a beloved community?**

I'm sharing this with you tonight because re-dreaming and transforming our Jewish education to meet our families and students of today is a big, bold initiative and we want multiple voices to co-create this new venture with us. Please let me know if you're interested. We have a lot of work to do! We have some answers but we don't have all of them yet; we're living into the questions, letting them animate our work and inspire our vision. We do know that our ability to thrive as a people has been our capacity and willingness to adapt in each generation, to let Torah be revealed to us in our unique ways. And we believe Shir Tikvah has a powerful, inspiring opportunity to join together to cultivate our moral imagination and inspire the next generation of courageous, fierce, loving Jews.

100 years ago, Ruthie and Sam weren't born in the Pale of Settlement, came through Ellis Island, spoke Yiddish, lived in a tenement on the Lower East Side, and had a tight-knit, complicated, rich, thick Jewish community and synagogue life.

Today, Ruthie and Sam might have two moms or dads, may be adopted, might be African-American, could have a parent who was born Jewish and might have a parent who converted to Judaism and maybe has a parent who is supportive of raising a Jewish kid but practices a different religious tradition—or none at all. We owe the Ruthies and Sams, their Great Grandchildren and their Great Grandparents, a community and a Jewish education that speaks to their deepest spiritual longings, their boldest dreams, and the truths of who they and their families were, are, and are becoming. What a blessing, in 2019, that Ruth and Sam are part of Shir Tikvah and we have the privilege of learning and growing with them.

Shabbat Shalom!