

3,000 Years of the Warmest Welcome

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Le-Shanah Tovah!

A good year to all of us!

Thank you all for so warmly welcoming me and my family into the Temple Beth El family.

Even my first encounter with Temple Beth El, the very intense interview, left Ginny and me with a profound sense of connection to many of you. Through madly writing sample sermons, trying to convey when I would or wouldn't eat a cheeseburger, and explaining that I don't have any weird ideas about God, I felt engaged, not interrogated.

At Beth El, you have shown me, and Ginny, my wife, and Jude, our son, just how a warm welcome can transform a house into a home.

This summer I was working with a Bat Mitzvah student when her mother stopped and with emotion remarked, "When I married my husband, a non-Jew, I never dreamed that I would be sitting here today working on our daughter's Bat Mitzvah. My husband's unwavering support made this all possible. I can't thank him enough."

Beth El is a beautiful home, just look at it.

Still, what makes Beth El truly amazing is the people who are in it:

- Non-Jews married to Jews who help build Jewish homes, like the father of this past summer's Bat Mitzvah;
- Jews by Choice, converts, who learn and live our shared Torah to its fullest;
- Jews of color, LGBTQ Jews, and Jews by birth who continue to find and share deeper meanings in our family's traditions.

A warm Beth El welcome embraces the non-Jewish partner who is married to a Jew.

Moira Quinn Klein, our Beth El President, was once that non-Jew who participated fully in congregational life at Beth El - learning about Judaism and living it at home, singing in the choir, actively volunteering, and parenting sons that became B'nei Mitzvah. One day she turned to Rabbi Bennett and said, "I am ready to convert". Rabbi Bennett looked at her in astonishment and said, "You're not Jewish?". He couldn't believe that she wasn't already Jewish. She had been such an active Jewish learner and doer for so many years.

It wasn't a long course of study before Rabbi Bennett called two other rabbis in the community, formed a Beit Din, a Jewish court confirming her readiness, and made Moira's conversion final.

A more recent story: a brand new family moved to Charlotte. With the Jewish holy days just around the corner, the Jewish husband asked his non-Jewish wife to find a synagogue to join so they had a place to go for the High Holy Days, and to make sure that the kids were enrolled in religious school. She was so warmly welcomed to Temple Beth El that in a short time she made a happy home here for herself and her family.

At Temple Beth El our warm welcome of non-Jews creates a Jewish future. So many of you are responsible for the Jewish identity of our families.

Our Reform approach at Beth El is nothing new and should not be seen as radical.

The Jewish family has always included non-Jews.

Did you realize that every one of our patriarchs intermarried?

Moses, our greatest prophet, married a non-Jew too.

While many of us today intermarry and risk family criticism if lucky, and condemnation and rejection, if less lucky, the history of Judaism shows us that intermarriage has been with us from the very start. Non-Jews have always been an essential part of Jewish communities.

A core Jewish ethic is written in Exodus: Do not oppress the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Exodus 22:20) or in our terms: warmly welcome the non-Jew, the foreigner, even the Jew from another place, for you were once that person.

Abraham expanded his tent, our tent, by having the flaps of his home open on all four sides so that he could see any passerby and warmly welcome every stranger into his midst.

Moses likewise embraced all. He ran and greeted his non-Jewish father-in-law Jethro into the Jewish camp and treated him like a dignitary. In return, Jethro taught him how to lead, how to delegate, how to set up the court system that even today serves as the foundation of judicial systems across the globe.

It is this warm welcome of the non-Jew, not only here but everywhere in our Reform Movement that led Rabbi Janet Marder, six years ago, to invite all the non-Jews of her congregation to the bimah on Yom Kippur for a special blessing. To all the non-Jews in our midst, I offer you some of her words:

"You are the moms and dads who drive the Hebrew school carpool. You help explain to your kids why it's important to get up early and stay late to learn to be a Jew. You take classes and read Jewish books to deepen your own understanding, so you can help to make a Jewish home.

You learn to make kugel and latkes; you try to like gefilte fish;  
you learn to put on a Seder; you learn to put up a Sukkah.  
You join your spouse at the Shabbat table –  
maybe you even set that Shabbat table and make it beautiful.

“You come to services, even when it feels strange and confusing at first.  
You stand on the *bimah* and pass the Torah to your children  
on the day of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and tell them how proud you are and how much you  
love them, and how glad you are to see them grow into young Jewish men and women.

“I hope your children and your spouse tell you often how wonderful you are,  
and that *their* love and gratitude, and *our* love and gratitude,  
will be some compensation, and will bring you joy.”

Thank you.

Just as we embrace the non-Jew, we welcome and celebrate our Jews by choice.

Thousands of years ago Ruth joined the Jewish people when she said, quite simply to her Jewish mother-in-law Naomi: “Wherever you go I will go, wherever you dwell there I will live. Your people will be my people, your God my God. Wherever you die, there I will be buried.” Naomi welcomed her immediately. We tell the story of Ruth in part to remind us that a convert turned out to be an ancestor of King David, no small Jew.

Hillel, one of the highest authorities of the Talmud, welcomed converts with open arms. In the most famous story about his embrace of the stranger, a man wanting to become Jewish first went to Shammai, Hillel’s rival, and said: “Convert me to Judaism on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah on one foot”. Shammai responded by chasing the convert off with the ancient equivalent of a two-by-four.

This man asked Hillel the same question: “Convert me to Judaism on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah on one foot”. Hillel gave this famous response: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary, now go and study.”

Imagine going to any rabbi today and receiving a response to any question which could so easily fit in a fortune cookie, or a tweet. Hillel gave a concise answer, and converted the man on the spot. Hillel’s conversion was conditional upon continued study. When we look more

closely at this terse text, we see that Hillel's brief response was also a warm welcome. Later, Hillel's converts came together and concluded: "Shammai's great impatience sought to drive us from the world, but Hillel's gentleness brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence."

We at Beth El, like Hillel, strive to warmly welcome those seeking to learn about Judaism and those aiming to become Jewish.

Jews falling in love with non-Jews and non-Jews falling in love with Jews, this is not a new reality – it happened even in the Talmud.

A famous Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Chiyya, had a very religious student, let's call him Shmuely. Shmuely heard about a particularly beautiful woman, let's call her Lilah. Upon seeing Lilah, Shmuely fell in love. Yet being bound by Jewish traditions, the Talmudic student Shmuely, told Lilah he could not pursue their relationship for they weren't married and she was not Jewish. He went on his way.

Lilah was so impressed by Shmuely's affection for her and loyalty to his faith that she quit her job, sold all of her things, gave most of her wealth to the poor, and took what was left with her to seek out this student.

Lilah found Shmuely's academy and approached his esteemed teacher. "Rabbi Chiyya," she pleaded, "Instruct me that I may convert."

When Rabbi Chiyya heard of her intention and about the student with whom she had fallen in love because of his devotion to tradition, Rabbi Chiyya converted her and sent her to marry Shmuely. Rabbi Chiyya understood the power of love as a way of bringing people together, and then bringing them into the Jewish community with a warm welcome. We are committed to do the same.

In recent decades, Jews have been understandably suspicious of outsiders. Terrible tragedies have befallen us. Even in this Golden Age of Judaism, with the reawakening of our dreams of Israel combined with what might be the strongest diaspora Jewish community in history; the memories of the terrible tragedies that led up to this time are still fresh in our minds.

With this odd mix of traumatic memories and unprecedented Jewish success, we struggle to overcome our skepticism surrounding outsiders and our questioning of any non-Jew wanting to join our community.

Some of you have met my wife Ginny. Ginny is a proud Jewish convert. After our wedding, we spent two years in Israel as students. During that time, Israelis often asked her: "Why would you want to convert?" They wondered why would anyone want to take on the burden and the danger of being Jewish. Ginny's answer was always the same: "I'm Jewish. I

don't really have a choice." Let us celebrate those who have joined their fate with ours, becoming members of our family.

A warm welcome extends hospitality to everyone, even Jews by birth. Believe it or not at Beth El many of us feel like outsiders. Newer Jews feel disconnected. Old time members recognize fewer people than they'd like. The solution is simple. We can get rid of our outsider neurosis and each and every one of us take responsibility for the warmest welcome.

My grandmother Connie Freirich, may her memory be a blessing, went to her local synagogue on Long Island in the 1950s to join and enroll her four kids in religious school. She spoke directly with the rabbi, who was obviously thrilled to engage a new member family with all of these potential students for their religious school. The rabbi eventually got around to asking my grandmother what her husband did for a living. My grandfather ran the family business which packaged corned beef and pastrami. The rabbi asked: "Is the business kosher?" It was not. The rabbi told my grandmother that in order for her family to join his congregation, her husband would need to change his business. My grandmother walked out of that synagogue, and didn't enter another one until she absolutely had to, many years later at my Bar Mitzvah.

That rabbi didn't understand what we get in our *kishkes*, in our gut, here at Temple Beth El. We know that every new person we meet may be a new member of our community and a valued participant in our extended family here in Charlotte.

Every time someone comes to speak to me, I have the opportunity to open the door to Judaism for them. I work to welcome everyone through that door. Any discussion any of us have may be their first step into our community, or, God forbid, as it was with my grandmother, their last step away from our community and all of Judaism.

The latest cover of Reform Judaism magazine captures this notion asking: "What Does Your Oneg Say About You?" With only the clergy welcoming, we have not created a congregation of warmth. Each of you needs to see Beth El as your home and warmly welcome others into it. To the one you think you do not know, simply reach out your hand, and say, "I'm Jonathan Freirich, I've been a member here since 2011, what's your name?"

We have a new and renovated Beth El - a beautiful and impressive building. This new structure may make all of us, new members and old, Jews by choice and Jews by birth, Jew and non-Jew alike, feel like newcomers. I came to Charlotte not for the building but for the people who are in it. You are a warm and welcoming community.

Here at Temple Beth El, you work to open the door every day.

Together we work to live up to the welcome of strangers taught by Abraham. We follow the model of Moses by embracing non-Jews and including our mixed families in all aspects of Jewish communal life. We learn from Hillel's school the value of conversion as a confirmation of people's sincere embrace of Jewish identity. We constantly strive to be worthy heirs to 3,000 years of giving the warmest welcome.

We even do our best to welcome those of us born to Jewish families.

We work towards a Jewish home, a Temple Beth El home that welcomes all of us who want to belong to our family of families. We continue to build the supportive and caring community that makes being here at Temple Beth El comforting, meaningful, and celebratory.

This building is a sacred home, a place filled with God, because we fill it with welcome. With that welcome we live up to the words over our ark: "Behold! There is God in this place!"

Welcome home for our holy days. Thank you for the kind welcome you have given Ginny, Jude and me, and I am thrilled to be a part of continuing to create a welcoming home for all of us.

L'shanah tovah!