

**2RH 5769 Evangelical Judaism**  
**Rabbi Francine Roston**  
**Congregation Beth El**  
**South Orange, NJ**

I thought I'd start with a little quiz.

Some yes or no questions...I ask the questions; you give the answers—Yes or No

Do you Jews believe in....

hell                   no

heaven yes

shrimp no

bison steak    yes

wasting energy, food, money no

giving away money, food, clothing   yes

conversion            yes

proselytizing   no

Last year, on the first night of Chanukah, after we had lit the candles and we were playing with new toys, the doorbell rang. I went to the door to greet a young couple standing there with a brochure and some Chanukah candles. “Are you Jewish?” Yes, I’m Jewish. (They looked excited) “Do you know it’s the first night of Chanukah?” Yes, I do. “Have you lit the candles?” Yes, I have. (Now, they looked a bit disappointed) “Would you like us to tell you more about the holiday” Oh, no thank you, I know a lot already. “Would you like a brochure?” No thank you. “Oh, well, happy Chanukah” and with that they handed me the brochure anyways and walked on to the next house.

Many of you probably have stories to share about your experiences with the Mitzvah Mobiles and the roaming pairs of Lubavitch that stalk the sidewalks looking for Jewish men to wrap tefillin and Jewish women to light Shabbat candles.

What is the difference between them and the young men in their crisp black slacks and starched white shirts with nametags on their breast pockets who walk through the village and try to strike up a conversation about God, the meaning of life and the saving power of Jesus Christ?

It’s almost a matter of pride in the Jewish community that we don't proselytize. We don't act like the goyim. We *don't* impose our religion, our beliefs or practices on others—and I’m certainly not saying we should.

But, I’ve got to ask, Maybe we could be doing more? Maybe we SHOULD rethink this.

If Judaism gives us a good way to live our lives, why *don't* we share it with others?

Aren't there many aspects of Judaism that inspire our pride, that make us feel good, that help us get through the hard times?

There are a lot of people in the world looking for answers & looking for spirituality.

Why *don't* we promote Jewish values to others?

Why don't we actively welcome people to share in our worship, learn about Judaism and join our community?

Why don't we work harder to welcome converts, to invite seekers, to open our doors and welcome in anyone who is interested in sharing in the blessings of being a Conservative Jew?!

Let's start with what we know OR what we think we know.

What does Judaism teach about conversion and proselytizing?

First, we do have a set of laws that acknowledges conversion and sets basic requirements for a conversion—commitment to the mitzvot (often cultivated through education); for men, circumcision or the ritual drawing a drop of blood/hatafat dam brit; and for all immersion in a ritual bath or mikvah

[I asked the congregation:] How are we supposed to treat the potential convert?

Send him away three times

Make it impossible to convert: Tosefta Demai 2:6: A Convert who accepts all of the Torah except for one word is not accepted. R. Yossi ben R. Judah says: Even one small detail of rabbinic law.

Why? Question their sincerity

Don't want it to look to outsiders like we're trying to proselytize

“To protect them!”

Once converted, how are supposed to treat someone?

...they are Jews and it is a sin to mention their background

### **Why don't we proselytize? Where did we get this approach?**

Many assume it must be Jewish law that Jews don't proselytize.

Actually, proselytism was a Jewish tradition until the Roman Empire.

According to the great historian Salo Baron, proof of this is in the population growth of the Jewish population which grew from 150,000 in 586BCE to over eight million by the 1<sup>st</sup> century—that's 10% of the Roman Empire. It is generally understood that this growth occurred because Jews actively welcomed converts.

Sharing Jewish teachings and welcoming converts goes all the way back to Abraham, the first one to have a covenantal relationship with God and share that deal with others—travelling through the land, acquiring “souls” who joined his family and shared their fate. The rabbis saw the patriarchs as missionaries. We have a tradition that Moses taught the Torah in 70 languages. Why? So that all peoples could understand God's law and accept it.

And in prophetic literature, the trend to share the teachings of Judaism with others is packaged in the sacred mission of being a light to the nations—or la'goyim. We did not receive the Torah because we are any better than any other nation—one midrash has it that no one else would take it!

We received the Torah because we were chosen by God to take on the special responsibility of following God's laws. And those laws include the mandate to interact with and care for others, to welcome the stranger, to care for the alien laborers. Eventually, we are to share the message of God's love and law with all of humanity who is meant to share in the blessings of the covenant with us.

Look at the language of the second paragraph of Aleinu (p.344)

*“We pray for the day when God's majesty will prevail. When all false gods will be removed, and all idolatry will be abolished; when the world will be made a kingdom of God, When all humanity will invoke Your name, and the wicked will be turned to You. May all who live be convinced that to You every knee must bend, Every tongue must vow loyalty...”*

It doesn't get any clearer than that! Unity of all people believing in one unifying God!

Rabbi Harold Schulweis teaches that there are a number of reasons that what was “once considered a covenantal obligation became a neglected activity, ironically considered un-Jewish.”

1. Persecution by non-Jewish authorities: Jews stopped proselytizing because of pressure from Christian and Muslim rulers beginning in 407 CE when the Roman Empire outlawed conversion to Judaism under penalty of death.
2. “Minority status produced profound psychological changes, resulting in, among other negative effects, a loss of self-worth that undermined the impulse to offer Judaism to the world.”  
 “[The] Jewish mission [of universalism became] limited to one of simply following religious laws and waiting for the messiah. The usefulness of such a view was obvious not only in simply surviving and justifying the change in mission, but in providing a hope for a better Jewish future in messianic times.” The Messiah will do the work—He’ll bring everyone together!
3. “Christians took the Jewish mission to welcome converts and transformed its meaning. Seeking converts became a required activity because salvation was unavailable outside the Church. Intrusive activities, bribery, threats, and ultimately violence and murder were tolerated by an expanding Christianity. Additionally, Christians had relaxed the Jewish rules of conversion, such as the need for male circumcision, and the obligation to obey Jewish law, making it much easier for a pagan to convert to Christianity than to Judaism.”
4. “Finally, an enmity developed between the triumphant Christians and the downtrodden Jews... It became more unpalatable to offer Judaism to the very people who mocked and persecuted, forcibly converted, and killed Jews. The idea of welcoming converts under such circumstances became repugnant. Of course, from the gentile side, Jews were seen as guilty of Deicide, and a dispersed, weak people, available for pity, mockery, or persecution, not for joining.”

Haven't times changed?

Yes, we are still a minority in America, but we are not persecuted. Rather we are protected constitutionally, guaranteed freedom of religion. We exist in a country that not only promotes competition in the business marketplace, there is a spiritual marketplace of religions and beliefs. People are looking for a faith that will ground them and help them bear life's challenges and celebrate life's triumphs.

According to Gary Tobin, a Jewish sociologist and author of the book *Opening the Gates: Proactive Conversion*: In American today people change religions all the time. Two out of every five Americans switch religions at least once.

Tobin thinks “Jews should stop playing hard-to-get and start issuing open invitations to spiritual seekers from outside the faith. Jews don't need to go door-to-door or hold mass stadium rallies, just open their eyes and realize there's a growing number of non-Jews out there in America who are attracted to Judaism, and who would, if given a chance, make fine additions to the Jewish family.”

So right about now I'm imagining that your anxiety is up.

This is sounding very Christian, Rabbi!

We don't want to *antagonize* the Christian community, or anyone else for that matter.

I'm a Jew. My family is Jewish. The rest is everyone else's business.

I understand those sentiments. And I want to be clear about a few things.

I believe in a Judaism that promotes openness rather than Judgement. We should be willing to

welcome people who are interested in learning and living as Jews. While I believe we have a good thing, I don't believe any other religion is condemned to damnation. I just find value and truth in the way we Conservative Jews seek to understand and fulfill God's will.

I believe in a Judaism that is welcoming not shunning, that seeks to include those who sincerely wish to travel with us, study and davven with us. Never should we use coercion, deceit, or any intrusive behavior to gain members or attract converts.

So what does this mean for you and me?

What can we do?

1. We can continue our efforts to be constantly vigilant in our definition as a Welcoming Synagogue.
  - a. Join us in our work to provide a welcoming atmosphere—in both our physical space and our community.
  - b. We are continually working for make better signage to guide people through the building and toward great learning and prayer experiences...as well as the bathrooms! Let us know if something's missing.
  - c. We are also continuing to engage each other in welcoming practices—greeting people who walk through the doors is not just the role of the president, but each and every one of us can be an ambassador of the community, can guide someone to the Kippah box, the sanctuary...or the bathroom!
  - d. We would love to have each of you serve as a greeter on a Shabbat morning. All it takes is a willingness to smile, shake some hands and come early!!
  - e. We are also working to enhance our worship experience so that it is welcoming—so that it is engaging, creative, educational. Join us in singing, join us in learning.
  - f. I'd like you to think back to a time when you had to go to a new synagogue for the first time and you walked in and had no idea where to go. You sat down and didn't know many people around you. There are some people who come here year after year, Shabbat after Shabbat and don't know people who sit all the way on the other side of the sanctuary.
  - g. How about setting for ourselves the challenge that every time we come to synagogue in the next year---and I'm assuming that's more that a couple times!—every time we come to synagogue we are going to greet at least one person we do not know yet, learn one new person's name and something about them. Look out for that person who is looking like they don't know where to go...and help them out.

While the main intent of my sermon was welcoming the nonJew, or the unaffiliated/unconnected Jew, to the community, why am I talking about services....because you never know who is coming to our services. We advertise mainly in the general press, we have some interesting programs, speakers and concerts in the upcoming year....you never know who you are sitting next to!

2. Let's turn to Actively Welcoming people in our lives outside of synagogue.

Now, what in the world could that mean?

*Who likes to talk about religion with your coworkers? Your friends? Your family?*

Why should we be afraid to talk about our Judaism?

Why can't we comfortably say to someone: **In Jewish tradition, we...take a full day a**

week to slow down and appreciate life...**As a Jew, I often find myself feeling**...upset about the genocide in Darfur....**In our community, we** .....have incredible traditions to support the sick and comfort the mourner...would you like to hear about them?

I imagine one of the biggest barriers after the fear of being overbearing, is the fear of not knowing.

Take some time to think about what you believe about God, about Torah, about Israel? Read a new book on Judaism this year.

Think of the beauty of Shabbat and the many Jewish holidays and the gift Judaism gives us in these day of celebrating creation, ceasing from work and spending time with family and friends.

Think of the importance of family in Jewish traditions, the stress on actions over creed and the importance of tzedeka & social justice.

You know how we are always joking—*two Jews, three opinions*. Well, use that to your advantage! There are many different reasons and beliefs in the Jewish tradition, don't be afraid to explore them, learn about them and talk about them with others.

One of the places I find the most interesting discussions of faith are in places where Jews and nonJews purposely get together to share common values—Have you ever gone to the Annual South Orange-Maplewood Interfaith Holocaust Memorial Service? This year there is an interfaith musical gathering the Sunday before Thanksgiving to enable us to share our blessings including our musical traditions—I encourage you to participate with Cantor Fine. And, what about the Abraham House, standing alongside our neighbors, building a home for a neighbor family in Newark, we engage ourselves in a great act of hesed, of kindness and generosity...and we enable ourselves to share with others the Jewish values that inspire us to give tzedekah and do good works.

### 3. Being Proud of Being Jewish: Have you heard Adam Sandler's Hanukkah song?

When you feel like the only kid in town without a x-mas tree, heres a list of People who are jewish, just like you and me:

David lee roth lights the menorrah,  
So do james caan, kirk douglas, and the late dinah shore-ah

Guess who eats together at the karnickey deli,  
Bowzer from sha-na-na, and arthur fonzerrelli.

Paul newmans half jewish; goldie hawns half too,  
Put them together--what a fine lookin jew! [esus]

You dont need deck the halls or jingle bell rock  
Cause you can spin the dreidl with captain kirk and mr. spock--both jewish!

I always find it an interesting statement of Jewish pride. And, even if you think it is silly or offensive, I can guarantee that every one of your teenagers and college students hears it every year and waits for the latest version.!!

It is always my hope that the Jewish souls we kindle and nurture at Beth El and in the Jewish Learning Center are Jews who are proud of who they are, proud of their people and our history and accomplishments, proud of their synagogue and their traditions, proud to call themselves Jews. What about you?

What makes you proud to be Jewish? It's a good question for your lunch table later on!

We can always find something wrong with the Jewish people? We criticize our leaders, our state, our people's quirks and oddities. But, let's set that aside. Who wants to be a part of a people or a community that only sits and complains and cuts others down.

What *can* we celebrate?! Take a moment and think about it? What was a moment in your life when you were proud to be Jewish?

You might not walk away from this sermon ready to go talk to someone about the beauties of Jewish traditions, but maybe you can take away the feeling, the memory of pride in being Jewish...maybe that feeling, when cultivated will put you in a different place in your life and in the community. Maybe you will be willing to engage others in discussion, or welcome others to the synagogue, if you feel good about being here.

And if you don't --- feel good about being in synagogue, or feel good about being a Jew, well then, please make an appointment, let's have coffee, let's start that discussion while we still have time!!