

A Message from the Rabbi

Rabbi Mark Fasman

My mother grew up the middle of three daughters in a traditional Jewish family. My father is the youngest of four. His mother died when he was four months old. His father was unable to care for his children, who were scattered around Chicago, one in an orphanage, one with relatives, and two in different foster homes.

From what I know, their holiday meals and family get-togethers were radically different. My mother grew up in a traditional Jewish home. My father and his siblings grew up in more than four different homes of various levels of observance.

In my family, one married a Jew, one married a Jew-by-Choice and one married a non-Jew. Though we had grown up in the same Jewish home, when we created our own families Thanksgiving was very different for each of us.

I have straight cousins and gay cousins. I have married cousins, with and without children, as well as single cousins, with and without children. I have Jewishly-observant cousins and cousins who have essentially abandoned Judaism entirely.

My grandfather's first cousin was a Rosh Yeshivah in Chicago. His brother was one of the founding members of an important Reform congregation in Los Angeles.

I am guessing that my family is not much different from yours. Having just come through a major holiday season in which family traditionally plays a central role, and looking ahead to Thanksgiving in which family is also the focus in the American Jewish community, I find myself thinking a lot about the meaning of family, and the importance of the Jewish family in particular.

What do we care about most? For the most part, we want our children to create Jewish homes of their own, even if they are ultra-orthodox or completely secular. The Jewish world has always contained a broad spectrum of Jewish families. The odds are that the Jewish home of your parents and your grandparents and the generations before (after whom you are named, but about whom you know nothing except their names) looked a lot different than yours. That certainly is the case in my family.

Our goal is not to create carbon copies (remember those?) of our own families. It is to create a new generation of Jewish homes, Jewish families, and Jewish affiliations for our children and for their children.

So how can the synagogue help to encourage our members and our children to create Jewish homes? Too often we are the substitute for a Jewish home. Judaism lives in our homes more than in the Epstein sanctuary. Our task is not to create Jewish synagogues, but Jewish homes.

Our children are living in a very different world than we knew. They are forming relationships that are radically different from the ones we have known and they are creating homes that look radically different from ours. Should the synagogue hold to a strict standard of what a Jewish home should look like (whatever we imagine that to be)? Or do we meet our families where they are? How can we embrace the non-Jewish partner in an intermarried family who has made a commitment to create a warm and loving and exclusively

Jewish home for their children? Do we exclude him or her from synagogue life or from family celebrations in the synagogue? What do we imagine will happen when we do that? That they will convert to Judaism? Of course not. It is much more likely that they will withdraw or that the family will seek a congregation that is more welcoming to both spouses. What do we do about same-gender families? What do we do about single-parent families? What do we do about unmarried couples? What do we do about any families that look different than ours?

The question of who we permit to be members of our community is a very complex issue, one that brings together psychology and sociology, law and halakhah, religion and popular culture, gender and family, private values and public policy, ethics and morality.

We all have personal opinions. We all have personal history. We all have standards.

But let us never forget that the question of who we permit to be members of our community is also a very simple one. One of our core Jewish values is *hachnasat orchim* – “welcoming guests.” How are we diminished by opening our arms to those who have different family structures than ours? What do we lose by embracing Jewish families, whatever they look like? What possible argument can we have against the creation and encouragement and maintenance of committed Jewish families?

There are limits, of course. And defining those limits can be excruciatingly difficult ... and painful. The Conservative Movement is actively looking for ways to draw individuals and families of all kinds into our communities, not just for the sake of numbers but because we must remind ourselves that we are all made in God's image.

For me, it comes down to this:

1. We care about Judaism and about the future of the Jewish community.
2. We value loving, warm, observant Jewish homes.
3. We recognize that we are all made in God's image, and thus we are all obligated to treat others with dignity and decency.
4. Shaare Zedek is important to us, but not just the building. We are not a synagogue; we are a congregation. We use our synagogues to gather, to worship together, to celebrate together, and to learn together.
5. The core purpose of a synagogue is to strengthen Jews and the Jewish community. The best way to do this is to use the synagogue to strengthen our Jewish families and our Jewish homes.

If you see me reaching out more to families that look just like our own, but who have been made to feel unwelcome in our Jewish community, you will know that I am doing this because of these five reasons. I hope that you will join me. The future of Judaism depends on it.

