

RH 2009

I am not fond of change. It unnerves me, it makes me queasy, it is uncomfortable. Needless to say, with Rabbi White having announced his departure from Campus Ministry after over 40 years, I'm doing my best not to fall apart up here.

As far as standing up here and sharing some words with you for the High Holidays, I'm a relative newcomer. However, my connection to Rabbi White is 20 years old, and weirdly enough, that makes me a relative newcomer in that respect, too. Rabbi White has been a mainstay at Georgetown University for more than twice that length of time. Clearly, his legacies here at Georgetown are many, but it is one in particular that has occupied my thoughts lately.

This university prides itself on adhering to the Jesuit ideals, academic excellence is one of these of course, but also prominent among the ideals are those of creating and maintaining a diverse community--diverse by gender, geography, ethnicity and religion. Rabbi White understood these Ignatian values from his first days on campus, and helped create a truly unique Jewish community here.

The Jewish community at Georgetown includes faculty, staff, Georgetown alumni, members of the greater Washington DC community and, of course, students. It includes Reform Jews, Conservative Jews and non-Jews—our Jewish Community at Georgetown is Jewish by choice, by nurture rather than nature.

I have found that belonging to a Jewish community isn't bound by time and space. Well, it is, in that we are all bound by time and space (if there are any physicists in the congregation—just let it slide, ok?). What I mean to say is that one person may belong to many Jewish communities. One person may have a seriously fractured Jewish personality.

This multi-membership model is not unique to the Jewish people. But, in many ways Judaism, in particular, lends itself to a fluid membership model. Judaism has no institutional doctrinal requirements for membership—Abraham pretty much laid it out at the very beginning of his personal spiritual journey: There is one God, and there is no physical form to attribute to God. This core belief is of course bolstered by the stories and mitzvot in the Torah, and elaborated upon in the Talmud, but as we recite in the prayer Sh'ma, "Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God the Eternal is One." That is the essence of the Jewish creed. By basing an ancient and widely spread out religion on this central theme, Judaism has evolved, especially in the Western world, with great variations of religious observance and religious faith. Such diversity and variations are normal among Jews.

As I see it, there are two main reasons for both the variety of Jewish "types" and the ease with which Judaism accepts these variations. The first reason is that a Jew's relationship to God is inherently personal—there is no one in the Jewish community asking after or questioning religious beliefs. Secondly, the mitzvot in the Torah are by and large requirements to act or not act. The community can enforce laws that

are required to ensure the smooth functioning of a society, but the religious requirements are not judged, so a person's actions are under their own purview.

Ironically, in the story of the binding of Isaac, that we read today, Abraham is acting precisely as God has commanded, and is steered away from those actions. This is in direct contrast to the way we are to undertake the mitzvot in the Torah. They are requirements, true, but we do not have angels appearing to stay our hands, nor do we have sheep handy to replace our sacrifices. We are alone in our choices and our actions. But even so, it is a great strength of our religion that our actions and our thoughts are our own.

The downside to independent thinking—if there is a downside—is that people become very attached to their point of view. Knowing that you are right, because you have had the luxury of applying your own analysis to a given situation results in a very proprietary view of that opinion. The issue of who is a Jew is a situation that engenders heated debate precisely because of the nature of independent thought.

Over time, there have been a number of different ways to be considered Jewish ranging from birth to a Jewish parent (in Biblical times the father, and more recently the mother), to the relatively modern construct of conversion. So, even though biblically speaking, it was sufficient to lay claim to Hebraic beliefs to become part of the community, this hasn't been the case for centuries.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is in the Book of Ruth. After the loss of her husband, Ruth turns to her mother-in-law and makes the famous declaration: “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.” Often, Ruth is cited as the first convert to Judaism, but in fact, at that time, marriage was sufficient to accomplish the adoption into the community. To me, what is striking about her adoption of Naomi—her mother in law’s—religion are the close bonds that are forged by joining the community.

Over time, and due to the combined pressures of loss of political autonomy and the geographical spread of the diaspora the more formal requirements of both determining Judaism by lineage and by conversion were established. Membership in the Jewish community, for most of modern history, wasn’t exactly a benign or even pleasant thing. Living in isolated communities, lacking political, national, or even social commonality with their neighbors, keeping track of who was Jewish and who wanted to be Jewish was no big deal. After all, who in their right mind would willingly join such a marginalized group? This always makes me think of the famous saying by Groucho Marx, “I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member.”

Unsurprisingly, the Jewish oral tradition, Talmud, has wisdom to share regarding how to approach conversion.

The Talmud relates the story of 3 converts (Shabbos 31):

“A gentile once came to convert to Judaism, on the condition that he could learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot. He approached Shammai, who rejected him, so he went to Hillel, who taught him: "That which is hateful unto you, don't do to your fellow: That's the basis of Torah. The rest is commentary; go learn!"

Another gentile who wanted to learn only the written Torah came to convert. Shammai refused him, so he went to Hillel. The first day, Hillel taught him the Hebrew Alphabet. The next day he reversed the letters. The convert was confused: "But yesterday you said the opposite!?" Said Hillel: "Now you see that the written word alone is insufficient. We need the Oral Tradition to understand the Written."

A third gentile was very impressed by the Priestly garments of the Cohanim and came to convert. Again, Shammai dismissed him, but Hillel encouraged him to study more. After learning, he came to realize that even David, King of Israel didn't qualify to serve as a priest in the Temple, because he wasn't born a Cohen."

I am not sharing these stories to begin a study on conversion. What fascinates me is the contrast between Hillel and Shammai. Shammai took a literal approach and dismissed these potential converts out of hand. His assumption was that their

requests were frivolous or shallow. Hillel's assumption was that they wanted to learn.

How do I come to that conclusion? While in the stories it appears that he made pro-forma conversions, upon a deeper examination it is clear that he did not. In the first story, he shares the Jewish version of the "Golden Rule," and the admonishment of continued study. Upon studying, the convert would have to confront situations and issues where the bright line application of said rule might be confusing. Only with further study, and an adoption of the principles of Judaism, would this person come to fully accept and understand his choice. Similarly, in the second story, Hillel shows the convert a simple yet effective way in which a different perspective can alter the understanding of a subject. By having his student come to this realization on his own, Hillel proves the relevance of the oral tradition without slapping a pedantic overtone on it. In the last story, instead of merely telling the gentile that social status in Judaism is not based merely upon an accident of birth, he allows the student to realize that some of the greatest heroes in Judaic history achieved their positions through their deeds, and not because of their tribe affiliation.

Hillel, according to Rashi, was absolutely certain of the gentiles' sincerity. But, even discounting this telepathic theory, Hillel's approach is what stands out. Among his famous sayings is "Love people and bring them closer to Torah." His actions suit his words. By taking people at their word, and then showing them his own sincerity, Hillel created a welcoming setting for the students of Judaism to join and grow with.

Rabbi White has built the Jewish Community here at Georgetown by accepting all comers regardless of religion, background or social status. This unique and vibrant community that he created reflects both the Jesuit ideals of Unity in Diversity and the Jewish ideals as espoused by Hillel. I can not think of a more fitting legacy for a lifetime of work. It will be my goal, for as long as I am here at Georgetown, to continue to support this diverse and magnificent community. Luckily, I have past and present teachers to look to for guidance.

May you all be blessed with a sweet and healthy New Year. Shana Tova.