

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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I GOT TO THE CHURCH ON TIME

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I spent Shabbat Shuvah in a church. That's how this story begins. The way this story ends is this: I will now participate in interfaith wedding ceremonies.

I will be what I always am: a passionate teacher of text.

I have created a ceremony of teaching that I believe will work not only in teaching the couple at one of the most teachable moments in their lives but will work for the Jews in the congregation, facing the overwhelming symbols of another faith. I will act as a symbol of the survival of the Jewish people. Our people have always intermarried and assimilated. Yet still, we live. The more radical the situation (e.g., in a church on Shabbat) the more necessary this teaching is.

What brought about this change? Attending my sister's wedding. On Shabbat Shuvah. In a church. I strongly resisted participating in my sister's wedding, which actually confirms for me that my decision is the right one. I tried every which way to get out of participating in the ceremony. I would be happy just to be there, I said. She insisted I do something. Finally, I worked out something that felt comfortable to me. At the very end of the ceremony, after they had been presented as husband and wife, I would give the priestly benediction. It's hard to describe what happened at that point, but I could feel the relief and release of tension of the Jews there. That there was some assertion of Jewish identity, facing that crucifix, was a small representation of what it takes for us to be Jewish in America. We swim against an overwhelming tide.

Had it been anyone but my sister I would not have attended. It seems to me to be another part of God's giving me the message. God put me in a situation with only one course of action to teach me this lesson and show me this path.

Whenever I have followed the path that God has laid out for me, I have found satisfaction, even bliss. Life is too precious to live it in defiance of God's will out of fear or because a path is easy...and I've followed difficult paths before with good results. My parents forbid me to go to rabbinical school. I went anyway. I decided to step away from the conventional rabbinate to get my Ph.D. and write books. Now I feel called to this new path. My life experience has taught me that when God wants me to swing from the trapeze bar I'm on to the next one, which is clearly in sight, it is best to do it for two reasons. First, if I don't swing, I'm jamming up the works, as the bar I'm vacating is someone else's destiny and they can't move until I do. Second, God brings the message, "Swing! Fly! Catch!" home ever-more painfully. I have endured God prying my fingers off a bar because I feared to move to the next bar. It is very painful. Experience has taught me that no matter how odd my behavior may look to onlookers (e.g., making cloth, oval-shaped tefillin or commissioning my own shiviti), if God urges me onward then it is the right thing to do. The constants in all of this are my love of God and my love of our texts.

The easiest thing for me to do would be to continue my practice of 21 years of not officiating at intermarriages in any way. I have no board or congregants hounding me. I do this solely because I think it is the right course of action. Many people, my students, colleagues and teachers, may disapprove of my decision, whereas they would praise me for "staying the course." But the easy course is not the right one for me now. My life has always been one of pushing limits, of doing the difficult thing and it has granted me great spiritual rewards. Should I discern that this is not God's will, I can stop at any time with no difficulty...and I will.

It is easy to deride rabbis who participate in intermarriage ceremonies. Indeed, I am guilty of this sin myself. It's easy to think poorly of them...UNTIL YOU NEED ONE. For those who would judge me harshly, I ask only that you make an informed judgment. Find out what I do and how I do it before you blithely condemn this decision of mine as that of someone who's gone 'round the twist.

So, you, my students, please weigh in. Tell me what you think. I will keep you informed of where this new path leads.