

In the summer of 2005, I had the honor to officiate at a joyous Jewish Wedding in the high Colorado mountains. The unexpected rain rushed the ceremony to an early close, which was nonetheless very powerful and heartwarming. The bride's family was unaffiliated, while the groom's family, as became apparent in their comments throughout the rehearsal, had once been members of a congregation and disgruntled, they were now unaffiliated. As an independent ritual leader (or *Ritual Artist*) I have enjoyed each wedding, with its unique characteristics and participants, over the last six years serving in this blessed work. This wedding was particularly special- not so much in the ceremony itself, but in the encounter with the bride's uncle during the reception.

Very quickly during the cocktail hour, he approached me.
"Beautiful ceremony", he said, and continued right away, "I'd like to tell you a story"

This man, who is about the age of my father, continues to describe his own father's repelling experience of Jewish congregational affiliation and how he left it all after his Bar Mitzvah, which he recalls as a boring if not repressive experience. He then tells of his own adult experience of great insult by the synagogue and rabbi of his prior affiliation. As I am silently listening, my heart – so full of joy from the ceremony – falls in my chest like a lump of mud. Tears come to my eyes as I see his own.

His story includes the tales of his young wife who died of cancer and the cold-hearted, financially centered interaction with the small-town Pennsylvania Rabbi whom he turned to in his grief. Only days after his wife's passing, looking for a Jewish grave site, he was met with heartless and impossible financial requirements. This man's heart, over 30 years later, still ached and his anger still showed in his pained and lengthy description.

"Well, the short of it is", he finally concluded, "your ceremony is the first thing that has me even consider going back to Judaism."

The "problem" of the great numbers of unaffiliated Jews is being addressed by many foundations and organizations, especially in this last decade. Heaps of money is being poured into researching this population and devising how to draw them back to the Synagogue. As well, there is a prevalent - either quiet or outward- shunning of those Jews who chose to not be part of a synagogue, and ritual and spiritual services for them are greatly limited. I often find too that people such as myself who are committed to serving any Jew who comes with a sincere interest in this great heritage, are often looked at with scorn or as some sort of threat.

I question: why wouldn't we welcome anyone who wants to connect to their Jewish heritage in *any way* they can feel wholehearted? Isn't this tradition a path of heart? Isn't a principle wisdom in our tradition the meaningfulness of connection both to others and to

god? How could this shunning or pushing inspire connection? I am witness to so many who have sincerely not been met – even injured- by the established officers and/or codes of Judaism. I want for their healing and re-connection to the beauty of our tradition. I want to meet them where they are with a basket of flowering-traditions from which to pick.

After years of independent service in Jewish education and ritual leadership, I am proposing that we look at “unaffiliated Jews” from a different angle. Firstly, let’s remember to see with the eyes of compassion and generosity, which are qualities of true mitzvot. The lack of institutional affiliation amongst many Jews simply reflects that somehow the structures and forms conventional Judaism offers is not working for many people. Are we to demand of them to fit a mold that isn’t suitable or inspiring for them? I have seen, especially in the role of an educator, that meeting people where they are is the only true way to welcome them and inspire them in any new direction.

In this country, I believe that we have masses of injured Jews. Even in my own experience this man’s story is just one of tens of tear-jerkers on related topics. How are we going to relate as kin, as a tribe, to those who have been hurt by the established institutions and norms in which they cannot feel their own heart awoken? Humbly, I suggest that we need not research more the unaffiliated population as if they are the problem to solve. Underneath all the specs we data-base, we will find a simple reality that many would want a place for their tender and well-intended hearts to meet God, and would prefer that divinity to have a Hebrew name. But the affiliation is not a fit. If the structures and forms are not serving well enough, we must look -with great courage and creativity - at the *forms* themselves. And be willing to evolve, as our tradition always has.

We must look now at what is preventing the “Jewish Community” from meeting people where they are rather than putting effort to pull them toward what has been already disappointing? What are we gripping to? and what are we afraid of? And, are the actions we take true representations of the wisdom teachings of the Jewish tradition?

I pray we can gather in kinship and dialogue, in organizations or in small circles, and investigate these more difficult and in-depth questions.

I pray that the welcoming heart, represented by our father Avraham’s open-sided tent and the wedding *chuppah*, can guide us as we seek to repair the schisms between our own kin. And further, that this “in-home” repair effect tolerance and peace between us all.