Good morning and thank you for coming today.

Our gathering is the first in a three-part series that was chiefly designed to fulfill two goals during this year in which I have set out to reflect on the question of whether or not to officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies during this next chapter of my rabbinate.

The first of those goals is a sincere desire on my part to share some of the fundamental philosophical questions that I am grappling with as I proceed in my own decision-making process. And the second of those goals is to hear from you. I have had the privilege of hearing congregants’ perspectives on this issue on an almost weekly basis since I arrived here in July, and my office door remains open going forward. It goes without saying that I’d be delighted to schedule a meeting if you would like to discuss this topic, or any topic, in private. Our time together this morning will be an additional opportunity, for those who feel comfortable in this public setting, to share their own perspective on this broad issue, as well as respond to my teaching, which will make up the first part of our program today.

A brief word is in order regarding why it is that I need to discern my position on this question in the first place! You might have expected that a rabbi who has already served for more than seven years would have long since been able to explain his or her view on an issue as critical and pressing as this one.

I am, therefore, embarrassed to admit to you that this was an issue that largely passed me by until the summer of 2011, when I was preparing to interview in a job search that ultimately brought me here to Scarsdale.

During my five years of rabbinical school, you will perhaps be surprised to learn that we spent a grand total of one hour on this topic. The faculty of Hebrew Union College is largely opposed to rabbinic officiation at interfaith wedding ceremonies. And so, as a result, the student body (at least during my time in school) was mildly brainwashed into embracing that position. I say mildly because that was the unspoken default. We literally did not discuss it. It is hard to believe that, of all the issues that would have been passed over in rabbinical school, that this would have been one of them. Nonetheless: we did not speak of it, and so I never had the opportunity to deal with it then.

I left school and wound up at Temple Solel in San Diego. And although Temple Solel is like the typical American Reform community in nearly every respect….30% of the temple membership there were interfaith families, which is in line with the national average….Nonetheless: what is notable about Solel is that it was one of the few Reform synagogues in the country that had specifically gone on record publicly as actively *not wanting* its rabbis to officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies. Rabbi David Frank, my Senior Rabbi and teacher of the last seven years, openly embraced that position regarding officiation, and so I was trained in a milieu that passionately believed that it was possible to warmly welcome interfaith families into our midst in every way, except that our clergy would not stand with those couples underneath their chuppah.

Like my time in school, my tenure at Solel was marked by silence around this issue.

Thus: I am again embarrassed to admit that when I entered the job market to come here, I honestly was not sure how I felt about the question. No one had ever seriously asked me before.

You will never know how grateful I am that the Search Committee and our temple’s leadership have given me the gift of this year to study, reflect, and dialogue around this issue, so that I can speak much more authoritatively about it when my decision is made.

One final word of introduction. This is the sort of rabbinic conversation that necessitates a long list of disclaimers. This is, undoubtedly, a topic that we all take very personally. Which means that our feelings, and our own sense of our selves and our families, are on the line, whenever the subject gets broached. This subject is personal for you: because you yourselves are in an interfaith relationship, or because your parents or grandparents were in an interfaith relationship; or because your child is already in one. And even if your child is not already in one, it is personal because statistically speaking there’s at least a 50% chance that your child might choose to spend the rest of their lives with someone who is not Jewish. Amy and I have two children of our own, and we are sensitively aware of the fact that the statistic applies as much to our kids as it does to your’s.

This subject is personal for me in other ways as well. I have a close family member whose husband is not Jewish. They asked me to officiate at their wedding ceremony, which was steeped in Jewish tradition, and I had to decline. I declined because I was still a rabbinical student at the time, and thus was not permitted to officiate at any wedding ceremony. But I also declined because then, as now, I was not sure how I felt about the question of officiation, and so I erred (as I do now) on the side of not officiating until I resolve the question. I am extraordinarily close to my cousin, and I was heartbroken that for many reasons I could not stand with them under the chuppah.

The subject is also personal to me because some of my and Amy’s closest friends are part of interfaith families. Many of them were married before I met them. Nonetheless, I have spent years suspended in this strange space: of loving and respecting them on a personal level. And selfishly and embarrassingly grateful that they were married before I met them, because of my indecision about the officiation question on a professional level.

With that acknowledgement that all of us have personal ties to this issue, let me begin by offering a heartfelt apology. To anyone who walks away from today’s discussion with a sense of being judged by me: I am deeply sorry. It is not my intent to do so.

To be clear: on a personal level: the only stake that I have in in any conversation about love and marriage is that the two partners love each other, treat each other with mutual respect, and are – on the whole – happy.

I need not tell you that we live in a fractured and fragile world….one filled with hatred and distrust. It is, I believe, nothing less than a miracle that in this day and age: two individuals are able to find each other, articulate a love for each other, and mutually desire to spend the rest of their lives together. Whether the partners are of different genders, skin colors, or religions: it truly does not matter to me. I lift up your love and celebrate it. How fortunate you are to be in relationship together. Our world, and our community, are so much stronger because of it.

Unfortunately, it is not quite that simple for me to automatically celebrate a couple’s love for each other, when I am approached in the context of my work and identity as a rabbi. To a certain degree, Jeff Brown’s personal opinions about love and marriage are irrelevant….Because my role and identity as a rabbi is bound up in the way that I symbolically represent Jewish tradition and authority to others. That is what it means to be a rabbi. To ignore Jewish tradition in articulating my position on the question of whether I, as a rabbi, can officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies, would be, in my own not-so-humble opinion, absurd and professionally inappropriate.

For a number of decades, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the rabbinic organization that I am a proud member of, and am ultimately responsible to, has empowered Reform rabbis to autonomously determine whether they are in a position to articulate whether or not Jewish law and tradition – in this day and age – permits them to authentically stand as a rabbi underneath a chuppah with an interfaith couple – that is a couple in which one partner is Jewish and the other partner is not Jewish – and bless that couple and facilitate an authentic Jewish ritual for that couple, in a way that is historically consistent with the role of the rabbi at Jewish wedding ceremonies over the last 2000 years.

There are, to be sure, rabbinic colleagues of mine who have determined that with regards to this issue, and to other Jewish issues….that Jewish law and tradition gets no voice at all. I would respectfully say that there is a basic and global disconnect between the way that those individuals go about practicing in their rabbinate versus the way that I go about practicing mine. To be clear: the only way that I know how to be a rabbi is to ask the kinds of questions that I will be raising this morning and in our subsequent two sessions.

I must share with you that I have heard from some congregants that there is a sense of hurt on their part because I am in a place of ‘having to decide’ about this issue. I gather that, for them, even the thought of being in a relationship with a rabbi who *might* *not* officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies….of having a rabbi who even has to take the time to think about it….is hurtful to them.

If you would put yourself in this category, I would like to say a few things to you. First, I want to apologize again for the pain that I have caused. I don’t know what else to say except that it is most certainly not my intention to cause pain to you or your family – though I understand that that is a natural result of any rabbinic exploration of this issue.

But I would also say, in my own defense, that I humbly believe that it is in the long term best interests of this congregation, and congregations everywhere, to have rabbis who are able to be thoughtful and authentic about this issue and others like it. For what it is worth from the rabbi’s perspective: this is not an easy question to resolve. In a shameless effort to win your sympathy, I would invite those who are interested to track down a copy of the 1999 book *Rabbis Talk About Intermarriage* by Gary Tobin and Katherine Simon. The book does an excellent job of illustrating, by way of interviewing rabbis across the denominational spectrum, what a difficult issue this is for us. It does a fair job of representing the philosophical grappling that I have been doing, and will continue to do, over the next few months.

Of course, it may be, that in the fall when my decision is made, that we will have some work to do together if you are disappointed and further hurt by my ultimate decision in this matter. But in the meantime: during these next eight or nine months, I would invite you to be open to the idea that there is something intrinsically Jewish about being thoughtful and reflective before making what will amount to the biggest decision of one’s professional life. The leadership of the synagogue has been extraordinarily generous in giving me this time to make this decision, and I can only humbly ask that you indulge me as well.

In the remaining part of our first hour together, I’d like to split my time between discussing the arguments in favor of the concept of Jewish law changing over time, and the arguments against it. That will leave us with approximately half an hour for us to engage in discussion together. Please do feel free to make a note of questions that come up during the lecture. I will be happy to answer them once I have concluded my remarks.

A brief word about the selection of today’s topic: Can/Does Jewish Law Change Over Time? One need not be an expert in Jewish law to know that our *halachah* has been historically opposed to the concept of interfaith marriage. Our subsequent meetings will explore in just a little more depth why that was. But this morning, the larger meta-question about change in Jewish law is our focus. I trust that you can appreciate that if I am able to conclude that Jewish law can and should evolve over time, then that will pave the way for a willingness on my part to officiate at interfaith wedding ceremonies. And on the other hand, if I ultimately conclude that Jewish law should not evolve – or should do so in the most conservative fashion – then that will make it harder for me to authentically officiate.

After flipping a coin in my office a few days ago, I determined that we should begin this morning with the con side of the question…that the essence of Jewish law should not, and cannot, change over time.

As a sort of “thought exercise,” let’s take a minute to close our eyes and silently reflect on the question of WHAT DOES BEING JEWISH mean to you?

(Pause)

I imagine that if we were to survey the room, that we’d be able to generate a list of the “basics” which constitute essential aspects of Jewishness. In no particular order, those values might include: a desire to foster a sense of *tzedek* or justice in the world; the value of family; the value of having a Jewish home, and of celebrating Shabbat and Jewish holidays there (however our families might choose to observe them); and perhaps also the value of *tzedakah*: of philanthropically supporting those in need.

There is no question that Jewish families express these values differently. Some families focus their Jewish time and energy on philanthropy. And others are most conscious of *tzedek* and the way that they treat others in the world. And some families mark Shabbat every week, and other families count themselves as lucky if they are able to score an invitation to a Passover seder every few years. There is no question that there is a range of practice regarding what Jews, and more particularly what American Jews, *do*.

That is not the question before us this morning. The question before us this morning is to what extent the meta-definition of Judaism is able to evolve, regardless of the choices we are making in our personal lives.

Let me try to illustrate this with a real-world example. According to the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey, the most recent attempt by the American Jewish community to comprehensively measure trends connected to Jewish life, only 28% of American Jews light Shabbat candles on a regular basis.[[1]](#footnote-1)

28% is a tiny number….far fewer than the threshold of a majority. Only 28% of American Jews light Shabbat candles.

Are we to conclude from that data…from the ways that American Jews are voting with their feet and behavioral patterns, that experiencing Shabbat is no longer an essential aspect of Jewishness?

As a progressive rabbi, I tend not to judge the Jewish choices that my congregants make. I embrace the notion that in this post-Enlightenment and post-First Amendment world that we live in, Jews and everyone else in this country have a legitimate right to live a life that may or may not be filled with Jewish choices.

But that is a far cry from being in a place, as a rabbi, where I could reasonably stand up and tell you that Shabbat is not a critically important component of a rich and meaningful Jewish life. I do not believe that, and cannot authentically say that to you as your rabbi.

While the ways in which we might experience Shabbat vary, I would say to you that a Jewish life without Shabbat is not just missing something that I believe is nice and lovely and meaningful. I would go much further and tell you that a Jewish life without Shabbat is missing an essential aspect of Jewishness.

To be clear: I share all of this with you, not to guilt you into making Shabbat a more substantial part of your lives. I have already told you that I do not enter into judgment on that sort of thing.

I speak of Shabbat, rather, to illustrate the role of the rabbi when it comes to giving voice to the essential aspects of Judaism and Jewishness, and to argue – at least during this portion of our conversation this morning – that there is a world of difference between aspects of Jewish life that are being unobserved by our friends and neighbors – and aspects of Jewish life that our rabbis should be continuing to lift up as examples of part of the basic definition of what it means to be Jewish. If we were to follow this line of thinking to its logical conclusion, we might ask ourselves if rabbinic officiation at interfaith wedding ceremonies is analogously similar.

One further illustration with regards to Shabbat, because it is instructive…particularly of how we Reform Jews think about these issues.

I mention the word Reform here, because I think that some of us enter into a conversation about rabbinic officiation at interfaith weddings presuming that the Reform rabbinic community will have no objection to it. Our Reform rabbis, after all, are not Conservative and Orthodox.

On the contrary: we Reform rabbis draw lines and boundaries all the time as we attempt to guide our congregations in terms of what is ‘essentially Jewish’ and what isn’t.

Going back to the Shabbat example, a proposal was made several decades ago by Rabbi Alvin Reines, a noted Hebrew Union College professor and widely respected authority on Jewish philosophy. Dr. Reines proposed that Reform Jews be encouraged to observe Shabbat on whatever day of the week might be most convenient for them, instead of the traditional Shabbat timetable of sundown Friday through sundown Saturday.

Justifying his proposal, Reines wrote that: “In the highly individualistic contemporary world, a detemporalization and despatialization of Jewish observances enables religious Jewishness to be fashioned by each Jewish person according to her or his lifestyle and needs. When religious observances are shaped by individual Jews as an expression of their personal rhythms we are no longer confronted with the devastating problem of arrhythmic and impotent Jewish observances owing to disharmony with their existential contexts.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Reines sought to argue that the reason for lackluster Shabbat observance was because Friday night was inconvenient for American Jews. He reasoned, instead, that Shabbat observance would increase if people had the chance to decide for themselves when it would be most convenient for them to take their day of rest.

I’m not sure what you think of Reines’ idea. But I can tell you that nearly the entirety of the American Jewish community rejected it. Reines was subsequently marginalized as a radical, and lived out the rest of his career provoking debate amongst his rabbinical students…but not really taken seriously by anyone else.

Reines’ rejection by our community wasn’t just because of the power of Tradition, though that is something that I believe Reines woefully underestimates. He also fails to appreciate that Shabbat, and Jewish observance in general, is not something that is exclusively private and individualistic. Shabbat, like our Jewish identities in general, is also communal. It is most fully lived out when we share it with others. That sharing happens when we meet our friends and family in our homes and at our synagogue. And on a more global level, that sharing happens when we realize that, through our observance of Shabbat, we are connecting ourselves to *klal yisrael* – the entirety of the Jewish people (past and present). It is hard to do that if you are sitting down to a so-called Shabbat dinner by yourself on a Wednesday night.

Thus we can see that the rejection of Reines, by our own Reform community, is an affirmation by our movement that there are certain limits that we have…Authentic Jewishness is X, and we are not willing to include Y in that definition.

I’d like to share with you one other prominent example, from within our own Reform community, about the limits that we have put into place, regarding the issue of change.

Approximately twenty years ago, a synagogue in the Midwest approached the Reform movement about formally joining and becoming a Reform congregation.

The relatively straightforward inquiry turned strange, when – in the course of submitting its application paperwork – the congregation in question “outed itself” as a humanistic Jewish community….that is, a synagogue community founded on the idea that there is no such thing as God.

Thus the question was raised: does a synagogue which officially does not believe in God…a community that has written its own prayerbook so that its Shabbat services do not mention any reference to any kind of Deity…does a synagogue like that fall within the defintional parameters of Reform Judaism?

The question is not a simple one, when we consider that our’s is a theologically progressive expression of Judaism. The vast majority of Reform rabbis most certainly do not believe that God wrote the Torah, and some of them – like, perhaps some of us in this room – openly struggle with the question of God and God’s existence. Many Reform rabbis don’t necessarily believe in a “supernatural” God as described in the Bible, but perhaps some alternative definition of God that is more reflective of the way we understand our own modern and postmodern world.

The “problem” is that humanistic Jews are not interested in those contemporary re-definitions. They believe that it is more theologically and intellectually honest to just stand up and say: there is no God.

Our Reform movement denied the congregation’s application for membership.[[3]](#footnote-3) And in doing so they made a strong statement: that there are certain essences of Judaism that are not up for debate, and which cannot and should not change over time. And belief in some kind of God – any kind of God – is one of them. In our movement it is okay to question God. And it is okay to re-define God. But it is not, according to the movement, okay for a synagogue to call itself Reform and completely delete the word “God” from all prayer and worldview.

With the example of Reines’ proposal regarding the rescheduling of Shabbat, and with the example of the humanistic synagogue’s application for membership in the Reform movement, I have sought to show how our own Reform movement – Judaically permissive in so many ways – has drawn clear boundaries over the years to indicate that there is a limit to how much change we are willing to embrace when it comes to things that are tied to the very essence of what it means to be Jewish.

The million dollar question that is before me is whether or not rabbinic officiation at an interfaith wedding ceremony constitutes a change that should be made, or should not be. I trust that you won’t be bashful about sharing your own feelings about that question shortly.

For now, though, let us switch gears, as we explore this question: can/should Jewish law change over time, from the affirmative perspective.

As a Reform Jew, it is in many ways easier for me to make the argument that Judaism and Jewishness absolutely changes over time. After all: I do not live my life as, for example, an ultra-Orthodox Jew. Nor do I teach those values in my rabbinate. By definition: I affirm the notion that our tradition evolves over time. I do not desire, nor do I encourage others, to embrace a worldview and lifestyle that was rooted, depending on who you to talk to, in 18th century Poland or 6th century Babylonia.

The founders of Reform Judaism in 19th century Germany and America employed the language of ‘meaningfulness’ – an admittedly subjective criteria – that Reform Jews should use in order to determine which aspects of Jewish ritual observance they would take on for themselves.

More objectively speaking, our teachers have also engaged in a more substantive study and discussion of Jewish law to identify texts that specifically speak to the issue of the evolution of Jewish law, and the principles undergirding those changes.

If you are interested, I would refer you in this regard to Rabbi Moshe Zemer’s 1999 book *Evolving Halakhah*, which is one of the chief sourcebooks for the subject, and which I made ample use of in preparing this part of the lecture.

Zemer cites several values as the basis for the evolution of Jewish law over time.

For example, in the context of the principle of morality and conscience, he reminds us of Hillel, the great teacher from the turn of the millennium, who helped to pave the way for non-Orthodox Jews to no longer abide by the biblical law regarding a *mamzer* – that is, the so-called bastard status of a child born of two Jews whose union was illicit or prohibited. Hillel’s two thousand year old innovation stemmed from his novel way of reading and interpreting the traditional ketubah text. Zemer, reflecting on Hillel’s progressivism and his willingness to have Jewish law change over time, asserts that it grew out of “his conscience, that stirred him to take this audacious action.” After all, for Hillel and for us, it seems immoral for the community to punish a child for the actions of his or her parent.

Beyond issues of morality, we also have the Jewish legal principle of “human dignity.” As Zemer quotes from the Talmud:[[4]](#footnote-4) “Great is human dignity, which takes precedence over a negative precept of the Torah.” Zemer notes in his book that liberal authorities have long relied on this passage to encourage a more flexible reading of Jewish law – particularly around those aspects that have been historically designated as *d’rabbanan* – pieces of Jewish law instituted by the rabbis, as opposed to *d’oraita* – those pieces of Jewish law instituted by the Bible itself, which are always seen as more stringent. You might be interested to know that the American Conservative movement recently invoked the principle of “human dignity” in its arguments in favor of permitting homosexual relationships.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Less formally, I believe that one could argue that the gains of Jewish feminism have largely come about because of this value of “human dignity.” As more and more in our community embraced the idea that men and women were truly equal, there was a growing realization that there was something terribly undignified about the way that our Jewish tradition has historically and misogynistically treated women. It’s not just that Jewish law othered women by forcing them into the equivalent of seclusion during their menstrual periods. And it’s not just that Jewish law, in the worst kind of double standard, treated women’s bodies and voices as sexually enticing forces (and robbed rights from women as a result) while never presuming the opposite for men.

But it’s not just that those provisions in Jewish law were problematic. It’s that all of Jewish law has historically been written by Jewish men. Jewish women’s voices were never included at the table in the first place.

Our teacher Judith Plaskow puts this so much more beautifully than I ever could, as she writes on the very first page of her landmark 1990 book *Standing Again at Sinai*: “The need for a feminist Judaism begins with hearing silence. It begins with noting the absence of women’s history and experiences as shaping forces in the Jewish tradition. Half of Jews have been women, but men have been defined as normative Jews, while women’s voices and experiences are largely invisible in the record of Jewish belief and experience that has come down to us. Women have lived Jewish history and carried its burdens, but women’s perceptions and questions have not given form to scripture, shaped the direction of Jewish law, or found expression in liturgy. Confronting this silence raises disturbing questions and stirs the impulse toward far-reaching change. What in the tradition is ours? What can we claim that has not also wounded us? What would have been different had the great silence been filled?”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Plaskow’s work, and the work of so many other great Jewish feminists, is the work of *tikkun*, of fixing Jewish law and the indignities that it showered on women over these last 2000 years. I have taken the time to quote from Plaskow at length, because I think that her work illustrates part of the mandate for a Judaism that must change and evolve over time.

But there are other situations, beyond those concerning morality and human dignity that the Talmud and subsequent Jewish authorities indicated as scenarios in which Jewish legal leniency was permitted. These include: in cases of genuine emergencies; in cases that involve suffering; in cases that involved preventing enmity between people, as well as the related principle of promoting peace.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Zemer concludes the first chapter of his book by noting: “As we have seen, enlightened decisors of past generations considered themselves bound by the codified Halakhah as presented in the Written and Oral Laws [that is: the Torah and the Talmud]. At the same time, however, alert to the suffering of their people and the demands of their own conscience, they were willing to rectify injustices caused by the inevitable conflict between antique rules and the realities of their own age.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Some of our greatest medieval sages and commentators, whom we associate with scrupulousness when it comes to questions of religious observance, also took liberties to emphasize that our tradition and practice were not meant to be static and unchanging….that there had to be a certain spirit of flexibility embedded within Jewish law itself. For example, Maimonides was fond of citing the Talmudic dictum that “It is better for a person to eat the gravy, rather than the fat [or meat] itself.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Talmud, here, is speaking of the famous case of the pregnant woman who gets an unbearable craving for pork in the middle of her pregnancy. Shockingly, the rabbis of the Talmud – who of course took the Jewish dietary laws very, very seriously – have sympathy on a woman in such a predicament. Invoking the value of *pikuach nefesh* – the principle that we should do virtually anything in order to save someone’s life – the rabbis of the Talmud taught that the pork should be prepared and then presented to the woman with a straw. At first, she was encouraged to have some gravy with a straw. But if that did not satisfy her craving, then she was permitted to dig in and enjoy her pork lunch. Thus the dictum: ‘It is better for one to eat the gravy…’

Our interest in the text has nothing to do with observance of the dietary laws, and nothing to do with the unexpected sensitivity of the rabbis toward pregnant women. Our interest is chiefly associated with the rabbis’ liberalism when it came to enforcing the prohibition against pork in the dietary laws. They seem to be acknowledging that Jewish law cannot, and should not, remain valid in every situation. Or to put it in other words: flexibility and openness to change are necessary as we navigate our way through Jewish law.

This value is invoked more directly in Rashi’s commentary [as mentioned in his commentary to Yoma 69a] to a verse from the Book of Psalms, which reads: “It is time to act for the Lord; they have violated your Torah.” The rabbis of the Talmud [Brachot 63a] flip the clauses around to read: “Violate your teaching and infringe the law of the Torah, *because* it is time to act for the Lord.” Or, as Rashi himself put it in the eleventh century: “When the time comes to do something for the sake of the Holy One, blessed is He, it is permissible to violate the Torah.”[[10]](#footnote-10) And, similarly, the Talmud notes: “It is better that a specific precept of the Torah be uprooted, rather than the entire Torah be forgotten by the Jews.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Surely Rashi and others are not giving us *carte blanche* to ignore all of inherited Jewish law. Thus, I am faced with the challenge of grappling with this question this year….Is rabbinic officiation at an intermarriage a change that should be implemented in order to save the Torah from being forgotten by the Jewish People? We’ll have the opportunity to engage with that question a bit more in our next session, when we take issues of demographics and population growth into consideration.

To summarize his survey of the medieval period, Zemer notes that: “Halakhah is an evolutionary and ethical phenomenon. In all of these halakhic texts, the rabbis enacted regulations in response to changes of time, place, and circumstance, or because their conscience demanded it.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

This concludes my argument in favor of the fact that Jewish law has already, and can/should continue to change over time.

By way of concluding this morning’s lecture, I would be remiss if I did not mention one additional text. Rabbi Moses Sofer, better known as Chatam Sofer, was a noted Jewish legal authority from the late 18th century. He once famously wrote that “Anything new is forbidden by the Torah in every place.”

Those words have been commonly used by contemporary Orthodox authorities to criticize the very existence of our Reform movement.

I purposely refrained from using them during the first half of my presentation today, because of the emotional baggage that the words carry for me as a proud Reform Jew, and because it is a fact that all of us, and the Judaisms we espouse, have embraced change and evolution to a certain degree.

So as to the broad general question of this morning: Can/Should Jewish Law change over time? Of course the answer to that question is YES.

But the better question is: to what degree can and should it change?

And more specifically: if we take the time to examine the question through the lens of the various principles raised this morning – should Jewish law change to permit rabbis to officiate at interfaith marriages?

I am not sure what the right answer to that question is at this very moment. I’ve given myself another nine months – give or take – to decide.

In the meantime, I trust that there is no shortage of questions and comments here in this room. I’m most interested in hearing your perspectives.

Thank you.

1. <http://bit.ly/13aHOV9> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Two Concepts of Shabbat: The State-of-Being Shabbat and the Seventh-Day Shabbat” by Alvin Reines. Appearing in the *Journal of Reform Judaism*, Fall 1987. Page 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://bit.ly/VGc712> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Evolving Halakhah: A Progressive Approach to Traditional Jewish Law* by Moshe Zemer. Published in 1999. He refers to Brachot 19b on page 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://bit.ly/LUeIki> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Standing Again at Sinai* by Judith Plaskow. Published in 1990. Page 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zemer, pp. 4-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Zemer, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Zemer pp. 26-27 on Yoma 82a and Rambam’s use of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Zemer, p. 27-ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Temurah 14b, as quoted and translated by Zemer on p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Zemer, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)