Good morning and thank you for coming today.

Our gathering is the third 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. And the second is to hear from you. I have had the privilege of hearing congregants’ perspectives on this issue regularly 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.

For those that were not with us in January for the first session, I would refer you to my introductory remarks that were delivered at that time – and which can be accessed online – describing some of the background behind this process. On this day, I will only reiterate that: from the rabbi’s perspective, this is not an easy question to resolve. I would refer you to 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.

At our gathering in January, we focused on the broad introductory question of whether Jewish Law can, or should, change over time. I attempted to argue, at that time, that our tradition is of two minds on the subject. One school of thought aggressively champions such change, while another maintains that there are *ikkarim* or essences about our tradition that are off-limits: that there are aspects of Judaism that are so sacrosanct that changing them would actually transform Judaism into something that is no longer recognizable as Judaism.

And when we gathered last, in February, we had the chance to consider how interfaith marriage has manifested itself at different points in history. For example, we saw that there was strong evidence to indicate that none other than Moses himself was part of an interfaith marriage. It is hard to think of a stronger Biblical endorsement for marrying outside of the faith.

And yet: we also encountered texts that directly called the practice into question. We engaged in a close reading of passages from the Book of Ezra which violently depict how our ancestors, around 500 BCE, spontaneously abandoned their partners in a radical reaction against interfaith marriage, which helped to set the tone for Judaism’s default antipathy toward exogamy until recently.

In stepping back and considering the content of those two sessions, I hope that we all walk away with a renewed sense that our tradition is multivocal. It does not speak with one voice. There are sources that argue in favor of completely normalizing everything connected to interfaith marriage. And there are sources that do the exact opposite. Extended consideration of an issue as complex as this one breathes new life into the old adage that if you have two Jews in the room, there most certainly are three opinions.

Today’s discussion is equally multifaceted and will revolve around the question of the role that our tradition grants the one who is not Jewish in Jewish ritual.

On a surface level, I chose today’s topic because of the *tachlis* or pragmatic decision I need to make about whether I believe it is appropriate for me, as a rabbi, to officiate in the context of a Jewish wedding ceremony when one of the partners getting married is not Jewish.

But I also chose the topic because careful consideration of this issue takes us well beyond who says what during a wedding ceremony. This subject has significant philosophical ramifications that, for me, bring us to an even more complicated Jewish question – namely, who is a Jew and what does it mean to be part of the Jewish People?

In the remaining part of our first hour together, I’d like to split my time between exploring these issues from the vantage point of those who are opposed to officiation and those who are in favor.

We’ll look at the “con” side first, based on a coin flip I conducted in my office several days ago.

Following the lecture, we’ll have approximately half an hour to engage in discussion together. Please do feel free to make a note of questions that come up during my presentation. I will be happy to answer them once I have concluded my remarks.

And so, we begin with the “con” side of the question…and in doing so, I will seek to build a narrative that suggests that rabbis do not officiate at, and should not validate, a ritual that features substantial participation by someone who is not Jewish.

It is hard for me to even utter these next few sentences out loud because they are so hurtful. But, because I have committed myself to a process that is intellectually honest and transparent, we shall not avoid our own Jewish past.

The starting point for the historic opposition to non-Jewish roles in Jewish ritual is in an over-riding presumption that there are two mutually exclusive categories of people: those who are Jewish, and those who are not.

We saw, during our February gathering, that the Torah frowned upon having these two groups mix together socially. Thus Deuteronomy 7:3: “You shall not intermarry with them; do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons.”

And the reason for the separation between the two groups is made clear in the verse that immediately follows: “For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Eternal One’s anger will flare against you, promptly wiping you out.”

Thousands of years before the advent of electronic communication, the Internet, and social media – it is nothing short of quaint to read this text and be drawn into the Biblical Author’s belief that it is possible for us to shelter our children from anyone or anything in the world that is different from us.

Nonetheless: this is exactly what Jews tried to do for thousands of years. Those of other faith traditions were kept at arm’s length. Some times, this happened because other religious traditions imposed prohibitions on mixing socially with Jews. And other times, we imposed those restrictions ourselves.

For example, consider the disturbing material of Ezekiel Chapter 23 and the Talmudic interpretation of it. The prophet, there, seems to be suggesting that the destruction of the Ten Northern Tribes of Israel, in 722 BCE by the Assyrian Empire, was caused by God as a punishment to the Israelites for being intimate, and ultimately intermarrying, with the Assyrians. Note, for example, the hyper-sexualized and explicit language that the text uses in 23:20: “She [the Israelites] lusted for concubinage with them, whose sexual members were like those of asses and whose organs were like those of stallions.”

To be sure: there is a long Biblical tradition of using physical intimacy with non-Israelites as a metaphor for the even more problematic issue of Israelite idol worship. In the language of the prophets “whoring” isn’t just a physical act to describe a woman who sleeps with someone other than her husband. It’s a description for the spiritual act of an Israelite worshipping another god.

Nonetheless, the rabbis of the Talmud read this verse from Ezekiel to concretize their sense that those who are not Jewish – the so-called *goyim* of my grandparents’ parlance – are second-class citizens.

How do they do that? They begin by reading the Ezekiel verse as significantly less phallic. Instead of reiterating the notion that “size matters,” they translate the verse as: “She [the Israelites] lusted for concubinage with them. Like the flesh of asses is their flesh and like the issue of horses is their issue.”

Note what has happened here. The rabbis don’t just change the sexuality of the verse. They also inject a statement about the humanity of those who are not Jewish. Non-Jews, according to this reading, are more akin to animals than to human beings.

Indeed, the rabbis of the Talmud, on Yebamot 98a, go on to note – because of this verse from Ezekiel – that “The All Merciful One made his [a gentile’s] seed ownerless.” In other words…and again, I am really most ashamed to even suggest this thought out loud…the Talmud articulates a belief that the children of those who are not Jewish are not just “ownerless” – or legally fatherless - but actually “worthless.” Thus the text serves as a Talmudic rationale for regarding those who are not Jewish as second class citizens.

Rabbi Eugene Mihaly – may his memory live on to be for a blessing, in his important book *Responsa on Jewish Marriage*, rightly calls this passage, and other passages like it, “primitive barbarism.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And in that spirit, we will see, during the second half of this lecture, that our tradition is obviously not of one mind on this issue.

Nevertheless, I point all of this out to you, now, to try to explain in even more detail than in our last meeting, how it is that our tradition has at least historically come to the conclusion that interfaith marriage should be off limits. It is not a far leap to go from: “The *goyim* are second class citizens” to: “They have no place in Jewish ritual or Jewish life.”

In terms of issues relating to marriage, that approch manifests itself most significantly in the Talmud’s assertion in Kiddushin 68b: “*Lo tafsei bah kiddushin*. We have thus found that kiddushin with her [a non-Jew] is not recognized.”

That statement from at least 1500 years ago is our tradition’s final word on whether interfaith marriage is, strictly speaking, legally possible.

The question for all of us living in modernity, of course, is how relevant these pieces of text are to us today.

Historically, even those in the Reform rabbinate who oppose rabbinic officiation at interfaith weddings have been split in terms of their rationale for such opposition. Some have rooted their concerns in the halachic principles of the past. On the other hand, as Mihaly has shown in his book,[[2]](#footnote-2) most significant Reform thinkers going back to the 19th century base their opposition to rabbinic officiation on sociological grounds (for example: the impact of intermarriage on children born into the relationship) instead.

The Central Conference of American Rabbis’ most recent comprehensive responsum on the subject[[3]](#footnote-3) comes to us from 1980. And tellingly, that document uses both methodologies (i.e. relying on traditional texts that “discriminate” against those who are not Jewish *and* invoking the language of contemporary sociology) to conclude that: “Reform Judaism and the Central Conference of American Rabbis has opposed mixed marriages. We recognize the problem as significant in every period of Jewish history. It has become more severe in 20th-century America, and, therefore we have made provisions for families of mixed marriages and their children. They are welcome in our congregations, and we continue to urge them to convert to Judaism.”

The CCAR’s position will, perhaps, come as a surprise to some of you, particularly those who have been longtime members of Scarsdale Synagogue, and who were familiar with Rabbi Klein’s welcoming approach to interfaith families, which included officiation at those families’ wedding ceremonies under certain circumstances. Yet the CCAR document sheds light on the fact that Rabbi Klein and this synagogue community were, in many ways, light years ahead of our own movement on this issue. While individual Reform rabbis have always been empowered to decide for themselves how to navigate the officiation question, the fact remains that the CCAR as an organization remains opposed to this day to rabbis officiating at Jewish wedding rituals that include one who is not Jewish.

For me, that position was not and is not a surprise. It is one I have been taught, and one that I have taught to others, for many years.

For me, the real surprise in my research over these last few months has been a different document, from a different source.

In 1998, the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Task Force on “The Role of Non-Jews in Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Congregations” published its findings and position papers in a document entitled *Boundaries and Opportunities*.

The document is noteworthy for giving voice to the many reasons that non-Jews should be welcomed and included in congregational life. We will have a chance to discuss some of those during the second half of this presentation. But the document ultimately makes policy recommendations that are in favor of drawing and maintaining boundaries.

The document never invokes any of the historic texts of our tradition – texts that actively seek to describe those who are not Jewish as second class citizens. Instead, the document approaches the issue by way of a midrash, from the collection known as *Avot d’Rabbi Natan*, written approximately 1400 years ago. There, the rabbis observed that: “A vineyard with a fence is better than one without.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The invocation of boundaries and fences brings us back, in some ways, to the conversation that we had during our first session in January. At that time we explored the amount and pace of change that our tradition can tolerate. The fence, in this metaphor, becomes a mitigating factor against the tide of change.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What is surprising and remarkable, for me, is the fact that our Reconstructionist friends would be the ones invoking it.

In my own personal experience, I have always thought of Reconstructionism as being cutting edge progressive Judaism. I always found them to speak more liberally than mainstream Reform Judaism about the inclusion of women in Jewish life, the inclusion of gays and lesbians in Jewish life, and – until I read this document – I had always presumed that that extended to the inclusion of those who are not Jewish in Jewish life.

And yet, the JRF document holds the line of tradition. The document asserts and officially recommends that: a non-Jew should not count in a minyan;[[6]](#footnote-6) a non-Jew can and should participate in a worship service by offering appropriate readings, but never be the service leader;[[7]](#footnote-7) *aliyot,* and the lifting and dressing of the Torah should be reserved for Jews;[[8]](#footnote-8) and blessings containing the words *asher kidshanu bemitzvotav* (who has made us holy through Your commandments) should be reserved for Jews.[[9]](#footnote-9)

You may be interested to know that all of the Reconstructionist policy recommendations are in sync with the positions taken by our Central Conference of American Rabbis, whose Responsa Committee took up the issue of non-Jewish participation in worship services in 1994.[[10]](#footnote-10)

A special word is in order regarding the question of those who are not Jewish and whether or not they should be invited to come up to the *bimah* for the honor of the *aliyah* – to recite blessings immediately before and after a Torah reading.

This is an area of ritual practice where our synagogue’s *minhag*, or custom (which is to allow for those who are not Jewish to come up on their own for the honor of *aliyah* and recite the blessings in a less particularistic rendition in English rather than in the traditional Hebrew) is not in sync with the suggestion of the CCAR or the JRF.

The 1994 responsum from the CCAR notes that: “[…] A non-Jew should not be called to the Torah for an *aliyah.* The reading of the Torah requires the presence of a community, because it is one of the central acts by which the community affirms its reason for existence, i.e., the covenant whose words are contained within the scroll. To be called to the Torah is to take one's position in the chain of privilege and responsibility by which the Jewish community has perpetuated itself. A non-Jew, no matter how supportive, does not share that privilege or that responsibility as long as s/he remains formally outside the Jewish community.”

I have no doubt that these words will be difficult for some in this room to hear, if for no other reason than that our community has taken for granted the so-called right, or privilege, of non-Jews to be called for an *aliyah* for such a long time.

I share the words of our movement’s rabbis with you this morning, not because I intend to suggest a change in synagogue policy. Just the opposite – for as you will see in a few minutes, I am sympathetic to a worldview that calls this responsum’s basic presumptions into question. Nonetheless, I share this text with you because I think it is essential for our community to at least have a basic intellectual awareness of the fact that our choices, and most specifically those connected to the issue of the *aliyah*, stand in contrast to the normative practices of the rest of our movement.

One last word, this time about the Conservative movement. While the national bodies of the Reform and Reconstructionist movements have consistently recommended excluding those who are not Jewish from traditional forms and expressions of Jewish ritual practice, the Conservative movement has remained, to a degree, focused on the Jewish partner in the couple.

For our Conservative friends, there is little question as to the exclusion of the non-Jew from more than mere symbolic participation in Jewish ritual. What some of my Conservative colleagues are struggling with is whether or not to take punitive action against Jews who intermarry, by preventing the Jewish members of interfaith families from publicly participating in Jewish ritual.

For example, I would call your attention to a 1984 responsum by Rabbi Joel Roth, a leading traditionalist within the Conservative movement. His position was recognized as a legitimate Minority Opinion of the Conservative Movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards. Roth wrote: “I would urge that the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards adopt the position that aliyyot for an intermarried Jew be disallowed in almost all cases. Honoring one whose marriage threatens our community implies that the marriage is not really a threat. That is an implication we cannot afford to foster. I would make an exception only for an aliyyah in commemoration of a yahrzeit, because in that case the general perception is that the aliyyah is given in honor of the deceased. That perception is sufficiently widespread to obviate any fear that granting the aliyyah implies approval of the intermarriage.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Thus far we have surveyed an array of texts and traditions, both ancient and modern, that have argued for limiting the participation of the one who is not Jewish in Jewish ritual. Now, let us switch gears as we examine this important question from the opposite perspective.

You will forgive me for causing a little bit of intellectual whiplash during this exercise. In the last half hour, I presented you with texts that tried to insist that there is something “second class” about the one who is not Jewish. And now, I want to begin by telling you that that could not be further from the truth. We can easily invoke a universalistic principle like *b’tzelem Elohim* – the notion derived from Genesis 1:27 that every human being has, in the words of Rabbi Harold Kushner, “irreducible worth and dignity, because every human was fashioned in the image of God.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

And Rabbi Mihaly[[13]](#footnote-13) reminds us that there are any number of foundational texts from the Talmud and midrashic literature that also endorse this important Jewish worldview…texts like:

* “He who sees the wise of the nations recites the blessing, “Blessed be He who gave of his wisdom to all creatures.” – B. Brachot 58a
* “…There are righteous among the gentiles who have a share in the world to come.” Tosephta Sanhedrin 13:2
* “A gentile who studies Torah is like the high priest.” B. Sanhedrin 59a
* “When R. Simeon b. Gamliel saw an exceptionally beautiful gentile woman, he exclaimed, “How great are your works, O Lord, in whose wisdom have you made them all.” – B. Makkot 20a

* “I call heaven and earth to witness, whether a person is a gentile or Jew, man or woman, male or female slave, the holy spirit rests upon him in accordance with the deeds that he performs.” – Seder Eliahu Rabbah

Over and over again, these texts defy the presumption that there is something inherently lacking in the one who is not Jewish. Just the opposite: these texts attest to the innate *equality* of all human beings.

With these texts in mind, consider this radical and remarkably liberal statement from Menachem Meiri, of 13th century Spain: “Those (non-Jews) who live under a religious discipline and worship God in whatever manner, even though their faith is distant from ours, they are not included in the[se] rabbinic ordinances (against gentiles) but they are, regarding many matters, like full Jews, without any distinction.[[14]](#footnote-14)

These are amazing words. The Meiri, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, went on record as suggesting that there is not as much difference between Jews and non-Jews as we were originally led to believe. Indeed his exact words are that non-Jews are “like full Jews, without any distinction.”

Of course the Meiri did add distinctions. He went on to point out that it was not his intention to endorse or encourage interfaith marriage. Nonetheless, as we gather together almost 900 years later, what might we do with his observation?

To what extent can we responsibly use his work to justify a set of attitudes and behaviors that he almost certainly would not have intended during his own lifetime?

I don’t have a definitive answer to that question today. But I can tell you that his thinking is enormously alluring to me. For here we have a well-respected authority from the late Middle Ages who comes as close as we can reasonably expect such a figure to come to looking beyond some of the basic boundaries that have separated Jews and non-Jews for such a long time.

Meiri’s work invites us to ask: who is a Jew, and what does it mean to be part of the Jewish People today? More specifically, Meiri asks the provocative question: can one be counted as part of the Jewish People without formally being Jewish? And if the answer to that questions is yes, can/should such an individual be invited and empowered to fully participate in Jewish ritual life?

Interestingly, the rabbis of the Mishnah (the first part of the Talmud redacted no later than the early 200s of the Common Era) themselves asked that very same question.

In Tractate Brachot, Chapter Eight Mishnah Eight, we read the following incredible text. As background, you should know that the text opens with a discussion about the proper recitation of Birkat HaMazon, the traditional blessing of thanksgiving recited at the conclusion of a meal. The rabbis, ever concerned about the details of Jewish practice, attempt to clarify what to do if one has a glass of wine after the meal is over. Does one recite the blessing over wine before or after Birkat HaMazon?

We read from the text: “If wine is brought after the food and there is but that one cup, the School of Shammai say: The Benediction is said over the wine and then over the food. And the School of Hillel say: The Benediction is said over the food and then over the wine.”

Then, out of left field, the rabbis raise the question: what happens if I came very late to the meal…so late in fact that I actually arrived in the room in the middle of Birkat HaMazon? Am I entitled to answer Amen to a prayer that I only partially heard?

The text continues: “They may answer ‘Amen’ after an Israelite who says a Benediction, but not after a Samaritan unless, or until, they have heard the whole Benediction.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

I know that, on the surface, this might seem like a completely irrelevant text. Our own practice does not place that much importance on Birkat HaMazon. And even on those occasions when we do recite it, little or no attention is given to the question of how to handle a final cup of wine.

But it would be a mistake for us to write this text off. For buried in the end of the passage is a remarkable statement by our rabbis about the role of those who are not Jewish (represented in this case by the Samaritans) in Jewish life.

It would have been completely easy for the rabbis of the Mishnah to suggest that a Jew is *never* supposed to answer *Amen* to a blessing uttered by a non-Jew. Instead: the text indicates that as long as the Jew heard the entire blessing of the non-Jew, then he or she should absolutely feel free to answer *Amen*.

Why the need to hear the entirety of the blessing? Our commentaries indicate that hearing the entire blessing would allow the Jew to insure that the non-Jew did not invoke the deity of another religious tradition, or in some other way inappropriately violate Jewish liturgical norms.

To be sure, many of our medieval commentators sought to ignore this text. The mention of the Samaritans, who are ultimately discriminated against in later portions of the Talmud, allows medieval authorities to limit the applicability of the Mishnah text in classical *halachah*.

But we have the ability to rescue it from oblivion. For here we have a text that is almost 2,000 years old that validates the role that those who are not Jewish can, and should have, in communal Jewish prayer life. Rather than exclude by constructing a fence, this text favors a sense of welcoming, albeit under certain circumstances.

So: we have a mishnah that says that non-Jews can recite Jewish blessings publicly and authentically, in a way that constitutes ‘real prayer’ from the Jewish perspective. And we have the Meiri from the 13th century who says that non-Jews are “like full Jews, without any distinction.”

As we contemplate the contemporary implications of these older texts, I would invite you to join me as we jump ahead in Jewish history by hundreds of years to the recent past, to the critically important work of an individual whom I consider to be my teacher, Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg. Rabbi Greenberg, who situates himself on the left of Modern Orthodoxy, has written passionately about how Judaism has changed in light of the fact that we now live in a post-Holocaust world.

He begins by suggesting that some of the old rules about how Judaism operates are no longer in play, as a result of the Holocaust:

“The covenant of demand (for higher standards of behavior from Jews) had been morally passed through the fires of the Holocaust – and had been found wanting. In a world where evil forces had access to extraordinary power while God did not intervene to guarantee the safety of the covenantal people, in such a world, any absolute insistence that the people Israel live by a higher standard – or else – was inherently abusive. Such a demand was illegitimate, and therefore null and void…”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Since the early 19th century, we Reform Jews have taken for granted the notion that we have a choice regarding how (if at all) we will participate in Jewish life. But for the Orthodox Greenberg, such a realization only came about after the Holocaust.

As a result of his philosophical shift, he argues that we should be turning our attention away from our relationship with God, and toward a more significant relationship with those who are not Jewish.

Greenberg is coming from the presumption that part of the reason that the Holocaust happened is because Jews had historically not engaged in relationships or dialogue with those who were not Jewish. Moving forward, and in order to prevent another Holocaust, Greenberg argues for more relationships, and more engagement.

He writes, for example, that pluralism is a lovely tolerance for the ‘other.’ But for Greenberg, pluralism is not enough.

Greenberg uses the term “partnership” to express a more authentic Jewish characterization of interfaith relations. He writes that:

“Partnership, however, involves going one step further [than pluralism]. Each partner affirms that its truth/faith/system alone cannot fulfill God’s dreams. The world needs the contributions that the other religion can make for the sake of achieving wholeness and perfection for all. A partner affirms (today, I would say: celebrates) that God assigns different roles and different contributions to different groups.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

This is incredible. Here we have an Orthodox rabbi who has gone on record as writing that Judaism is *incomplete* without the existence of other faith traditions. Greenberg implies in his writing that God consciously created other faith traditions, and blessed their work, with the understanding that the Jewish People could not complete the work of *tikkun olam*, the perfection of our world, by ourselves. Rather than see the creation of other traditions as being philosophically separate from, and in conflict with, Judaism, Greenberg sees it as an act of charity by God to us…by relieving some of the burden that comes with being the so-called Chosen People.

Thus Greenberg writes: “The members of the other faiths could be recognized as Abraham’s beloved children, but only when they purged themselves of hatred of Jews and of supersessionist claims.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Or, to put it slightly differently, Greenberg writes: “In effect, I am proposing that Christians are “honorary” members of the House of Israel, spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah. […] The articulation of this relationship is an attempt to capture the special connection to the mission of Israel and the intention to join [or partner with] the people Israel, which Christians express by dint of being Christian.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Christians – and he implies in other parts of his writing that well-intentioned Muslims and those of other faiths could most certainly be included as well – are “honorary members of the House of Israel.” They are the opposite of second class citizens, Greenberg teaches us. They are, in Meiri’s words, “like full Jews.”

Let us presume, for the moment, that everyone in this room is comfortable with Greenberg’s assertion that Christians and Muslims who recognize the theological integrity of Judaism and renounce their tradition’s respective histories of anti-Semitism should be considered as honorary members of the Jewish People. What do we do with that assertion? How might we let that worldview influence our decision-making about the question of the role of non-Jews in Jewish ritual?

Greenberg, himself, is hesitant about this question. He goes out of his way in the updated version of his book to indicate that he is not a proponent of intermarriage and does not want his words to be quoted out of context, as I am perhaps doing this morning. Like the Meiri hundreds of years before him, Greenberg seems to be aware of the political ramifications that could come from the traditional Jewish world if his ideas are carried out to their logical conclusions.

It therefore falls to Greenberg’s students to begin charting a way forward.

And for that perspective, we turn to the work of Rabbi Steven Greenberg (no relation to Yitz).

Rabbi Steven Greenberg is a noted figure in his own right, as the world’s first openly gay Orthodox rabbi. He was a driving force behind the 2001 documentary *Trembling Before G-d*, which explored the lives of Modern Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox gays and lesbians. And he is the author of the acclaimed 2004 book *Wrestling With God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*. I strongly recommend both the film and the book.

Rabbi Greenberg is clearly an un-orthodox Orthodox rabbi. He has the willingness and ability to think outside of the box…not just about issues connected to sexuality but about interfaith issues as well.

In 2001, Rabbi Steven Greenberg wrote an essay entitled “Between Intermarriage and Conversion: Finding a Middle Way.”[[20]](#footnote-20) There, he reminds us that throughout Jewish history we have always had categories of individuals who are “sort of Jewish” – allies of the Jewish People who have chosen to throw their lot in with us, even though they never formally converted to Judaism, and might even still be actively practicing another tradition. In one era of our history we referred to these individuals as *yirei shamayim* (those that fear God). In another we called them *b’nei Noach* – Children of Noah – for following the seven Noahide commandments that the rabbis delineate as the minimum threshold for appropriate behavior by those who are not Jewish. And Greenberg, as we shall see, is fond of the category *ger-toshav*, the so-called “resident alien” of Biblical times. He writes:

In our day, “the traditional Jewish community forces the non-Jewish spouse [in an interfaith relationship] to consider an all or nothing bargain -- either full-fledged Jewish identity by conversion, or rejection.   An alternative approach that would emphasize the positive value of Jewish culture and tradition, and the joys of living in a Jewish home without insisting upon conversion has, until now, not been imaginable.  What if we were to create such an approach that would in effect look upon non-Jewish spouses as potential *gerei toshav*?   Rabbis would then be able to offer to non-Jews wishing to marry a Jewish spouse the opportunity to become not converts, but committed fans of the Jewish people.”

Greenberg goes on to write: “The marriage of a Jew and a *ger toshav* would not be legitimate under existing *halachic* frameworks.  However, my own work in finding solutions to gay and lesbian marriage has shed light on this issue for me.    In thinking about non-normative marriage partners, I have decided that *kiddushin*, the traditional ritual for the Jewish wedding, simply doesn’t apply to gay couples.   What does make sense for such couples is a religiously meaningful commitment ceremony.  In this case as well, the traditional ritual would not well serve a mixed couple.   New rituals for such marriages, rituals that partake of Jewish resources and speak honestly about what is actually happening, are needed.  Exactly what such marriages could mean for the Jewish community, how they ought to be formally enjoined, or how they should be terminated when they end are all questions that call for the exercise of cultural creativity.”

It is strange for me to inhabit a rabbinic world in which liberal Orthodox rabbis are calling for “creativity” and flexibility at a time when the majority of my Reform colleagues, and virtually all of my Conservative colleagues, refuse to discuss it. Nonetheless: this is the moment in history in which we find ourselves. And, it seems to me that it would be negligent if we ignored the important work that Rabbi Greenberg and Rabbi Greenberg are doing to address the issue of interfaith relationships.

Rabbis Irving and Steven Greenberg are hardly the first Jewish teachers to come along and validate the authenticity of other faith traditions. We had medieval authorities like Meiri. And all of the great rabbis and scholars of non-Orthodox Judaism of the last 200 years recognized the Truth that Christians, Muslims, Hindus and others represent. But comparatively few have been willing to change their Jewish practice, and their understanding of Judaism, because of it.

Nonetheless, my teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, hardly a supporter of rabbinic officiation at interfaith weddings, seems to be willing us toward some kind of change in our practice. He passionately asks in his book *The Dignity of Difference*, which we will be studying here in the fall:

“Can we live together? […] Can we overcome long histories of estrangement and bitterness? […] Can we find, in the human other, a trace of the Divine Other? Can we recognize God’s image in one who is not in my image? There are times when God meets us in the face of a stranger. […] Can I, a Jew, hear the echoes of God’s voice in that of a Hindu or Sikh or Christian or Muslim? What then becomes of my faith, which until then had encompassed the world and must now make space for another faith, another way of interpreting the world?”

For years I have been standing at a rabbinic precipice, able to acknowledge the gift that so many non-Jews give to the Jewish People by partnering with us to have Jewish homes and raise Jewish families. And yet, it was not at all clear to me what would happen if I looked over the edge of the precipice and actually allowed myself and my Judaism to change in an effort to embrace this new world that we seem to be living in.

In Sacks’ language, I set off on this journey to discern once and for all whether I could hear the echo of God’s voice in the lives of our interfaith families. This journey has been an incredibly rich and meaningful one for me, and I want to take this moment to sincerely thank each of you, and the members of our lay leadership, for supporting me on it.

I now look forward to taking your questions, and hearing your thoughts. Thank you so very much for being here today.

1. *Teshuvot* (*Responsa) on Jewish Marriage: with special reference to “Reform Rabbis and Mixed Marriage”* by Eugene Mihaly. Cincinnati, OH: 1985. Page 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mihaly p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://bit.ly/13i1kPd> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Boundaries and Opportunities,* p.27. The document cites the quote as “Avot d’Rabbi Natan (ver II) 1, 2a.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The CCAR also invokes the language of boundaries: “Our decisions [i.e. those of the CCAR Responsa Committee] have held that there must be boundaries in order to assure the identity and continued health of our congregations as well as our movement. If we are everything to everyone, we are in the end nothing at all. On this, there is general agreement.” (From the c. 1994 responsum entitled “Gentile Participation in Synagogue Ritual” at <http://bit.ly/11d3sVy>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Boundaries and Opportunities*, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.* p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.* p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.* p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <http://bit.ly/11d3sVy>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See “Synagogue Honors for the Intermarried Jew: Holding Office and *Aliyyot*” by Rabbi Joel Roth (1984) at <http://bit.ly/ZZ2jiW>**.**  [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary* (2001), p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mihaly pp. 62-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid*. p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Danby’s Mishnah translation, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: The New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity* by Irving “Yitz” Greenberg (2004), pages 27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Greenberg p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Greenberg, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid.* p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <http://www.clal.org/ss43.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)