

All Israel's Children
A Dvar Torah and Community Proposal, Rosh Hashanah 5784
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Shana Tova. May we all be written in the Book of Life, and may we all be written into the life of this holy community – the egalitarian code of inclusion that is the ethos of Or Shalom.

We have just been awarded a million-and-a-half dollar grant largely based on the *openness* of our embrace even as we perpetuate deep, traditional Jewish practice. We enact our Judaism with a little less tribalism, a little less gatekeeping, and we've been *seen* for this exceptional capacity, indeed, encouraged to walk the *halacha*, the path we are walking, more certain of its value to *klal Yisrael*, the Jewish community at large.

The greater Vancouver Jewish community needs the spiritual refuge that is Or Shalom.

So, we've been acknowledged, how gratifying. But let us not rest on any laurels. Rather, let's smile in gratitude as we open our next stride toward *Olam Haba*, the World that is Always Coming, always streaming toward us - the Eden we are entrusted to create right here on the ground.

There is always an edge to be pushed at the forefront of egalitarianism. In the 1970's that edge was full liturgical equality for women. Two decades later it was ratification of same sex unions as marriages in the eyes of God. In the last decade we've worked on gender-fluid prayer language. And the edge keeps us challenged because our world is changing – evolving as it always has, but even more quickly in this plastic moment, in which a certain brokenness we have lived through, perhaps with our suffering of the Corona viruses, has circumscribed our hearts and made change more likely to take hold.

I stand before you on this Day of Judgment, asking that our spiritual community ratify a change in coming months: I'm asking you to support my proposal that we, at Or Shalom, accept individuals with one Jewish parent, regardless of that parent's gender, as fully Jewish in our eyes. Again: I'm asking you to support my proposal that we, at Or Shalom, accept individuals with one Jewish parent, regardless of that parent's gender, as fully Jewish in our eyes.

Who does this affect most directly? Every individual in our midst whose one Jewish parent is not their mom, including the rising percentage of children and youth enrolled in our educational programs – raised by *us* to feel Jewish, and not yet accepted as Jewish.

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Our ancestors were repeatedly forced to change their world views, and the whole concept of *teshuva* is the mandate to return, time and again, from whatever our current positions are, to the core of what we believe to be good, in our highest dream of goodness. The Talmud calls this goodness "*svara*" - a 2,000-year-old Jewish concept invented by the Talmudic rabbis and

referring to our moral intuition. The Rabbis considered *svava* a legitimate and sacred means of figuring out how we should live, in addition to the means they already had – Torah.

And what, really is the “Torah” we speak of?

In the late Second Temple and post-Destruction periods, the beliefs, values, and practices of those who had been on the margins of the Temple cult - and whom we now call ‘the Rabbis’ - diverged so much from the written words of Torah, that it became impossible for them to explain how the very newfangled Judaism that they were practicing was authentic (Prayer instead of sacrifice? Heresy!). So, what did they do? They revised the myth of Sinai by expanding it.

In their expanded myth, Moses received not only... the ‘written torah’ - but also an ‘oral torah,’ a whole new corpus of additional laws and practices - or, in other tellings, a set of rules of interpretation through which new laws and practices would be developed in the future.

My most important Talmud teacher, Rabbi Bene Lappe, learns from this ancient paradigm shift, that “if we have reached a point today where our beliefs, values, and practices have diverged toward a breaking point with the Judaism of the *talmudic* Rabbis, perhaps the time has come to revise the myth once again, by expanding it yet further.” These breaks and re-formations, indeed, renewals are what the founder of our Jewish Renewal movement, Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalom, called “Paradigm Shifted *Halacha*,” or later, “Integral *Halacha*.” By “integral,” he meant a new *halacha* (a new path) that integrates aspects of past teaching and tradition. Not rejecting the past, nor hanging on for dear life to a system that is failing us; rather, taking a middle way that is relevant to our moment and, at the same time, is compatible with the core of Judaism.

It is in this flavor or *halacha* that I have been [further] ordained as a *Dayan* (one of six in our Movement), an adjudicator of Jewish law. With that authority, and holding its responsibility with real reverence, I look at our present circumstance regarding the many patrilineally descended Jews and, particularly, children, in our synagogue community with a desire to expand the scope of our thinking to absorb changes in worldview that *poskim* (*halachic* adjudicators) of the past did not envision.

The Talmud, itself, asks: “Would it occur to anyone to think that one should rely upon a judge who is not of one’s own time? No. Rather, [what is meant is] that one may not go to any but a judge in his own time!

A member of Or Shalom recently shared concern that we might be making up our own rules. Yet despite our potential discomfort, our legal system does mean for us to continually question and revise. Reb Yehudah Alter of Ger taught it this way: “Not only did the Blessed One, give the Torah to the Children of Israel, The Blessed One planted the power of Torah within us, so that we can re-configure the letters of Torah, refreshing Torah in every age.”

Wow. The mandate is to make Torah our own, *living it* in ways that nurture us. When Rabbi Bene Lappe visited with us a number of years ago, she said this: “Our enactment of Torah might be a Judaism that is unrecognizable to our ancestors, but it *pleases* God that we struggle to reinterpret and renew Torah so that we can lean in to a Judaism that is at the center of our lives because it speaks to us with relevance, right here, right now.”

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During the process of editing the Mishnah, the divergent views and disputes among the various rabbis were preserved and recorded in the code. One reason for this, stated explicitly in the Mishnah, is that should a later court of law see fit to rule differently, the minority opinion would stand in support. Former Israeli Supreme Court Justice Menachem Elon explains that there is no such thing as an absolute ruling in Jewish law. Every *talmudic* case has multiple considerations and although the majority determines the ruling in a particular age, a different majority, at a different time, might arrive at a different conclusion.

In 1998, Or Shalom entertained the question of inherited Jewish identity and came out upholding a position of matrilineal descent, although by a narrow margin. And in keeping with the talmudic tradition of preserving all sides of the debate, our archives include a letter written at that time by our wise elder Gloria Levi.

Friends,

We take the position that *halacha* is not derived from God but rather it was man made and is open to change. The issue is on what basis do we have the right to change it. One basis would be if a halacha violates a higher principle. In today’s world with our increasing understanding of gender equality, it makes absolutely no sense to diminish a father’s parenting.

One of the reasons we are confronting this issue is because we worry about Jewish continuity in our free, pluralistic society. But policing who is entitled to membership in our club is not what will ensure Jewish continuity. After all, children born to Jewish mothers who have no knowledge of or commitment to our rich heritage do not ensure continuity.

The tradition of matrilineality originated at a time when race and ethnic origin was of prime importance. The question is, are these guiding principles for us? What fundamental principles are we upholding? And more importantly [Gloria asked], what fundamental principles are we violating with our present stance?

Enacting justice, fairness, and love, we need to recognize descent from any Jewish parent.

However, there is a price to pay! The parents of those offspring must be made aware that their Jewishness will not be accepted everywhere.

One could argue that the principle of Jewish unity supersedes principles of gender equality and fairness. But [let's remember that] this did not deter us from taking a stand on counting women in a *minyan*. Why? - because we knew in our hearts that it was the right thing to do!

For a long time [Gloria said], I felt a deep-seated attachment to matrilineal descent. The weight of historical reality, I think. But this is an issue that cries out for redress. It is morally and ethically wrong to have 2 different standards for gender equality. In spite of the pressure from the Jewish community at large, I believe Or Shalom should be strong and hold to its avowed principles.

That was 25 years ago.

After our "All Israel's Children" dialogue in 2021, Gloria Levi wrote this:

I used to adhere to the saying: "My tribe right or wrong." I have changed that to: "My tribe, when right to keep right; and when wrong, to set right."

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So, what needs to be set right? First, this sense that we need to be gatekeepers – an outdated emphasis on Jewish separatism. Second, the notion that mom's instill basic values in our children in a way that dads do not. Third, the notion that families are, necessarily, raised by two cis gendered parents who identify as male and female.

There is a seminal difference between the way in which the ancient Rabbis, and even rabbis a generation ago, saw their world and the way in which we see ours. Jewish Renewal lets go of a Jewish-centered history in favor of embracing a universal consciousness that sees Judaism's own future, as bound together with that of all humankind. We are, literally, bound with others when identifying Jews intermarry, and when children raised within Judaism have a non-Jewish parent. *Klal Yisrael*, the Jewish community, is affected by our interfaith unions - we are literally becoming related to, i.e. family with, more and more of humankind.

As an egalitarian community, we value transmission of Jewish values, culture, and religiosity as equally potent, passed on by either or any parent.

And one more difference in worldview: We fully welcome Queer community. *This includes households in which there is no female-identifying parent.*

The *svara* in this matter, what's right, is to detangle Jewish identity from gender definition, embracing the children of any Jewish parent without inquiring about parental gender.

Attention to interfaith couples and families and to LGBT2Q+ community are sensitivities new to our time. "And if this is our new situation," Reb Zalman has taught, "then we need to go beyond the limitations that the old system now imposes, so that we can, again, practice in a way that leads to transformation." If our old paradigm protected our integrity as a people confronted by ethnic adversity, now we require a paradigm of softer boundaries so as to respectfully and lovingly integrate all who are already a part of our community, and welcome those who seek the accepting home that we are. It is a profoundly shifted attitude, the core of which asks - not what is best for my tribe, but, rather, what will build bridges and what will serve to create a harmonious humankind?

The old paradigm valued separatism; Reb Zalman believed that the mitzvah of our time is connection. This is the tikkun our acceptance of a gender-inclusive definition of Jewish identity will enact.

When Or Shalom reviewed policy about Jewish Identity 20+ years ago, a significant issue raised by those who opposed enlarging our perspective was concern for our place in *Klal Yisrael*, in the larger Jewish community, not wishing to fracture from other Jews or Jewish institutions. What they meant was *Klal Yisrael* here in Vancouver. But since Covid and cross pollination of ideas and opportunities for participation made possible by virtual connections, our sense of Jewish community is suddenly so much bigger! And we must ask: who is our *klal*?

If we think of the greater Jewish community of which we are a part as extending beyond Vancouver, we can be heartened by awareness that we are most definitely not making up new rules. Renewal communities in the U.S accept a gender-inclusive definition of inherited Jewishness.

In 1983, the union of Reform Rabbis in the U.S. resolved as follows:

The Central Conference of American Rabbis declares that the child of one Jewish parent is under presumption of Jewish decent. This presumption of the Jewish status of the offspring of any mixed marriage is to be established through appropriate and timely public and formal acts of identification with the Jewish faith and people. The performance of these mitzvot serves to commit those who participate in them, both parent and child, to Jewish life.

This resolution is enacted by only 5 Reform Congregations in Canada. It is accepted in all Reform communities across the United States. In an American Reform community (and since 2015, in the UK as well), what is asked of a person born to one Jewish parent (regardless of that parent's gender) is that they demonstrate desire to participate in Jewish life, and their Jewishness is accepted.

The Reconstructionist Movement also holds that a person who has any Jewish parent, and is raised Jewishly, has Jewish status.

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Embracing a gender-inclusive definition of Jewish status, Or Shalom will join a *Klal Yisrael* of hundreds of like-minded synagogue communities. Indeed, globally, we will be followers.

In Vancouver, we will be torchbearers, a light to our People.

May we all be written into the life of this holy community. Shana Tova.