

Rabbinic Personal Statement

“Quick, hide the menorah! Your father’s pulling up in the driveway.”

Throughout the homes of American Jews nationwide, I’m sure that no family celebrates Hanukkah in precisely the same way as that of his or her neighbor. There is beauty in diversity of Jewish practice and observance. When I was growing up, I celebrated Hanukkah in a very different way from that of my Jewish peers; as the product of a mixed marriage, it happened to be the only way *to* celebrate, given the circumstances.

While many interfaith families in America compromise by celebrating the religious traditions of both parents, such had not been the case for the Falco family. Instead, my father insisted upon sending my brother and me to monthly Christian education classes and occasionally demanded that we attend mass with him on Sundays.

Meanwhile, my mother revealed to me at a very young age that, since I was born from a Jewish mother, I am a Jew, and that nobody can take that away from me. When my father was away for work, she would teach me the stories of our people. The ones of Jewish triumph in the face of persecution deeply resonated with me, and I understood that, like those who came before me, I too would need to take my identity into my own hands.

Armed with *The Illustrated Bible for Jewish Children* and a nightlight, I began to educate myself about our tradition in secrecy. As my father would pull up into the driveway late at night from work, I felt like a modern-day Converso as we stashed the Hanukkah menorah from the windowsill and pretended to decorate the Christmas tree. Later, I would crawl into bed and my father would come into the room telling me to say my prayers with him. Something was wrong; these weren’t *my* prayers.

These *could* have been my prayers, though; I chose for them not to be. Choices are not always easy to make, and often, they are even harder to sustain. The choice of embracing my Jewish identity was an active and conscientious one – a choice that led me on a path of Jewish exploration and discovery across the denominational spectrum that ultimately culminated in my return “home” to Reform Judaism. As I walked that path, I became intimately familiar with the needs of Jews seeking a spiritual home – needs that truly bear upon a person’s choice to engage in the Jewish community. We, as the American Jewish people at large, *are* that people.

The flexibility of 21st century American life and the choices available to us here as Jews inspires a level of innovative creativity with respect to one’s Jewish practice. Our multicultural milieu compels us to harmonize the practices and teachings of tradition with the prevailing trends of the dominant secular culture as we constantly (and unconsciously) make determinations about how we, as Jews, fit into the greater picture of American life. These “determinations” are the choices we make in our everyday lives, the sum of which make up our character and who we are as individuals.

Choice is a metaphor for who I am. My story, like so many others, is one of choosing. I know how choices can shape a life – the richness and fulfillment they can bring, as well as the loss that tends to accompany them. In today's world, the choices available to American Jews are bewildering in number and no less significant or consequential than had ever been in the past. Having dedicated my life to the American Jewish experience in capacities both personal and professional, I want to be able to help others to make these choices for themselves. As a servant of the Jewish community, I hope to guide our members toward making such choices *in community* as we bring people together and make meaning from their decisions.

As I enter my rabbinate, I envision building a culture of Jewish fearlessness; that is, a culture of engaged and contemporary Jews, curious about their tradition and proud of their culture, ready to wrestle with the very decisions and questions that define us as a people. These decisions are to be celebrated, and the needs required for their support are to be fulfilled. Creating opportunities for communal connection, spiritual growth, and Jewish study represents one among many of the keys toward sustaining those choices grounded in and informed by tradition.

Through both formal and informal Jewish education – about our ideals, our history, and our rituals – a sense of peoplehood and unique cultural identity confidently emerges and begins to take shape. By merging an authentic and inclusive love for our people with a veneration for tradition and a mind for modernity, I am eager to foster a welcoming and vibrant Jewish communal life with relationships as its pillar, Jewish values at its heart, and enthusiasm in its soul.