

# CHANGING OUR PERCEPTIONS OF THE CONSERVATIVE/MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

---

**Rabbi Michael Menitoff**

---

It is important for us to change the perception of our synagogues that is out there in order to more effectively communicate the message that they are viable options for families where one member is not Jewish.

Our shuls have to change. We have to become more welcoming and user-friendly. The kinds of things we have to do for overall membership acquisition have to be done in even greater measure and with even greater intensity in order to attract Jews-by-Choice and interfaith couples whose children are being raised as Jews: One-on-one connections with the rabbi and other members of the synagogue staff are invaluable; Pairing new people in the community or potential new members of similar backgrounds and interests can go a long way towards solidifying relationships and attracting new members; People are particularly appreciative at being invited to Shabbat dinner or having a pre-Shabbat challah and wine delivery at their home.

Besides being seen as a warm and caring place, a Conservative synagogue that really wants to have a larger number of interfaith families has to do much more programming for this population than we generally do. Hebrew literacy is something many of us take for granted. Our newcomers often have as much to learn as people who have been at the synagogue for a long time but have never taken the initiative. While we need to provide advanced level classes for people with strong backgrounds, it is no less incumbent upon us to go back to the basics and provide elementary Hebrew language, prayer book, and Jewish life cycle instruction. Increasingly parallel programming for parents of religious and day-school children can work wonders at giving parents at least a handle at understanding what we are all about.

Realistically, if we are to become a home for Jews-by-Choice and interfaith families, we have to foster (or create) a culture where there is absolute equality between Jews-by-Birth and Jews-by-Choice; also where there is absolute respect and regard for a person who is not Jewish. It seems to me that regard for the non-Jew has to be totally unconditional. While most of us feel that Jewish family life is lived on its highest plane when all members of the family are Jews, although we always hold open the option of conversion, it should never appear that our caring has an ulterior motive of conversion to Judaism.

For us to have a chance of attracting families who would otherwise opt for a Reform synagogue, we have to be open to the non-Jewish family members taking part in the communal life of the institution in ways that do not compromise our halachic integrity. It appears unlikely that many mixed married families will join a synagogue in which the non-Jew will be barred from the bimah. None of us would offer the non-Jew an aliyah or other bimah honor, even in the unlikely event s/he would want one. But those of our colleagues who would not welcome both parents of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah on the bimah for acknowledgement of some kind will obviously find it much more difficult to recruit such families to that synagogue. There have to be ways in which the non-Jew can assume roles of active participation, not leadership, in some of the “non-religious” educational and communal components of synagogue life in order for it to be a place in which s/he wants to invest themselves.

Once the reality is such that the synagogue is indeed accepting and inclusive we have to let everyone know about that. If we genuinely want people searching for religious meaning and spirituality, Jews-by-Choice, and interfaith couples, then in our marketing and presentation of ourselves to the community we are best served by saying exactly that. Invitations to social events, lectures, and other synagogue programs, might reflect that: “Intermarried Jewish families are especially welcome.” I realize that for some of us, and some of our members, such a mode of outreach might not be acceptable. But the only way people will know our synagogues are a serious option is if we truly are and if we go out of our way to say that we are. Most of our synagogues put ads in the local general and Jewish press over the summertime in order to attract new members. If we are really interested in attracting families one of whose members is not Jewish, then we have to say that.

Most of our synagogue’s “mission statements” talk exclusively of our preexisting community. They talk of in- reach and tend not to celebrate outreach. While there obviously has to be a balance, we have to devote much more energy than we have in the past in order to bring to the Conservative fold some of the many families who do not even consider us an option.

It would serve us well not to be apologetic for what we are unable to do for non-Jews in a Conservative synagogue that can be done in Reform or Reconstructionist synagogues. Many people will be respectful of our integrity and authenticity. We must be proud of who we are and exude that pride to the overall community.