

FROM TOLERANCE TO ACCEPTANCE

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Within our Conservative synagogues are crypto-Jews hiding their true identities, fearful of getting caught. Unlike the crypto-Jews of Spain who pretended to be Christian, we now have the much more interesting situation of non-Jews posing as Jews. These individuals are non-Jewish members of our synagogues who are married to Jewish spouses and raising Jewish children, and yet because the official policy of most Conservative congregations that excludes non-Jews from membership they must go underground to share Jewish life as a family.

Ask most rabbis of Conservative synagogues whether they are accepting of intermarried couples (most exogamous couples affiliated with a synagogue include a non-Jew not practicing a religion and hence are appropriately referred to as intermarried couples rather than interfaith couples) and they will quickly answer in the affirmative. But ask most intermarried couples whether Conservative synagogues are accepting of them and you are likely to give a very different answer. Over the years I have tried to look at synagogue life through the eyes of intermarried couples: How do our religious school teachers speak of intermarried marriages in their classrooms where a number of their students come from such homes? How do rabbis nuance the subject of intermarriage from the *bimah*? And more importantly, do our policies reflect attitudes of true acceptance or *de facto* tolerance? While most synagogues would like to believe that they provide warm, welcoming environments for intermarried couples, in reality the welcome mat is located at the back door rather than the front one.

In order for a synagogue to create an ambiance of true acceptance, it is essential that its leadership believe that intermarried couples deserve the same treatment as endogamous Jewish couples. We must dispel the idea that acknowledging an intermarried couple from the *bimah* will encourage other Jews to intermarry and will be responsible for the diminution of the Jewish people. Quite the contrary, such an acknowledgement can send the message that even if someone has intermarried he or she can still create a Jewish family and be connected to synagogue life. I wish to argue that much like the addition of non-Jews who converted for marriage that has rejuvenated a number of synagogues, that accepting intermarried couples who are raising Jewish families has the potential to greatly impact the Jewish community. Unfortunately, it is the outward acceptance, yet underlying non-acceptance, of intermarried couples that imparts the feeling that they are being tolerated rather than accepted and ultimately will keep them from synagogue life.

If intermarriage is a reality of American Jewish life, then it is time for a new reality that teaches intermarried couples who wish to create a Jewish family that they will be embraced and nurtured by Conservative synagogues. In previous generations, guilt, fear and all other techniques were used to discourage intermarriage. In light of our failure to decrease the rates of intermarriage, perhaps it is time to work at increasing the rate of children raised as Jews in intermarried families. The National Jewish Population Study indicated that only one-third of intermarried families are raising their children as Jews, while another third are raised as Christians, it is the

final third, raised with no religion, that offers the greatest opportunity for bringing Jews back into Jewish life.

There are many aspects of synagogue life that let intermarried couples know how they are truly perceived, but I believe the ultimate success of a synagogue to engage in *keruv* is determined by the attitudes of the rabbis, cantors, professionals and lay leaders. While policies are important since they determine actions, it is only when the synagogue leadership believes that intermarried couples are to be truly accepted rather than merely tolerated, that a fostering, nurturing environment will be created.

POLICIES

When synagogue leadership can discard the fear of what may come from policies that welcome intermarried couples, they will begin to see policy as statements of acceptance.

First and foremost, I believe it is essential that synagogue policy recognize non-Jewish spouses of intermarried couples as full members of the congregational community. While we must be clear that there are limitations on participation in certain religious rituals (that will be determined by each congregation), in truth how many of our congregants participate on a regular basis in the activities to which non-Jews would be excluded? It is the name on a roster, addressed correspondences and participation in synagogue events (most not religious) that define synagogue membership for most people. It is not just the non-Jew who is conscious of the exclusion, it is also the Jew. I believe it is the idea that their spouse will be viewed as a second-class citizen that motivates many Jews not to consider synagogue affiliation- a defiant statement, “if she is not good enough for them then forget it!”

Personally, I find it horribly ironic that in cases where synagogues require an intermarried couple to register as a single-parent family (with only the Jew recognized as a member) that the financial obligation is less than an endogamous two-parent family. The message we convey- it is financially beneficial to be intermarried. If paying half-dues is not incentive for intermarriage I don't know what is. In the model of full acceptance, intermarried couples and their families take part in the financial commitment of the synagogue just like endogamous couples.

When an intermarried couple comes to a Conservative synagogue I believe that they are making an important statement. After all, in most cases they could easily go to a Reform synagogue to be more fully accepted and not have to deal with potential issues of conversion for their children. A central premise in the acceptance of intermarried couples is the idea that they have dedicated themselves to living a Jewish life in a Conservative synagogue community. The newest National Jewish Population Study reflected a loss in affiliation for the Conservative Movement. Could part of this be from our failure to welcome the largest segment of the Jewish population (intermarrieds)? When considering the sad state of synagogue affiliation and the efforts we exert in search of new congregants, it seems as if we are ignoring an important community that is searching for Jewish identity.

After welcoming non-Jews as members, rabbis and synagogue boards will have to determine policies on a variety of issues. When considering policies, it is important to distinguish between

those issues that are truly halachic in nature, and those related to social concerns. The question of reciting the blessings over the Torah is an halachic issue, while allowing a non-Jewish parent to speak to his or her child is not. Creative solutions can be found for some questions; for example, when it comes to synagogue votes, allowing one vote per family, rather than per individual (after all, if a husband and wife vote differently their votes will nullify each other). And in some cases the symbolic significance is too great; as in the question of an aufruf for an intermarried couple (even when it consists only of a blessing and not an aliyah).

In my experience, in addition to being recognized as members with correspondence addressed them, some of the most visible ways in which intermarried couples will know they are being accepted rather than tolerated are:

1. Is the non-Jew allowed on the bimah for lifecycle events? [It is understood that this involvement does not include the recitation of blessings.]
2. If the synagogue acknowledges anniversaries in the bulletin or from the bimah, is the intermarried couple included?
3. Is the non-Jew allowed to participate in High Holy Day services with English readings or other appropriate involvement?

Ultimately, it is the hope that the rabbi can lead the synagogue to understand that while he or she must struggle with the halachic implications, that it is far easier to be accepting on a social level and that board decisions must reflect the complete acceptance of intermarried couples.

ACCEPTANCE

After policies are in place to establish a de jure welcome of intermarried families, true de facto acceptance will be achieved when synagogue leadership believes in it enough to speak of it to professionals and congregants. It is imperative to dedicate a High Holy Day sermon to explain to the congregation why intermarried couples and their families must be embraced.

Staff, especially teachers, must be taught how to speak about intermarriage. Rather than disparaging comments about intermarriage, we must learn to affirm the importance of a Jewish family. In truth, Jewish endogamous marriage does not guarantee a Jewish family. By focusing on the importance of creating a Jewish home, we not only utilize language that includes intermarried couples, we also teach our children that being Jewish does not end with marrying a fellow Jew.

For those families in which the non-Jew is living as a crypto-Jew, this status is established at the very time of membership. It is at the moment that both names are listed on the membership form and the section asking for Hebrew names is skipped (which is often a synagogue's way of distinguishing Jew from non-Jew) that the non-Jew begins to live the life of a crypto-Jew, wondering when he or she will be discovered. The Board of my synagogue decided to force the issue of an accepted non-Jew by including a check-off box for each congregant that asks them to indicate their religious background. The choices include the different streams of Judaism, as well as convert (to determine the halachic status) and non-Jew. In a very symbolic gesture, by checking off the appropriate box, the non-Jew acknowledges his or her religious status, but also acknowledges that he or she will be accepted fully as such.

It is imperative to follow up the High Holy Day sermon with articles in the synagogue bulletin and Shabbat sermons that address in a variety of ways that non-Jewish spouses are accepted. Whether it is discussing the circumstances when conversion is necessary for intermarried families to raise Jewish children or issues of dealing with non-Jewish extended family during the holidays, these are important ways for the non-Jewish spouses to know that they are not alone. With these articles, as with all articles and sermons, language must be sensitive to the inclusion of the non-Jewish spouse.

In addition, to the sermonic and written expressions of inclusion, it is imperative to develop relationships with non-Jewish congregants in the celebration of synagogue life. Whether it is demonstrating concern for an illness, providing comfort for a bereavement or offering the benefits of counseling that you would offer to any Jewish member of the congregation, each act is one of *keruv* that brings the non-Jew and his/her family closer to the rabbi and synagogue.

When dealing with intermarried couples, each action is dedicated toward one goal: establishing the absolute acceptance of the non-Jewish spouse as a full member of the community. When this is achieved, they will become more active members of the synagogue (as will their families) and will also be better able to fulfill their role as a non-Jewish partner and parent.

CONCLUSION

Too many synagogue leaders are afraid that public acknowledgements of intermarriage will lead to an increase in the rates of intermarriage. If we are afraid that such public displays will continue lead to the public acceptance of intermarriage... it is too late. Do we truly believe that ignoring the reality of intermarriage will strengthen our communities? It is time for us to acknowledge that ignoring and alienating intermarried couples and their families has not worked. It is time to acknowledge that the future of Conservative Judaism will be closely tied to our ability to make the fastest growing segment of the Jewish community feel comfortable in our synagogues.

Ten years ago, after speaking to my congregation about the acceptance of non-Jewish spouses at High Holy Days services and educating Board members to the importance of embracing intermarried couples, several things happened:

1. The Board decided to extend membership rights to the non-Jewish spouse of an intermarried couple.
2. The Men's Club and Sisterhood took it upon themselves to open their membership to these individuals for congregational participation (regional and national policy do not allow participation of non-Jews).
3. Intermarried couples came forward to convert their children.

While I have preached absolute total social acceptance of non-Jewish spouses, the limits of this principle were recently challenged when the Board wanted to honor an interfaith couple as part of our gala dinner and fundraiser that would honor a total of three couples. This couple has been active for a number of years, not only in the synagogue, but also in the local Federation and a community Jewish Day School. The choice was obvious. As I thought about the implications of

honoring such a couple, I realized that this was the ultimate affirmation of my belief that acceptance will translate into active participation.

So much to gain...so little to lose... it is time for the ultimate *Keruv* that will bring Jews back to synagogue and Judaism.