

Interfaith Weddings ***Should Or Shalom Permit Its Officiants to Conduct Them?***

A discussion paper prepared by Rabbi Laura Duhan Kaplan, June 2014

The question is widely acknowledged as a delicate one. If the answer is, “No,” then the synagogue receives increasing pressure from interfaith couples. If the answer is “Yes,” the synagogue’s acceptance within the larger Jewish community may be compromised.

Below are: arguments in favor of both positions, possible compromises, questions of practice to consider, and a model for synagogue exploration of the question.

NO: The role of synagogue and rabbi is to promote traditional Judaism.

Traditional Judaism, i.e., Judaism based in *halachah* (Jewish law and custom as developed over centuries) does not recognize interfaith marriage. *Halachah* is binding only on Jews; thus a Jewish wedding is not a binding vow on a non-Jewish partner. Affirming this, the core of the Jewish wedding ceremony, the ring exchange, declares “you are holy to me according to the laws of Moses and Israel.”

For sociological reasons, as well, Jews have been encouraged to marry Jews since Biblical times. Many Jews find Jewish civilization valuable, and wish it to remain a distinct entity. Many contemporary studies find the children of two Jews more likely to identify as Jewish. It is important for synagogues and rabbis to signal that Jews marrying Jews is an important priority.

It is the responsibility of the synagogue and rabbi to welcome the non-Jewish partner by warmly offering study of Judaism and conversion as a preferred option. This approach is more likely to create Jewish families.

YES: The role of a synagogue and rabbi is to welcome people into Jewish community.

In 21st century North America, Jewish identity is complex. A couple that hopes to have a rabbi lead their wedding is expressing a Jewish identity. When a synagogue turns away such a couple, the couple feels that the Jewish community does not accept them. However, if they do feel accepted, they are more likely to participate in Jewish community and further strengthen their Jewish identity.

In our country, the provincial government, rather than the Jewish community, administers family law. Most Jews seek to be married under that legal system, not the *halachic* system. For them, the wedding ceremony is primarily an expression of values and identity, expressed through rituals, sacred objects, music and words. An interfaith wedding, while not *halachically* valid, is legally binding and can connect people with their Jewish identity.

Many Jewish teachers acknowledge that Judaism is a life journey. The rabbi and synagogue should encourage people to participate in a journey, without a heavy-handed insistence on the shape of the journey. People should convert when they are ready, not just to facilitate a wedding.

Possible Compromises

Officiate at an interfaith wedding only if (a) couple agrees that children resulting from their union will be raised Jewish; or (b) non-Jewish partner does not practice another religion; or (c) both partners commit to running a Jewish household; or (d) non-Jewish partner commits to supporting their partner's Jewish practice and furthering their own Jewish education; or (e) both partners have been previously involved with the synagogue, i.e., not to casual callers; or (f) both partners agree to be active members of the synagogue; or (g) the Jewish partner has been a member of the synagogue; or (h) the Jewish partner has previously been involved with the synagogue.

Create a vibrant Jewish community that everyone wants to participate in! Officiate at an interfaith wedding, then welcome the partners to great Jewish study afterwards.

Ritual Questions

By way of traditional practice and as a means of creating group identity, a synagogue practices rituals – actions done largely the same way over and over, with commitment to their meaning. Decisions about interfaith weddings have implications for the performance of ritual.

If permitting its officiants to lead interfaith weddings, Or Shalom would have to decide whether it would offer certain rules, guidelines, or (more moderately) recommendations. For example, would the phrase “by the laws of Moses and Israel” need to be modified? What language could a *ketubah* include? Which ceremonial objects could the wedding include, e.g., *chuppah*, Kiddush cup, or *talit*? Which actions could the wedding include e.g, breaking a glass, *Sheva Berachot* (7 blessings), signing and reading a non-traditional *ketubah*?

Would other practices around including non-Jews in synagogue ritual be discussed and modified? Currently at Or Shalom, non-Jews do not participate in individual *aliyot*, *hagbah*, leading prayer (beyond a short song, poem, or prayer for peace), or counting in a *minyan*.

If Or Shalom keeps policies as they are, how can it be more welcoming? Past suggestions by interfaith families include stating explicitly on all our public relations materials “interfaith families are welcome,” and making available each week the *bnei mitzvah* program insert describing the Shabbat morning service.

One Synagogue's Process: Dor Chadash, Pittsburgh (Reconstructionist)

Dor Chadash conducted a review of the role of non-Jews in synagogue life, based on the following steps:

1. Appoint an "Inclusivity Committee" that reflects all the views and constituencies of the congregation.
2. Create a trusting atmosphere.
3. Examine the congregation's mission and underlying values.
4. Determine who will be affected by the decisions.
5. Consider the issues involved in membership, ritual, and governance.
6. Explore which values pertain and which values conflict in each area.
7. Select appropriate means to educate the congregation (including the board) once the inclusivity committee arrives at a series of positions.
8. Vote on the positions at the committee and board levels.
9. Make policies available to all members and prospective members.
10. Continue the education process.

Using the *Guide to Jewish Practice* by Rabbi David Teutsch (published by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation), the committee identified the following relevant values to guide their decision-making.

- Commitment to Community
- Connection to God
- Democracy
- Diversity
- Holiness (*Kedushah*)
- Human Dignity
- Integrity of Jewish Ritual Practice
- Jewish Continuity and the Survival of the Jewish People
- Jewish Education
- Maintaining an Inviting and Accepting Atmosphere
- Preservation of Jewish Tradition
- Preserving Peace in the Home (*Shalom Bayit*)
- Welcoming the Stranger / Guest (*Hachnasat Orchim*)

Or Shalom might consider adapting this process to its own needs, appointing a committee appropriate to Or Shalom, creating opportunities for communal discussion, and identifying its own relevant values.

Sources come from the Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal and independent streams of Judaism, which have considered this question: *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice* by Mark Washofsky (URJ Press, 2001); jrf.com [Jewish Reconstructionist Federation]; Ohalah: Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal discussion list with follow-up interviews; interfaithfamily.com.