

NOTES FROM INTER-MARRIAGE TASK FORCE SESSIONS

The Process:

These brief notes are a synthesis of key points that raised or discussed in the course of our invitational sessions with congregants on May 17, 24, 31 and June 1, 2011. Several different groupings of congregations were convened, to allow for a variety of ages, viewpoints and experience.

At each session about 12 persons participated, including 2 – 3 members of the Task Force. Rabbi Garten was available at the first three sessions. There was a good representation of different ages (20s through 70s), intermarried couples, Jewish couples, couples in which one Jewish partner was a convert, same gender couples, individuals not in a relationship and one engaged couple considering conversion. In some cases only one partner in a relationship was present and others were able to speak about their intermarried children.

At each session two questions were posed to guide the discussion:

1. *The Temple has policies that deal with interfaith participation in a number of lifecycle events (Bar Mitzvah, burial, etc.). Is (or why is) interfaith marriage different?*
2. *If Temple were to have a policy on interfaith marriage, what elements should be addressed in such a policy?*

The information, questions or views raised in any one session was freely shared with participants in subsequent sessions.

It was invariably the case that participants in each session raised their own questions as a means of discussing the two posed by the Task Force. We have highlighted those questions and the responses heard below.

Highlights:

There was a great deal of information sharing at the beginning of each session, as there were a number of misunderstandings about current Temple policies, Rabbinic guidelines, and Jewish law. The following is a summary of questions and information that was shared with participants:

- The question of *“What constitutes a Jewish wedding?”* was answered using Talmudic guidance – i.e., that there be witnesses to “the exchange of something of value e.g., a ring” and “sexual intercourse”. Other customs such as Rabbinic involvement, blessings, a Chuppah, etc., are variable historically and in modern practice but not necessitated by halacha. In essence, a marriage can be viewed as a public proclamation of a private decision of the couple involved.

- Temple Israel does not have a written policy on our Rabbi's participation in intermarriage. However, the employment contract between the Congregation and the Rabbi has stipulated the understanding that he would follow Canadian Reform practice and not participate in weddings between a Jew and a non-Jew. This practice in Canada was assumed to be a "policy" when in fact it was custom of some congregations but this may not be widely understood. Many congregations (Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg) have had intermarriage options for many years, often with no restrictions.
- Why is the question of intermarriage being raised at this time? Participants were reminded of the Rabbi's Rosh Hoshanah sermon (5771), the demographic projections for North American and Ottawa Jewish communities as well as information shared with congregants by Rabbi Kerry Orlitsky.

A variety of views were expressed at each session. What follows is a summary of recurring themes and thoughts expressed by participants:

- Fundamentally, participants acknowledged that intermarried couples are a significant and increasing proportion of Temple Israel, not to mention other Reform congregations and this cannot be ignored. Participants felt that the current situation presents an untenable dilemma in which Rabbis unable to perform intermarriage ceremonies must 'reject' prospective couples and yet congregations and their Rabbis may then actively solicit their participation as congregants after they are married. It has been some congregants' experience that this rejection is usually hurtful to the couple and often their families who may be longstanding Temple Israel members. Participants felt that, in terms of the couple involved, it can mean the loss to the Jewish community not only of them but their children. In comparison, participants felt that the non-Jewish partners are frequently very supportive of the family's fuller participation in Temple activities particularly with respect to education of children and maintaining Jewish family customs and practice.
- Participants reiterated that "interfaith" is not really interfaith, as frequently the non-Jewish partner is not practicing another religion. As Rabbi Olitzky pointed out, these are often, in truth, Jewish households. In some cases, there are two religious partners, but more likely to be only a Jewish partner than a real "interfaith" relationship.
- Participants asked: If Temple policy is to welcome and provide for the full participation of non-Jewish partners (excluding only specific covenantal roles) how can we express this vis-à-vis intermarriage when it is requested? As distinct from the wedding event (and in fact, a Bar or Bat Mitzvah or other life cycle events), marriage was seen by a number of

participants as an ongoing process. Therefore, it was felt that the Temple should be looking to provide support and education to the couple before and after the ceremony, be they intermarried or not. The engagement of individuals and families generally varies over time for age and stage or other reasons.

- What are the reasons that participants saw for encouraging a more open approach to intermarriage? Most frequently mentioned were to support the involvement of Jewish children; to strengthen pre-marital education for the Jewish and non-Jewish partner; and, to strengthen the Jewish community in the face of current demographic projections. There was a general perception and occasionally experience shared indicating that today's youth are unlikely to be in social environments that are exclusively Jewish. Consequently they will increasingly be choosing life partners from among non-Jewish peers. Finding ways to respect this reality was expressed by participants as an important consideration for our Congregation.
- Concerns with intermarriage revolved around issues of commitment to the Jewish religion, the community and the congregation. There were comments that those choosing to be part of the community should make some commitment and that this should be an integral part of any policy or set of guidelines.

Possible options presented by participants for consideration:

The majority of participants agreed that some form of accommodation for intermarriage should be made. A very small minority of those attending saying that no accommodation should be made.

In terms of how the "policy" around intermarriage should be developed, the following were recurring proposals raised during discussions:

In the majority, participants felt that any practice of intermarriage should be at the Rabbi's discretion, as the Rabbi has the final decision about most events like Bar and Bat Mitzvah. While it was recognized by participants that it is nearly impossible to legislate behaviour that comes after a ceremony, it was suggested by a majority of participants that the Rabbi espouse the values of the Temple community (much like the statements on wearing of Talitot and Keepah on the Bimah) in making his decisions, with the following guidelines:

- A Jewish Wedding: Participants felt that individuals who seek to be married by the Rabbi should understand that they are doing so because they wish to have a Jewish wedding, verses a secular or other type of ceremony.

- Pre-Marital Education: Participants felt that all those who seek to be married by the Rabbi (intermarriage or not) should engage in some type of pre-marital education (this will be taken up with the education committee) where important issues such as what religion means for the couple and how this will be expressed, should be discussed
- In Temple or outside: There were a variety of opinions as to whether there was a distinction to be made between “in the Temple” marriages and not; the majority of those who spoke felt that the same guidelines should apply regardless of where the marriage took place as the Rabbi is the representative of the Temple community.
- Congregational membership: Participants felt that couples seeking to be married by the Rabbi should commit in some form to be members of the congregation
- Education about the Jewish Faith: Participants felt that couples seeking to be married by the Rabbi should indicate a willingness to be educated about the Jewish faith and engage in some form of education about the Jewish religion
- A Jewish home: Participants felt that couples seeking to be married by the Rabbi should indicate an interest in having their children participate as part of the community and in Jewish education
- Other religious traditions: Generally speaking, participants felt that the Rabbi should not consider participating in ceremonies including traditions from other faiths, unless they are in keeping with the Jewish ceremony. A small minority of participants felt the Rabbi should be able to officiate in a manner of his choosing.
- Other officiates: in general, participants felt the congregation would not welcome having an officiate of another faith participate in a wedding ceremony in the Temple or with the Rabbi.

Next steps:

This report will be published on the Temple website and available to congregants. Feedback will be provided to the ritual committee, who will be charged with developing guidelines as discussed in this report. Congregational feedback on these guidelines will be sought prior to any presentation to the Board of Directors of the Temple.