CENTER FOR RADICALLY INCLUSIVE JUDAISM

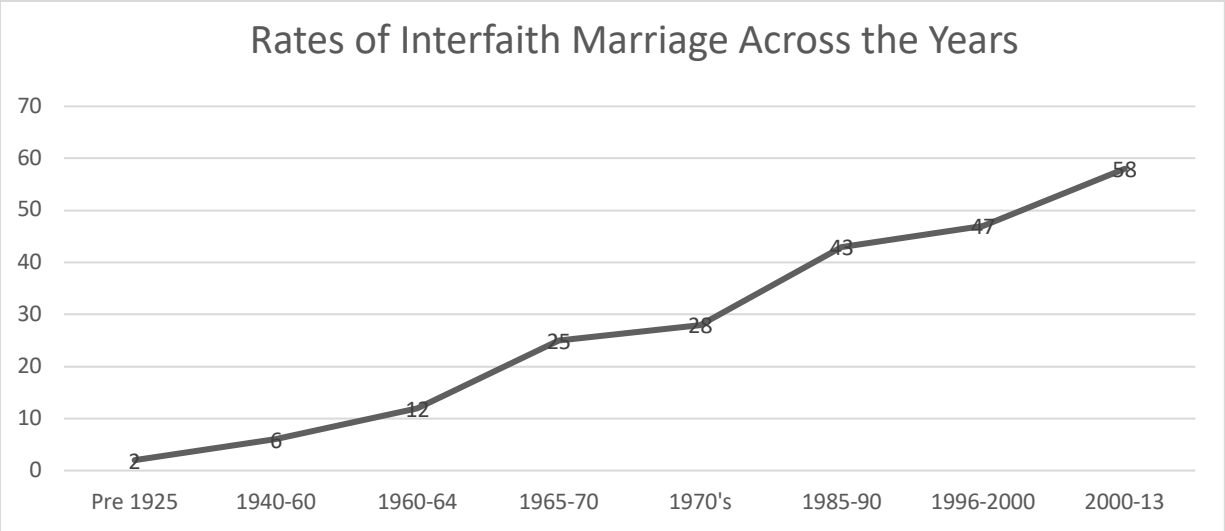
Advocating for attitudes, policies and programs that engage interfaith families in Jewish life and community

PROPOSED URJ FULL INCLUSION RESOLUTION

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

The Growth of Interfaith Marriage and the Intermarriage Debate

The following graph charts the rates of interfaith marriage in America (the percentage of all Jews who got married in a period of time who married someone from a different faith background):



The well-known 2013 Pew Research Center report *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* found that 44 percent of all Jews who were married as of 2013 (not those who got married at any particular time) were intermarried.

Most important, the Pew Report found that 72 percent of non-Orthodox Jews who got married between 2000 and 2013, intermarried. That means that 84% of new households formed between 2000 and 2013 and involving a non-Orthodox Jew, were intermarried households.

The growth of intermarriage generated an often fierce debate between those who feared the trend would lead to assimilation and the disappearance of Judaism and the Jewish people, and those who recognized that interfaith marriage is a fact of life for the American Jewish community, that many interfaith families participate actively in the Jewish community, and that whether they

become involved depends in large part on whether the community choses to engage them. (The history of this debate is traced in detail in the Center's book, *Radical Inclusion: Engaging Interfaith Families for a Thriving Jewish Future*, the source of the above data.)

The Reform Movement's Response To Interfaith Marriage

The Reform Movement led efforts to engage interfaith families in Jewish life and community; under the leadership of Rabbi Alexander Schindler, it created an Outreach Program in 1978, and declared that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent in 1983 (commonly called "patrilineal descent").

At its height, the URJ had an outreach department with a national staff and a half-time outreach director in each of the URJ's then fourteen regions around the country. In a controversial move in 2003, under then president Rabbi Eric Yoffie, the URJ eliminated the outreach department, reportedly for financial reasons.

In 2013 under current president Rabbi Rick Jacobs, the URJ launched the Audacious Hospitality initiative which seeks to engage groups of people who have been marginalized, including LGBTQ people, Jews of color and people with disabilities. Audacious Hospitality includes but has not been particularly focused on interfaith couples and families, in the Center's view. The head of the Audacious Hospitality department left the URJ at the end of 2018 and future plans for the department have not been announced.

At the 2017 Biennial, Rabbi Jacobs announced a new program, to be called RJ Connect, that among other things would refer interfaith couples to rabbis willing to officiate at their weddings. In March 2019, the URJ further announced that a pilot of the Reform Wedding Officiation Network would start in Phoenix and Atlanta later in 2019.

Why a Resolution?

As the resolution recites, as a result of the URJ's past efforts, many thousands of interfaith couples and families are participating in Reform congregations, with many partners from different faith traditions Jewishly engaged, and many deciding to become Jewish.

It is often said that half of the families that belong to Reform synagogues are interfaith. It is probably true that an interfaith couple that is interested in joining a synagogue will join a Reform one, given the less welcoming response of the Conservative movement and the unwelcoming response of the Orthodox.

Some people would say that the Reform movement doesn't need to make any further effort to attract interfaith families, or that their synagogue is already very welcoming. But as the Religious Institute noted in the context of LGBTQ inclusion, there is "a tendency toward complacency among many congregations once the rainbow banner is unfurled…. [M]any clergy and congregants consider LGBT inclusion a 'non-issue' because 'everyone knows we're welcoming.'"

The key point is that too many interfaith families are not Jewishly engaged in general, or identified with the Reform movement in particular. The 2013 Pew Report found that 35% of US Jews identify with Reform (the largest denomination in the US), but 30% identify with no denomination. Moreover, **only 14% of Jews whose spouses are not Jewish are members of a synagogue, compared to 59% of Jews whose spouses are Jewish**.

The proposed resolution takes the position that given a 72% rate of interfaith marriage among non-Orthodox Jews, the future vitality of Reform synagogues depends on attracting increasing numbers of interfaith families; the resolution would commit the movement to renewed efforts towards that goal, taking a new approach.

Aren't We Welcoming Enough?

There are many reasons why interfaith families do not engage in Jewish life and community. One is that many Jewish partners grow up with little Jewish experience so that neither partner knows what they are missing. Another may be a trend to being secular and not religious. The resolution reflects the Center's view that a major reason why interfaith families do not engage is the way they are treated or anticipate being treated by Jews and Jewish leaders and organizations.

The traditional Jewish view is not welcoming to interfaith couples: Judaism is a system for Jews only, and what matters is *being* Jewish and part of the Jewish people. In that view, interfaith marriage is bad or wrong, and partners from different faith backgrounds are undesirable – but they can convert if they want to engage.

Deep-seated attitudes towards intermarriage are reflected in this 2006 cartoon from the Boston Globe:

"Harold, do you hear this? He's marrying a shiksa!"

These attitudes are clearly changing. The Cohen Center at Brandeis recently released an important study of interfaith couples and declared that "we have succeeded in making intermarried families feel welcome." They found that "Most Jewish parents were very accepting

of their children's non-Jewish partners, as were most non-Jewish parents of their children's Jewish partners." They also found that the majority of young intermarried couples felt welcome in the Jewish community (among interfaith couples, 33% of the Jewish partners and 42% of the partners from different faith backgrounds feel completely welcome in Jewish settings without qualification, compared to 62% of inmarried couples).

But the study itself notes that respondents in interfaith couples who did not feel completely welcome "emphasized their feelings of being 'other' and not fitting in." As one partner from a different faith tradition said, "I feel accepted into [my partner's Jewish] family, but I am uncertain of how much this brings me into the folds of the Jewish community at large." And a companion study by the Cohen Center noted that

> In some cases, despite the initial welcome by a congregation, couples felt an undercurrent of disapproval or being treated as outsiders rather than as integral and valued members of the community. Some couples recounted being regularly welcomed when they attended activities at a synagogue but never really progressing to feel like they belonged in the community.

These findings point to the key distinction between welcoming and inclusion on which the proposed resolution is based. People can feel welcomed but still "other" and "outsider" and therefore that they don't belong. (You can read more about the Cohen Center's studies in the Center's op-eds, Beyond Welcoming? Not So Fast and This New Year, Who Will Be Only Welcomed, Who Fully Included?)

Beyond Welcoming, to Inclusion

In the inclusion field, welcoming is understood to make people feel that their presence as a guest is appreciated. Advocates for every other marginalized Jewish group, including LGBTQ people, people of color, and people with disabilities, all agree that inclusion – the feeling of belonging – is necessary to support engagement.

Congregational consultant David Brubaker explains the difference:

> A hospitable congregation welcomes visitors …, showing [them] that existing members are glad that they've come… [T]he visitor leaves feeling that his or her presence was truly appreciated.
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> Having been welcomed… offers no assurance that a visitor will also be fully included… [I]nclusion is a much deeper form of acceptance… [O]nly genuine inclusion will convince me to remain part of the community. I will stay if I feel I truly belong.

The URJ's existing resolutions on interfaith marriage do not state full inclusion as their goal. As expressed in the most recent (2005) resolution, The Unfinished Outreach Revolution, the movement's approach, from the time the Outreach Department was created, has been two-fold: the URJ encourages congregations both to "express appreciation to non-Jewish spouses who support the Jewish involvement of their family members" and at the same time to encourage

"individuals already involved in synagogue life to formally embrace the richness of Judaism and our covenantal community [i.e., to convert]."

In contrast, resolutions adopted by the URJ concerning LGBTQ people, transgender/gender non-conforming people, and people with disabilities recognize the distinction between welcoming and inclusion, and state full inclusion as their goal: "[T]o integrate fully all Jews into the life of the community regardless of sexual orientation," "[W]elcoming communities of meaningful inclusion, enabling and encouraging people with disabilities and their families to participate fully in Jewish life in a way that promotes a sense of personal belonging for all individuals," "[C]ommitment to the full equality, inclusion and acceptance of people of all gender identities and gender expressions."

It stands to reason that interfaith couples, and partners from different faith backgrounds, like other marginalized groups, will "stay if they feel they truly belong" – and not if they feel "other" or "outsider."

The most recent URJ resolution on interfaith marriage is limited to expressing appreciation to partners from different faith backgrounds, a form of welcoming. Some descriptions of audacious hospitality have used language of inclusion: "The URJ believes that everyone can feel at home in Jewish community… we stand for a Judaism that is inclusive," but have not defined the goals of audacious hospitality or how it will make interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds "feel at home" or included.

In order to serve the goal of engaging increasing numbers of interfaith families in Jewish life and community – and in particular, in Reform synagogues – and to exercise ongoing leadership in such efforts, the proposed resolution makes clear that the goal of audacious hospitality with respect to interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds is their full inclusion.

What Does Full Inclusion Mean in the Context of Interfaith Marriage?

The crux of the issue is that the URJ resolutions concerning LGBTQ people, transgender/gender non-conforming people, and people with disabilities all involve Jews, while the proposed resolution concerns partners from different faith backgrounds – who are not Jews. If inclusion advocates are correct that engagement depends on belonging, and if we want partners from different faith backgrounds to engage, then they need to be made to feel that they belong – even though they are not Jews.

Full inclusion is based on an understanding of Judaism as a system not just for Jews or the Jewish people, but for the community of those who are engaging in Jewish life – who are *doing* Jewish – some of whom are Jewish, and some of whom are not. In the context of interfaith marriage, full inclusion means treating interfaith families as equal to inmarried families, and partners from different faith backgrounds as equal to Jews. This is radical, because it stands the traditional view on its head.

Full inclusion is consistent with the bedrock principle that "You shall love the stranger as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34) – the ultimate expression of inclusive attitudes. In addition, the Torah

portion read in Reform synagogues on Yom Kippur morning suggests that the *gerim toshavim* (sojourners that sojourn with you, Leviticus 19:34) were included among the people who entered into God's covenant: "You stand this day, all of you, . . . every man, woman, and child of Israel; and the stranger in the midst of your camp; . . . to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God, . . . to establish you as God's people" (Deuteronomy 29:9–12). Elsewhere the Torah refers to *kol adat b'nai yisrael* – "the entire community of the children of Israel" (Leviticus 19:2).

Conversion remains a wonderful, personal, existential choice to formally identify as and become a Jew – to *be* Jewish. Treating partners from different faith backgrounds as equally invited to *do* Jewish – to engage as fully as they desire in all aspects of Jewish life and community – should not be understood to denigrate or lessen conversion in any way. It is important that those who might be interested in pursuing conversion know that paths are available to do so. But the earlier and the more we suggest that we'd like them to convert, the less they will ever get involved in Jewish life in the first place.

Identifying as a Jew remains important for Jews, both as an existential choice, and because identifying as a Jew motivates people to *do* Jewish. Identifying as Jews is important for the children of interfaith couples, for the same reasons. With respect to partners from different faith backgrounds, some may come to informally identify as partly Jewish, kind of Jewish, or Jew-*ish*; some may even decide to make that identification formal and convert. But how they end up identifying is less important than the feeling of belonging, of being included, which is critical, because feeling included will motivate their engagement in Jewish traditions. Bound to Jewish communities through loving relationships with their Jewish partners, they can feel proud of, and even love for, the history and the accomplishments of the Jewish community, without identifying as Jewish themselves.

What Are the Practical Consequences for Synagogues?

Full inclusion is consistent with another bedrock principle, that "You and the stranger shall be alike before the Eternal; the same ritual and the same rule shall apply to you and to the stranger who resides among you" (Numbers 15:15–16) – the ultimate expression of inclusive policies and practices.

The proposed resolution establishes full inclusion as a goal, but leaves for future determination by Reform congregations, congregants, clergy, and institutions what those inclusive policies and practices will be. It is important to note that the proposed resolution does not mean to challenge in any way the authority of rabbis and cantors to make decisions on religious practices. In considering whether to support the proposed resolution, it is worthwhile to anticipate what the issues around those policies and practices are likely to be, even though the resolution deliberately does not address any issue specifically.

Inclusion theory posits that inclusion requires an adaptation of underlying attitudes towards those to be included, and adaptive change in the established system with which they engage. Brubaker explains:

> Hospitality requires no adaptation on the part of the congregation. (Friendliness and welcoming, yes, but no deep change.) Inclusion is quite different. When a congregation begins to integrate people… it usually must adapt its way of being to be genuinely inclusive. Modes of worship may need to broaden… [I]nteraction patterns among members may need to evolve… Congregations that refuse to include new people along with their new ways of being will inevitably discover that new people have no desire to affiliate.

It is important to note that the proposed resolution's goal is to fully include partners from different faith traditions – make them feel that they belong – while maintaining Jewish practices. The goal is not to change the Jewish nature of Jewish practices, it is to facilitate partners from different faith traditions engaging in them.

Policies and practices that relate specifically to synagogues include messaging about interfaith marriage, policies regarding leadership roles and ritual participation by partners from different faith backgrounds, and whether to enroll, in synagogue religious schools, children who are receiving formal education in another religion.

Messaging. The proposed resolution notes that the term "non-Jew" can be considered to be inappropriate language, akin to the term "disabled person" that the 2011 Resolution on Jews with Disabilities discouraged. More use of universalistic language in prayer could be considered, for example always adding "and all who dwell on earth" to the Oseh Shalom prayer's plea for peace for "us [and] all Israel." Messages from the bimah could be considered, like Rabbi Allison Berry's 2017 Rosh Hashanah sermon on inclusivity, which expressed the radically inclusive attitude that there are letters in the Torah not just for every Jew but for every Jewishly engaged person.

Leadership Roles. Can the synagogue president be someone who is not Jewish? An elected board member? Considering and treating partners from different faith backgrounds as equal to Jews would seem to require not restricting their participation as members and leaders.

Ritual Participation. In 1999 the then president of the Reform movement wrote, "We all understand that those who have not converted cannot participate in certain rituals." In the past, most Reform rabbis would not allow a parent from a different faith background to have an *aliyah* at their child's bar or bat mitzvah. How could people who were not Jewish recite a prayer that thanks God for choosing "us" [the Jewish people] among the nations and giving "us" [the Jewish people] the Torah? How could they be given the highest honor that a Jew can have?

From a full inclusion perspective, an intermarried partner who has participated in raising a child as a Jew to the point of that child becoming bar or bat mitzvah could say, with complete integrity and authenticity, that his or her family is included among the "us" who were chosen and to whom the Torah was given.

Some argue, using the analogy of citizenship, where certain rights such as voting pertain to citizens only, that only those who are born Jewish or converts should have certain rights, such as having an *aliyah*. However, applying that approach in this context – telling people in interfaith

relationships that only born Jews or converts can participate fully – discourages the partners from different faith traditions, as well as their Jewish partners, from engaging with Judaism at all. They may never get involved in the first place, or they may not stay long enough to get to the point where they would consider conversion, a deeply personal, often years-long process.

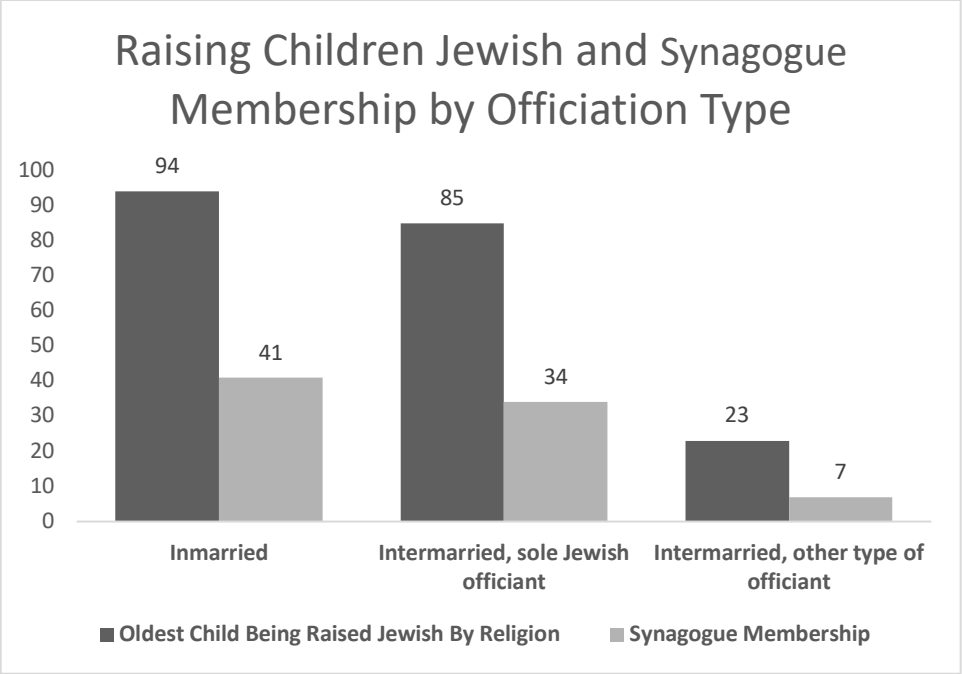
Dual Education. The URJ has an existing resolution that recommends that Reform synagogues not enroll, in their religious schools, children who are receiving formal education in another religion. Adopting a full inclusion perspective does not provide a clear answer to this question, because we can emphasize *doing* as opposed to *being* Jewish as important for our attitudes to partners from different faith backgrounds, while still preferring that children be raised to *be* Jewish. But arguably, providing Jewish education to a child being raised in two religions keeps a door opened to the child's later Jewish engagement.

Broader Issues

Adopting a radically inclusive approach has implications for at least two other issues that are not directly determined by synagogues: rabbinic officiation at weddings of interfaith couples, and whether rabbis can be intermarried.

Rabbinic Officiation. The Reform rabbis' association, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), still has an official resolution dating from 1973 that disapproves of officiation because intermarriage "should be discouraged," although in 2010 a CCAR report noted "underlying respect for the integrity of colleagues across a broad spectrum of ideology and practice so long as it is consistent with the CCAR Code of Ethics and policies against officiation on Shabbat and co-officiation with non-Jewish clergy." (The strict prohibition against Conservative rabbis officiating for interfaith couples is probably the biggest impediment to that movement's ability to attract interfaith families and retain their relatives as members.)

In 2016 the Cohen Center published a game-changing study on this issue that reported the following data:



Eighty-five percent of intermarried couples who had only Jewish clergy officiate at their wedding were raising their children Jewish, close to the 94 percent of inmarried couples who have Jewish clergy officiate and much greater than the 23 percent of intermarried couples who have other officiants. In addition, 34 percent of intermarried couples with sole Jewish clergy officiants were synagogue members, not far from the 41 percent of inmarried couples and much more than the 7 percent of intermarrieds with other officiants.

As careful researchers, the Cohen Center team did not claim causation. Nevertheless, the association between officiation and later Jewish engagement is significant.

> Interactions with Jewish clergy in preparation for the wedding may serve to welcome the non-Jewish partner into Judaism, establish the groundwork for a continuing relationship, and affirm the couple's prior decision to raise a Jewish family. However, the opposite may also be true. Rejection by Jewish clergy may serve to dissuade couples from pursuing other Jewish commitments and connections.

Rabbis who will not officiate at weddings of interfaith couples can no longer rely on the argument that those couples won't engage in Jewish life. Rabbis who don't officiate are refusing to take action that is strongly associated with interfaith couples raising their children as Jews and joining synagogues. In the Center's view, that association shows that inclusive policies and practices are effective to engage interfaith families.

In 2017 InterfaithFamily did a survey of Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis – it had 881 responses, including 23 percent of Reform and 44 percent of Reconstuctionist rabbinic association members – that found that 85 percent officiate at weddings of interfaith couples.

Couples who want their weddings to take place before Shabbat has ended may have a hard time finding a rabbi to officiate. Many rabbis impose requirements and conditions on their officiation: only for members of their synagogue, or only for couples who are committed to raising Jewish children and creating a Jewish home, or only if the partner from a different faith tradition will take an Introduction to Judaism class. Co-officiation with clergy from other religions is the biggest frontier issue for rabbis who want to be inclusive.

Intermarried Rabbis. In 2002 the CCAR's Responsa Committee reaffirmed the Reform seminary's ban on ordaining intermarried Jews as rabbis, reasoning that rabbis are role models and should teach, by personal example, the ideal of inmarriage. Calling inmarriage "ideal," and saying that intermarriage "should be discouraged," express the opposite of inclusive attitudes.

From a radically inclusive perspective, why not encourage intermarried Jews to become rabbis and thus role models for extensive engagement in Jewish life by others like them? Indeed, what better role model for engaged interfaith families could there be?

In 2015, the Reconstructionist movement took the bold step to accept and graduate rabbinic students who are intermarried or in committed relationships with partners who are not Jewish. Responding to the role model argument, the movement reaffirmed that "all rabbinical candidates must model commitment to Judaism in their communal, personal, and family lives" – but explained their decision was in large part because "Jews with non-Jewish partners demonstrat[e] these commitments every day in many Jewish communities."

Again, the proposed resolution establishes full inclusion as a goal, but leaves for future determination how all of these particular policy and practice issues will be resolved.