

A New Theory of Interfaith Marriage

We need a new theory of interfaith marriage in which the covenant is understood to be between God and people who are Jewishly engaged. What matters is the engaging itself, not whether the person engaging is a Jew or not.

Edmund Case

With a 72% rate of interfaith marriage among non-Orthodox Jews,[1] so that at least 72% of new households formed by marriages involving non-Orthodox Jews are interfaith households,[2] the future vitality of liberal Judaism in the United States depends on engaging increasing numbers of interfaith families in Jewish life and community.

But interfaith families are relatively less Jewishly engaged, as the recent *Beyond Welcoming* study by the Cohen Center confirms.[3] For those interested in synagogue membership, as just one example, the 2013 Pew Report found that 55% of non-Orthodox Jews whose spouses are Jewish are members of a synagogue, compared to 14% of non-Orthodox Jews whose spouses are not Jewish.[4]

There are two sets of reasons why interfaith couples tend not to engage. The first is that, for a variety of reasons, they don't see the value of joining — how engaging Jewishly can add meaning to their lives; serve as a framework for raising grounded, compassionate children; and be a source of community and spiritual expression — or that the perceived benefits outweigh the costs. As the *Beyond Welcoming* study found, the Jewish partners had less exposure to Jewish life growing up, and the couples have little interest in religion; hence, proactive invitations and access points that spark curiosity and enthusiasm about Jewish engagement are needed.

My focus is on the second set of reasons: the challenge that interfaith couples, and in particular, the partners from different faith traditions, face in feeling welcomed and included — feeling that they belong — in Jewish groups, organizations and communities.

The Need for Inclusion of Interfaith Couples and Partners from Different Faith

Backgrounds

The *Beyond Welcoming* study declared that we have succeeded “in making intermarried families feel welcome” — a premature declaration of victory, in my view.^[5] The study itself notes that interfaith couples who did not feel completely welcome “emphasized their feelings of being ‘other’ and not fitting in.” A companion study, *We’ll Cross That Bridge When We Come to It*, reported 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.”^[6]

The latter study draws an important distinction between welcoming and inclusion. Thus, even if we have succeeded in making interfaith families feel welcome, welcoming by itself, while essential, is insufficient. Welcoming makes people feel that their presence as a guest was 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.

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.^[7]

It stands to reason that interfaith couples and in particular partners from different faith backgrounds will not engage unless they are fully included — made to feel that they truly belong — in Jewish families, organizations and communities.

But unlike those other marginalized people, the partners from different faith backgrounds are by definition not Jewish.^[8] How can people who are not Jews feel that they truly belong in Jewish communities?

That is the challenge of our time: to help make partners from different faith backgrounds feel that they belong. We need a new understanding of interfaith marriage and adapted attitudes and policies that support their inclusion.

The Traditional Theory Against Inclusion

The foundation of Judaism is the covenant traditionally understood to be between God and the

Jewish people. The Jews agree to do what God says — traditionally, to follow all the commandments; now, liberally, to undertake informed obligations to act in certain ways — and God will reward them. In the traditional view, Judaism is a system of and for Jews. Jews are a people, and the Jewish people consists of people who have a fundamentally distinctive Jewish identity. Jews engage in certain behaviors and attitudes, and others do not. Jews feel connected to other Jews and have an attachment to Israel. What matters is who is a Jew and who is not.

The focus on being Jewish and Jewish peoplehood is the source of the traditional norm that Jews should marry other Jews. It is also the source of the negative attitudes Jews have about intermarriage and partners from different faith backgrounds (along with suspicion of non-Jews based on centuries-old prejudice that excluded and oppressed Jews).

Conversely, the feeling of belonging in Jewish communities is challenging for partners from different faith backgrounds who do not feel, or are told that they are not or cannot be, included in the Jewish people. If the Jewish people consists of people who are *in* — who identify as Jews — and if the partner is *out* or *other* — not a Jew — then the partner is not part of the Jewish people. If Judaism is a set of traditions for Jews, in which only Jewish people believe and/or do this and that, then the traditions are not for the partner.

A New Theory for Inclusion

We need a new theory of interfaith marriage in which the covenant is understood to be between God and people who are Jewishly engaged. In this radically inclusive view, Judaism is a system in which Jews and others, including their partners from different faith backgrounds, can engage in Jewish life, and a Jewish community consists of those people who do so — some of whom are Jewish, and some of whom are not. What matters is the engaging itself, not whether the person engaging is a Jew or not; what matters is “doing,” not “being.”

There is support for this view in the Torah. Leviticus 19:34 suggests that the *gerim* (sojourners that sojourn with you, Fox translation) 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* — translated by Fox as “the entire community of the children of Israel” (Leviticus 19:2).^[9]

Conversion, Peoplehood and Identity

Conversion is a neat “solution” to the challenge of inclusion. The partner from a different faith

background can become Jewish, become “in,” part of the “us,” included in the Jewish people. Instead of our having to include those who want to do Jewish without being Jewish, we can limit inclusion to those who are willing to become Jewish.

But if we are only willing to fully include those who convert, then far too many interfaith couples will continue to be disengaged. Conversion is a wonderful, personal, existential choice. It is important that those who might be interested in pursuing conversion know that paths are available to do so. But conversion is not appealing to many couples and partners from different faith backgrounds. The earlier and the more we suggest that we’d like them to convert, the less likely that they will ever get involved in Jewish life in the first place.

Partners from different faith traditions who do not convert can be considered and feel part of the Jewish *group*. It helps to think of that group as a *community* rather than as a *people*. Partners from different faith traditions can feel 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 Jews themselves. Feeling part of or a member of the Jewish *community* is a more universal approach that appeals to those who are uncomfortable with tribalism, chosenness, and particularism.^[10]

In a radically inclusive Judaism, identifying as a Jew remains important for Jews, both as an existential choice and because identifying as a Jew motivates people to “do” Jewish. It may seem paradoxical, but 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 incidental. It’s the feeling of belonging, of being included, that is critical, because feeling included will motivate their engagement in Jewish traditions.

Before my wife converted (after 30 years of marriage), she used to say, “I live Jewishly, but I’m not a Jew.” In the traditional view, that doesn’t make any sense. We need a new understanding in which it makes perfect sense. In the context of interfaith marriage, we need to prioritize doing Jewish over being/identifying as Jewish.

Making Theory Reality

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. In the context of interfaith marriage, full inclusion means *thinking of*, as well as *treating*, interfaith families as equal to inmarried families, and partners from different faith backgrounds as equal to Jews. Thinking of them as

equal is a matter of culture; treating them as equal is a matter of policy.

Adapted Attitudes

The traditional “us” vs. “other,” “in” vs. “out” view is the source of negative attitudes about intermarriage, interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds that unfortunately continue to be expressed and discourage interfaith families from engaging.

Examples abound: cartoons depicting ancestors complaining that “He’s marrying a *shiksa*”; Chelsea Clinton’s 2010 wedding (with a rabbi co-officiating, a *ketubah* and *chuppah*, and the groom wearing a *tallis* and *kippah*) described by leaders of all the Jewish movements as “not a Jewish event”; “experts” declaring when Mark Zuckerberg intermarried that his children wouldn’t be Jewish. Comments from Israel are uniformly negative: in 2018, the new head of the Jewish Agency for Israel said intermarriage was a “plague”; in 2019, the new head of the Jewish National Fund called it a “disaster.”

Some off-putting expressions of attitudes are more subtle, including parents inquiring whether prospective dates or mates of their children are Jewish. Even expressing a preference that our children marry Jews delivers a message of disapproval to the 72% of them who will intermarry anyway. Feeling disapproved of is not conducive to the feeling of belonging.

Another message of disapproval is conveyed by the refusal of most rabbinic seminaries to accept and ordain intermarried rabbinic students. That interfaith marriage is viewed as less than ideal is quite clear from the CCAR’s support for Hebrew Union College’s ban by reasoning that rabbis are role models and should teach by personal example the ideal of inmarriage.^[11] The Reconstructionist movement’s bold 2015 step to accept and graduate intermarried/interpartnered rabbinic students was an important step in negating disapproval: “The issue of Jews intermarrying is no longer something we want to police; we want to welcome Jews and the people who love us to join us in the very difficult project of bringing meaning, justice and hope into our world.”^[12]

Adapted Policies and Practices

Inclusion theory also posits that inclusion requires adaptive change in the established system with which they engage.^[13] Treating partners from different faith backgrounds as equals implicates policy issues such as what ritual services will be provided to them, what leadership roles they may hold, and what ritual practices they may engage in and lead.

The interfaith inclusion policy and practice issue that has drawn perhaps the most attention is rabbinic officiation and co-officiation at weddings of interfaith couples. A 2017 survey to which 44% of

Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association members responded found that 88% officiated at weddings of interfaith couples; 53% required, as a condition of officiation, a commitment to a Jewish home/to raise Jewish children.^[14] The survey also found that 22% of RRA member respondents co-officiated at weddings of interfaith couples.

With respect to leadership roles and ritual participation, a 2019 survey to which half of all Reform synagogues responded showed that 43% allowed partners from different faith traditions to serve as board members and 24% as officers (but not necessarily as president); and that 70% allowed them to have or join in an *aliyah* (but not necessarily say the words of the blessing by themselves).^[15] A key takeaway from these survey results is that many view conversion as a *condition* for inclusion: if you convert, you can hold any position and lead any prayer — otherwise you can't.^[16]

As noted above, conversion is a wonderful, personal, existential choice to formally identify as and become a Jew — to *be* Jewish. Encouraging partners from different faith backgrounds 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. Instead of viewing conversion as a *condition* to inclusion, we should view conversion as a possible, incidental *outcome* of inclusion.

One thing should be clear: Inclusive policies lead to Jewish engagement. Rabbis who are willing to officiate at weddings of interfaith couples are implementing an inclusive policy, with demonstrated results: far more interfaith couples who have a rabbi as the sole officiant at their weddings are raising their children Jewish (85%) and are synagogue members (34%) than those who have other officiants (23% and 7%, respectively).^[17]

Messaging

Jewish organizations largely do not talk about engaging interfaith families. The Reform synagogue survey revealed that only 18% published their policies and practices on interfaith families' leadership roles and ritual participation. Jewish leaders who do talk about inclusion have moved from focusing on inclusion of LGBTQ people to Jews of Color — a very important, but much smaller, group than interfaith families. The leaders of Jewish organizations and the Jewish media are largely silent on the issue.

Many interfaith couples are not aware that their presence and participation is very much desired in Jewish organizations and communities. We could do much better communicating a message of welcome, and starting to build a feeling among those that we want to and need to engage, that if they come, they can feel that they belong.

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Full inclusion is consistent with the bedrock principles that “You shall love the stranger who resides with you as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34), the ultimate expression of inclusive attitudes, as well as with “You and the stranger shall be alike before the Lord; 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 adoption of a radically inclusive understanding of interfaith marriage would have significant consequences. Radically inclusive attitudes towards interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds would follow. Radically inclusive policies and practices would emerge that adaptively change Jewish systems to accommodate them. Expression of attitudes that they are equal and belong, and policies and practices regarding ritual services, leadership roles and ritual participation that implement such equal treatment, would communicate and demonstrate a commitment to their full inclusion beyond welcoming that would lead to their increased Jewish engagement.



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NOTES:

[1] The 72% figure is based on data underlying Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center's Religions and Public Life Project, 2013), <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/715>, and is stated explicitly in Alan Cooperman and Gregory A. Smith, "What Happens When Jews Inter marry, Pew Research Center," Nov. 12, 2013, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/11/12/what-happens-when-jews-intermarry/>. Cooperman is the principal author of what is commonly referred to as "The Pew Report."

[2] In *Reconceptualizing Conversion* (eJewishPhilanthropy, Feb. 4, 2020), I calculated that 84% of new households formed by marriages involving at least one non-Orthodox Jew were interfaith households: assume the total number of non-Orthodox Jews who marry is 100; if 72 intermarry, 72 interfaith households are created; the other 28 marry each other, creating 14 households, for a total of 86 households; 72 is 84% of 86. After an extensive private email communication with Alan Cooperman and Ira Sheskin, I acknowledge that the calculation of what percentage of households are interfaith is more complicated than my comment indicated; it might be accurate or approximately accurate, but it's not certain.

[3] Michelle Shain et al, *Beyond Welcoming: Engaging Intermarried Couples in Jewish Life* (Waltham: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2019), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/noteworthy/couples.html>; see also Janet Krasner Aronson et al, 2018-2019 *Greater Denver Jewish Community Study* (Waltham: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2020), https://bir.brandeis.edu/bitstream/handle/10192/37152/denver_boulder_comm_study01132020.pdf.

[4] Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center's Religions and Public Life Project, 2013), <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/715>, 48, 60; private communication with Alan Cooperman, principal author, as to non-Orthodox figures.

[5] Michelle Shain et al, *Beyond Welcoming: Engaging Intermarried Couples in Jewish Life* (Waltham: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2019), <https://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/noteworthy/couples.html>.

There is much to celebrate in the *Beyond Welcoming* study's results. The majority of young intermarried couples said they 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. In addition, "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." Also, "In premarital discussions about what role

religion would play in their future household, most Jewish+non-Jewish couples agreed on most issues and did not feel they made a lot of compromises."

The study also reports that only 3% of interfaith couples "sought out a rabbi or cantor but were unable [to] find one who would agree to officiate" — but 49% never considered having a Jewish officiant, and another 17% considered it but didn't contact one. Of course, some of those couples had no interest in having a Jewish officiant. But how many didn't consider it, or didn't contact one, because they anticipated rejection? See also Edmund Case, "Beyond Welcoming? Not So Fast" (2019), <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/beyond-welcoming-not-so-fast/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2019).

[6] Fern Chertok et al, *We'll Cross That Bridge When We Come to It* (Waltham: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2019), https://bir.brandeis.edu/bitstream/handle/10192/36953/interfaith_needs_boston080619.pdf.

[7] David Brubaker, "Beyond Hospitality to Inclusion," 2017, <http://www.congregationalconsulting.org/beyond-hospitality-inclusion/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2019).

[8] The Reform movement's resolutions concerning LGBTQ and transgender/gender non-conforming people, and people with disabilities, recognize the distinction between welcoming and "full integration," "full equality" and "inclusion." "[T]o integrate fully all Jews into the life of the community regardless of sexual orientation," Resolution, Civil Marriage for Gay and Lesbian Jewish Couples, 1997 <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/civil-marriage-gay-and-lesbian-jewish-couples> (accessed July 17, 2019); "[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," Resolution, Resolution in Support of Access to Lifelong Jewish Learning for Jews with Disabilities, 2011 <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-support-access-lifelong-jewish-learning-jews-disabilities> (accessed July 17, 2019); "[C]ommitment to the full equality, inclusion and acceptance of people of all gender identities and gender expressions," Resolution, Resolution on the Rights of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming People, 2015 <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/resolution-rights-transgender-and-gender-non-conforming-people> (accessed July 17, 2019). But the movement's resolutions on interfaith marriage commit only to welcoming interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds, while also encouraging conversion. Resolution, The Unfinished Outreach Revolution, 2005 <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/unfinished-outreach-revolution> (accessed July 17, 2019).

[9] The traditional rabbinic understanding of *ger/sojourner* is someone who has converted to Judaism, but that is not the plain sense of the biblical text.

[10] Critics of interfaith marriage want to retain boundaries that exclude in order to fortify authentic Jewish identity at a time when identities are fluid and "life in an open society means that group boundaries are weakened and transgressed." Contemporary Jews disfavor notions that Jews are special, or require exclusivity or separation from others. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 130.

[11] CCAR Responsa 5761.6, "May a Jew Married to a Non-Jew Become a Rabbi?" March 2002, <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/nyp-no-5761-6>.

[12] Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, "RRC Removes Ban on Admitting/Graduating Intermarried Rabbinical Students," Sept. 30, 2015.

[13] 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 from a racial group or socio-economic status different from its own dominant culture, it usually must adapt its way of being to be genuinely inclusive. Modes of worship may need to broaden. Methods of decision-making may need to change. And interaction patterns among members may need to evolve ... New ideas will stretch the prevailing doctrines and new energies will stress the existing systems." David Brubaker, "Beyond Hospitality to Inclusion," 2017, <http://www.congregationalconsulting.org/beyond-hospitality-inclusion/> (accessed Sept. 11, 2019).

[14] InterfaithFamily, *Report on 2017 InterfaithFamily's 2017 Survey on Rabbinic Officiation for Interfaith Couples* (2018), <http://www.cfrij.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Rabbi-Officiation-Report-Final.pdf>.

[15] Center for Radically Inclusive Judaism, *Survey on Reform Synagogue Interfaith Inclusion Policies and Practices* (2019), <http://www.cfrij.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/URJ-Survey-Report.pdf>.

[16] In the Conservative movement, conversion is a condition to having a rabbi officiate at a wedding. See e.g. Rabbi Wes Gardenswartz, "A Three-Generation Yes or a Three-Generation No?" (2019), <https://www.cfrij.com/a-three-generation-yes-or-a-three-generation-no-guest-post-by-rabbi-wes-gardenswartz/>.

[17] Leonard Saxe et al., *Under the Chuppah: Rabbinic Officiation and Intermarriage* (Waltham: Brandeis University, Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 2016), <http://www.brandeis.edu/cmjs/pdfs/jewish%20futures/RabbinicOfficiation102616.pdf>, p. 11.