

October 17, 2019

Proposed Resolution: On Full Inclusion of Interfaith Families and Partners from Different Faith Backgrounds

Background

The Reform Movement has led efforts to engage interfaith families in Jewish life and community, creating an Outreach Program in 1978,¹ declaring that the child of one Jewish parent is under the presumption of Jewish descent in 1983,² and launching the Audacious Hospitality initiative in 2013³ that seeks to “widen the circle and engage more groups of people who are often unrecognized and underserved in Jewish communal and institutional spaces... [T]he evolving needs of interfaith and intermarried couples and families, requires our attention.”⁴

As a result of these 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.

However, 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, 59% of Jews whose spouses are Jewish are members of a synagogue, compared to 14% of Jews whose spouses are not Jewish.⁵

With a 72% rate of interfaith marriage among non-Orthodox Jews,⁶ the future vitality of liberal Judaism in general and Reform Judaism in particular depend on engaging increasing numbers of interfaith families in Jewish life and community. **This resolution commits the Reform Movement to the full inclusion of interfaith families and of partners from different faith backgrounds in order to lead to increasing engagement and affiliation.**⁷

Full inclusion is consistent with the bedrock principles that “You shall love the stranger as yourself” (Leviticus 19:34) – the ultimate expression of inclusive attitudes – and “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 Union’s existing resolutions do not state full inclusion as their goal. As expressed in The Unfinished Outreach Revolution, the most recent (2005) resolution addressing interfaith marriage, the Reform Movement’s approach has been two-fold: the Union encourages congregations to “express appreciation to non-Jewish spouses who support the Jewish involvement of their family members” and to encourage “individuals already involved in synagogue life to formally embrace the richness of Judaism and our covenantal community.”⁸

Full inclusion means treating people equally and making them feel that they truly belong, in a system that adaptively changes to accommodate them. In the inclusion field, expressing appreciation is a form of welcoming – welcoming makes people feel that their presence as a guest was appreciated. Inclusion encompasses welcoming, but goes further:

A hospitable congregation welcomes visitors... the visitor leaves feeling that his or her presence was truly appreciated... Having been welcomed into a congregation 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... 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.⁹

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. Instead of Judaism as a system for Jews only, where what matters is *being* Jewish, full inclusion understands Judaism to be a system for the community of those who are engaging in Jewish life and community – who are *doing* Jewish – some of whom are Jewish, and some of whom are not.

Conversion remains 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.

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.¹⁰

In order to serve the goal of engaging increasing numbers of interfaith families in Jewish life and community, and to exercise ongoing leadership in such efforts, this resolution makes clear that the goal of audacious hospitality with respect to interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds is their full inclusion – so that they are treated equally and understand and are made to feel that they truly belong.

How to realize the goal of full inclusion, in terms of messaging about interfaith marriage, policies regarding leadership roles and ritual participation by partners from different faith backgrounds, and the like, is to be determined going forward by Reform congregations, congregants, clergy, and institutions. For example, 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.

Nothing in this resolution is intended to challenge the authority of rabbis and cantors to make decisions on religious practices, or to lead to changes in the Jewish nature of Jewish practices. The resolution takes the important first step of declaring that full inclusion is the goal, in order to facilitate interfaith families and partners from different faith traditions engaging in Jewish practices.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Union for Reform Judaism:

- Declares its commitment to the full inclusion of interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds
- Encourages Reform congregations, congregants, clergy, camps, institutions and affiliates, to adopt and implement policies that lead to full inclusion of interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds
- Urges Reform Movement institutions to begin or continue to work to create inclusive communities for interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds and to spread awareness and increase knowledge of issues related to interfaith family inclusion. These activities may include trainings for religious school staff, education programs on interfaith family issues, and sermons on the topic of interfaith family inclusion
- Urges Reform Movement institutions to review their use of language in prayers, forms and policies in an effort to ensure that partners from different faith backgrounds are included. This includes developing statements of inclusion pertaining to interfaith families and partners, and the use of appropriate language
- Will work in collaboration with other Reform Movement institutions to create ritual, programmatic and educational materials that will empower such institutions to be more inclusive and welcoming of interfaith families and partners from different faith backgrounds.

¹ Resolution, Outreach, 1979, <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/outreach> (accessed July 17, 2019).

² Committee on Patrilineal Descent, *The Status of Children of Mixed Marriages* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1983), <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/reform-movement-s-resolution-on-patrilineal-descent-march-1983>.

³ Rick Jacobs, “The Genesis of Our Future” (keynote address, Union for Reform Judaism Biennial, San Diego, CA, December 11–15, 2013), <https://urj.org/blog/2013/12/12/genesis-our-future>.

⁴ What is Audacious Hospitality? <https://urj.org/audacioushospitality> (accessed July 17, 2019).

⁵ Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center’s Religions and Public Life Project, 2013), <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/715>, 48, 60.

⁶ Pew Research Center, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center’s Religions and Public Life Project, 2013), <https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/715>.

⁷ Inclusion leads to affiliation. As one example, far more interfaith couples who have only a rabbi officiate at their weddings are synagogue members (34%) than those who have other officiants (7%). 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>, 11.

⁸ Resolution, The Unfinished Outreach Revolution, 2005 <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/resolutions/unfinished-outreach-revolution> (accessed July 17, 2019).

⁹ David Brubaker, “Beyond Hospitality to Inclusion,” 2017, <http://www.congregationalconsulting.org/beyond-hospitality-inclusion/> (accessed July 17, 2019) (emphasis in original). The Union’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).

¹⁰ What Is Audacious Hospitality? <https://urj.org/audacioushospitality>, (accessed July 17, 2019).