

Why Hebrew Union College Should Revoke Its Policy Not To Admit or Ordain Rabbinic Students Who Are in Interfaith Relationships

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The Reform movement's Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC) is looking to the future – engaged in a [strategic planning process](#). But facing a future of widespread interfaith marriage, HUC maintains a policy that has the effect of discouraging, rather than encouraging, the Jewish engagement of interfaith families that liberal Judaism needs to thrive in that future. At this time of transition, HUC should revoke its policy not to admit or ordain rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships.

The Imperative To Engage Interfaith Families Jewishly

In 2001, the CCAR Responsa Committee issued a [teshuvah](#) that supported HUC's policy excluding intermarried students. Hebrew College's rabbinical school was established in 2003.¹ In that time frame, the individual rate of interfaith marriage was [47%](#).

In 2020, the individual rate of interfaith marriage was [61%](#) – and 72% among non-Orthodox Jews.

Because the couples rate of interfaith marriage is always greater than the individual rate, it is reasonable to assume that more than 80% of new non-Orthodox Jewish couples being formed are interfaith couples. Liberal Jewish life and community simply cannot grow unless more of these couples are engaged.

There is [growing consensus](#) within the Reform movement that people will engage in a community if they feel included – that they are part of, that they belong, in that community. But [national](#) and [local](#) Jewish community studies show that many partners from different faith backgrounds feel othered – made to feel like outsiders – in Jewish settings.

1. Holding Up Inmarriage As “The Ideal” Discourages Jewish Engagement By Interfaith Families.

The 2001 CCAR [teshuvah](#) supported HUC's rule excluding intermarried students with this reasoning:

[A]lthough we welcome mixed-married households into our community, we do not condone mixed marriage itself.... [T]he purpose of our rabbinical function, our teaching, counseling, and leadership, is to help our people make Jewish choices, build Jewish homes, and ensure the transmission of Jewish life and identity to our children.... [W]e want [our people] to make the choice for Jewish marriage, which by definition is a marriage between Jews.... [W]e should never forget that the ideal toward which we rabbis strive, teach and lead is that Jews should marry Jews.

The inexorable increase in the rate of interfaith marriage from the time the *teshuvah* was issued to the present demonstrates that attempts to teach and lead Jews to marry other Jews have not been effective.

Worse, statements that we do not condone interfaith marriage and explaining policies by holding up inmarriage as the Jewish ideal necessarily send a message that interfaith marriage is disapproved and *not* ideal. Interfaith couples are told that their marriage choices are *not* ideal, second rate, sub-optimal, regrettable, that in the eyes of the Jewish community their beloved partners from different faith backgrounds are undesirable.

These messages are self-fulfilling and counter-productive because they discourage interfaith couples from even trying to engage Jewishly. Statements that “we welcome” interfaith families or “[we celebrate](#) the contribution of people of all faiths toward building and sustaining loving Jewish homes” are insufficient to overcome “not ideal” and “undesirable.” Who would want to be part of a community that views their marriage and one of the partners so negatively?

As Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan has [written](#), “Admission requirements have symbolic importance beyond their substantive impact on the students and their families.” Revoking the policies and their underlying principle that inmarriage is ideal would eliminate a barrier to feeling included.

2. Holding Up Intermarriage As Inconsistent With Commitment To Jewish Life Discourages Jewish Engagement By Interfaith Families.

The 2001 CCAR [teshuvah](#) states that interfaith marriage “tends to frustrate the achievement of” “build[ing] Jewish homes, and ensur[ing] the transmission of Jewish life and identity to our children.”

It is true, as the 2020 Pew report shows, that interfaith families compared to inmarried families *as a group* tend to be less Jewishly engaged on traditional measures of Jewish attitudes and behaviors.

But in numerous *individual* cases, interfaith couples do make Jewish choices; indeed, as Rabbi Deborah Waxman stated in [explaining](#) the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College’s 2015 decision to revoke their policy excluding intermarried students, “Jews with non-Jewish partners demonstrat[e] these commitments [to Judaism in their communal, personal and family lives] every day in many Jewish communities.”² She [continued](#), “After years of study, research, and discussion with many members of the Reconstructionist community, we have concluded that the status of a rabbinical student’s partner is not a reliable measure of the student’s commitment to Judaism – or lack thereof. Nor does it undermine their passion for creating meaningful Judaism and bringing us closer to a just world.”

Rabbi Michael Marmor of HUC has [written](#) about the policies: “I believe that what is playing out in the current debate is a rejection of the notion that the answer to the question ‘Are you married to a non-Jew?’ is the sole benchmark most likely to provide us with the tools we need to make a judgment about our student. Twenty years ago it might have been. Given the changes within the Jewish community, it may no longer be.”

It is entirely reasonable to hold that rabbis should demonstrate a commitment to Jewish homes and Jewish life, even an “unambiguous” commitment or an “enthusiastic holistic commitment,” as some have said. But when proponents of the policies say or think that being in an interfaith relationship undermines a rabbi’s commitment, or that commitment to Jewish life requires inmarriage, or that inmarriage is the *sine qua non* of Judaism, or that intermarriage indicates an attenuated sense of being part of the Jewish people, they ignore the reality of interfaith families demonstrating that commitment.

Worse, questioning interfaith families’ commitment to Jewish life sends them a clear message that whatever they try to do Jewishly won’t be good enough.

3. Holding Rabbis To A “Higher Standard” Of Inmarriage Discourages Jewish Engagement By Interfaith Families.

The 2001 CCAR [teshuvah](#) states that “Our rabbis ... have accepted upon themselves (and are properly expected by our community to live up to) higher standards of Jewish learning and observance than those that we demand of others.” Rabbi Eugene Borowitz [said](#) about HUC’s policy that HUC “needs to set a standard of Jewish practice that is high and strong and firm.” When HUC last considered changing the policy in 2013, the end result was a statement of “policies and expectations” on the HUC website that [says](#):

“We celebrate the contribution of people of all faiths toward building and sustaining loving Jewish homes, and yet we believe that rabbis ... should exemplify a distinct standard of Jewish continuity. Therefore, HUC–JIR will only admit, graduate or ordain candidates who, if in a committed long-term relationship, are in such a relationship with a Jewish partner.”

HUC’s current director of admissions has [defended](#) the policy by saying the American Jewish community “still thinks of clergy differently.”

But Rabbi Marmor has [acknowledged](#) that “Suggesting that our students should be held to a higher standard implies that there is something ‘lower’ about the family arrangements from which many of our students come. Such a judgment is insulting to many. It is often pointed out that a richer Jewish life is created in some of these mixed households than in some ‘purely’ Jewish homes.”

Saying that inmarriage is a higher or distinct standard of Jewish continuity suffers from the same defects as holding up inmarriage as the Jewish ideal – it ignores the reality of interfaith marriage, and alienates interfaith families.

4. HUC Could Identify Jewishly Committed Candidates With A Less Restrictive Alternative.

HUC could accomplish a goal of only admitting candidates committed to Jewish life without a blanket exclusion of those who are in interfaith relationships. Under the policy, “anyone with a

non-Jewish partner is beyond the pale,” automatically disqualified, in the [words](#) of Rabbi Marmor. This only makes sense if intermarriage is regarded as negating commitment to Jewish life.

Once being intermarried is not seen as precluding commitment to Jewish life, HUC could accomplish a goal of only admitting candidates committed to Jewish life with a much less restrictive alternative. Rabbi Marmor [describes](#) a criterion in the admissions procedure which could talk about a commitment to Jewish life and challenge the applicant to speak to how this is significantly present in their lives. That is essentially the [admissions practice](#) of the ALEPH Rabbinic Program, where the applicant’s marital status is a factor to be considered, not an absolute bar; ALEPH [evaluates](#) potential rabbinic students in interfaith relationships on a case by case basis and has ordained rabbis whose non-Jewish spouses “are powerful companions and allies of the Jewish people and of their rabbinate.” Similarly, when the RRC revoked its policy, it [said](#) that it had “strengthened our admissions standards on reviewing an applicant’s commitment to Jewish continuity in their personal, familial and communal life.”

5. Intermarried Rabbis Would Be Much-Needed Role Models Of Jewish Engagement By Interfaith Couples.

The 2001 CCAR [teshuvah](#) states, “Since one of the ways in which we convey our teaching is through personal example, a rabbi’s life and home should embody this ideal” – i.e., that Jews should marry Jews. It adds, “a Jewish religious professional, whose very life is dedicated to setting an example of Jewish commitment to which our people should aspire, cannot serve as a ‘positive Judaic role model’ if he or she is married to a non-Jew.” When Rabbi David Ellenson became president of HUC, he was [quoted](#) as affirming the policy excluding intermarried rabbis because rabbis are “role models;” other proponents of the policy say “symbolic exemplars.” HUC’s current director of admissions has [defended](#) the policy by saying the American Jewish community “expects rabbis to be exemplars of a Jewish home.”

Holding up rabbis as role models of Jewish commitment is entirely appropriate. But saying that intermarriage is essential to being a positive Jewish role model suffers from the same defects as holding up intermarriage as the Jewish ideal, ignoring the reality of interfaith marriage and alienating interfaith families.

We should instead hold up intermarried rabbis as role models of Jewish commitment among interfaith families, as Rabbi Ellen Lippman, who has an unconverted partner from a different faith tradition, did in 2013 in an [open letter to HUC](#), her alma mater:

We are like the thousands of Jews across America who commit to strongly Jewish lives with their non-Jewish spouses. Interfaith families tell me that having a rabbi who mirrors their relationships makes an enormous difference to being able to commit to Jewish life.... [A] rabbi is a role model, and there are many kinds of role models. Intermarriage is a fact of American Jewish life. We can do a better job of connecting intermarried Jews to synagogues, rabbis and Jewish life. One way is to knowingly ordain intermarried rabbis.

As I have argued [for the last twenty years](#),

“Having more intermarried people get more involved in Jewish life would serve the value of Jewish continuity more than anything else could. 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?”

When the RRC revoked its policy, it [said](#), “Our congregations have members with non-Jewish partners, and we need rabbis who can provide them with role models for vibrant Jewish living.”

6. The Policy Discriminates Against Jews Of Color, LGBTQ Jews, And Children of Intermarried Parents.

Disparate impact is a legal doctrine which declares that a policy can be considered discriminatory if it adversely impacts a group based on that group’s traits, such as its race or color (or religion or sex). It allows challenges to employment or educational practices that are nondiscriminatory on their face but have a disproportionately negative effect on members of legally protected groups.

HUC’s admissions policy does not present a legal question,³ but civil rights and employment law are instructive. The policy not to admit or ordain intermarried rabbis has the unintended impact of discriminating against Jews of color, LGBTQ Jews, and children of intermarried parents – because all of those groups have higher rates of interfaith marriage than Jews in general, so the policies have a disproportionate negative impact on them.

The [2020 Pew report](#) found that 42% of all Jews who are married are intermarried, compared to 82% of married Jews who have one Jewish parent. HUC sociology professor Bruce Phillips told me his analysis of the 2020 Pew report data shows that 80% of Black, Asian, Hispanic, other race and mixed race married Jews are intermarried, and that 77% of gay and lesbian married Jews are intermarried.

Fairness and a commitment to justice demands that the policies be revoked.

7. Intermarried Rabbis Could Work With Converts.

Rabbi Marmur has [expressed concern](#) that intermarried rabbis could not privilege the path of conversion, that efforts to encourage conversion would be undermined if the rabbi “making the pitch” was intermarried. This underestimates the capacity of both rabbis and candidates for conversion.

Conversion is a wonderful, personal, existential choice that people make when they feel compelled to formally identify as Jewish, some because they have chosen to do so before being extensively engaged, many after living Jewishly for long periods of time. Candidates for conversion are capable of understanding that others who live Jewishly chose not to formally identify as Jewish for a variety of personal reasons.

8. Practical Consequences

Maintaining the policy continues the unfortunate (to say the least) situation [described](#) by Rabbi Marmor that “A student who conceals a long-term committed relationship with a non-Jew may declare their love a day after completing their studies.... [I]n some sense students in such a relationship are given the message that if they keep it quiet, all will be well. It looks like a version of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’.”

If the policy is revoked, there is no way to be certain how many candidates in interfaith relationships would apply for admission, or for that matter how many candidates would apply for admission elsewhere based on disagreement with a new policy. One thing that is certain is that given the high rate of interfaith marriage, over time more and more prospective candidates will be children of intermarried parents, who we also know are more highly intermarried than other Jews. We also know, as reported in a [recent eJewishPhilanthropy essay](#), that there is a “supply chain problem” in finding young adult leaders.

Rabbi Marmor [wrote](#) in 2013 that the HUC admissions office was “aware that a number of intermarried candidates are interested in coming to the school” and that “this issue has become more acute recently ... because of the increasing prevalence of children of mixed marriages in our institutions.” He also noted the argument that “by rejecting these candidates we lose out on great talent.”⁴

Some are concerned that intermarried students ordained by the seminaries would have difficulty finding congregational jobs. When congregations hire rabbis, lay leaders are the ones who select them. Congregations that wanted to promote inmarriage presumably wouldn’t hire intermarried rabbis. However, congregations that were focused on supporting the Jewish engagement of all community members might well welcome an intermarried rabbi. Congregations are diverse, and rabbis could be as well.

Rabbi Marmor has [noted](#) that for some “a change to the policy would endanger their sense of belonging and their ability to identify with the [institution]. There are faculty members, administrators and others for whom the idea of ordaining intermarried rabbis seems absurd, reprehensible, or both. That the school would make such a decision is likely to make it difficult for them to continue to identify with the institution. We should not be surprised if for a number of individuals this issue decides their continued commitment to this institution....” When the RRC changed its policy, Rabbi Waxman [said](#) it was “emotionally challenging” to do so.

Rabbi Marmor has also [expressed concern](#) that a change to the policy “will be understood as a significant retreat from our commitment” to *klal yisrael*, would have implications for HUC’s programs in Israel, and would likely result in a “hit” in the more traditional parts of the Reform movement and in the mainstream Jewish community in North America, Israel and elsewhere.

While these are serious concerns, ultimately HUC must determine what is the greater good – maintaining a policy that is consistent with traditional viewpoints, or encouraging Jewish engagement by interfaith families.

Rabbi Marmor [suggested](#) that “if we open into a thoughtful process of research and debate, if we demonstrate that we are taking this seriously and grappling with it in the best spirit of our [institutions], and if we invest time and attention in presenting whatever decision we take vigorously and unapologetically, we stand the best chance of prevailing.”

9. Conceptualization and Boundaries.

Rabbi Marmor has [written](#) that the debate over the policies “speaks to the way in which we conceptualize Judaism, and the extent to which we believe boundaries can and ought to be established.”

When the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College revoked its policy excluding intermarried rabbinic students in 2015, Rabbi Deborah Waxman [said](#) that Judaism’s

“borders and boundaries are porous and constantly evolving. The Jewish present and Jewish future depend on our shifting focus toward Jews ‘doing Jewish’ in ways that are meaningful to them rather than on ‘being Jewish’ because of bloodline or adherence to mandated behaviors... 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.⁵

In an editorial, Jane Eisner, then editor of the *Forward*, [said](#) “we should expect a rabbi to raise his or her children in a Jewish home, to maintain that home as the most sacred place in the Jewish ecosystem.” The boundary she drew around Jewish homes clearly is marked by intermarriage – an intermarried home is not a Jewish home, a “sacred place in the Jewish ecosystem.” The liberal Jewish community maintains that boundary at its peril.

In contrast to traditional views, an inclusive liberal Judaism would be a system in which:

- not only Jews, but also their partners from different faith backgrounds who want to engage in Jewish life and community, would feel that they belonged either to the Jewish people or to a more broadly conceived Jewish “community”
- not just “being” Jewish, but also “doing” Jewish, would matter, and those who “do” Jewish would be regarded and treated as equal to those who “are” Jewish
- boundaries would not be drawn between Jews and “others,” but around particularistic Jewish beliefs, attitudes and practices
- inmarriage would not be privileged as ideal or normative; interfaith marriage would be regarded as of equal worth, and, as Rabbi Lex Rofeberg has [said](#), we would “see all Jewish family backgrounds as deep and equal contributors to the Jewish future”
- inclusion would lead to increased engagement, thereby sustaining Jewish continuity.

¹ For reasoning behind HUC's policy, in addition to CCAR Responsa 5761.6, "[May a Jew Married to a Non-Jew Become a Rabbi?](#)" March 2002, see Rabbi Dana Evan Kaplan, "[Can a rabbi marry someone of another religion? Debates of the American Reform movement whether intermarried rabbis can lead Reform congregations.](#)" *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 32:1, 15-31, December 22, 2016, and Rabbi Michael Marmor, May 26, 2013, "[Intermarried Students at HUC-JIR](#)".

² In the same vein, Rabbi Marmor [has said](#): "A number of men and women with non-Jewish partners argue with passion that they are living a highly committed Jewish life. Indeed, often their situation forces them to pay more attention to questions which might appear trivial in a family with no non-Jewish parents. They often point out that many who come from 'normative' Jewish homes have a much weaker connection to Jewish life and learning. They also note that the picture of a 'normal' or 'normative' Jewish family – Jewish father, Jewish mother, Jewish grandparents, Jewish children – is less and less normal or normative. Ignoring the current question at hand, rapid social change in North America and around the world means that the family looks different today than the conventions of a generation ago would allow. It's time to realize that there are other ways of building a Jewish home and committing to a Jewish life."

Rabbi Daniel Kirzane, who publicly challenged HUC's policy in 2013, [wrote](#): "A partner's Jewish status is not an essential signifier of what kind of Jewish home the family will have. Connection to the Jewish people, history, beliefs, state, or myths, for example, can be much more important and powerful an indicator than Jewish status, and to presume that a non-Jewish spouse does not have such connections is not only inaccurate, it's unfair."

³ Interestingly, Rabbi Marmor [writes](#) that "in a European seminary affiliated with the Reform movement, a change in the policy was brought about not as a result of an internal change of heart but because of advice from legal counsel that in terms of European law there is no way to insist that a spouse of a student be Jewish."

⁴ Over the years at InterfaithFamily I talked with a number of exceptional people who were frustrated that they couldn't be accepted by seminaries because they were intermarried. One was David Curiel, the lead subject of "[The Coming of the Intermarried Rabbi](#)," a 2009 *New Voices* article about men and women seeking to attend and be ordained by rabbinical schools that will not accept them because they are intermarried. [Another](#) was Peter Bregman, who many years later, in 2017, was honored by Romemu, a prominent emerging Jewish Renewal spiritual community, along with his wife, Reverend Eleanor Harrison Bregman, who then worked at Romemu.

In 2009, *Tablet* published an [article](#) about Ed Stafman, a former attorney who intermarried, became active in a Reform synagogue, and eventually received ordination by the ALEPH Rabbinic Program, the only seminary at the time that did not reject intermarried students outright. Rabbi Stafman was becoming the rabbi at Beth Shalom, a heavily intermarried Reform synagogue in Bozeman, Montana, whose members' comments supported the notion of an intermarried rabbi as a role model and inspiration for interfaith couples. One person in the hiring process said that Stafman's being intermarried "might be a great asset because we're so

intermarried here that you might have a better understanding of the congregation.” Another said, “I think it will be very beneficial to those interfaith families in the community, and that they will really feel they have a home at Beth Shalom.” Rabbi Stafman retired after many years at Beth Shalom and was [elected](#) to the Montana House of Representatives in 2020.

⁵ Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, “RRC Removes Ban on Admitting/Graduating Intermarried Rabbinical Students,” September 30, 2015, quoted in “[Bravo Reconstructionists!](#)” The policy change is also referred to in “[RRC's Non-Jewish Partner Policy Announced.](#)”