

Seminary Admissions of Rabbinic Students in Interfaith Relationships: A History

Note: For an opinion essay describing the Reform movement's grappling with this issue, 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, https://f3e1f2e0-2081-46ec-a784-115692054fb0.filesusr.com/ugd/a2c620_9bd4d855bcf94cbd9a647acf2341a276.pdf.

Other Liberal Seminaries

The International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism has admitted and ordained rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships since 1992.

ALEPH Alliance for Jewish Renewal has had an ordination program since 1993 and has always admitted and ordained rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical College decided to admit and ordain rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships in 2015.

As of 2018, the Academy for Jewish Religion – California will consider rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships

2002

An intermarried congregant of a Pittsburgh synagogue sought to be admitted as a rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College (HUC), the Reform seminary. The Central Conference of American Rabbis' Responsa Committee reaffirmed HUC's ban on ordaining intermarried Jews as rabbis, reasoning that rabbis are role models and should teach, by personal example, the ideal of inmarriage. 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>.

2007

In October 2007 Rabbi Yael Shmilovitz, then a student at HUC–New York, gave a [senior sermon](#) in which she described her struggle with HUC's policy.

2009

Articles appeared by or about people who had been frustrated that they couldn't be accepted by seminaries because they were intermarried:

- Edie Mueller described her 1994 experience of this rejection. Edie Mueller, "Why I'm Not a Rabbi," *InterfaithFamily.com*, October 1, 2018.
- David Curiel was the lead subject of an article about men and women seeking to attend and be ordained by rabbinical schools that will not accept them because they are intermarried. Jeremy Gillick, "The Coming of the Intermarried Rabbi," *New Voices*, April 23, 2009, <http://newvoices.org/2009/04/23/0007-3>.
- *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, affiliated with the Renewal movement, 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. 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." Marissa Brostoff, "Big Tent Country," *Tablet*, August 10, 2009, <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/13034/big-tent-country>.

In a blog post, Edmund Case reasoned that while it made sense for denominations that consider halachah binding to require rabbis to live in halachically recognized marriages, the seminaries training rabbis for other denominations were free to consider that their graduates will be serving constituencies with many interfaith couples and families. Rabbis presumably want to inspire

their constituents to more Jewish engagement; intermarried rabbis would be particularly inspiring to the interfaith couples who they served—and there is no reason they could not be inspiring to inmarried couples as well. Further, when congregations hire rabbis, lay leaders are the ones who select them. Congregations that wanted to promote inmarriage wouldn't hire rabbis that they perceive to encourage interfaith marriage. Presumably those lay leaders would choose not to hire an intermarried rabbi. By the same token, congregations that wanted to promote conversion as the desired response to the issue of interfaith marriage also presumably would choose not to hire a rabbi whose partner had not chosen to convert. 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. Edmund Case, "Rabbinical School and the Interfaith Marriage, Part 2," *EdmundCase.com* (blog), May 5, 2009, <http://www.edmundcase.com/intermarried-rabbis/rabbinical-school-and-the-interfaith-marriage-part-2>, originally published at InterfaithFamily.com (now 18Doors.org).

2013 - 14

In 2013 a debate erupted about Hebrew Union College's policy.

- According to an Ha'aretz [article](#), in October 2012 Rabbi Jordan Helfman, then a student at HUC-Cincinnati, gave a [senior sermon](#) in which he called the policy "racial discrimination." At the same time, Rabbi Daniel Kirzane, then a student at HUC-New York, gave a [senior sermon](#) calling for changing the policy. Rabbi Kirzane then wrote in a debate in *Reform Judaism* magazine that HUC's seminary should admit students with partners from different faith traditions. Daniel Kirzane, "Debatable: Should Our Seminary Admit Students with Non-Jewish Partners?" *Reform Judaism*, Spring 2013, <https://reformjudaismmag.org/past-issues/spring2013/seminary-admit-students-non-jewish-partners>.

- In a response, Rabbi Mark Miller lamented what he called Reform Judaism's "embrace of assimilation." Mark Miller, "Rabbis Married to Gentiles?" *Times of Israel*, March 25, 2013, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/rabbis-married-to-gentiles>.
- An intermarried woman, Aliza Worthington, responded to Rabbi Miller:

You are taking people who have chosen Judaism – *chosen* it! – and shoving them away. Here is someone [Kirzane] who was born of an intermarriage of faiths, and he not only *chose* Judaism to follow, to study, but to live and to teach! And you belittle his parents' love because it somehow makes his Judaism less authentic to you? You deny him his learning and his future livelihood should he fall in love with someone who is not Jewish? You're worried that a rabbi who marries a gentile is threatening and disgraceful to the Jewish faith? Even though he cherishes Judaism? Aliza Worthington, "Rigidity Is the Real Threat to Jewish Continuity," *Times of Israel*, March 27, 2013, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/rigidity-is-the-real-threat-to-jewish-continuity>.
- Adin Feder, a student at Gann Academy in Boston, wrote in support of Worthington, "The Threat of Warrantless Hatred," *Times of Israel*, April 1, 2013, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/113854/>.
- Harold Berman wrote "Intermarried Rabbis? Please!", *Times of Israel*, April 1, 2013, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/intermarried-rabbis-please/>.
- Daniel Kirzane wrote "Marriage Freedom for Reform Rabbis," *Times of Israel*, March 28, 2013, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/marriage-freedom-for-reform-rabbis/>.
- *Sh'ma* published "Rabbinic Life Partners: Do They Have To Be Jewish," a debate between Brandon Bernstein and Daniel Kirzane, *Sh'ma*, April 3, 2013, <http://shma.com/rabbinic-life-partners-do-they-have-to-be-jewish/>.

- Rabbi Ellen Lippman, who has an unconverted partner from a different faith tradition, wrote 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.” Rabbi Lippman argued that an “inclusive vision of Jewish leadership” meant that “we should not push away those who want to become leaders of the Jewish community as rabbis just because they are intermarried.” She argued that “a rabbi is a role model, and there are many kinds of role models. Inter marriage 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.” Ellen Lippman, “Reform Rabbi Urges Hebrew Union College to Reconsider Decision on Inter marriage,” *Forward*, May 17, 2013, <http://forward.com/opinion/176823/reform-rabbi-urges-hebrew-union-college-to-reconsi>.
- Debra Nussbaum Cohen reported, in a *Ha'aretz* article reprinted in the *Forward*, “Reform College, Bowing to Pressure, Will Rethink Rabbi Inter marriage Policy,” *Forward*, May 21, 2013, <https://forward.com/news/breaking-news/177071/reform-college-bowing-to-pressure-will-rethink-rab/>.
- In response to Rabbi Lippman, Joel Alperson wrote, “If Rabbis Are Allowed To Inter marry, Get Ready for the Non-Jewish Rabbi,” *Forward*, May 24, 2013, <https://forward.com/opinion/177256/if-rabbis-are-allowed-to-intermarry-get-ready-for/>.
- Rabbi Michael Marmor, who was then the Provost of HUC, wrote an essay dated May 26, 2013, in which he proposed to “say something about the ground rules for this discussion, to set out what appear to me the most salient aspects of this debate, and to propose a way in

which the President of the College-Institute might proceed in addressing it.”

<http://www.cfrij.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Marmur-May-26-2013.pdf> (reprinted with permission). Rabbi Marmur reported that as of May 2013, a committee comprising faculty members had been constituted that would be working with him to set up a comprehensive process of consultation. He said that no decision would be made during the Ellenson administration (which ended at the end of December 2013) and that any decision would be after substantive research and discourse.

- Harold Berman wrote “Why a Rabbi Should Not Marry Outside the Faith,” *Forward*, June 17, 2013, <https://forward.com/opinion/178646/why-a-rabbi-should-not-marry-outside-the-faith/?p=all>.
- Paul Golin added his perspective: “Rabbis with nontraditional families like my own make me feel more included. Conveying why Judaism is still relevant to them provides me with access I wouldn’t feel elsewhere.” Paul Golin, “What Intermarried Rabbis Can Teach Us,” *New Jersey Jewish News*, July 24, 2013, <https://njewishnews.timesofisrael.com/what-intermarried-rabbis-can-teach-us>.
- Daniel Kirzane wrote “With Vision and Boldness: Opening HUC-JIR to Applicants and Students with Non-Jewish Partners,” *Reform Jewish Quarterly*, Spring 2014, <http://www.cfrij.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Spring-2014-RJ-Quarterly-Kirzane.pdf> (reprinted with permission of the CCAR).

Rabbi Aaron Panken, z”l, became President of HUC on January 1, 2014, He died tragically in a plane crash on May 5, 2018.

2015

In 2015, the Reconstructionist movement decided 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, led by Rabbi Deborah Waxman, 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”:

Reconstructionism approaches Jews and Judaism not simply as representing a culture or a religion, but as a people and a civilization. Its 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. Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, “RRC Removes Ban on Admitting/Graduating Intermarried Rabbinical Students,” September 30, 2015. The policy change is referred to at <https://archive.rrc.edu/news-media/news/rrcs-non-jewish-partner-policy-announced>.

- The Reconstructionist decision was controversial. In a *Forward* editorial, Jane Eisner 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. Jane Eisner, “Why We Shouldn’t Accept Rabbis Who Marry Non-Jews,” *Forward*, October 8, 2015, <http://forward.com/opinion/editorial/322258/why-rabbis-shouldnt-marry-non-jews>.

- Daniel Kirzane endorsed the RRC policy change in “Intermarried Rabbis – Responding to the Major Concerns,” *eJewishPhilanthropy*, October 21, 2015, <http://ejewishphilanthropy.com/intermarried-rabbis-responding-to-the-major-concerns/>.

2017 - 2018

- The Jew Too Podcast featured a discussion with two students at RRC who are intermarried, “Intermarried Rabbinical Students,” Jew Too Podcast, Episode 4, November 26, 2017, <https://soundcloud.com/jewtoo/episode-4>, and a discussion of HUC policy among Rabbi Emily Cohen, Lex Rofeberg, Rabbi Jessica Shimberg and Rabbi Daniel Kirzane, “Intermarriage and HUC,” Jew Too Podcast, Episode 10, 2018, <https://soundcloud.com/jewtoo/episode-10-intermarriage-and-huc-jir>.

2019

In January 2019 Rabbi Thalia Halpert Rodis, then a student at HUC-New York, gave a senior sermon calling for change in the policy. Visit <https://www.thaliahalpertrodiss.com/sermon> and click on “Senior Sermon.”

2020

Articles again appeared by or about people who had been frustrated that they couldn’t be accepted by seminaries because they were intermarried:

- Susan Rizzo criticized HUC’s policy not to admit or ordain rabbinic students in interfaith relationships. Susan Rizzo, “Seminary Admissions: Modern-Day Discrimination,” *CFRIJ.com (blog)*, July 16, 2020, <https://www.cfrij.com/seminary-admissions-modern-day-discrimination/>.
- Ezra Samuels wrote, “You can say that [interfaith] families are equal and welcome, but true equality means equal access to resources and positions of power. If I, a qualified candidate

based on my experience, degree and knowledge, am no longer eligible because of who I love, then I am not equal.” Ezra Samuels, “Why Does My Interfaith Relationship Disqualify Me From Rabbinical School?” *Alma*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.heyalma.com/why-does-my-interfaith-relationship-disqualify-me-from-rabbinical-school/>, reprinted in *Jerusalem Post*, <https://www.jpost.com/judaism/why-do-reform-rabbinical-schools-deny-those-in-interfaith-relationships-642587>.

- In September 2020 the Center for Radically Inclusive Judaism set up a [resource](#) for those interested or involved in the question whether liberal seminaries should admit and ordain rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships. The resource started with a [reading list](#) and a [history](#) of the discussions of the issue to date.
- In November 2020 the Center added two items to the resource: a compelling personal story by Rabbi Ed Stafman, “[My Experience as an Intermarried Rabbi](#),” and a May 2013 [memorandum](#) by Rabbi Michael Marmor, then the Provost of HUC, that framed the last consideration of the question there.
- In December 2020 the Center added two new essays about seminary policies not to admit or ordain rabbinic students in interfaith relationships, one by [Alicia Chandler](#), the other by [Rabbi Mychal Copeland and Reverend Eleanor Harrison Bregman](#). The Forward also published a [column](#) giving advice to a rabbi dating someone not Jewish.

2021

- In January 2021 the Center added an [interview of Emily Albert](#) who was exploring applying to HUC but was deterred by the policy against admitting rabbinic students in interfaith relationships.

- In February 2021 there was a story by Alix Wall in the Forward, [As More American Jews Intermarry, Seminaries Face Calls To Ordain Intermarried Rabbis](#), that mentioned the Center's [Resource](#) addressing the issue.
- On March 3, the Forward published Ed Case's op-ed, [To Truly Welcome Jews of Color, Seminaries Must Ordain Intermarried Rabbis](#), arguing that policies not to admit rabbinic students in interfaith relationships have a disparate impact on Jews of color, because more of them are intermarried than other Jews. That is inconsistent with the Reform movement's stated dedication to inclusion of Jews of color.
- In April 2021, there was an [opinion piece](#) by Rabbi Bruce Warshal, who described seminary policies not to admit rabbinic students in interfaith relationships as "cruelty" and concluded, "As an octogenarian, I understand the initial reaction of older people to a changing world. Change is not easy at any age, but survival requires it. And Reform Judaism requires it."

2022

- In February 2022, against a backdrop of stories about shortages of rabbis for available congregational positions, there was public discussion on the seminary admissions issue. Reconstructing Judaism published a [story](#) about the intermarried rabbis it had ordained in the six years since its rabbinical school changed its policy.
- In a [Facebook thread](#), Rabbi Lex Rofeberg pointed out that "Articles commenting on a shortage of American rabbis, that do not mention the fact that [many] American Jews are literally barred from attendance at most rabbinical schools (all who are in an interfaith relationship)... should probably not be published. They're missing a huge piece of the puzzle."

- On March 29 the Forward published Ed Case's op-ed, [Want More Reform Rabbis? Stop Turning Away Jews In Interfaith Relationships](#). It was reprinted in [J: the Jewish News of Northern California](#) and mentioned in Binyamin Cohen's [April 7 Forwarding the News](#). JTA had just reported that HUC, the Reform seminary, proposed to stop enrolling rabbinic students at its Cincinnati campus, in part because of declining enrollment. In all of the press, and in the HUC proposal and background materials, that was no mention of revoking the restrictive admissions policy as a way to increase the pool of prospective applicants. The Center also publicized that Case's paper, [Why Hebrew Union College Should Revoke Its Policy Not To Admit or Ordain Rabbinic Students Who Are in Interfaith Relationships](#), was now included in the Resource.
- In September 2022, for its Ask the Rabbis feature, where rabbis from different denominations answer the same question, Moment magazine offered [Can Jews Married to Non-Jews be Considered Spiritual Leaders in the Jewish Community?](#) The Independent, Humanist, Renewal, Reconstructionist and Reform rabbis all approved of intermarried rabbis, while the Conservative and Orthodox rabbis did not.

2023

- In January 2023, at the Awakenings: Transformations in Jewish Responses to Interfaith Marriage webinar, Rabbi Ben Spratt spoke on the seminary admissions issue. He spoke of the importance to institutions to look at "the winds of change" in deciding what are the "front lines" that matter most in defining our leadership. He suggested that instead of holding up a definition of an ideal from a prior generation, we shouldn't miss the opportunity to activate a sense of leadership identity that creates a sense of belonging for those around them. You can watch what Rabbi Spratt said [here](#).

- In February the Hebrew College Rabbinical School [decided](#) to admit and ordain rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships. Then Rabbi Arthur Green, who founded and recently retired as rector of that seminary, criticized the decision as “[giving in to assimilation](#).” The Times of Israel published Ed Case’s response, [What’s More Important, Being Jewish or Doing Jewish](#), which concluded:

“The Hebrew College decision is forward looking and embraces change positively. Its underlying rationale prioritizes *doing* Jewish over *being* Jewish and does not prioritize in-marriage over interfaith marriage; its practical consequence is to potentially ordain intermarried rabbis. Both result in encouraging more interfaith couples and partners from different faith backgrounds to live Jewishly – the exact opposite of assimilation.”

- Reaction to the [news](#) that Hebrew College would admit and ordain rabbinic students who are in interfaith relationships was largely positive (the [guiding principles](#) for admission and ordination are now online). Rabbi Deborah Waxman of Reconstructing Judaism, referring to its seminary’s groundbreaking policy change made seven years ago, [said](#): “We have been inspired and moved by the powerful and passionate students who have enrolled at RRC since this policy change, some because of their non-Jewish partners and more in support of this principle.”