

**Intermarriage Officiation:
Executive Summary
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During nearly 14 years as a rabbi, I have held to the position that I would not officiate at intermarriages. Today, after a period of dialogue, discussion, reflection on the heterogeneous society in which we live, and thorough exploration of Jewish texts and Reform interpretations of Jewish tradition, I have changed my stance, and will, under prescribed circumstances, officiate at marriages between Jews and non-Jews.

Why I Have Now Decided to Officiate at Intermarriages

Much has changed in the Jewish world since the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) issued its last *responsum* on intermarriage in 1973 stating that Reform rabbis should not officiate at intermarriages. Between 1970 and 2000, the rate of intermarriage among U.S. Jews increased from 13 percent to 47 percent. Jewish acceptance of intermarriage has also grown, with only 22 percent opposing intermarriage in 1990 as compared with 50 percent of American Jews who expressed strong opposition to intermarriage in 1970.

In addition to citing reasons of Jewish law and tradition, rabbis have historically declined to officiate at intermarriages because they sought to avoid overt endorsement or encouragement of intermarriage. While that strategy may have been noble in its intent—among other things, to promote the creation of Jewish families—the statistics cited above suggest that despite the lack of rabbinic endorsement of intermarriage, the rate of Jews marrying non-Jews continues to increase. One scholar on the subject called intermarriage a simple demographic reality and said being for or against intermarriage was “like being for or against the weather.”

Meanwhile, the percentage of intermarried families raising their children as Jews is up markedly. This is a critical trend that we need to support.

For the past 14 years as a rabbi, I have maintained that my ordination empowered me only to officiate at weddings between Jews and that the liturgy of the Jewish wedding and its symbolism should be reserved for Jewish couples. I also assumed that counseling of mixed couples, rather than officiation, was the key to creating Jewish households. Yet in declining to officiate at intermarriages, I have gleaned some important lessons. Although I always encourage mixed couples to meet with me for discussion and counseling—in their view, I have closed the door on their *relationship* by stating at the outset that I would not perform their ceremony.

At a time when couples are making decisions about the kind of home they will create together, support, input, and counseling from within the Jewish community is critical. Yet declining to officiate at intermarriages has often prevented me from being part of a couple’s decision-making process. I now believe that by counseling couples as they prepare for marriage and helping them

to get involved in the Jewish community, a rabbi can play a critical role in helping mixed couples make the choice to create a Jewish home.

The prevalence of intermarriage has compelled me and compels all of us to reevaluate accepted principles and to confront old assumptions with intellectual integrity and a fresh eye. I have been engaged in that process during 20 years as a student and then ordained rabbi. This ability to examine, think, and speak with intellectual and religious integrity is one of the main tenets of Beth Emet. During the past year, and particularly during the past few months, I have devoted considerable time to reviewing the rabbinical and sociological literature on the subject of intermarriage and to formulating a position that reflects my beliefs and speaks to the needs of our community.

One cannot, however, discount the conviction of many rabbis, past and present, that marriage between two Jews involves a sacred element, known as *kiddushin*, that is exclusive to the Jewish wedding. After lengthy exploration of the sources on this topic (detailed in the full paper), I agree with this conclusion. I believe that marriage between Jews should be celebrated and encouraged and must retain a uniquely sanctified status for our community.

Yet, I believe that the balance of tradition and modernity that is at the heart of Reform Judaism allows room for both preserving the unique spiritual elements of marriage between two Jews and for rabbinic officiation at intermarriages. At the philosophical core of Reform Judaism is the assumption that our practices should be informed by contemporary conditions and how Jewish tradition speaks to our situation. As we like to quip in the Reform Movement, “Reform is a verb!” which means it is always evolving. Beth Emet’s statement of principles also reminds us of this value: “Our congregation is dedicated to relevant, dynamic and liberal Judaism. We will stress the all-embracing character of Judaism and the Jewish people.”

By changing my stance on intermarriage officiation, I seek to balance two competing, but important values: the desire to retain and respect the unique sacred character of the Jewish wedding and the opportunity to welcome mixed couples into the Jewish community and help them create Jewish homes.

My Decision

Based on my study and introspection, consultation with colleagues, and discussions with Beth Emet members, I have determined that I will officiate at intermarriages, with some modifications to the traditional Reform ceremony, for couples who are committed to:

1. Taking an Introduction to Judaism class or its equivalent;
2. Establishing and maintaining a Jewish home and, if blessed with children, to raise them as Jews;
3. Pre-marital counseling with me;
4. Exclusively Jewish clergy officiation at the wedding;
5. Participating in a Jewish community wherever they chose to settle after they are married.

Defining the Intermarriage Ceremony

The intermarriage ceremonies that I perform will contain many of the traditional Jewish wedding elements — blessings over wine, the seven wedding blessings, the breaking of the glass, and the *chupah*—but with some modifications. The first part of the ceremony—which is known as *kiddushin*—will be adapted to accommodate the non-Jewish partner. Most notably, the formula for the exchange of rings will be changed. In an egalitarian Reform Jewish wedding (the only kind I perform), rings are exchanged under the *chupah* (wedding canopy), with each member of the couple reciting the words, “You are sanctified to me... according to the laws of Moses and Israel.” Many rabbis have argued that this oath cannot be recited by one who is not Jewish. I agree with this assessment and feel that the language here can be modified to capture the spirit of the couple’s sacred commitment in an appropriate manner. At this point, I am not proposing any other modifications to other parts of the ceremony, but this will inevitably be an evolving process as I work with couples and gain experience officiating at intermarriages.

A Process for Jewish and Mixed Couples Alike

From my years of pre-marital counseling, I have concluded that all marriages are “intermarriages” in the sense that each member of a couple comes from a different home and that the understanding of “Jewish home” is shaped by the home in which each individual grew up. That is why it is so important for Jewish couples to articulate and clarify before marriage the traditions and practices they want to have in their home. I usually initiate this conversation after several meetings with a couple because my assumption has been that they want a Jewish home and that our task in counseling is to define what that means. In the future, before I agree to officiate at *any* wedding, I will discuss with the couple whether they are prepared to make a commitment to having a Jewish home and to define what this means. If a commitment to creating a Jewish home is the expectation for intermarried couples, it must be the expectation for all couples who step under the *chupah*.

I have been asked how I will determine at which weddings to officiate. This decision will be a mutual one made by the couple and me. During our first meeting, we will discuss the commitments the couple must make in order for me to officiate and whether these commitments

are compatible with their vision and values. If not, I will help the couple envision the kind of ceremony that will best suit them and to determine who might be best suited to officiate. Moreover, even if I cannot officiate, I will offer to continue the couple's pre-marital counseling so that I can help them prepare, spiritually and practically, to enter into a healthy and sacred marital relationship. I regard this continuing role as both a responsibility and an opportunity to continue to engage with members of our community and the partners to whom they have committed themselves.

Conclusion: Embracing Change to Promote Continuity

Over the past few years, the issue of rabbinic officiation at mixed marriages has been a controversial issue at Beth Emet, as it has been at most other Reform congregations. I have heard the anguish and pain of parents whose children intermarried and were denied the presence of their rabbi. I have heard the frustration and feelings of rejection that couples have felt because a rabbi would not officiate at their wedding. I have also heard from members of the congregation who believe that a rabbi should never officiate at intermarriages. And some Jews by choice within our community have expressed to me concern that rabbinic officiation at intermarriages would devalue their commitment and dedication in becoming Jewish.

Our community is diverse and has sustained itself and thrived on that diversity through the respect and love we have for one another and the Jewish tradition and the value we place on engaging one another in a constructive, informed and thoughtful manner, *l'shem shamayim*—for the sake of discerning God's will. As our community changes and the circumstances in which we find ourselves change, our tradition should be our guide, helping us grow in the ways of God. At the same time, our tradition should grow with us. Judaism does not ask us to be set in our ways, but always evolving. Thus, Jewish tradition and the changing needs of the community should always be in dialogue. May God help us find in Jewish tradition the wisdom to guide and inspire us in ever-changing circumstances.