

Interfaith Marriage

A View of the North American Reform Rabbinate

I. *Have you changed your position with regard to your work with interfaith families? If so, what prompted the change?*

The view of the rabbinate with regard to interfaith families and their children is a snapshot, a momentary portrait in time, which, like the theology of Reform Judaism, is bound to evolve and thereby change. Thus, what might represent the culture of the contemporary rabbinate, in general, and specific rabbis, in particular, today, is likely to look different in a short period of time and will most probably not look anything like what it did ten years previously or in ten years time hence. Whatever the position of the individual rabbi or of the CCAR with regard to interfaith marriage, it is clear that such positions are taken neither lightly nor halfheartedly. And each position involves a compromise of a value construct that had once been considered an essential part of Jewish community and continuity.

I've made one significant change during my years in the rabbinate with regard to interfaith family issues. For the first nineteen years of my rabbinate, I did not officiate at wedding ceremonies unless both partners were Jewish. Ten years ago (when I moved from Buffalo to Boston), I modified my position. At that time I announced a new position to the congregation (from the pulpit and in a bulletin article). I articulated a set of criteria that, if accepted by the couple, would lead me to agree to officiate at the wedding of Jewish and non-Jewish (but who was not the practicing adherent of another faith) partners.

This article is derived from answers to a specific set of questions asked of a group of colleagues. There is nothing implied by the order of the presentation of responses; selections have been made simply to accommodate the logical flow of ideas for this article.

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From the very beginning of my rabbinate, I never felt wholly comfortable with either position on rabbinic officiation at interfaith ceremonies. For the nineteen years that I did not officiate, I was, nevertheless, involved in a very welcoming extensive outreach program. Two things occurred during this time. First, the welcome that we extended to interfaith couples (especially to couples who were not truly “interfaith,” but an engaged Jew with a “disengaged” Christian-by-birth) began to feel somewhat hollow. I was affected (though not persuaded) by some of the testimony that couples brought forward; that is, that they were looking for a religious institution for their family, but could not understand why they were so welcomed after their marriage, yet could find no support as they entered marriage. I also felt that the categorical refusal to officiate was understood by some as a matter of principle. Many misinterpreted it, no matter how much I tried to create a caring context for the refusal and subsequent invitation (after the wedding). Second, I was in one place for sixteen years. That meant that an increasing number of “my kids” began to show up with their partners, Jewish and non-Jewish, wanting to be married by “their rabbi.” I knew the Jewish commitment of so many of these young adults, having had a hand in “raising” them. The categorical refusal to officiate became more painful to me because it was often painful to them.

I worried increasingly about the message that was being received by couples whom I refused and felt that it was contrary to the message that I wished to send. I felt (and feel) compelled by the statistics. We need to “capture” more than our fair share of the children of Jewish/non-Jewish families for the sake of the Jewish future. I began to feel that being able to offer a conditional “yes” to the request of Jewish/non-Jewish couples (I do not officiate if the non-Jew is actually the practicing adherent of another faith, and I require significant Jewish study and commitment on the part of the couple) enhanced the possibility of Jewish continuity.

Ronne Friedman

Kids grow up with their rabbis, and while we attempt to bring them close to us, they read a decision not to officiate at their wedding as “pushing away” or disappointment. But colleagues are motivated to reconsider their position (and most do so regularly) for other reasons. They may change the prism for their change in thinking from a lens on whom one marries to the nature of the individual Jew who enters into an interfaith relationship. This

moves the discussion from interfaith marriage (and will I officiate?) to how can we influence the decision to raise Jewish children in an inevitable interfaith relationship. It is also clear that most of these relationships are not "interfaith" marriages. They are often marriages between a Jew (practicing or not) and a secular non-Jew (often a lapsed Christian); many of these marriages involve couples who together practice what might be described as American civil religion more than anything else.

I have seen an enormous change in how couples find each other. Once Jewish fraternities and Jewish sororities were the pool for marriage choices, and most of my weddings involved young people in or just out of college. In more recent decades, the Jewish attorney for the real estate company meets the non-Jewish accountant of the same company. The Jewish and non-Jewish insurance agents meet at a seminar in a city where neither lives. Women in the workplace, later marriage, the open society in general are all forces that, in my opinion, mean that we have less influence than we once did over whom a Jew chooses as a marriage partner. But increased Jewish education and experience means we have greater influence over what kind of Jew enters the intermarriage.

Once the intermarrying Jew was written off as leaving the fold. It is clear today that many such Jews are committed to having Jewish households and Jewish families, and that the Jewish community, the synagogue, and the rabbi have great potential influence over their choices. Add to that the fact that, very often, the non-Jewish partner has, in my experience, left his or her childhood religion already. Some intermarriages are "interfaith" to be sure, but many are not. A marriage between a Jew and a non-Jew often offers the rabbi, the synagogue, and the Jewish community great potential to affect the Jewish outcomes of the wedding even if we are less able to influence who marries whom.

The desire of many Jewish partners to have Jewish households and the openness of the non-Jewish partners have confirmed my judgment that our dealings with couples entering intermarriage have far greater significance than simply answering the question, "Who will do the wedding?" They may very well serve our goal of Jewish continuity and the enrichment of Jewish life.

I don't believe that officiating at interfaith weddings ought to be driven simply by an effort to "recruit" the couple for Judaism. I do

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believe that, if the rabbi and synagogue and community can be welcoming to the couple, Judaism is well-served.

Harry Danziger

It is difficult to maintain a welcoming posture, especially when one's position does not feel welcoming to the person being turned away. However, often it is a staff member of the synagogue who is responding for the rabbi and the rabbi doesn't know what is being said, how it is being said, or even that it is being said. As those who teach at Disney University are fond of saying, "the front line is the bottom line." Whatever our position, we want to make sure that it is being communicated in a supportive and welcoming environment. For some, while conversion may not represent the ticket to enter into the synagogue community, it is certainly the goal.

I changed my position in particular in response to officiation at interfaith marriages. I have always felt that outreach and welcoming was important, but in my first years as a rabbi I refused officiation under any circumstances. Then I realized that my secretary was turning people away as a matter of course and I felt a responsibility to make myself available to at least counsel people. I would inform them over the phone that I would be happy to meet though it was unlikely that I would officiate. As I met with couples, I became curious if I would ever meet an interfaith couple that I just couldn't turn away. It happened. There was a couple, Len and Jen, who were living completely Jewish lives. Even though they were in their twenties, they had already affiliated with the temple. He was Jewish and she had no other religion. They were not only anticipating but were enthusiastic about building a Jewish home together. I knew they would have Jewish children. And the likelihood of her converting eventually was extremely high, in my estimation. So I said yes. Over time, I developed the criteria that follow:

1. The couple must be willing to take an Introduction to Judaism course or its equivalent;
2. The couple is planning to have a home that is Jewish and only Jewish (specifically no Christmas);
3. The couple is planning to raise children who are Jewish and only Jewish; and
4. (This criterion I don't articulate but evaluate on my own.) The non-Jewish partner is "convertible," that is, has no other

faith, therefore nothing that could prevent him/her from ultimately choosing Judaism.

Karen Bender

What we as rabbis are loathe to face is our own personal relationship to the issue. How do we really feel about interfaith marriage. Often we don't consider our own feelings honestly until we are faced with the possibility that our own children might choose for their life partners someone who was born in another faith community. While we may have placed ourselves squarely in the core of the Jewish community and raised our children in institutions that populate that core, they, like their peers, are making their own choices—irrespective of our position on the issue. Often their choices challenge the very values that we have made the foundations of our professional lives. For some colleagues, how we respond to our own children becomes a measuring stick for how we respond to others. And that response, like so many others in our lives, may provoke us to change our perspective yet again.

My work with interfaith families has remained consistent over the years, with one exception. I try to be warm, welcoming, helpful, and supportive. My congregations and I have offered a variety of outreach programs, conversion opportunities, and individual and couples counseling. Somehow, I managed to be ordained and accept my first pulpit—a solo—without coming to a definitive decision as to officiation at interfaith ceremonies. After considerable struggle, and having observed that Jewish commitment and the religious identity of a couple bore no necessarily correlation, I decided to officiate at interfaith ceremonies. While I had justified doing so to myself intellectually, in the interest of Jewish continuity, I found the actual experience unsettling. It did not feel right departing from two millennia of Jewish practice without the collective sanction of the Reform rabbinate. I felt embarrassed explaining my position to rabbinic colleagues. Most importantly, I came to feel that officiation was in conflict with my parenting. As parents, Susie and I wanted to give our children a strong message about the importance of Jewish marriage and family. I decided that the way to do so was to tell them, "Please marry someone Jewish so I can officiate at your wedding." However, if I couldn't officiate for my own children, I couldn't do so for others, so I reversed my position twenty years ago. To demonstrate my support for interfaith couples and counteract the appearance of rejection, I refer couples to colleagues for offici-

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ation and, when invited, bless them on the *bimah* prior to their wedding or at the conclusion of their (exclusively Jewish) ceremony and attend the wedding.

Richard A. Block

It seems that personal experiences combined with a generally liberal approach to building an inclusive Jewish community lead rabbis to evaluate and then reevaluate their perspectives on officiation at weddings between Jews and non-Jews. While it is never guaranteed what future Jewish lives will be lived by couples that stand in front of us under the chuppah, when we are burdened with the responsibility of burying someone, the Jewish lives that were led become quite concrete and easy to evaluate.

After ten years in the rabbinate, about a year and a half ago, I began officiating at interfaith weddings or, to be more precise, at Jewish weddings between a Jew and a non-Jew. A number of factors prompted the change in my position. Most importantly, I experienced a nagging discomfort with my position of the previous few years. I first noticed that my position was beginning to shift when I was speaking to a group of young Israeli leaders traveling through our city. The topic for the day was “intermarriage” and I was on a panel of rabbis. I was the one who “didn’t.” And yet when the participants from Israel asked me questions, I found that I had more reasons for doing interfaith weddings than not. Later, an elderly woman, Ruth, called and asked me to officiate at her marriage to Bob, a wonderful man, a non-Jew. Reluctantly, I said no, but there was a large part of me that wanted to say yes. Here was a woman who found happiness late in life with an incredible man. He traveled with her to survivors conferences. He took her to synagogue and sang the prayers. He sat at the head of the table for holidays. Why was it that I wouldn’t marry them? That same year, another family in my congregation helped to concretize what appeared to be an emerging desire to officiate at interfaith weddings. Katherine, a young woman in my congregation, was dying from cancer. It was wrenching. Her only son, David, was about to become a bar mitzvah. Gathering whatever strength she could muster, Katherine only wanted to make it to this special day. And she did. She literally crawled up the *bimah* steps to stand next to him while he chanted from the Torah and said the blessings. Just a few days later, Katherine died and was buried in our temple cemetery. Katherine was born a Catholic; she never converted to Judaism, but Katherine

was a Jewish mother and wife. I could not imagine not having officiated at this woman's marriage to her husband, nor could I imagine any person, Jew or not, being more devoted to her son's Jewish learning and living.

People like Katherine, Ruth, and Bob have opened to me different ways of thinking and living. They have helped me to see that non-Jews can be terrific parents to Jews, amazing spouses and partners to Jews, and incredible members of our community. The non-Jews in my community have helped me to see that being Jewish is an evolution, a process, a journey, and I see my role as not only welcoming people to that process, but guiding them along in it.

Stacy Friedman

Whether we are recently ordained rabbis or have served the Jewish community for many years, the struggle remains. It was Sam Sandmel, of blessed memory, who taught us to question such important decisions daily. With the future of the North American Jewish community in our grasp, the decisions with regard to interfaith weddings and marriages do not come easily—nor should they. But the decisions we make still leave us with plenty of questions yet to answer. Of one thing we can be sure: our decisions will not remain static. As the community continues to evolve and change, so may we.

After more than twenty-five years in the rabbinate, I continue to struggle with the issue of whether or not to officiate at interfaith weddings. While I have chosen not to officiate as rabbi, I have on occasion stood beside close family members under their *chuppah* as the matron of honor. There is an important difference between the two situations. In my role as relative or close friend, I was thrilled about the wedding and was honored to be a part of the celebration. Yet in my role as rabbi, I represent the Jewish tradition, which, as I have understood it, defines a Jewish wedding as a wedding between two Jews. But I am no longer so certain.

Over the years, particularly the last ten years serving as the rabbi of a large congregation, I have worked with many intermarried couples who have created Jewish homes, whose children are students in our day school or religious school, and who are active temple members. While the non-Jew has chosen not to convert, there is no question in my mind that he or she is partly responsible for the Jewishness of the home; that is, if not for the support of the non-Jewish partner, this family would not be a Jewish family. I

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recognize that many of these families began when a rabbi stood with the couple under their *chuppah*. So perhaps a Jewish wedding, then, is a wedding of two people committed to creating a Jewish home, whether or not they are both Jewish.

I must admit to being confused by the finding that an intermarried couple's decision to raise their children as Jews is independent of whether or not a rabbi officiated at their wedding. If this is true, then the decision about officiating is unrelated to the goal of bringing families into the Jewish community. From my experience, I'm not so sure this is true. Over the years, many couples have told me that their decision to create a Jewish home was motivated by a rabbi's decision to participate in their wedding.

I recognize that this raises a number of questions. How can one determine in advance which couples really are committed to creating a Jewish home? What would be the standard? And what about encouraging the non-Jewish partner to explore conversion?

One of the most moving dimensions of my rabbinate is accompanying Jews-by-choice on their spiritual journeys. Some of those journeys begin when they fall in love with a Jew and their Jewish partner encourages them to explore Judaism. Their journey not only is transformative for the potential convert, but also often for the Jewish partner as well. How can I encourage a couple to be open to conversion while at the same time telling them that I would officiate even if conversion were not to take place?

These questions continue to challenge me. About a year ago a couple took our Introduction to Judaism class. The non-Jewish man has made a commitment to his bride to be her partner in creating a Jewish home. They celebrate holidays and Shabbat together; they have even joined our synagogue. He has a son by his previous marriage who is being raised by his Christian mother. The groom feels that if he were to convert, it would make his son feel abandoned. So he has chosen not to convert—at least not yet. But they have chosen to have a Jewish wedding and a Jewish home. This is a wedding that I feel ready to do.

I no longer think that the decision to do an interfaith wedding is absolute, that once you do one, you have to do all. If the standard becomes: "Is this a wedding of two people committed to creating a Jewish home," then I can feel authentic in my calling as a rabbi to bring people closer to Judaism and strengthen the Jewish community.

Laura Geller

II. *When you have made a decision to do so, how do you say “no” to an inter-faith couple?*

Among perhaps the most difficult things we have to do as rabbis is to say “no” to couples who ask us to officiate at their wedding even when we may want to say “yes.” How can we not condone a loving relationship between two people, just because they have been born into different faith communities? These are people who have entered a relationship with the Jewish community out of love. We know, more than do most peoples, about the accidents of history. And we know too frequently how the hate of others drove our ancestors and the decisions that they were often forced to make. Yet, those same lessons of history have also schooled us in ways that we feel compelled to act upon.

At the beginning of the first meeting that I have with the couple, I tell them that I want to be helpful to them regardless of whether or not I’m able to officiate at their wedding. I explain that I do officiate at interfaith weddings, but that I have criteria that they must feel comfortable in meeting. If my criteria are uncomfortable for them, I want to help them find what they need in order to celebrate a wonderful wedding.

In most instances, the issue hinges upon whether the non-Jewish partner is the practicing adherent of another faith. I explain why I do not officiate under that set of circumstances and try to either steer them toward a ceremony that they create with a justice of the peace as the officiant, or provide them with information about colleagues who will provide what they want (officiation or co-officiation).

I try very hard to meet with the couple face to face. The one uncomfortable situation I’ve had in the last ten years was with the child of a member who was living with her fiancé in Texas. They needed a response and weren’t coming to Boston for some time. I think that it’s much more difficult to say “no” over the phone. People have a harder time understanding that you care than they do when you meet with them in person.

Ronne Friedman

Since many colleagues will not officiate at life cycle ceremonies for those who are not members of the congregation or their children, it makes it easier to say “no” to couples who make requests that might be met with a “no” in any case. But making a referral to someone else is not always the best way to be of help. Colleagues can’t often make the time to be of help, even if they

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are inclined to do so. Whether we end up officiating at a particular couple's wedding or not, it consumes a great deal of time to help prepare a couple for marriage. In each situation, rabbis use the opportunity to encourage the growth of a Jewish household.

I decline any weddings of couples who are not already members of my congregation, so that makes things much easier. Most of the congregation knows my views, since I have spoken about them on the High Holidays. So when a family is trying to find an officiant for an interfaith wedding, they will call me for advice, but rarely will ask me to officiate. In cases where it isn't yet clear to me whether this is an "interfaith" marriage (as opposed to a marriage where one partner is not officially Jewish but the family and household they intend to create will be completely Jewish), I meet with the couple. During the course of the meeting I ask each partner about his or her religious beliefs and get them to focus on the differences and what each is going to expect of the other. We talk about raising children, dealing with holidays, etc. If it becomes clear to me that this is not going to be a Jewish wedding, I start talking about different options for them. I like to refer people to Ethical Culture directors if they are both sort of universalistic, and there isn't a strong enough Jewish commitment for me to officiate. If they want co-officiation, I send them to the Center for Rabbinic Counseling. I really hate to refer to other colleagues directly because I have often felt like I was being used as a "shabbos goy" when people referred interfaith couples to me without even having the courtesy to check with me first. It's very hurtful to all parties involved to send a couple to a rabbi who can't officiate at their wedding. They don't need another rejection; I don't need extra phone calls. It's just plain insensitive all around. (If there's something one doesn't want to do oneself, one should at least have the decency not to use one's colleagues without obtaining their permission first.)

I often find I spend more time with a couple whose wedding I won't do than with couples where I am officiating. I explain that the only kind of wedding I really know how to perform is a Jewish one, and that from what I am hearing that would not be equally inclusive of both of them. I talk about what the ceremony should accomplish and how the officiant should be a representative of what is most sacred to both of them. (I generally advocate for single-officiant weddings or cantor and rabbi—but not two rabbis. If the couple can't agree on one officiant, I think it's a warning signal. But the way

I word it is that they should both feel represented equally by the officiant.)

I try to get the couple to imagine what kind of person would feel right to them, and then we try to figure out how to find that person. I offer to meet with them as many times as necessary. I go over the elements of a Jewish wedding. I've only had to do this a few times, but I've had some successful outcomes. There was one case where the husband had a close relative who was an Episcopal priest. The couple had every intention of having a Jewish home and children, but they really wanted this relative involved, so I worked with the priest to design a ceremony that made explicit their religious intentions, and why a priest was officiating. I didn't attend the wedding, but I was told that it was clear to everyone that the couple would be creating a Jewish household.

When it is clear that a Jewish household would not be in the couple's future, then I try to guide the conversation to a point where they see that I am not the right person to officiate, rather than simply saying "no." Even then, I spend a lot of time talking with them about how children will be raised, and I think on a few occasions the couple has actually decided not to get married (but that's happened over other issues as well).

Judith A. Lewis

It is never easy to say "no." Yet we are charged with the responsibility of making decisions that affect the Jewish future. So we determine what we think will have the best outcomes. Sometimes that means that we can say "yes" to couples who present themselves to us. At other times, it means that we have to say "no." For those colleagues who are prepared to officiate at a wedding between someone who is Jewish and someone who is not Jewish, the primary challenge is in what religious tradition they will raise their children.

I have had to say "no" to intermarrying couples less often than might be expected. My experience has been that as I outline to them my prerequisites and explain the reasons for them, those who cannot meet them opt out on their own. Some of the reasons have been the inability to commit to a Jewish household, not just raising Jewish children; an unwillingness to go through the studies akin to those for conversion; or a realization that they simply are not "there" yet. When I do have to say "no" to a couple, it most often becomes clear in our discussions that I will not be able to officiate. My ulti-

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mate decision, as I explain to them, is that I can officiate when it is clearly the beginning of a Jewish household. I always assure them that I will be helpful in any way I can and that the synagogue and Judaism are always open to them. I do urge them not to seek out any religious ceremony that does not reflect the future as best they know it. Rather, they may want a spiritual ceremony that is done by a civil officer and does not imply religious commitments they have not made.

Harry Danziger

As most of us have learned, when we say "no," it is hurtful and even harmful, as gently and as supportively as we may try to say it. It is still heard as a "no." Nevertheless, how we say it, and how we act on our desire to be as supportive and nurturing to the couple as possible may, in the end, be what makes the real difference in terms of the future decisions regarding affiliation and the identity of their children.

It is always difficult and often painful to say "no" to a request to officiate at an interfaith marriage ceremony. I am acutely aware that I will certainly disappoint, likely hurt, and possibly alienate two decent, thoughtful, and loving people. As I sometimes tell such couples, I did not become a rabbi in order to harm people. Had that been my aim, I tell them, tongue lodged only slightly in cheek, I would have remained an attorney where I was paid to do that for a living.

In my experience, the tone of this conversation is as important as the content, if not more so. First, I offer warm and sincere congratulations and best wishes and spend some time getting to know the couple. I normally explain my inability to officiate and offer them as many "yeses" as possible to go with my "no." As to the latter, I indicate that, much as I would like to officiate, I do not feel comfortable departing from two thousand years of Jewish tradition defining and setting bounds to the role of a rabbi, especially given that every major departure from tradition by the Reform movement has historically been endorsed by our rabbinate as a whole, which has not happened with respect to interfaith officiation.

While this approach is not always persuasive, it has the virtue of showing that my "no" is not a judgment about them personally. I urge couples to view this as "my problem" rather than "your problem." As to saying "yes," I offer counseling about interfaith relationship issues to help ensure the success of their marriage, and to

assist them in finding a caring rabbi who can officiate. I invite them to the *bimah* for a blessing prior to the wedding as a way of expressing my support for their relationship and welcoming them to the temple, now and in the future. Finally, when appropriate, I indicate that I will be happy to attend the wedding, if invited, and, if they wish, to bless them following the declaration that they are married.

Not always, but often, this conversation marks the beginning of a warm, ongoing relationship.

Richard A. Block

Since I have begun officiating at interfaith weddings, I have not turned anybody down; I am lucky that those who have approached me thus far have fallen within my parameters. However, there is a couple who approached me a few years ago to officiate at their wedding, and at the time I said “no” because I was not performing interfaith weddings. In looking back at my decision, I still feel that I wouldn’t marry that couple, not because they are an interfaith couple, but because I didn’t feel that they truly wanted a Jewish wedding or were committed to living a Jewish life. I feel that their desire for a rabbi to officiate was to satisfy their parents, and that they were looking for a more mixed faith, in their words, “spiritual” wedding with symbols and rituals that I didn’t feel comfortable incorporating into a Jewish wedding ceremony.

Stacy Friedman

In general, I officiate only at weddings of people connected to the congregation or willing to join. When a couple connected to the congregation or willing to join inquires about an intermarriage, I invite them to meet with me. In the meeting I ask them to share with me some of the issues that have come up for them in contemplating an interfaith marriage and whether conversion is an option. If it is an option, I will encourage them to take the Introduction to Judaism class to see if they are ready to make a commitment to creating a Jewish family. If conversion is not an option, I ask them to share with me the reasons for that decision. As we discuss those reasons, it often flows very naturally that a Jewish wedding doesn’t really make sense. Instead, I recommend that they create their own ceremony, one that reflects each of the partners and the traditions that are important to each of them. I suggest they read Anita Diamant’s *The New Jewish Wedding* to discover some of the wonderful richness

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in a Jewish ceremony and adapt the parts that are meaningful for use in their own ceremony. If they are willing to meet with me several times, I will often help them craft that ceremony. I always explore with them who would be the best person to officiate. In California, where anyone can be certified to perform a wedding for one day, it is not difficult to encourage couples to ask a dear friend or teacher to be the one who officiates.

I have found that if an interfaith couple is willing to put in the work to create a personal ceremony with elements from the Jewish tradition, and if someone they feel close to can officiate, it is less of an issue to them that a rabbi is not officiating at their wedding.

Laura Geller

III. *How do you screen a colleague when you make a referral? How do you follow up once a referral has been made?*

While it seems like it should be easy to make a referral to colleagues who believe that they have a responsibility to officiate at a wedding between a Jew and a non-Jew and are comfortable in doing so, such a referral is not always easy to make. Overwhelmed by their work, in some cases, colleagues do not welcome our referrals. Even in a rabbinate that is relatively small, not all rabbis are known to one another. Furthermore, even in cases where the practices of a particular rabbi are not endorsed, colleagues find it difficult to make a judgment for others about whether they would be appropriate officiants in particular circumstances. Some have a predetermined set of criteria that are employed in making referrals.

I make referrals only for members of my congregation, and then only to our own clergy (that pretty much goes for any weddings). For everyone else, I send them to the Center for Rabbinic Counseling. I have had weddings referred to me and have found it very, very offensive that the one who made the referral never bothered to check with me. Moreover, if I don't find something acceptable for me to do, I am not going to ask someone else to do it for me—I make an exception with “the list” [from the Center] since everyone there has voluntarily listed themselves.

Judith A. Lewis

I deal with referrals on a three-tier kind of basis. First tier: Those colleagues whom I know and feel comfortable about; I don't need to

screen them. Second tier: Those colleagues about whom I know something (that is, that they'll officiate under a specific set of circumstances) but whom I don't know personally. Of these colleagues, I tell people that I am providing information, but not a personal referral. Third tier: There are colleagues who may be known to me (either directly or by reputation) whose practices I would not endorse (such as charging exorbitant fees or officiating with Christian clergy on Shabbat). In that instance I will provide information, but I make it clear that the information does not imply an endorsement of any kind. In all instances I ask the people that I've referred to call me and let me know about their experience with the rabbi to whom I have made the referral. I let the couple know that their information will help me to guide others in the future and that anything they tell me will be held in confidence. I receive feedback often if I really have a connection to or personal relationship with the couple that I refer. If my contact with them is limited, then I receive such feedback less than half the time.

Ronne Friedman

It has been very hard for me to find colleagues whom I trust for referral. I don't have a particular technique. I just want to know that the colleague has integrity and a sense of purpose and is not just in the intermarriage-for-profit business!

Karen Bender

Knowing that I continue to work through the struggle of not officiating at interfaith weddings, it is always a question of why then have someone else do so in my stead? I remember the "heated" discussion (Okay, it was a knock-down, drag-out rabbinic debate) that took place during our fifth-year senior seminar session at HUC-JIR on interfaith marriage. Never before had an issue caused so much conflict, and so much personal commitment at both ends of the spectrum. It was there, almost eighteen years ago, that I began to realize my "right response" was not "right" for everyone.

In referring a couple to a colleague, I make certain that three operating principles will be in place:

1. *Jewish spiritual integrity*: Will my rabbinic colleague's officiation maintain the integrity of Jewish tradition? I am not looking for a rabbi to co-officiate with a clergyperson of another faith on Shabbos morning!

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2. *Continuity*: Will my referral further my own rabbinic aim, fostering the continuity of the Jewish people by making use of the Jewish marriage as a learning opportunity, and an exchange of Jewish values and future aspirations?
3. *Commitment*: How will this rabbi enable future Jewish commitment on the part of this interfaith couple? If it is coercive, requirements that sign-away a “first-born,” it may well do more damage than good. But if my colleague can do what I hope to do in working with a wedding couple, engaging them in “living Jewish” as part of the process of building their future lives together, integrating meaningful Jewish-life experiences now, then commitment to community and congregation will be a natural.

My follow-up is always twofold. I make a call to the clergyperson to whom I made the referral to see how it all panned out. And, most crucially, I make a call to the wedding couple, to ensure that expectations were mutual and that everyone felt comfortable with the relationship so that it might grow.

Jeffrey Sirkman

The hesitations continue. Even for those who will officiate, the questions remain: When will the wedding take place? Will it involve an officiant from another faith (which implies that the decision as to how to raise the children has either not been made or the couple will attempt to raise the children in both faith communities). But the referrals are not about convenience nor are they about asking someone to do something that we ourselves are uncomfortable in doing. Rather, they are an extension of our desire to continue to embrace the couple and welcome them into the community.

I really don't make referrals with regard to intermarriage for the most part. The question of referral has usually come if it was for a wedding that I wouldn't do given my position and requirements. Most often, it has involved someone who will co-officiate with clergy of another faith. I hesitate to make such a referral. If it is a marriage I cannot do for reasons of time and place, I try to find only colleagues who do some measure of counseling regarding intermarriage and the family and whose requirements are similar to mine.

Harry Danziger

When I refer a couple to another rabbi, my goal is to connect them with a colleague I respect, to whom I would be comfortable turning if I or a family member of my own needed a rabbi. While the referral may involve officiation, I would not recommend someone I would not trust to handle other kinds of pastoral matters with compassion, good judgment, and integrity. I ask the couple to let me know when they have secured an officiant or if they need further assistance finding one.

Richard A. Block

IV. What guides your decision-making process with regard to interfaith families?

While the couples who make contact with us are focused on the wedding, and it is the most important event in their lives at the time, it is only a relatively short ceremony and they have the rest of their lives to consider. The challenges will continue as will the role of the rabbi, particularly in terms of other life cycle events over the course of their lives. Sometimes the way we handle weddings provides others with insight into how we might work with interfaith families at other times in their lives. However, this is not always the case. There are many other issues that inform what we are willing to do and how we are willing to do it.

Two principles guide my decision-making process. The first is the hope that the children of intermarried families will be raised as Jews and see themselves as fully part of the Jewish community. The second is that conversion is a choice and if someone chooses not to convert, that decision should be honored and we should not pretend that they are Jewish.

Because of the first principle, we welcome intermarried families in our congregation. They participate fully in all our schools and in much of the social and intellectual life of the congregation. Non-Jewish parents are in our choirs, participate in our intergenerational theater productions, and serve on temple committees. When the child of an intermarriage becomes bar or bat mitzvah, we involve the non-Jewish parent as well as the Jewish parent, believing that no child would become bar/bat mitzvah without the active support of both parents. Non-Jewish parents pass the Torah to their children, and they are called to the Torah with their spouses for an *aliyah*.

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Because of the second principle, we do make distinctions between non-Jews and Jews in prayer and ritual. Non-Jewish grandparents do not participate in the Torah passing, though they may be included in the service with a special reading or given an honor that is appropriate for non-Jews. Those honors include opening the ark and dressing the Torah. Non-Jews are not called to the Torah for an *aliyah* on their own or for *hagbah*. We also make distinctions in certain areas of temple governance; non-Jews may not serve on the Board of Directors.

Laura Geller

In working with interfaith couples I am guided by concern for their welfare and the hope that I can help them form a committed Jewish household, raise Jewish children, join the synagogue, and contribute to the Jewish future. I also want to demonstrate the warmth and sincerity of my welcome to couples and congregants who might be disappointed with my stance on officiation.

Richard A. Block

I am constantly engaged in discussions about the issue of intermarriage and I push myself to listen harder on this topic than on most, because my gut is so instinctively particularistic and anti-intermarriage. I try to be open to hearing arguments in all directions from anyone willing to talk about it: colleagues, friends, intermarried friends, non-Jews, non-Jews raising Jewish kids and especially my conscience. I also feel that the memory of grandparents and great-grandparents, and what I imagine they would want me to do, has a say.

Karen Bender

Our congregation makes it clear that our purpose is to help families raise happy, healthy, confidently self-identified Jewish children, regardless of the “pedigree” of either parent. As long as both parents agree on that goal, I usually end up forgetting who the Jewish partner is and who the non-Jew is. Everything in our worship, governance, etc. is designed so that none of our parents is ever asked to do something that it would be inappropriate for a non-Jew to do (or rituals are observed together so that at least one Jewish person is participating). Our by-laws state that anyone who is either Jewish,

or wishes to worship in accordance with the Jewish faith, can be a full member of the congregation.

I've had a couple of cases of truly interfaith families ending up in the congregation one way or another—and all too often the power struggle is overt and nasty. Most often, I've tried to get the Jewish partner to understand what's at stake for the Christian partner. (These are marriages I would not have officiated at.) We spend a lot of time talking about the historical departure of Christianity from Judaism. I've sometimes worked with Christian clergy so that the non-Jewish partner feels "protected" and usually the Christian clergy is very sensitive to the desire to raise Jewish children and becomes our strongest advocate.

The patrilineal descent issue definitely made me feel more secure in my position and I make it very clear to people that the Reform movement may be the only movement to recognize their children as Jewish. (I give disclaimers about Israel, *aliyah*, marriage there, etc.) I apply the descent issue to either parent, and have turned away marriages between two Jews if I felt there was no commitment to raising Jewish children. I definitely care about my board and temple by-laws, and feel comfortable at Temple Israel because they recognize anyone "wishing to worship in accordance with the Jewish faith" as a full and equal member. I care about Jewish law to the extent that I wouldn't want to put anyone in a position of not being able to become an orthodox Jew if they should so choose. I care about the judgment of my colleagues only to the extent that I don't ever want anyone to think I'm doing anything for personal gain, but only because I truly believe that it's at least possibly better for the future of the Jewish people. That's why I don't officiate outside my congregation, and I don't accept any sort of compensation.

Judith A. Lewis

My decision-making process with regard to interfaith families is guided by: the liberal legislation of the Reform movement on issues of *ishut* (matrimony); a personal conviction (based upon my reading and experience) that the future of American Jewry depends, in part, upon our ability to encourage interfaith couples to choose Judaism for their children; and a belief that the Jewish education of the Jewish and the non-Jewish partner coupled with their participation in the

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life of the synagogue and the Jewish community will affect the qualitative content of their family's identification with Judaism.

Ronne Friedman

V. What is the relationship between how you deal professionally with interfaith families and how you deal with them personally in your own family?

While intellectual discussions about the impact of the interfaith family on the Jewish community are important, the issues become real when they are viewed through the lens of our own families.

While I wouldn't officiate as a rabbi at an interfaith wedding ceremony where the couple has no intention of creating a Jewish home, I would participate in such a ceremony as a sister or a cousin. In other words, I might be a matron of honor at a wedding where I wouldn't be the rabbi. When I interact with my family it is as a member of the family, not as a rabbi. My whole family respects my Jewish life and commitments and I respect the lives they have created with their partners. In general, those family members who have intermarried work very hard, with the full support of their partners, to raise their children as Jews. I see how hard it is, and I honor their effort. At the same time, my family and I have "visited" Christmas at the home of the parents of my sister-in-law and appreciated the experience. I am grateful to be included in all kinds of family celebrations.

My family knows I don't usually officiate at interfaith weddings. That decision probably has been hurtful to some family members who have intermarried. I feel sad about hurting people I love, but I believe that our mutual respect for each other's life styles, choices, and commitments ultimately transcends the hurt.

Laura Geller

I have dealt with interfaith issues in my rabbinate and in our extended family in the identical manner, with genuine caring, patient listening and explaining, and a respect for the boundaries I have set for myself. I am grateful that both of our sons have chosen Jewish spouses, but from the beginning, my rabbinic touchstone has been the question, "What would I do for my own children?" I could not

do for others what I would not do for them and I could not do for them what I could not do for others.

Richard A. Block

Regarding the difference between professional and personal dealings, since I've become a rabbi, my family and I have an understanding that I am not the family rabbi, rather, I am the family sister, daughter, cousin, etc. However, these lines do tend to blur at times. My step-sister recently asked me to officiate at her wedding. Although her fiance is not Jewish, the bigger issue for me in hesitating to officiate was the fact that she is family. When I officiate at a wedding, I am no longer a celebrant, no longer just a sister, I become a rabbi as well. After she and I discussed her wedding, we agreed that somebody else would officiate at her wedding (a secular officiant who knows them both well) and I would take part in the ceremony in some meaningful way, adding Jewish rituals and blessings.

Stacy Friedman

My kids are too young to be thinking about marriage yet, so it's hard for me to predict what may happen. My basic approach is that we transmit religious identity through family connection and celebration, so I'm more and more concerned about how I can provide those celebrations and connections for my children when I'm so busy working. On the other hand, I can also see that family Christmas celebrations with my husband's late wife's Catholic relatives have, if anything, intensified my own children's Jewish identity (especially when the Host is passed around at the beginning of the meal), even though they enjoy the celebrations from a family point-of-view. But so far, being married to someone who was not born Jewish and decided to become Jewish without any urging on my part has pretty much reaffirmed my attitudes and approaches.

Judith A. Lewis

My professional dealings with interfaith families are essentially identical to the way that I deal with the interfaith relationships within my own family. In both instances I want to be welcoming, encouraging, and non-judgmental.

Ronne Friedman