



September 17, 2003

Research Methodology and Commentary

The Ritual Policy Task Force has been meeting on a monthly basis since early 2001. Our first task was to list questions of ritual policy that we believed needed to be addressed in the congregation. We began with a very substantive question: What is the role of the non-Jew in religious rituals performed by the congregation?

To ensure that our answer would be well-considered and would have lasting value to the congregation, we agreed to educate ourselves. This provided us with a common background as a group in principles of Jewish inquiry, sources of Jewish authority, and Reconstructionist philosophy.

Among the sources we studied were:

- Portions from the Torah and Mishnah
- The JRF Ritual Task Force Report Summaries and Guidelines
- "The Principles of Reconstructionism," from Questions Jews Ask by Mordecai Kaplan
- Are Boundaries Necessary – Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought, an edited volume containing articles by various authors
- The Beginnings of Jewishness by Shaye J. D. Cohen
- The Future of the American Jew by Mordecai Kaplan
- The Jew in the Modern World, containing articles by various authors
- The Future of the Jewish Community in America, containing articles by various authors

Regarding our relationship with the past, we found the following quite helpful: the pamphlet "Who is a Reconstructionist Jew", from the JRF; and Dan Cedarbaum's article "Reconstructing Halakha" in the Spring 2002 issue of Reconstructionism Today.

We, as members of Congregation Beth Hatikvah, share a common commitment to belonging to a Jewish community, but differ from one another, and sometimes harbor conflicting feelings within ourselves, about the beliefs and behaviors that go along with this membership. Characteristically, we are strong individualists. Yet to be a community, we need a common understanding about our rituals.

When non-Jews join us in services, or in group activities that include a ritual component, how do we include our non-Jewish family members, companions, and associates?

We are mindful of the past, so we are obligated to consider and, when necessary, to reconsider what it gives us. The Society for the Jewish Renaissance, a predecessor of the Reconstructionist movement, was co-founded with others by Mordecai Kaplan. It adopted in its platform the following perspective: "We accept the halakha, which is rooted in the Talmud, as the norm of Jewish life, availing ourselves at the same time of the method implicit therein to interpret and develop the body of Jewish Law in accordance with the actual conditions and spiritual needs of modern life." This perspective is often summarized in the catchphrase "The past has a vote but not a veto."

Here are some of the questions and points of view that we encountered during our work:

- We believe that our services have a universal aspect. The universalist point of view is that spiritual matters are equally accessible to all. Many passages in the prayer book use spiritual constructs that are suitable for any person.
- Are boundaries necessary at all? Should there be limits on what some people do within our services? If so, how should these limits be expressed? We invoke here the language of the Kabbalah, that there cannot be Chesed (love) without Gevurah (discipline / restraint).
- We believe that the distinguishing responsibility and identifying characteristic of a Jew is a firm commitment and responsibility to the covenant. A Jew can pronounce statements and perform actions that assert membership in the Jewish people.
- In talking about the Jewish people, we sometimes use the technical term "Am Yisrael," meaning the covenanted community of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, whose name was also Israel. The phrase "Am Yisrael" includes in its meaning a sense of collective responsibility for each other and a responsibility to uphold the covenant we have with God, which binds all Jews. For members of Am Yisrael, there is a sense that our actions have an effect not just on ourselves but on all our fellow Jews - that there is a mutual responsibility among Jews and among local Jewish communities for one another locally, for Jews in all Jewish communities, and for Am Yisrael as a whole.
- As Reconstructionists, we balance this sense of Jewish identity with an eagerness to reach out to others beyond our own community.
- We considered whether non-Jewish participants in our ritual activities can participate in every role or action that a Jewish participant can. We compared non-Jews to non-citizens who live in the United States and pay taxes, but lack certain privileges, such as being able to vote or run for office, until they become citizens.
- We wrestled with inconsistencies. Consider a non-Jewish father/husband, who regularly unselfishly acted to benefit his family. Why would he not be able to partake in all of the Jewish rituals, yet a born Jewish father who did absolutely nothing could?
- We acknowledged the complexities of our context. We live in a society where Jewish people are not the only people. We cannot avoid questions that have to do with our relationships with non-Jews. We are all troubled by other questions that also have to do with this

relationship. Is intermarriage good or bad for the Jewish people? Is assimilation good for the Jewish people?

- For those uncomfortable with establishing boundaries, we heard evidence that we are not creating these distinctions unilaterally, and that it is not our goal to exclude people for no reason, or in order to drive them away. Non-Jews have reasons to make distinctions between Jews and non-Jews, reasons that show the importance and mutuality of the question of identity. We considered a real case of a non-Jewish father/husband, who was thoroughly committed to his family and actively made an effort to participate in many of Jewish practices at home and at shul. Yet he was not ready to "sign on the dotted line" and convert for fear of disrespecting his devout Catholic Mother.
- To understand the need for a distinction, turn the situation around. If Jews went to a church would they kneel or take the host?
- Aren't some people effectively Jewish even if they have not converted? In the Talmud, we encountered the concept of the Ger Toshav; not a convert, but one who lived amongst the Jewish people and happy to be a part of the Jewish world and supportive of the religious and social framework of Jewish life. They did not have the same status as Jews, but had respected status, with some of the same privileges and obligations as Jews.
- We also learned that boundaries can be helpful. In many situations, the participants turn to the congregation for guidance. What are the best ways for each person to contribute to a meaningful event?
- In support of the necessity of boundaries, we learned about Mordecai Kaplan's discourse on "Sancta" and holiness/Kedusha. Kaplan points out that a thing must be separate to be unique and special, (i.e. Holidays/Holy-days). He states that the absence of this has been proven throughout history not to work, it only eventually breeds erosion and finally abandonment to certain ideals and necessary principles.
- It is a tradition that every generation is responsible for carrying on the traditions. Some believe that this is especially important as a response to the Holocaust.
- There are plenty of alternative practices for cases where the traditional practice is reserved for Jewish people. The non-Jew can adopt unique, new and personally creative traditions in addition to the Jewish practice, such as passing on an heirloom or planting a tree. The alternative tradition may have equivalent or greater meaning or connection for that person.
- Why do we need rituals and prayers? They serve a cathartic purpose; the ideas and actions of prayer and ritual have a cleansing and healing effect. We are grateful to be living in a tolerant country, where we have the freedom to pray as Jews.
- We grappled with the need for Jewish law. What is the nature of mitzvot? Is it incumbent upon us to perform them? The term means: practices that Jews are commanded to do (or not do). Kaplan himself wrote that "Jewish life is meaningless without Jewish law." One of us drew the analogy that mitzvot are like speed bumps: although not always convenient, they are there for everyone's protection. Many members of the community do not consider their sense of Jewish identity to depend on the performance of particular commandments; if so, what is the role of the commandments?

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- Is it fair to have rulings that are incumbent upon the entire community? What about personal freedom? We recognize that individuals have personal feelings, but in becoming a community, we agree with one another on what we do when we convene as a community.
- We also have a responsibility to future generations. The way that we structure our relationships within the congregation is critical. We must align our behaviors with the messages that we want to send our children.

Having participated in this adventure, we learned how much lies beneath the questions that we encounter. There are some things that are evident right away, and some that we may feel are beyond our comprehension and limited perception. The decisions that we made and guidelines that we came up with should not be based on individual or spontaneous opinions or feelings. We have available to us almost 4,000 years of history! It can be hard to make rules while wishing to be flexible, yet we found that boundaries are indeed necessary, both for Jews in the congregation, and for non-Jews who join in our religious activities. For those who are unaccustomed to making and upholding rules, being "the heavy," or implementing rules and structure can be awkward, even difficult. But we feel that we have wrestled with important issues and have explored a number of scenarios and strategies in coming to our conclusions. We hope that you will accept what we have formulated and what we strongly feel are loving, nurturing and compassionate guidelines. We have explored and studied the role of the non-Jew with gratitude for the opportunity, and with deep respect for CBH and for the generations to come.

B'Shalom,
The Ritual Policy Task Force Committee

Affirmation of the Role of the Non-Jew in Our Congregation

September 17, 2003

As an evolving religious community whose religious observances are respectful of Jewish tradition with its emphasis on Torah, tzedakah, gemilut chasadim (acts of loving kindness,) prayer and community, we recognize and welcome the contributions of all of our members. Our congregation has agreed that certain values form the foundation of our community. Through their participation individual members can express their own special interests or talents.

We recognize and understand that there are several ways that non-Jews come to be part of our community. Most are through interfaith marriages. In these marriages, some non-Jewish spouses choose to become active participants in the life on the congregation. Some others may wish to participate occasionally. Still others may choose to refrain from participation, and some may even be participants in a different faith's religious community for themselves. In some cases, the participation of the Jewish spouse is a source of some marital negotiation, when, in fact, the non-Jewish partner may feel more than distance from their spouses' Jewish engagement, and may feel ambivalence or discomfort.

It is also sometimes the case that non-Jews come to Congregation Beth Hatikvah without having entered an interfaith relationship. They are spiritual seekers investigating Judaism for themselves.

In all cases, we recognize that there are emotional issues involved and deeply personal family dynamics. We strive to support all members of the family and to help them to find a comfortable, nourishing home in relation to our congregation.

As a touchstone for our deliberations, we turn to the list of values that have been established for Congregation Beth Hatikvah, and indicate briefly how they are applicable to our deliberations.

List of values:

1. Caring community - We welcome the participation of the non-Jewish spouse in all of the ways that we care for each other as a community.
2. Inclusivity - We value the unity of our community in that we respect and accept differences of views and lifestyles.
3. Shared responsibility - We welcome non-Jewish spouses in helping us to fulfill our mission and vision of a congregation, and also in fulfilling our mutual responsibility to repair the world.
4. Menschlichkeit - We strive for respect and decency in all of our personal and communal interactions.
5. Devotion to learning - We welcome and encourage Jews and non-Jews to learn with us about Jewish tradition, contemporary Judaism and how Judaism can help us achieve our human potential.

6. Balancing tradition and innovation - We retain the traditional approach where possible, but we embrace innovation when it is necessary to accommodate our special circumstances, in this case the presence and involvement of both Jewish and non-Jewish participants. In seeking this balance, we strive to make the Jewish tradition accessible to all.
7. Spirituality - We affirm and value the spiritual traditions of other peoples and we are open to the introduction of contributions that are consistent with the shared universal religious values of our peoples.
8. Comfort level - We strive to assure that all of us feel respected and accepted. Our down-to-earth informality is a reflection of our embrace of the person, so that each one can feel valued.
9. Engagement - it is of utmost importance that all members of our congregation feels that their contribution is valued, and in fact, needed.
10. Jewish continuity - We appreciate the contribution made by non-Jews to the continuity of the Jewish people by supporting our community and participating in Jewish family life.

While we want everyone in our community to participate as fully as they wish to, there are some limitations to the participation of non-Jews in certain religious activities. Some religious practices in various services and observances are recited as an affirmation of Jewish faith, and therefore are reserved for members of the Jewish people.

Religious activities that are open to all members

Jews and non-Jews may participate equally in all prayers that are recited by the congregation as a whole. Each individual is welcome to participate in prayers with the congregation according to their religious practice. Of course, private prayer is always encouraged.

In addition, each of our services includes English prayers that are read aloud for the congregation by designated Readers. Many of the English prayers in our services are appropriate for non-Jews to recite as Readers in our service. These are readings that represent our shared universal religious traditions. (For services in which readings and readers are pre-assigned, the rabbi will assist in selecting the appropriate readings for the Readers.)

Religious activities that are reserved for Jewish people to lead

Certain parts of our services include prayers that are considered honors when assigned to individuals to lead. In doing this, that person speaks on behalf of the congregation. In those cases where the prayers or rituals represent covenantal loyalty or commitment, these will be reserved for Jewish people. These include central prayers such as the Kiddush, the Aleynu, and the Amidah, the Shema and its blessings, the Torah service prayers and rituals, all Hebrew prayers and other prayers that are specific affirmations of covenant.

Every individual is welcome to pray with the congregation.

When questions are not directly or clearly addressed by this policy, consult with the rabbi for guidance.

Example of prayers and rituals reserved for Jewish people

This list concentrates on aspects of ritual that involve statements of faith in which a Jewish person invokes the covenant or brings himself or herself into a distinctively Jewish relationship with G-d. Statements and rituals that are appropriate for all people of faith are not on the list because we do wish to welcome all respectful participants into our community.

We have constructed the most complete list that we could, although it may not be exhaustive. If contingencies or issues come up that we were unable to anticipate, they should be handled according to the Rabbi's best judgment until it becomes necessary to bring them back before the committee. With that understanding, the following are the rituals and prayers that a non-Jew may not perform within a service or other community event.

Prayers that affirm the covenant, such as Shema and its blessings, Amidah, Kiddush, Kaddish, Aleynu.

Torah Rituals, such as: opening the ark, carrying the Torah, Torah service prayers, Torah reading and blessings (aliyot), haftarah reading and blessings, hagbah (lifting the Torah), and gelilah (dressing the Torah.) However, during the bar mitzvah of his or her child, a non-Jewish parent may stand at the side of the reader's table during the last two aliyot in order to stand as a family with their spouse and child.

For brit milah and baby naming, the prayers dedicating the child to the covenant of Israel, and sandek¹.

For weddings, the 7 wedding blessings.

For Jewish ritual documents, serving as a witness, such as for a ketubah (Jewish marriage contract) or a get (Jewish divorce document) or a conversion.

Prayers and rituals that Jews and Non-Jews can participate in as honors

Jews and non-Jews may participate equally in all prayers that are recited by the congregation as a whole.

Prayer Services: Many of the English prayers in our services are appropriate for non-Jews to recite aloud (on behalf of the congregation) as Readers in our service. Examples may be: Psalms, Poetic Introductions to the Amidah, Poems like "Merger" by Judy Chicago, and many of the readings in the back reading section of the Siddur.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah: Most supplemental English readings selected for b'nai mitzvah services are appropriate. These include many versions of blessings for the bar/bat mitzvah child. In addition, individual tributes written for the bar/bat mitzvah would always be appropriate.

¹ Sandek is the term for a person honored at the brit milah, traditionally either by holding the baby during the circumcision or handing the baby to the mohel.

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Brit Milah and Baby Naming: Most supplemental English readings selected for the naming services are appropriate. These include many versions of blessings for the child. In addition, individual tributes, including wishes and hopes for the child, would always be appropriate and welcome. It is appropriate for both parents to talk about the child's namesake, or to designate other family members or friends to do the same.

In the case of a brit milah, the baby can be passed from parents or grandparents to the mohel. This role, which may traditionally be called the kvater, can be performed by Jews and non-Jews.

There are no limitations on how the child's name is selected. (Naming a baby after a non-Jewish relative is not an issue.)

Weddings: Most supplemental English readings selected for the wedding service are appropriate. Well wishes and hopes for the new couple are also appropriate and welcome.