

The Keruv Papers #4

Keruv and
Implications for
Synagogue Policy

Rabbi Charles Simon



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Preface

This is the fourth in a series of four papers devoted to the issues of the Conservative Movement regarding demographic change and the subsequent need for keruv. The first three papers addressed the language and vocabulary of inclusion, creating and guiding a keruv committee and issues of staffing and holiday conflict. These papers were written in response to specific questions raised in the Federation of Jewish Men's Club lay and rabbinic think tanks convened from 2001–2008.

The purpose of this paper is to examine current synagogue policies in the Conservative/Masorti Movement in light of our changing populations. It addresses issues of synagogue membership, staffing, burial, rabbinic support and the Standards of Rabbinic Practice by which clergy must abide.

The complete Keruv white paper series
can be downloaded at
www.fjmc.org/keruv.html

Keruv and Implications for Synagogue Policy

The Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has provided our Movement with some of the necessary guidance that rabbis and lay leaders need in order to address the challenge of changing demographics in North American society. Recognizing that there are regional and local differences, following the model of *mara d'atra*, the CJLS has empowered the local congregational rabbis with a great deal of flexibility in order to allow them to respond in an appropriate manner.

Applying this model to the keruv initiative of the FJMC, Rabbi Myron Geller, who served in Gloucester MA for many years and is a member of the CJLS, wrote in *Intermarriage, Keruv Marriage, Synagogue Membership and the CJLS* which was presented at an FJMC Rabbinic Keruv Think Tank in 2006:

“The guidelines available in the *teshuvot* and deliberations of the CJLS leave practical application squarely upon the *mara d'atra* of the local congregation. This is a remarkable opportunity for the rabbi to ponder, study, and teach about the meaning of keruv and to mold congregational attitudes toward the intermarried. More than a few models of inspired outreach already exist and they demonstrate how important, farsighted, and courageous rabbinic leadership is to the success of keruv. It is entirely possible that the future of Conservative Judaism will be determined by our ability to welcome the intermarrieds in our communities, to capture their imagination and to inspire them to renew and build links with Torah tradition and our congregations.

When summarizing the decisions of the CJLS he notes,

“To date, keruv initiatives have suffered because it was unclear what their programmatic objectives were, what congregations and their rabbis were able to do to satisfy both the *halakhah* and the demands of outreach. The CJLS sought to navigate the difficult path between these two positions that were oftentimes conflicted. One’s application of the keruv initiative depended on whether one saw potentials Jews or potential threats in the intermarried among us.”

This paper attempts to provide a systematic framework to understand the issues that can be addressed if a congregation wishes to reach out to and involve our children and grandchildren and their potential spouses. Demographic trends have resulted in the creation of an intermarried culture that must be understood and embraced if the synagogue community wishes to maintain Jewish continuity. In order to accomplish this goal it is important that each community understand where matters of Jewish Law intersect with congregational custom and policy.

What are the issues that a community must address in order to attract and integrate intermarried families?

1. Membership
2. Burial
3. Staffing
4. Conflicting statements of goals
5. Rabbinic Attitudes
6. Rabbinic Support
7. Rabbinic Standards of Practice

Membership and burial are the great divide between culture and synagogue policy.

Membership

Synagogue lay leaders often fail to understand the impact their policy decisions have on their members and their affiliate organizations *vis a vis* intermarried families. While the synagogue might outwardly state it encourages non-Jewish spouses of members to feel comfortable and part of the community, its policies might create an opposite effect. For example, the synagogue that prohibits non-Jewish men and women from any type of affiliation or a legitimate role in a Men’s Club or Sisterhood undermines the connection that a non-Jewish spouse can play. Similarly a synagogue that prohibits non-Jews from serving as ushers or from being honored for community services weakens the message of the synagogue. Whether these policies were motivated by a fear of assimilating into the larger culture, fear of what the impact of the unknown will be on Jewish life, or the fear espoused by religious leaders who believe their congregants want them to officiate at intermarriages, the result has been the creation of institutions and synagogue cultures that unknowingly yet aggressively discourage those families from seeking to join and identify with our communities. If the supportive non-Jewish spouses are invisible how can they join a Men’s Club or Sisterhood? This policy of exclusion flies in the face of demographic truths.

The rabbinic leaders of the Movement have been aware of this trend for several generations and have not ignored these realities. There has been an evolution in the decisions of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards that began with an attempt to discourage intermarriage (1963), then allowed non-

Jews to sit together with their Jewish families on the High Holidays, and moved to a subtle acceptance of these non-Jews in many phases of synagogue life. This trend is also paralleled, though in a somewhat different fashion, in the materials published by the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism. These powerful changes in both instances document the institutions' efforts to reflect the realities of the community. The lay leadership of the congregations can further this evolution by rethinking how they account for families with intermarried adults in the membership rolls. Just one example should suffice.

Currently most Conservative synagogues in North America restrict their membership to Jews. Synagogue membership policies reflect a 1950's Ozzie and Harriet culture, i.e. in order to be a member of a synagogue one must be either "married" or "single". Married couples pay one amount and singles usually pay something less. In the event that a couple is intermarried, and since only Jews can be members, the intermarried unit is labeled "single", even if there are children who will be attending the Hebrew School and celebrating life events in the synagogue. Single membership costs less. In effect this subsidizes the intermarried family's membership. This policy is both fiscally unsound and reinforces the congregation's failure to acknowledge the non-Jewish partner.

An indigenous shift is slowly occurring in our congregations that involves a re-conceptualizing of who belongs to our synagogues. This reflects the data in the National Jewish Population of 2000 which indicates that in the Conservative Movement most of our members who are identified as families are not families as defined historically. They are households. This shift acknowledges that many people living together today are living in different groupings than the way they were understood fifty years ago. It also acknowledges that many intermarried couples (or multi-faith couples or any grouping

that comprises a household) can create Jewish homes and raise Jewish children. Basing membership on the model of counting households instead of singles or families makes more sense both financially and realistically. Another model that is becoming more popular bases membership dues on a sliding scale based on ability to pay, with total household income as the determining factor for either single or family memberships and no mention of marriage. Either model reflects a sensitivity to families with non-Jewish members.

Burial

The policies which a community formulates regarding the burial of the non-Jewish partner parallels the manner our communities address issues of membership. Our communities and our Rabbis have historically been conditioned to believe that the burying of a non-Jew in a Jewish cemetery violates one of the great legal taboos of Jewish law. The concept that holy ground and the people interred within will be desecrated if a non-Jew is buried in close proximity is a response less about Jewish law and more a result of attitudes that developed during the Middle Ages. This theory is similar to those held in some communities that believe women cannot hold a Torah. They are a result of attitudes that were shaped by historical circumstances and over time have assumed fallacious legal status that re-enforce the cultural status quo.

In past decades the CJLS attempted to address the issue of burial for intermarried families by suggesting special sections of cemeteries be created and barriers be planted that separate one grave from another. These efforts were based on the taboo theory and as a result failed to develop positions that fully addressed the issue. As a result, rabbis are continuously placed in situations where their conscience and understanding

of synagogue policy and Jewish law are in conflict. Their hearts might dictate one thing but the demands of synagogue policy and what they have been taught, (more often than not as if it were Jewish law), determines the nature of the decisions they have to make. There have been many times when rabbis have been confronted with the death of a non-Jewish spouse who labored for years on behalf of the synagogue and the rabbi, community and family are conflicted where the interment should take place. Similarly rabbis have had to make such decisions when a person in process of becoming Jewish dies prior to conversion or when the supportive non-Jewish spouse in an intermarried family who is raising Jewish children, dies. These are situations where some flexibility already exists, and the CJLS should take the initiative to assist the local rabbi and the respective community to create options that will more effectively address these concerns. As the culture changes or congregations consider changing their policies, these attitudes need to be re-visited.

Staffing

The guidelines from the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly regarding the staffing at synagogues state that intermarried Jews may not serve as teachers or youth directors because they present a negative role model. This “role model” approach to Jewish life fails to take into account the possibility that these intermarried individuals who seek to serve the Jewish community might be raising Jewish families. While positive Jewish role models are critical for children, it might be more effective if staffs were engaged because of who they were and their desire to serve the Jewish community, rather than lump them into the category of “non-acceptable”. This is a sticky issue, but many

smaller communities may have fewer choices than larger cities; the more effective teachers and youth leaders may be the ones who are intermarried, rather than the ones with Jewish spouses. Congregations and rabbis need to be empowered to make these decisions without feeling that the weight of the leadership of the Movement is looking over their shoulder and restricting them.

Conflicting Statements of Goals

There are those in the leadership of the Masorti/Conservative Movement who posit that the goal of keruv is to bring intermarried Jews into congregational life, particularly those trying to raise Jewish children, with or without the conversion of the non-Jewish spouse. This is the position of the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs. There are also those who posit that the only goal of keruv is conversion. While this discussion continues at the leadership levels, there are implications in the congregations on a daily basis. Requiring conversion by an adult who is not ready to accept the responsibilities of becoming a Jew can be an active deterrent to an intermarried family with children who desire to affiliate with a Conservative synagogue.

Given that reality, some of our congregations have unwittingly created situations that discourage non-Jewish spouses from identifying with the community, and as a consequence, limit their active participation to “conversion classes” or “basic Judaism classes”. For example, while many scholarly studies indicate that women’s involvement is the determining factor in the development of a child’s Jewish identity and that social integration is the key factor to Jewish identification and Jewish choices, synagogues can be unwittingly perpetuating a community in which these women are discouraged from

learning how to identify with the Jewish people. This bodes badly for Jewish families and by extension, our communal institutions.

Our synagogue leaders need to re-assess their policies and behaviors and distinguish between what are cultural and institutional policies and what are *halakhic* ones. By recognizing who is living in our communities, who our children are marrying and who we wish to attract and engage, we can act to bring families closer to congregational life. By making these distinctions we can transition from an exclusionary culture to one that is more inclusive and we can reposition our Movement from a position of weakness to one of strength.

Rabbinic Attitudes

Rabbis have historically viewed intermarriage negatively. It is a matter of strict code that members of the Rabbinical Assembly may not officiate in any way at the marriage of a Jew to a non-Jewish partner. As a consequence, the initial rabbinic response to intermarrieds or potential intermarrieds has usually been more concerned with religious responsibility and participation instead of considering the nature of how this increasing population can be integrated and absorbed into the community. Rabbis who are sensitive to the number of intermarriages taking place are realizing that a number of ways to work with these populations can exist within our congregations. Attitudes take many years to change, and we are currently a part of that process.

Rabbis have been led to believe that too much acceptance and absorption will result in a diminishment of Jewish life, Jewish practice and the nature of what occurs in the religious

community. These assumptions are currently being challenged by a number of demographers. This should lead us to reconsider our attitudes and policies. If our goal is to “absorb” the intermarried couples and families into the community, or to create welcoming environments that will attract both Jews and non-Jews and foster their participation and involvement, then rabbinic attitudes must promote endogamy and at the same time accept the choices that adults have made. It is possible to create a language that responds in a welcoming manner to those who are choosing to intermarry, maintain our *halakhic* stance, and respond to those who are concerned that “acceptance” of intermarrieds is a form of condoning intermarriage. This was addressed in a previous paper in this series.

Rabbis have in many cases been led to believe that Jewish law and synagogue policy are synonymous. They are not. By co-mingling these we have unwittingly created a culture of exclusion. It is possible to separate these threads, retain our *halakhic* positions, and at the same time no longer deter a growing population from feeling a part of us. Our communities are more broadly and diversely composed than we previously thought. Lay leaders have a role to play in working with rabbis who do not separate the *halakhah* from synagogue policy to relax these stringencies.

For example, synagogue policy has placed undue emphasis on whose name can be mentioned in the bulletin and under what circumstances. The community learns about itself and communicates its values through its bulletin. We should be prepared to offer comfort and guidance as a community to the non-Jewish family members in our synagogues and to their non-Jewish families when a death occurs. Because acknowledging members’ family occasions is important, both Jewish and non-Jewish family members can be hurt when these events are not properly recognized.

A broadening of our definition of community should never be viewed as a diminishment of the importance of being Jewish or misconstrued as providing an opportunity for non-Jews to fulfill *halakhic* requirements, nor should it. The community celebrates most of its religious functions on the *bima*, a visual delineation. Broadening the definition of community challenges us to trust people to understand that fulfilling religious mandates are restricted to people who are Jewish.

Rabbinic Support

A world of opportunity exists for the rabbi to be supportive when learning an intermarriage is going to occur. The rabbi who understands this as an opportunity can provide guidance to the Jewish partner's parents and establish a relationship based on mutual respect with the prospective couple. The rabbi who understands this as a threat to Jewish continuity will approach the situation from a vantage point of weakness and failure and does little to foster Jewish living for the new couple. One of the results of the FJMC Keruv Rabbinic think tanks has been that participating rabbis discuss the nature of the support they offer and learn from one another. The limits of how supportive a rabbi can be and what can be accomplished to involve and integrate a prospective intermarried couple have yet to be realized.

Rabbinic Standards of Practice

Rabbinic involvement is often deterred by a fear of the tremendous pressure that will be brought to bear on the rabbi to officiate at an intermarriage and/or to officiate in some capacity at the life cycle events of intermarried families. While it is possible for the rabbi to be involved in any number of life

cycle events, officiating at an intermarriage, or even attending an intermarriage, is not. This issue should not be taken lightly by lay leaders. Today, Masorti/Conservative rabbis are prohibited from attending intermarriages that occur within their own families. To do so would violate a "Rabbinic Standard of Practice" and those rabbis risk expulsion from the Rabbinical Assembly.

One could say that this standard creates an unnecessary barrier and distance within the rabbinic family and actively discourages the intermarried rabbinic family members from choosing to live and raise Jewish children. One could also say that rabbis are "defenders of the faith" and as such need to set a strict example and adhere to a higher standard than what many is expected or occurring within the Jewish community. The Rabbinic Standards of Practice are not matters of Jewish Law but were instituted by a particular culture at a particular time. Our culture has changed and this particular "Standard of Practice" should be revisited in the name of *shalom bayit* for these rabbinic families.

Conclusion

Community and religious culture conflict with the emerging intermarried culture in synagogue related activities *vis-a-vis* membership, burial, communication policies and rabbinic non-*halakhic* decisions. These predominant cultural attitudes should be replaced by an approach that brings Jewish values to the community, and accepts those who have chosen to identify with the Jewish people and are not prepared to convert, in a loving and dignified manner.



Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 832

New York, NY 10115

International@FJMC.org

T: (212) 749-8100

F: (212) 316-4271

Toll free: 800-288-FJMC