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JTS Inter marriage Workshop Signals Change On Issue

First-ever ‘sensitizing’ sessions at Conservative seminary reveal movement in transition.

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The Conservative movement’s long war against inter marriage may be slowly drawing to a close.

For decades, as the Reform movement reached out, Conservative leaders stuck to a harder line, hoping that by doing so they could discourage Jews from marrying gentiles.

Today, as the once-dominant American Jewish movement faces shrinking membership rolls and new leadership, that hard line seems to be dramatically softening.

Some of the changes could be seen last week when, in a first for any Conservative seminary, the Jewish Theological Seminary hosted a two-day workshop “sensitizing” students to “issues of inter marriage and changing demographics.”

The optional workshop was run by the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, a group that has for the past decade advocated for more inclusiveness in the Conservative movement. Approximately 30 rabbinical, cantorial and education students participated, a number organizers say would have been considerably larger were it not for various scheduling challenges.

“When I was in rabbinical school, we were taught there was only one way to respond” to inter marriage, Rabbi Charles Simon, executive director of the FJMC and a JTS graduate, told the group of students. “And that was not to respond at all, but to walk away and say ‘I’m sorry we’re losing another person.’”

In contrast, speaker after speaker at last week’s workshop urged students not to walk away but to reach out, not only to inter married Jews and their partners, but to longtime congregants whose children have inter married and who are fearful of being judged.

(Full disclosure: This reporter, who writes this newspaper’s “In the Mix” column, appeared on a panel discussion called “Listening to Inter marrieds.”)

Barry Holtz, dean of JTS’ William Davidson School of Education called the workshop “a



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groundbreaking moment at the seminary.” Once considered a bastion of traditionalism, JTS, which recently began ordaining openly gay rabbis and which came under new leadership in 2007, is, like the rest of the Conservative movement, in transition.

To be sure, the movement is hardly going Reform. It continues to see itself as guided by Jewish law, does not recognize patrilineal descent or allow its rabbis to officiate at interfaith weddings, and its approach to interfaith families varies considerably from synagogue to synagogue and region to region.

And intermarriage remains a touchy issue. While Rabbi Daniel Nevins, the dean of JTS’ rabbinical school, spoke at last week’s workshop, he insisted that all his comments remain off the record.

Many JTS faculty members — such as history professor and former provost Jack Wertheimer, who has published recent opinion pieces in *Commentary* and other Jewish publications on the topic — continue to speak out strongly against intermarriage.

Nonetheless, things have changed dramatically even from four years ago, when the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism issued its “Al Ha-Derekh” paper emphasizing the need to encourage conversion of gentile spouses and detailing what non-Jewish partners can and can’t be allowed to do in the synagogue.

And that paper was a big change from just a few years earlier, when many Conservative leaders proudly spoke of being “hawkish” on intermarriage and the United Synagogue publicized its opposition to allowing intermarried Jews to serve in leadership roles or as Jewish educators.

Today, there is talk of allowing rabbis to attend interfaith weddings of friends and family members, a question that will come before the Rabbinical Assembly when it meets later this year.

And earlier this month the movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards ruled that the non-Jewish spouses of congregants can be buried alongside their Jewish partners in Jewish cemeteries, provided that they are in a section set aside for this purpose, that gentile clergy do not officiate at the funeral and that no non-Jewish markers appear on the graves.

In the ruling, approved by a vote of 10 (three law committee members abstained, and one voted against) is the statement, “Our relations to non-Jews are very different than in the past. Many of us have non-Jews in our families. All of us know non-Jews who are strongly connected to the Jewish community although they have chosen not to convert and retain their status as non-Jews.

“In regard to the question of interfaith marriages, we must be sensitive to their feelings and make them feel welcome in our communities. In addition, non-Jewish spouses and children who are involved in our synagogues, while not Jewish, are nevertheless part of our community...”

Last week’s workshop at JTS was a condensed version of the FJMC’s two-day “think tanks” on outreach to interfaith families, which it has conducted with over 200 Conservative rabbis since 2001. But it’s only in the past two years that a session at JTS seemed viable.

“Under the previous chancellor, this could never have happened,” Rabbi Simon told *The Jewish Week*, referring to Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, who was succeeded by Chancellor Arnold Eisen. “There just wasn’t an understanding of the dimensions of what was going on.”

Granted, there is hardly unanimous support for outreach. The workshop was only allotted

eight hours, and was relegated to the Thursday and Friday after President's Day, a time when many students were away, needed to travel to student pulpits or were busy preparing for "interview days," the annual Sunday and Monday when employers visit the seminary to interview graduating students.

Rabbi Simon is hoping that the workshop signifies a beginning, however, and that in the future JTS will consider a mandatory session or doing more to integrate outreach issues into the curriculum.

Participants were quick to point out that, since the program was optional, they were a self-selected group and not necessarily representative of the wider student body. However, many people noted that even at JTS — whose students represent the most committed members of the movement — few students or faculty remain personally untouched by intermarriage.

At least one of the current rabbinical students grew up in an interfaith home, and many have close friends and family members who are intermarried.

The Conservative movement's shift on intermarriage comes as it, like all Jewish institutions, is grappling with new budget constraints and a tight employment market. The second day of the JTS workshop was held in a dorm, rather than in the main building, because the seminary, in a cost-cutting measure, is no longer open on Fridays. And at dinner and in the halls, several students spoke grimly about their prospects for finding jobs when they graduate, noting that many synagogues are cutting clergy positions.

Many at the workshop talked about the struggle to balance boundaries and tradition with the need to be more inclusive.

Rabbi Simon noted that the restrictions many synagogues debate about where non-Jews can stand or if they can touch the Torah are "minhag," or tradition, rather than Jewish law.

"It's about perception, culture, how do you create a sacred space," he said. "It's not necessarily a halachic issue. How you handle this is up to you, but don't get stuck" thinking that Jewish law prohibits things it does not actually prohibit.

At one session, a male rabbinical student burst out, "If we're going to be so welcoming, why not just do the intermarriage? Yet I don't want to. This feels like a slippery slope."

A female rabbinical student next to him retorted, "It's a slippery slope either way. If you don't slip down one side, you slip down the other side."

"I want to be welcoming, but I have this 'but,' and I don't know what to do with the 'but,'" the male student replied.

Intermarried Jews have always been able to join Conservative synagogues, of course, but strict regulations barred them from assuming leadership roles and prevented their gentile partners from participating in lifecycle ceremonies, appearing on the bima or even being listed as a family member on synagogue mailings.

Of all these policies, the lifecycle events seem the most alienating, many at the workshop noted.

One speaker, Jenn Chau, 32, who grew up in a Conservative congregation in Queens spoke about how hurtful it was to have her non-Jewish father, at the last minute, rudely told he could not be on the bima during her bat mitzvah.

Today, a number of Conservative synagogues allow non-Jewish family members on the bima during b'nai mitzvah and baby-naming ceremonies, although some require them to stand on a separate step or make sure to clarify that they are not saying a blessing over the Torah.

Some are also allowing aufrufs, the pre-wedding aliyah, for interfaith couples and are reconsidering longstanding policies barring the mention of interfaith weddings from the synagogue newsletter.

Conspicuously absent from this workshop were the once-ubiquitous debates over “inreach versus outreach” or whether welcoming and being sensitive to interfaith families makes it impossible to promote in-marriage.

At one point during the workshop Rabbi Simon said “we’re caught between engagement on one hand and promoting endogamy. We have to do both at once.” However, he did not elaborate as to how this is possible.

Asked about this later, he told The Jewish Week that one can embrace interfaith couples while “at the same time saying we also believe that it’s easier when both parties are Jewish, have positive Jewish feelings and are willing to work on that road together.”

Presenting on studies about interfaith families, Len Saxe of Brandeis University’s Steinhardt Social Research Institute, told the workshop that “demography is not destiny,” and noted that the intermarried population has become too large for the Jewish community to write off or ignore.

“It takes two Jews to produce two kids in an in-marriage; it takes one Jew to produce two in an intermarriage,” Saxe said. “If more than 50 percent of intermarried families raise Jewish children, we could experience Jewish growth.”

But encouraging intermarried families to raise Jewish children, particularly in the Conservative movement, requires a more proactive approach, FJMC presenters emphasized.

“The rabbi who says, ‘I don’t know how many people in my congregation are intermarried or have children who are intermarried, because they don’t come to me,’ is making a mistake,” Rabbi Simon said. “I say, ‘Don’t you think the parents, your congregants, are in pain?’ You need to position yourself in a way that people know you’re receptive.”

“Saying my door is always open is not effective,” he added. “You can’t expect them to come to you. You have to go to them.”

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