

What is KERUV?

from the Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs website: www.fjmc.org

"I felt like such a failure when my son married out, it felt like a rejection of everything I believed in. I didn't tell any of my synagogue friends for weeks. We had done everything we were supposed to from Jewish camps to lighting candles---what happened?"

"Although I am not Jewish myself, I have been totally supportive of Jewish observance. I schlepped the kids to Hebrew school, brought them to the Purim carnivals, took them to services. And yet, I felt like a stranger when I watched my family on the bima at my son's Bar Mitzvah."

"People keep asking me why I don't convert. I would love to, but my mother would be devastated. How would you feel if any of your children converted from Judaism?"

These comments came from a disparate group of adults sitting in a circle in a nondescript synagogue classroom. Some in the group had young children, some had grandchildren, some were empty-nesters. Some were Jewish, some were not. What they all had in common was that their lives had, in some way, been affected by intermarriage. They were brought together at a FJMC Keruv event. Every participant wanted to share his or her emotions and learn from others who had dealt with similar situations. A skilled and trained FJMC Keruv consultant facilitated the meeting, delicately steering the group through a spirited and emotional discussion.

In over sixty synagogues throughout North America, sessions like this one have been held under the auspices of the FJMC Keruv Initiative. Since 1999, FJMC has conducted rabbinic think tanks and lay consultant training sessions across the United States from Providence, Rhode Island, to Berkeley, California. More than 100 lay people and 150 rabbis have participated. FJMC publications have helped congregations implement their own successful Keruv programs.

The FJMC Keruv Initiative was launched to address the most profound change affecting the American Jewish community in the 21st Century. Professor Sylvia Barack Fishman of Brandeis University, in her study, "Choosing Jewish," published by the American Jewish Committee, states that in the American Jewish community today:

1. More than one-third of American Jews are married to non-Jews.
2. Close to one-half of recent "Jewish" marriages are between a Jew and a non-Jew.
3. Of all the Jews who are co-habiting today, over 80% of these partnerships include individuals of non-Jewish origin.

In all too many cases, the parents of these marriages, of these co-habitations, of these arrangements, have nowhere to go to express the pain they feel and the dilemmas they face. We have a name for these parents: synagogue congregants.

With nearly half of all Jews marrying a non-Jew, few people in our Conservative congregations do not have an intermarried family member. Yet until recently, the issues surrounding intermarriage were rarely acknowledged in Conservative synagogues. Moreover, intermarried families who chose to affiliate predominantly were choosing Reform congregations where outreach programs were more common and synagogue policies often were more appealing.

The FJMC Keruv Initiative serves the needs of our congregations in several ways. Keruv programming provides opportunities for congregants to explore issues relating to intermarriage in a safe and supportive environment. The establishment of a synagogue Keruv Committee fosters a culture change which makes the congregation more appealing to potential members with diverse backgrounds.

As Rabbi Charles Simon, FJMC Executive Director, expressed it,

“If we are concerned with the future of Conservative Judaism and fail to act proactively, then our movement will be condemned to a diminishing future.”

As with all culture change, successful implementation of Keruv is not always easy. Resistance can come from both clergy and lay leaders who fear that promotion of Keruv either sanctions intermarriage or compromises halachic (Jewish legal) standards. FJMC Keruv consultants understand that interpretation of Jewish law is the province of the local rabbi (mara d’atra) and that the objectives of Keruv do not include changing ritual practices. The FJMC Keruv program recognizes intermarriage as a reality that congregations must confront as they face the future.

What has been accomplished? In congregations where FJMC Keruv consultants have established active and flourishing committees and programs, changes are obvious. Intermarried families feel more welcome and all congregants have a forum in which to discuss their concerns and emotions. Broader yet are the changes throughout the Conservative movement, where every leading institution is now reconsidering its traditional posture toward intermarriage and Conservative congregations are evaluating their own policies, trying to find ways to open doors to intermarried families.

Twenty years after its creation, the Steering Committee of the FJMC Keruv Initiative remains focused on the people in the Conservative movement who need and want Keruv programming. FJMC is motivated by the continuing progress within the world of Conservative Judaism and remains inspired by mentors such as Rabbi Harold Shulweiss of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California, who has written,

“In our attitude and practice toward the stranger we as a community of faith will recover the moral passion and purpose in Jewish living. Out there I seek seekers who want to discover a faith, wisdom, ethics and people who can solidify their lives. Out there are intermarried couples who stand outside on the threshold of the synagogue, ambivalent, frightened to enter, waiting to be invited in.”

Assumptions of the Keruv Initiative

The FJMC Keruv Initiative is based upon assumptions that clarify and explain the context of the program:

- Each Congregation has a unique culture.
- A rabbi/lay team is essential to effect cultural change.
- The rabbi’s authority as Mara d’Atra (Master of the House) is underutilized.
- Congregational transformation must develop from the rabbi’s place of comfort.
- The process of Keruv, of welcoming people when we simply are not used to welcoming, is a challenge.

Nevertheless, it is vital and a key to the survival, growth and emotional well being of the Conservative Movement in the 21st century.

FJMC Keruv Program

The FJMC Keruv initiative is based on a lay/professional partnership that began in 2001. Since then, FJMC has brought together groups of rabbis to learn and to think about the issues that are occurring in their communities and within their member families. With the help of academics who study the dynamics of intermarriage, rabbis are challenged to examine how they respond to synagogue members and their children when intermarriages occur.

Rabbis are invited to recommend a man and a woman to be trained as FJMC Keruv consultants. During the course of a weekend of training, these volunteers are taught to partner with their rabbi and to provide strategic support to their fellow congregants. While the consultants are provided with a support network and an annual weekend of additional training, the rabbi/lay team works in their own way to address community needs.