

## RA Keruv Rabbinic Think Tank Summary

What follows is a summary of the FJMC Keruv Rabbinic Think Tank that took place in Metuchen, New Jersey, December 2-3, 2013. The taping process was not overly successful in every instance. Twenty-nine congregational rabbis and two Cantors were in attendance. The discussions were lively and provocative.

### 1. Should we rethink the process of Conversion?

A presentation was made challenging the traditional process which we use for conversion under the assumption that perhaps we make it too difficult. The discussion revealed that standards for conversion, (not including mikvah and hatafat dam brit) are totally subjective. One rabbi could insist upon a period of study for a year or longer and theoretically another could decide that one session would be sufficient.

The presenter suggested that a model similar to a health club membership be considered where a person can easily join but needs to work at it after joining to become proficient.

This changing, not lowering of standards, could possibly increase the number of conversions taking place and bring people closer to the rabbi, synagogue and community. Discussion followed both in favor of and in opposition to, followed. At one point the question was asked whether or not this idea was sent to a member of the CJLS or to the entire CJLS. The presenter indicated that he was not yet prepared to do so.

2. **Burial of the non Jewish spouse:** Challenge with Burial, desire to bury nj spouse with Jewish spouse who are members of congregation in a cemetery (not owned by synagogue) apparently don't ask don't tell policy is the only way to handle this unless cemetery bylaws are changed. Only option is the non-sectarian section. Only is to offer non-Jewish spouses more expensive graves (double the price) in the non-sectarian section. What do you do? What do they do in a patrilineal situation? The cemetery stated that if a Reform rabbi says the person is "Jewish" they accept them. Discussion followed. It is obvious that a great deal of variation occurs across the Continent. It was suggested that rabbis interviewing with congregations should have this information.

### 3. What should a synagogue application look like?

The presenter indicated that applications for membership are extremely complicated and in many instances detract from engagement. The question was asked if a person goes a congregation what is the process for receiving an application, who presents it and under what circumstances? What is it composed of? Discussion followed including how the synagogue is presented through its website and what is the relationship between the website and the membership application? Suggestions for different models followed.

**Question:** Where should membership fees be posted? Should it be on the website?

Is this part of a larger conversation about where synagogue membership will be in five years?

**Question:** What types of questions should not be placed on a membership application?

**Question:** Why are we asking people who are not Jewish for their Hebrew names?

**Question:** What is the relationship between a synagogue constitution and a membership application?

Information was shared about the various forms of membership which exist in our congregations and how they evolving.

Discussion followed about what constitutes a Jewish family and how do we recognize the supportive non-Jewish spouse in our communities who can sit on what committees

Comment: Teachers need to be sensitized to nature of changing families

An intake model was presented and suggested.

4. **What do we need to do when someone from a different religious tradition is Divorced and remains in the community. How do we offer them comfort?** Discussion followed.
5. **Should our youth groups be utilized to attract and engage patrilineal children or unchurched members of our community who are sincere seekers in order to bring them closer to Jewish life?** Cases were presented: Discussion followed. Comments were made about the state of many of our youth programs where some participants are clearly not Jewish by halakic standards. A discussion followed regarding the relationship between congregational youth programs and current USCJ Youth policies. Discussion followed where does one draw the line? Should we open up our youth programs and schools and stop being so fearful? Should USY be asked to revisit their current requirements in light of current demographics and the needs of our Movement to grow?
6. **What's in a name?** The question was asked, what does one call a non-Jewish woman who is raising a Jewish child and wishes to be included with a Hebrew name when the family is called up for an aliyah? Discussion followed, a number of suggestions were put forward.
7. **Can a non-Jew open the Ark, A Discussion of the recently passed teshuvah.** The teshuvah was summarized and then the presenter asked the group how many of them thought this was a halakic issue? An overwhelming majority through a show of hands felt that this was not a matter of Jewish law. The presenter then asked how many of the group would permit it? An overwhelming majority indicated that they would not permit it. A discussion followed surrounding the value of this honor and its impact on the Jewish community. Comments were made that indicating that this topic should have been presented to the CJLS in the context of other issues and that possibly it was something that should have been discussed in larger forums before it went to the CJLS.
8. **Appropriate Tallit language.** The question was raised how a rabbi or volunteers should respond when a Jewish person is asked to wear a tallit and refuses. Discussion and suggestions followed.
9. **The Salon Model:** Outreach to Different populations. A presentation about a model of engagement in apartments or people's homes could attract empty nesters or other types of groups.
10. **What will our shuls look like in five years?** A presentation was made focusing on the joint statement written by JOI and the FJMC. It was explained as a document to be used for discussion in light of current demography and the Pew study. Discussion followed, as anticipated there was both agreement and disagreement with many of the items