

Bet Am Shalom Longstanding Policies on Intermarriage Ceremonies  
and Other Related Issues  
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There are varying oral accounts of what our policies were with respect to intermarriage ceremonies before 1988. Some recall several “mixed marriage” or “interfaith” ceremonies here on site before that time. Others are not sure.

Nonetheless, in 1988 the congregation took up the question of whether Jew/non-Jew ceremonies would take place on our premises. The answer was no, but that does not tell the story.

The question was put to the Board of Trustees, or perhaps initially to the ritual committee, because a congregant family wanted to have such a ceremony here, and because another congregant who was both a rabbi and a family friend wanted to perform the ceremony. (Such was the normal procedure of *she’elot ut’shuvot*, i.e. “inquiries and responsa,” throughout Jewish history. The Rabbis would rarely raise a subject theoretically. Rather, they would “respond” when a quandary arose.)

The congregation proceeded to engage in a Reconstructionist-style “process” whereby members would be able to 1) examine and express their own feelings about the issue; 2) study ancient and contemporary sources on the matter; and 3) engage in discussions to clarify their views. Numerous articles (pro, con, and neutral) were gathered and made available. Congregants expressed their own

views in writing. Notable among them were congregants with Judaic credentials or relevant backgrounds.

Notable, too, was the phenomenon of congregants who were sympathetic to intermarriage, and even to the rabbi's officiating, but who in the end felt that the synagogue premises were not appropriate for such events.

The vote of the Board is in our official records, as are many of the source articles and several of the congregants' personal statements. Board members assessed the mood of the membership and voted not to allow intermarriage ceremonies at Bet Am Shalom. However, they reaffirmed their welcoming of intermarried families and their commitment to what was then popularly called "outreach." They also did not place any stipulations on the rabbi's own practice in this regard. The rabbi was free to conduct intermarriage ceremonies as he/she saw fit, but not in the synagogue.

When I became the rabbi of Bet Am Shalom officially in July 1989 (and unofficially when I was offered the position in April 1989), I was presented with this policy, along with the entire packet of readings and writings that had comprised the process. I was asked at the time whether I was comfortable with the policy. I was, though I knew that this was (and still is) a tender subject for many in the congregation.

#### Clarifying the definitions of different types of weddings:

What I found interesting, among other things, was that the study did not seem to distinguish between what I will call an "intermarriage wedding," or, more

accurately, a “Jew/non-Jew wedding,” as opposed to an “interfaith” wedding. The two are different (some would say very different).

In a *Jew/non-Jew wedding*, one partner is Jewish and one is not. A rabbi or cantor (or sometimes a layperson or secular official) performs the ceremony much in the same way they would conduct the ceremony for two Jews. No non-Jewish clergy participate in the proceedings. The ceremony may or may not be less overtly Jewish than an in-marriage liturgy, but it is not syncretistic (i.e., it is not a blending of two or more religious traditions).

In an *interfaith wedding*, by contrast, traditions from the non-Jew’s (non-Jewish) religious background are integrated into the ceremony. There may even be participation by a clergyperson of a faith other than Judaism. Hence, “interfaith.”

#### Basic questions moving forward:

Because Bet Am Shalom will soon reexamine the 1989 policy, these distinctions will be helpful. Do congregants want to allow “Jew/non-Jew” weddings on the premises? Additionally, do congregants want to allow “interfaith” weddings on the premises? Would we choose to be more liberal in our policy for congregants than for outside renters in making this distinction?

If we allow interfaith (i.e., non-Jewish) clergy to participate here, will we impose any requirements or restrictions on them? Currently, when an outside party rents our facility for a wedding, our Bet Am Shalom rabbi must approve of the rabbi or cantor performing the ceremony. We do so to safeguard against our abetting non-credentialed rabbis or cantors from working here, including so-called

Messianic rabbis. Will we continue that policy? Will we extend that vetting process to non-Jewish clergy?

If we allow any of these varieties of ceremonies, then by extension we would allow our own rabbi to perform them. Even if we do not change some or all of our policies, will we *require or encourage* our rabbi to perform intermarriage or interfaith weddings for congregants (or others), whether here or elsewhere?

Additionally, would we choose to allow a wedding on the premises where *neither* partner is Jewish?

#### Kashrut at ceremonies:

Currently, we have a strict kashrut policy for non-congregant renters of any kind (wedding, b'nai mitzvah party, b'rit bat or b'rit milah, etc.). We have a somewhat more liberal policy for congregants celebrating their simcha here. In any case, will we maintain the same strictures for intermarriage weddings and /or interfaith weddings as we do now? Or even for in-marriage weddings going forward?

Some background: The current kashrut guidelines were laid out by the ritual committee and myself in 1990 with Board approval, and updated and revised many times over, especially when we began renting our facility to outside parties. There may be a desire among congregants to reexamine both the specifics and the general assumptions of our kashrut guidelines irrespective of the subject of weddings.

### Shabbat and Calendar policies:

Currently, we do not allow weddings to take place on Shabbat (allowing liberally for the conclusion of Shabbat on Saturday night). Nor do we allow weddings during various “restricted periods” on the Jewish calendar. Will we maintain those same restrictions on intermarriage or interfaith weddings?

### Background reading:

There is no end to the number of books and articles that exist on this subject. In order to narrow our purview, we might start with the relevant sections in the three-volume *A Guide to Jewish Practice: Volume 3, The Life Cycle* (2014, RRC Press, Wyncote PA), especially pages 149-152 (“When a Marriage is an Intermarriage”), and pages 158-161 (“Who Officiates?”). This voluminous guide lays out the official current range of positions within the Reconstructing Judaism movement. [A Guide to Reconstructionist Jewish Practice \(pages 148-161\)](#)

I recommend that we familiarize ourselves with accurate data from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (RRA), Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), and the Conservative movement’s Rabbinical Assembly (RA) on the percentage of their member rabbis who conduct weddings where one partner is a non-Jew. A complete picture of the data would distinguish between Jew/non-Jew ceremonies (intermarriage ceremonies) and interfaith ceremonies; between those who co-officiate with other clergy and those who do not; and between those who require some kind of commitment to establishing a Jewish home or

raising Jewish children, and those who do not. In my travels in the rabbinate, I have encountered many variations on these categories.

The reason I suggest this is that hearsay is not a good way to determine our own place along the spectrum of American Jewish practice. In my experience, people's impressions of what the lay of the land looks like are inaccurate.

Here is a link to recent surveys of both Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis with regard to these practices:

[Survey on Reconstructionist Congregations' Interfaith Inclusion Policies and Practices \(May 2021\)](#)

[Survey on Reform Synagogue Interfaith Inclusion Policies and Practices \(November 2019\)](#)

Here is an article in the Jewish Telegraphic Agency from 2018 on a statistical survey of rabbis' practices:

[Nearly all Reform Rabbis Perform Interfaith Ceremonies — but Not with Non-Jewish Clergy, Study Finds](#)

Background note: The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association (Reconstructionist) and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (Reform) both allow member rabbis to conduct interfaith ceremonies, including interfaith ceremonies, but without “endorsing” or “encouraging” their member rabbis to do so. The Rabbinical Assembly (Conservative) prohibits their member rabbis from conducting or participating in these ceremonies, though there is considerable discussion in the membership about liberalizing their policy, and some Conservative rabbis do indeed participate in various ways in interfaith/intermarriage ceremonies.

Next, it might be instructive for us to provide access to some or all of the readings our predecessors used in their 1988 study. They are out of date, but they reflect some concerns that are still relevant. For the sake of brevity, these readings are not included here, but they can be made available on request.

Finally, here are some helpful articles and videos online. (An important caveat is that some of these sources use “interfaith,” “intermarriage,” “Jew/non-Jew” and “mixed marriage” interchangeably. You will have to sort out the distinctions for yourself):

[Why I Won't Officiate at Intermarriages by Rabbi Elias Lieberman](#)

[Article in The Current from 2017 on current Conservative rabbinic views of intermarriage](#)

[A conversation with Rabbi Angela Buchdahl of Central Synagogue](#)

[YouTube talk by Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove \(Park Avenue Synagogue\) on Intermarriage issue, focused on “taking responsibility for our own Judaism rather than pinning our shortcomings on the rabbi.”](#)

### One Final Consideration

It might behoove us to ask ourselves along the way why our rabbi, or any rabbi, chooses *not* to officiate at interfaith or intermarriage ceremonies, and why many have chosen to do so. What are the philosophical, theological, sociological, and practical rationales behind these decisions? If we were to hear these reasons, it may not sway us one way or another, but it might make our own thought process

more credible, i.e. more grounded in the context of the discussions that rabbis are having with themselves and with one another on behalf of the Jewish people.