



Proposed Amendments to Adas Israel Bylaws Updates to Membership Criteria

For community vote at Annual Meeting June 19th beginning at 6:15 PM

Pursuant to our bylaws, we are publishing in advance proposed changes to that governing document. The Board of Directors approved these changes at its April 10th meeting, and the membership will vote on them at the June 19th Annual Meeting. Read below to review the origin of the proposal, our current practices, a chronology of the process, the proposed bylaws amendment and an FAQ sheet.

Special thanks must go to the Task Force convened to review this issue. Members are Ian Wallace, Nancy Weiss, Blake Yedwab, Michelle Buzgon (Vice President for Membership), and Laurie Aladjem (President-Elect and Chair of the Task Force).

ORIGIN OF PROPOSED CHANGES TO MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA

In March 2016, United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism (“USCJ,” the umbrella organization for Conservative congregations) created the “USCJ Commission on Community and Covenant in the Twenty-First Century.” This is a long way of saying that the committee was charged with studying how Conservative congregations can be more welcoming to two-faith families and making recommendations to USCJ’s Board of Directors. Adas Israel member Stephen Lachter was a member of this Commission.

This was a new approach. While various congregations, including our own, had been implementing practices in this regard, the organization as a whole had not focused on the changing reality within the Jewish world, including Conservative Judaism, in this way. This recommendation focused on the requirements for membership in a Conservative synagogue, and mirrors USCJ’s recent shift to imposing fewer rules on its member congregations, giving them more latitude in determining their own governing policies. The Commission recommended that each *kehillah* be permitted to create its own requirements for membership; until this point, only Jews were allowed to be members of Conservative shuls, and synagogues were required to say this in their governing document. The recommendation was adopted by the USCJ Board in December, 2016, and approved overwhelmingly by the Presidents of Conservative congregations in March, 2017. Adas Israel Congregation supported the change. While no Congregation is required to change its criteria for membership, a number of Congregations, some in our area, have amended their bylaws to no longer stipulate that only Jewish people can be members.



ADAS ISRAEL'S PRACTICES

Many Conservative congregations have always had “individual memberships” and “family memberships.” This means that in the case of two-faith families, Jewish partners have been “individual members” and non-Jewish partners have not been members. In 1997, our membership approved a change in membership categories to “household membership,” and since then we’ve have one-adult households as members and two-adult households as members. In practice, we make no distinction between members of interfaith families for purposes of membership.

This change to “household memberships” has had no effect on our ritual practices. Only Jewish people can have Torah *aliyot*, for example, and our rabbis do not perform interfaith marriages. Children of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother who wish to become a *B'nai Mitzvah* visit the *mikvah* if they haven’t already.

What we have found in our community since 1997 is that interfaith families feel welcomed and accepted and DO enroll their children in our Gan. These children DO attend our religious school. We have seen that when we welcome two-faith families and show them they are accepted here, they embrace our community whole-heartedly. By focusing on the household instead of singling out people because they have not converted to Judaism, we are creating a stronger community with more fulfilled members.

CHRONOLOGY OF THIS PROCESS AT ADAS ISRAEL

Under the guidance of our Senior Rabbis Lauren Holtzblatt and Aaron Alexander, our Board of Directors has been studying this topic for the past two years. I’ve referred to it in my addresses at the last two Annual Meetings and in my monthly *Chronicle* column.

Earlier this year I appointed a Task Force to make recommendations to our Board of Directors for our going forward. The Task Force quickly determined that there are two parts to the question of membership criteria at Adas Israel. One concerns who is eligible for membership, and bringing our bylaws into compliance with our long-standing practice. The second is more complicated and concerns governance. The Task Force proposed a new definition of who can be a member of our community (part one), and specified that Trustees and President (and thus President-Elect) must be Jewish (part two).

Our Board discussed in some detail at its March meeting the criteria for membership as well as defining who can be a board member, a member of the Ritual Committee, a Trustee, an officer, and President. Between the March Board meeting and the April meeting, Board members were asked to identify any other issues they wanted to discuss at the April meeting, at which the Board would vote. None were submitted. I held a briefing for our valued Life Members (including

Past Presidents) and Trustees on March 31st. At this meeting as well as at our Board meetings there were a number of questions about potential changes to our ritual practices; Article XII of our bylaws clearly states that all Jewish practices conform to the standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, Conservative, and the Committee on Jewish Law and Practice. (See the Membership Criteria Task Force Proposal below for the language of Article XII.)

The question of whether all members of the Ritual Committee must be Jewish was rejected by the Board, as was the question of whether all officers must be Jewish. Choosing to make our bylaws as inclusive as possible, and by a vote of 32 to 8, the Board approved the recommendation of the Task Force with only one change to the proposed membership criteria (which change is explained with the actual motion of the Task Force, found on the next page). These proposed changes to the by-laws will be discussed and voted on by the membership at the Annual Meeting on June 19th.

DISCUSSION OPPORTUNITIES

We will have two meetings for the Congregation to discuss this proposal. One of the Rabbis, a member of the Task Force and I will be there to answer your questions. **Meetings will be held on Sun. May 19 at 10 am and Wed. May 29 at 7 pm.**

MEMBERSHIP CRITERIA TASK FORCE PROPOSAL PASSED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS ON MAY 10, 2019

Proposed Amendments to By-laws: all sections of by-laws that could be impacted by this amendment appear below, with **proposed changes noted in red.**

II. MEMBERSHIP

2.1 CURRENT LANGUAGE:

Any individual of the Jewish faith and of good moral character shall be eligible for membership in the Congregation.

2.1 PROPOSED LANGUAGE:

Any individual not less than 21 years of age who is of the Jewish faith; **or any individual who is married to, or in a committed relationship with someone who is of the Jewish faith, or any person who is raising Jewish children*** shall be eligible for membership, provided that such person is of good moral character.

***The original proposal included "or is committed to raising Jewish children." The Board voted 24 to 12 to eliminate this language, which seemed overly broad to the majority of the Board.**



2.2 CURRENT LANGUAGE:

Membership shall be available to any individual not less than 21 years of age. Membership shall include: the right to vote; the right to hold office; and the right to burial in the historic Adas Israel Cemetery (as available).

2.2 PROPOSED LANGUAGE:

Membership shall include: the right to vote; the right to hold office, and the right to burial in the historic Adas Israel Cemetery (as available); except as specified elsewhere in these bylaw.

IV. OFFICERS

4.2 CURRENT LANGUAGE:

Eligibility. Any member of the Congregation in good standing who has served on a committee or task force of the Congregation shall be eligible to hold office under this Article.

4.2 PROPOSED LANGUAGE:

Eligibility. Any member of the Congregation in good standing who has served on a committee or task force of the Congregation shall be eligible to hold office under this Article, **with the exception of President-Elect and President, who shall be Jewish.**

VI. TRUSTEES

6.6 CURRENT LANGUAGE:

Any member in good standing shall be eligible to serve as a Trustee; provided, however, that he/she shall not be an office holder (other than honorary) in any other Congregation in the greater metropolitan Washington area.

6.6 PROPOSED LANGUAGE:

Any Jewish member in good standing shall be eligible to serve as a Trustee; provided, however, that he/she shall not be an office holder (other than honorary) in any other Congregation in the greater metropolitan Washington area.

XIII. ADAS ISRAEL HISTORIC CEMETERY

(No change required. Included here because this right of membership is mentioned in Article 2.2.)

13.1 CURRENT LANGUAGE:

Adas Israel Historic Cemetery, located at 1400 Alabama Avenue, SE; Washington, DC. No individual shall hold title to any cemetery property; the same shall never be encumbered by debt or lien of any kind whatsoever, but the same shall always remain the property of the Congregation absolutely. **Burials in the Congregational cemetery shall be restricted to individuals of the Jewish faith** (*emphasis added*) and shall be in conformity with practices of Conservative Judaism. Cemetery privileges for members shall be regulated by rules and regulations established by the Board of Directors.

ARTICLE XII: RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

(This existing article included to show that matters pertaining to ritual practice will not change be affected by the approval of the proposed membership criteria amendment.)

- 12.1** Customs, ceremonies, and practices constituting the established ritual of the Congregation in the conduct of its services of every nature shall be in conformity with the precedents and principles of Conservative Judaism.
- 12.2** Prayer books to be used by the Congregation on all occasions shall be those published or approved by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Rabbinical Assembly of America or other prayer books acceptable within the Conservative Movement.
- 12.3** Matters of ritual shall be determined by the Ritual Committee, in collaboration with the Rabbi; and, if deemed necessary, in consultation with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism and the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly of America.
- 12.4** Questions of interpretation as to any religious law or custom, proposed or established, shall be submitted to the Rabbinical Assembly's Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, and the decision of the Committee shall serve as a guide for the Congregation.

By-laws Update FAQs

1) **Why is this change being proposed? Why is it important?**

Families who do not feel welcome by their community – a sentiment expressed by many interfaith families about Conservative synagogues – are less likely to provide Jewish education and other experiences that are critical for Jewish continuity. We want to help those families who wish to practice Judaism in a traditional environment to make the

choice to join our synagogue. Since Adas Israel already welcomes interfaith couples, we want to bring our bylaws into conformity with our practice.

- 2) **What prompted this update now?** In March, 2017, the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USCJ) changed its constitution to allow each synagogue to define its own membership criteria. Previous to that change, USCJ required that all members of affiliated synagogues be of the Jewish faith. Even before that standard change, many Conservative synagogues, including ours, were stretching their membership policies to be more welcoming of interfaith families. The number of congregations reporting or anticipating policy change has increased dramatically in the past year.
- 3) **What will change if the proposed amendment is adopted by our congregation?** Since we have “household memberships” rather than “individual memberships,” we already have interfaith families as members. The amendment will allow a single parent who is not of the Jewish faith, but who is raising Jewish children – as might happen in the case of death or divorce –to be a member of our community. In addition, non-Jewish members will now have the right to vote.
- 4) **What is the status of a child with a Jewish father and a mother who is of another religion?**
Jewish law as interpreted by the Standards of the Conservative Movement defines a child’s Jewish status by that of the mother. The child of a Jewish father and a mother who is not Jewish requires immersion in a kosher mikvah (and ritual circumcision). Our rabbis work with families to construct personalized rituals to add joy and meaning to the mikvah experience.
- 5) **Can a child with a Jewish father and a mother of another religion enroll in Adas Israel’s Gan and Religious School?**
Yes. For the child described here to become Jewish, the standards of the Conservative movement require that he or she be immersed in a kosher mikvah, but we do not require that this occur at any specific time. In order for the child to become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, an immersion is required if it has not already taken place.
- 6) **Can a person who is not of the Jewish faith become President of the Congregation?**
No. Per the proposed amendment persons not of the Jewish faith cannot become President-Elect, President, or a Trustee of the congregation.
- 7) **Can people not of the Jewish faith be on committees?** The President of the Congregation appoints the members of the committees, and all members are welcome to participate and contribute to committee discussions. While committees deliberate on matters of import to the congregation, recommendations regarding synagogue policy must be approved by the Executive Committee and Board of Directors.

- 8) **Are persons not of the Jewish faith permitted burial in Adas Israel's cemeteries?** This is not permitted in the Adas Israel Historic Cemetery. Judean Memorial Gardens and Garden of Remembrance each have other sections within the cemetery grounds where individuals who are not Jewish may be buried.
- 9) **Will members who are not of the Jewish faith be able to participate in all ritual aspects of the synagogue?** Individuals who are not of the Jewish faith, whether members or not, may participate in non-ritual roles during the service. These include leading the Prayer for Our Country, opening and closing the ark and addressing the congregation during the service. Parents of babies who are being named or children becoming bar or bat mitzvah are invited to accompany their spouses, though only the Jewish parent recites the Torah blessings. None of this represents a change in current Adas practice.
- 10) **What is Adas Israel's policy regarding intermarriage?** Following the Standard of Rabbinic Practice of the Conservative movement, Adas Israel Rabbis can only officiate at marriages between two people of the Jewish faith. Intermarriages are not performed at Adas Israel.