

Is there a role for 'Non-Jewish Jews' or 'Jewish Gentiles' in the Conservative Synagogue?
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For the past decade or so, Conservative Judaism has taken a real beating in the Jewish press. If you read the JTA--Jewish Telegraphic Agency articles, local Jewish newspapers, the *Forward*, the coverage and analysis of national Jewish population surveys or regional community studies...or just listen to how some Conservative Jews talk about the trends in our own movement and our own synagogues, you know that it's been a pretty rough ride lately. You've probably heard the prognostications: the Conservative movement in shrinking; our more serious members are fleeing to Orthodoxy, while the less observant are affiliating Reform; United Synagogue, our seminaries, USY, and other denominational organizations have downsized and tightened the belt. We're attacked from the right for essentially being Reform with a little more Hebrew, and from the left for being intolerant of anyone from intermarrieds to the LGBTQ community. It's really tough to be a centrist...Just ask any Conservative Rabbi!

The most recent brouhaha has been over the recent change in policy for synagogue membership of affiliated Conservative congregations. For a long time there wasn't really anything to discuss. The only people who would want to be members of a synagogue were Jews! Moreover Conservative synagogues—espousing traditional Jewish life, a commitment to Hebrew in religious services, and a rabbinic ban on officiation at intermarriages—were not the *obvious* destination destination for most intermarried families. Even asking the question about synagogue membership for non-Jews for most of the last century would have been at least irrelevant and quite possibly offensive. But over the past several years, the Conservative movement has made a conscientious effort to be more welcoming, more inclusive, more respectful of the non-Jews who are in fact in the orbit of our synagogues and communities. As I have explained to many bewildered parents who have shed tears in my office, intermarriage is an unavoidable fact of life when we are but 2% of the population. You can send your kids to Jewish day school, to Jewish camps and youth groups, on Birthright trips, and while you may be hedging your bets in really important, and substantive ways, there is still really no guarantee that a child will grow up and marry a Jew. As Eric Yoffie once said, 'the only way to put the genie back in the bottle is to return to the shtetl,' which most of us are not prepared to do. I would bet

that nearly every single family here has a relative who has intermarried. Every one of us has been touched by intermarriage, and every one of us now has a non-Jewish member of our family. My family is certainly no exception. The question is: What is our posture toward the non-Jews in our midst? United Synagogue, the umbrella organization of Conservative synagogues, recently voted to extend membership privileges to non-Jewish spouses and partners in families that are affiliated with Conservative synagogues. Of course, synagogues have the right to either accept that new policy, modify it for their own particular needs, or to reject it altogether. Now if you've been reading the articles in the press, the op-eds, the letters to the editor, or for that matter, some of the emails I've received from congregants, this new posture toward non-Jews is nothing short of the death knell of the Conservative movement. It is not only the abandonment of tradition, critics maintain, but it will critically undermine our ability to promote Jewish endogamy [in-marriage] as the ideal. As I have attempted to provide guidance for our own board of directors, and tried to respond to the flurry of phone calls from reporters and emails from congregants, I am acutely aware that this is not the first time the Jewish community has been faced with the question of how to relate to non-Jews in our midst.

In fact, the Torah itself spoke of a specific population of non-Jews who lived amongst the tribes of Israel. Typically these non-Jews or non-Israelites were foreign merchants, craftsmen, or even mercenary soldiers, and were called "*ger toshav*," usually translated as "resident alien."¹ The fact that the Bible has a sociological category for this population means that it was neither inconsequential nor infrequent. Non-Jews traveled with, lived and worked among, and even occasionally intermarried with the Israelite population. And the Torah is explicit with regard to how those "resident aliens" must be treated:

In our Torah portion this morning, Leviticus 19:33 says: "*Vechi yagur itcha ger b'artzechem*, When a stranger resides with you in your land, *lo tonu oto*, you shall not wrong him. *K'eizrach mikem yihiyeh lachem*, the stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens, *ve'ahavta lo kamocha*, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

¹ Etz Hayim Humash, p. 700, n. 33

Lest one be tempted to mistreat a resident alien, the Torah stipulates: “*V’ger lo toneh, ve’lo tilchatzenu*: You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, again, because you were strangers in Egypt.”²

Further, “*Ushvatem tzedek bein ish u’vein achiv u’vein geiro*... You shall decide justly between any person and a fellow Israelite or a stranger.”³

Deuteronomy goes so far as to say that God is an *ohev ger*, meaning God loves the stranger who dwells among the Jewish people!⁴

Who were these *geirei toshav*? They were people who agreed not to worship idols, who subscribed to certain laws that governed the Jewish society they inhabited, who were themselves avid, devoted supporters of the Jewish community, but who were not full-fledged Jews themselves. To me this sounds an awful lot like some of the non-Jewish inhabitants of our community today.⁵

But the Biblical period was not the last time the Jewish community conscientiously integrated non-Jews. In his endlessly fascinating book *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, Professor Shaye Cohen writes that “the synagogues of the Roman diaspora were open to gentiles, and some—perhaps many—gentiles actually attended services. This was true for Asia Minor in the first century and for Antioch and Syria in the fourth. The Jewish community of Aphrodisias established a charitable organization that was administered by a small group of Jews...and supported...by a large number of gentiles titled ‘venerators of God.’” In the Greek: *theosebeis*.⁶ Professor Cohen goes on to describe the phenomenon of intermarriage in the first centuries of the Common Era. A non-Jew who married a Jew was integrated into the Jewish community, and though that person continued to regard himself or herself as a gentile, he or she was treated as part of the Jewish people, even without a formal conversion.⁷

² Exodus 22:20

³ Deuteronomy 1:16

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:17

⁵ Greenberg, Rabbi Steve. “Between Intermarriage and Conversion: Finding a Middle Way,” <http://www.clal.org/ss43.html>

⁶ Cohen, Shaye J.D. *The Beginnings of Jewishness. Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*. Page 55

⁷ *Ibid.* Page 156

Professor Lee Levine's exhaustive treatment of the ancient synagogue notes that an inscription on the synagogue in Panticapaeum, a city on the eastern shore of the Crimean peninsula read: "The Synagogue of the Jews and the God-Fearers," again pointing to a special status enjoyed by gentile supporters of the Jewish community.⁸

Look friends, there are many more examples of this in the annals of Jewish history. My point is that we are hardly the first generation to grapple with how to live with and among non-Jews. Though the population surveys may make us think otherwise, we are not, by a long shot, the first generation to deal with intermarriage...*anybody remember Queen Esther?* And as in the cases I mentioned earlier, we would not be the first synagogue to figure out what role non-Jewish supporters can play either.

Here are a couple of observations I can make after 15 years in the congregational rabbinate:

1. Our synagogues are populated by a number of non-Jewish spouses and parents who are partners in raising Jewish children, promoting Jewish family life, and supporting their family's congregation financially, as well as with their time, their effort, and their wisdom.
2. While our posture has typically been to encourage non-Jewish spouses to convert to Judaism, a posture which I support, some non-Jewish spouses are simply not interested in converting to Judaism. Whether they are not prepared to make a commitment to another religion, or they don't want to cause disappointment to their non-Jewish relatives, or perhaps they are happy practitioners of another faith, not every non-Jewish spouse is a candidate for conversion to Judaism. But that fact does not necessarily compromise their support for the synagogue or their encouragement of their Jewish family members.
3. In my experience, non-Jewish relatives of synagogue members are not asking to lead services, to read from the Torah, to be counted in a minyan, or to perform ritual acts on behalf of the community. What they want is to be treated with respect; they want to be considered valued members of the community; and they want to have a role, even if limited, in the Jewish life cycle events of their spouses and children.

⁸ Levine, Lee. The Ancient Synagogue. *The First Thousand Years*. Second Edition. Page 123

What the By-Laws Committee and the Board of Directors propose in the upcoming congregational vote is that non-Jewish family members be granted the status of membership within our synagogue family. Membership means that they will indeed have a vote on matters that are of interest to the congregation, like incurring congregational financial obligations, or other matters of governance. It means that their voice and their knowledge will be welcomed on various committees like budget, ways and means, house operations, and others, but not committees of an overt ritual or educational portfolios. The synagogue president and officers will *always* be positions reserved for Jewish members of the congregation. But it does mean that non-Jewish members would be able to serve on and even chair certain committees within our leadership structure. And I want you to know, my friends, this is something I wholeheartedly support.

Make no mistake, I passionately want Jews to marry other Jews. I believe that our ability to create vibrant Jewish homes and to perpetuate Jewish life is significantly enhanced when we have Jewish partners in fostering those commitments. But I also am a realist. I know that intermarriage is a fact of Jewish life in America, and I also know that there are some very special, very sincere, very devoted non-Jewish spouses who have also taken on the responsibility of supporting this synagogue and their Jewish family members. I am deeply uncomfortable taking their thousands of dollars in dues checks, High Holiday appeal contributions, religious school or ECC tuition with one hand, while keeping them at arm's length with the other.

At the end of Shabbat, when we make Havdalah, we articulate a whole formula of Judaism's binary approach to the world in the final blessing: *Hamavdil bein kodesh lechol, bein or lechoshech, bein Yisrael le'amim, bein yom ha'shvii le'sheishet y'mei ha'maasei*; we praise God as "the One who distinguishes between holy and unholy, light and dark, Jews and non-Jews, between the seventh day and the other six days of the week." I recite these words every week, and I happen to believe that certain categories are important...that there are distinctive roles, and purposes, and destinies for different peoples, different aspects of creation, and different days of the week and times of the year. Yet, I also believe that a strictly dualistic approach to the world doesn't always capture its complexity and nuance. Perhaps it's time to revive the biblical status of *ger toshav*, the resident alien (though we'll

have to come up with a better translation!), or the “God-Fearer.” Because between Jews and non-Jews, there is a whole other population of ‘non-Jewish Jews,’ or ‘Jewish-Gentiles’ who deserve a place of dignity in our community. I hope you’ll think deeply about this as you join the discussion about the people who make up our synagogue family, and eventually cast your vote on this important facet of our congregational life.