

Guidelines for Non-Jewish Participation at Congregation Shaarei Shamayim

Revised May 1, 2019

Welcoming all members and friends of the Shaarei Shamayim community is a core value of our congregation. This spirit of openness is embodied in our [vision statement](#). We believe that diversity is a strength, and this includes religious diversity. A large fraction of Shaarei Shamayim's households are interfaith, and we seek to create a welcoming space for all who wish to participate in our ritual activities.

Shaarei Shamayim has welcomed non-Jews as members since we were founded in 1989. Our non-Jewish members actively participate in the life of the congregation, serve on committees including our Coordinating Committee, and teach and lead programs at the congregation. They also participate fully in their children's Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies.

Shaarei Shamayim's policy regarding the participation of non-Jews in our ritual activities is intended to support our Jewish community with the active, welcome participation of non-Jewish family and household members. These guidelines are also intended to help non-Jewish participants who want to participate respectfully.

Why would an inclusive community distinguish between Jews and non-Jews?

There are four main reasons why we identify some boundaries regarding non-Jewish leadership of Jewish ritual in our services.

1. Affirming the religious authenticity of the ritual

Many Hebrew prayers presume that the person saying it is Jewish. The word "*v'tzivanu*," which means "and who has commanded us," is part of many blessings. Likewise, a tallit has tzitzit tied onto its corners, which are a reminder of observing the commandments. While our members do not necessarily take the commandments literally, reciting this phrase identifies the one praying as a Jew.

2. Maintaining religious distinctions

Maintaining certain practices as distinctly Jewish is a way that we sustain Jewish culture and identity within the broader culture.

3. Discouraging cultural and religious appropriation

Sometimes non-Jews take on Jewish rituals because they think they are interesting or they feel that the ritual reinforces their own beliefs from another religion. Examples include Christians wishing to read Torah so that they can draw closer to their Biblical roots, or Christians participating in Passover seders as a way of commemorating Jesus' Last Supper. There is an important difference between on the one hand a non-Jew's participation in the Jewish community to support Judaism as practiced by Jews, and on the other hand a non-Jew's appropriating Jewish culture and traditions to fulfill a religious need based in another religion.

4. **Making conversion meaningful for those who choose this path**

Conversion students embark on a very special journey as they commit to a process of learning, discernment, and embracing of a new identity. Because of that, these students are in a unique position where they can study and observe, but also wait to participate fully until they become part of the Jewish people.

Policies for Participation by Non-Jews in Ritual Activities

While we honor divergent opinions in our community, our members and visitors need clarity in regard to our community's practices and policies. We have therefore established these guidelines to create a shared understanding among all who wish to join with us in religious rituals. We will never use these guidelines to shame, embarrass, or single anyone out who participates in our services.

This document does not attempt to answer the question of "Who is a Jew?" The community's attitude is in line with the practices of Reconstructionist and Reform congregations, which essentially hold that one is Jewish if either parent is Jewish or if the person in question has completed a formal conversion process. In cases of ambiguity, please consult the Rabbi.

Shaarei Shamayim makes no distinction on the basis of gender for participation in ritual activities. We do limit some activities, such as coming up for an aliyah or being counted in a minyan, to people who are 13 years of age or older.

Categories of Ritual Activity

We have identified three main categories of ritual activity:

1. **Activities Conducted as a Member of a Group**

Congregational group activities are those in which everyone present is invited to participate. Examples include group recitation of prayers and group aliyot. For these kinds of group activities, no distinction is made between Jews and non-Jews. We encourage service leaders to welcome everyone to participate in group activities during services.

2. **Individual Activities in the Congregational Setting**

During a service one's personal observance becomes a part of the communal norm. For example, wearing a kippah or symbolically kissing the Torah as it is carried around the sanctuary are individual acts that define the community's ritual practice. Usually all participants are welcome to engage in their own expressions of worship. Some special cases are discussed further in this document.

3. **Leading Ritual Activities in the Community**

Various people, often including non-Jewish members and guests, lead different parts of the service. For example, non-Jews may give a dvar Torah, do an English reading at High Holiday services, or pass the Torah at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony.

We do reserve some of these ritual leadership activities for Jews alone. These include the following:

1. **Blessings that implicitly declare the speaker to be a Jew**

These include coming up for an individual aliyah or reciting a blessing that begins *“Baruch atah Adonai Eloheynu melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b’mitzvotav v’tzivanu...”* – “Blessed are you, Adonai Our God, Sovereign of the universe who makes us holy with Your commandments and commands us to...” Note that a group aliyah or a community reciting of the candle blessing is open to all.

2. **Torah reading**

When members and guests read Torah, they are reading on behalf of the community. We ask that our Torah readers be Jewish because this is a uniquely Jewish ritual. Non-Jews do not typically read Torah.

Other Specific Questions

1. **Who counts in a minyan?**

We count everyone over the age of 13 in a minyan. This is a fundamental principle of our community that affirms our spirit of inclusivity.

2. **May a non-Jew wear a kippah?**

Yes. Many congregations require all men, Jewish or not, to wear one. While we do not have any requirements of that sort, we welcome all who wish to wear one to do so. Wearing a kippah is simply a sign of respect.

3. **May a non-Jew wear a tallit?**

It depends. We make a distinction between participating in a group activity and acting as an individual.

- Group context: When several people wear a tallit gathered around the Torah, they put on a tallit to affirm their communal connection to the Torah.
- Individual context: When individuals put on tallitot, they are affirming their commitment to the commandments by wearing tzitzit, and they are saying a blessing that commands Jews to follow the commandments. Therefore, we ask that only Jews wear a tallit during the regular service.

4. **Would our community celebrate the Bar or Bat Mitzvah of a child of Jewish and non-Jewish parents?**

Yes. The Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebrates the student becoming an adult in the Jewish community. The majority of our children are part of families with one non-Jewish parent, and they participate fully in the ritual life of the congregation. Sometimes students are being raised both Jewish and Christian. There is a separate policy to address that issue. In brief, the child should not participate in or prepare for a commitment ceremony to another religion while they are preparing for their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. For a copy of the full policy, please consult the Rabbi.

5. **What roles and honors are appropriate for non-Jewish family members at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah celebration?**
Non-Jewish family members can participate in a variety of ways at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. See the Bar/Bat Mitzvah handbook for more details or consult the Rabbi.
6. **Can non-Jewish parents have an aliyah at their child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah?**
Yes. As is the case with all group aliyot, non-Jews are welcome to come up and say the blessing with Jews. In the case where there are no Jewish parents, the Rabbi will find a different blessing for the non-Jewish parents to say.
7. **Can non-Jews participate in other lifecycle events such as brit milah or naming ceremonies, weddings, or funerals?**
Yes. Please consult the Rabbi with specific questions.
8. **May a non-Jew blow the shofar at High Holiday services?**
Yes. The blessing before the blowing of the shofar commands us to *hear* the shofar, not to *blow* the shofar. Therefore, Jews in our community fulfill the commandment regarding the shofar regardless of whether Jews or non-Jews are blowing it.
9. **Are there different rules for conversion students?**
The Rabbi may have special guidelines for conversion students. Please consult the Rabbi for more information.
10. **May a conversion student join the congregation?**
Yes. In fact, we ask that all conversion students become members within the first four months that they are working with our Rabbi so that they develop a commitment to being part of a Jewish community.
11. **May a non-Jew join the congregation if they are not partnered with a Jew and do not intend to convert to Judaism?**
Yes. We recognize that occasionally a non-Jew would like to join our community. As long as the person affirms the mission of our congregation and respects our community's religious norms, they are welcome to join. We ask the person to speak with the Rabbi about their reasons for joining and what membership in the community means to them.

Exceptions

We welcome the respectful, intentional participation of members and friends of our community. We recognize that there may be situations where a non-Jewish participant would like to take on certain activities that are ordinarily reserved for Jews. Please consult the rabbi for exceptional situations.