



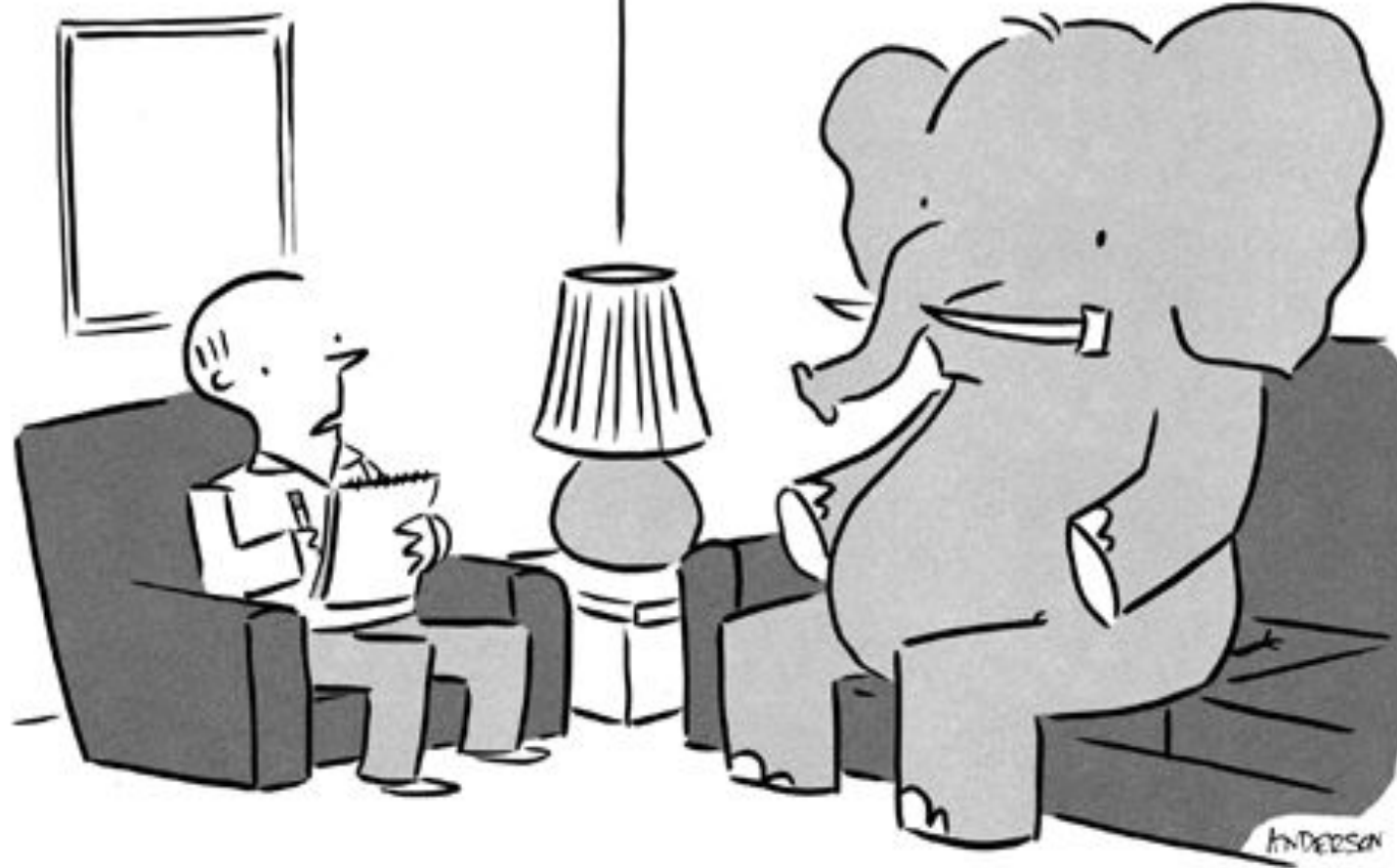
A Synagogue for All Families

Beth Meyer Synagogue, Raleigh, North Carolina



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"Let's try some role playing. I'll be the elephant in the room and you address me."

P.S. I Love You, Judaism

Liz Polay-Wettengel, “An Open Letter to Judaism from an Interfaith Family,” *Medium*, 19 October 2015.



You see, when you denounce intermarried rabbis and talk about the declining vitality of Judaism, we, the families are listening to you talk about how these rabbis—whose families closely resemble our own—don’t count for you. We hear you tell us, yet again, that we are not good enough but that you are welcoming in the same breath.

So while some of your newspapers and your blogs and your institutions (and your commenters, oh gosh, your commenters) whisper too loudly behind my back and wonder what to do with a “problem” like my family, my boys will bound through the door this Friday, giddy from the waning of the week and ask “MOM? What time is Shabbat?”

The Art of Asking

“The very act of asking questions influences people. Asking and answering questions alters experience and generates possibilities for further experiences.”

-Parker Palmer

1. Find a person you did not know (well) before today.
2. I will pose a question.
3. One person will speak uninterrupted for five minutes.
4. Partner will ask clarifying questions for 1-2 minutes.
5. Reverse roles.
6. Remaining time will be spent with both partners discussing how the conversation felt, specifically whether both of them felt heard.



Question: Describe a story from your Jewish journey that helps your partner understand how the topic of engaging interfaith families affects you personally.

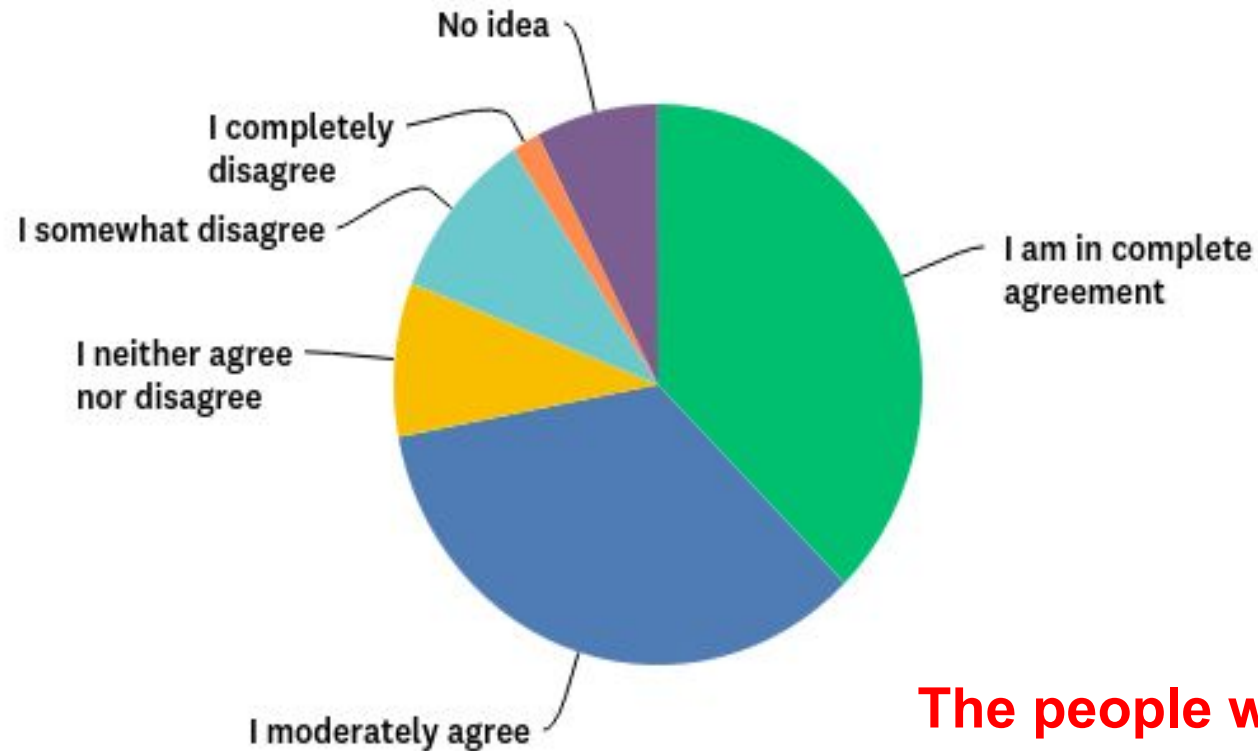
Some Data To Consider



- The Thriving Congregations Assessment (TCA) was created by USCJ in 2015 as a way for congregations to measure how they are doing using a variety of key indicators and foundational practices of congregational vitality
- Since 2015, almost 200 Conservative congregations (1/3 of our network) and over 2000 people have taken the assessment



Q55: We are Fully Welcoming and Inclusive of Interfaith Households



- 72% agree
- 12% disagree
- 16% neither/don't know

Area of Strength

The people who tend to take this assessment are the leadership of the congregation.

What would these numbers look like if you asked people from interfaith households?

USCJ Survey On Interfaith Families in Kehillot

Select Data on Synagogue Programming (2019)

1. **Response Rate:** 46% response-rate of member kehillot (272 kehillot).
2. **Membership:** 32.51% of kehillot count partners of a different faith as full voting members in the bylaws; 54.73% do not, and 8.64% are in-process.
3. **Synagogue Website:** 20.51% of kehillot have a special section on their website for interfaith families; 56.84% do not, and 19.23% are in-process.
4. **Life Cycle Announcements:** 54.08% of kehillot congratulate interfaith couples for their engagement or marriage in all the same ways they do for Jewish-Jewish couples; 33.48% do not.
5. **Staff and Lay Leadership Training:** 11.79% of kehillot did staff trainings on how to serve interfaith families; 72.93% have not. 8.15% of kehillot did lay leadership trainings on how to serve interfaith families; 78.11% have not.
6. **Community Organizing or Listening Campaigns:** 19.92% of kehillot have done community organizing or listening campaigns on how they can better serve interfaith families; 66.10% have not, and 11.44% are in-process of doing one.
7. **Keynote Speakers:** 12.45% of kehillot have brought speakers to their congregation to talk about issues facing interfaith families in synagogues and Jewish life; 78.97% have not.



Community and Covenant

The Breathing Organization

Barry Johnson, PhD., *Polarity Management*, 21-22

1. Question: Will we be an 'inhaling' or 'exhaling' organization?
2. After politicking, board decides that "inhaling is...the wave of the future."
3. The result: people start to turn blue from only inhaling!
4. Exhale minority says, "We told you so!" A shake-up happens, and immediately an 'exhaler' is put in to rescue the organization.

"The difficulty is not with inhaling or exhaling. Both are essential. The difficulty is the perception that they are dealing with a problem that can be solved by choosing either one or the other...[And] In such a situation, the fear of getting stuck in the opposite pole gets you stuck in your own pole. The more you stay stuck in your pole, the more you experience the downside of your pole."



Two Concepts: Community (*Am*) and Covenant (*Brit*)

Paradigm 1: Community (*Am*)

“I am invested in and committed to the Jewish people.”

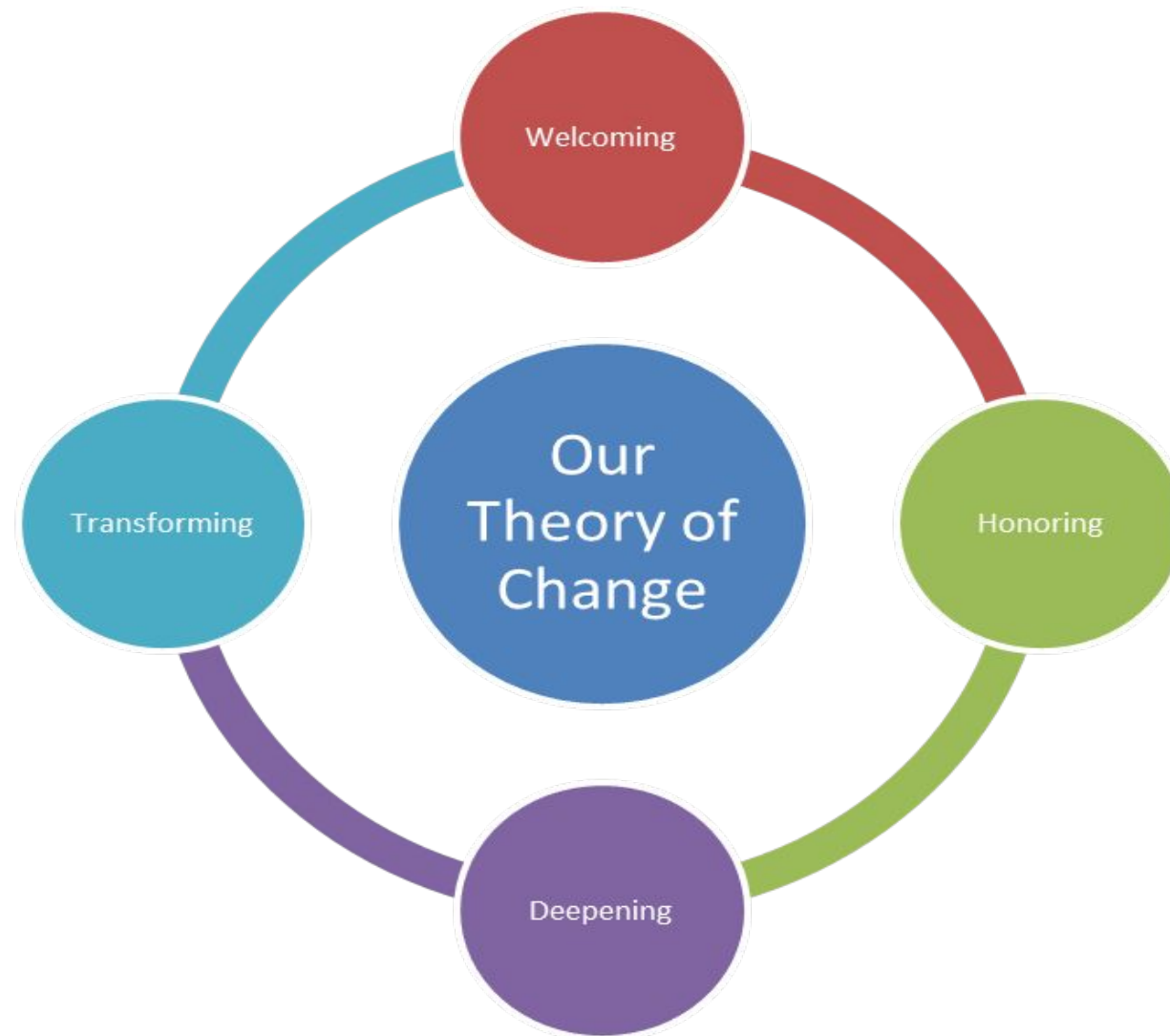
Ruth 1:16: “But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God.”

Paradigm 2: Covenant (*Brit*)

“I accept the obligations (mitzvot) of the Jewish covenant.”

Shemot 19:8: “All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord.”

Our Theory of Change



Community and Covenant

Stages of Theory of Change

1. **Welcoming:** The first step in transformative change involves putting the kehilla's communications materials and outreach strategies under the microscope and examining the language used to describe the community and the methods employed to create low-barrier entry-points for families who otherwise would not feel welcomed.
2. **Honoring:** If a kehilla wants to better engage families where one partner is not Jewish, then the congregation needs to affirm how every member of the community defines his or her relationship to the Jewish covenant. The kehilla needs to help non-Jewish partners feel that they can make a contribution to the community's mission and vision while also ensuring that those partners who wish to explore conversion can do so in a supportive process.
3. **Deepening:** A successful process must value the hearing of individual and family stories to develop a better understanding of how people come to and enter Jewish community. In particular, community organizing techniques such as one-on-one meetings and house meetings will play a critical role in helping the community develop a shared language.
4. **Transforming:** The previous steps set the stage for the congregation to make structural changes, heighten people's sensitivities to the needs of the community, and prepare the way for culture change. As with any virtuous cycle, if a kehilla transforms its culture, it becomes easier to welcome, honor and deepen relationships in the future.

A Synagogue for All Families

Mission and Vision:

Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago, Illinois shares a vision of Jewish participation and engagement for interfaith families in the form of a “promise” on their website to invite interfaith families to fully engage in the synagogue experience and acknowledges some of the barriers to participation.

Anshe Emet Promise to Interfaith Families

Our goal, like yours, is to keep your family strong.

These days, most Jews live in some form of interfaith family. Sometimes the non-Jewish member is a spouse, sometimes a son or daughter-in-law, grandchild, cousin. No matter the configuration of your family, our goal, like yours, is to keep your family strong.

We welcome interfaith couples and families to make Anshe Emet their home. Anshe Emet prides itself on our diverse worship possibilities. We try to meet individuals and families where they are on their Jewish journeys. We recognize that while differing traditions and belief systems sometimes conflict, they can also be a source of strength and joy in interfaith families. We want to help you build strong Jewish homes and lives while embracing the richness that a multicultural family life brings.

We recognize that interfaith families may approach a Conservative synagogue with some trepidation, unsure whether or not their participation will be encouraged, whether or not they will feel like they really belong. Our answer: the more you participate, the more you belong. At Anshe Emet we avoid don'ts when it comes to interfaith families as much as possible and focus on do's.

Do come worship with us.

Do celebrate the Sabbath and the holidays of the Jewish calendar.

Do give your kids a Jewish education.

Do enjoy the richness of your family, the variety of your beliefs, the wisdom of your customs, and the joy of your love.

Do give us a chance to embrace you.



Governance and Bylaws:

Temple Aliyah in Woodland Hills, California is one of a number of Conservative synagogues that changed their bylaws to include partners from other faith backgrounds as full members of the congregation. Temple Aliyah added an addendum to state that a partner who is not Jewish can remain a full member even upon the end of the marriage or domestic partnership.

Article III- Membership

Section 1: Membership may be open to any person of the Jewish faith and spouse/domestic partner of any such person. Upon the end of the marriage/domestic partnership, the non-Jewish spouse/domestic partner may be eligible to continue an existing membership.

Section 2: Except as otherwise provided in these Bylaws, a member in good standing shall enjoy the benefits of membership, Congregational activities and, to the extent permissible under Jewish Law, as determined by the Rabbi, ritual activities.

Section 6: Each adult member in good standing shall have one vote, with a maximum per family of two votes.



Membership:

The *Talmud* states in Sanhedrin 56a all of the children of Noah were given seven mitzvot that apply to all of humanity, otherwise known as the *Sheva Mitzvot B'nei Noah* (The Seven Noahide Laws). Congregation Ahavas Israel in Grand Rapids, Michigan translates this concept into a category of affiliation for any person who is not Jewish, whether it is the spouse of a Jew, a person interested in conversion to Judaism or just a person who, despite not being Jewish, wants to support the work of the synagogue. In this way, they recognize the value of every spiritual path, while still acknowledging distinctions of religious tradition.

B'nei Noah Membership

“Interested in learning more about us or becoming a part of our community? You can download an **informational brochure** here, and you can download a **membership application** for an individual here, and for a household here. Ahavas Israel has a special affiliation category for those who are not Jewish who want to support the work that we do, called "B'nai Noah" affiliation. You can find the B'nai Noah application here.”



Marketing and Branding:

Temple Emanuel in Virginia Beach, Virginia wanted to send a clear branded message that their congregation embraces all kinds of families as a 21st century synagogue. Their logo and tagline reflect the explicit and implicit values they want to model as a synagogue community with a *menorah* in the shape of diverse people joined together in community.



Family Education:

Rabbi David Lerner of Temple Emunah in Lexington, Massachusetts created a ceremony to celebrate the choice of interfaith families to raise their children as exclusively Jewish. A “Hanukkat Habayit” is a special ritual for establishing a new home that includes affixing a mezuzah to one’s doorpost, and Rabbi Lerner’s congregation signals this ceremony as the first chapter in a larger journey of engagement. Visit the [Rabbinical Assembly](#)’s website to view the full ritual.

Hanukkat Ha-Bayit Ceremony

“The ceremony was a response to my experience working with interfaith couples – including couples in which the non-Jewish partner initially considered conversion, but subsequently, for various reasons, decided not to convert. As a result I realized the need for a Jewish ceremony to celebrate the Jewish choices they are making. Utilizing the existing ceremony for affixing a *mezuzah* seemed like a logical place to start, since the act does not create something new, nor is it controversial. Rather, it accurately represents the rabbi and the community wanting to welcome the couple and support them in bringing more Judaism into their homes and more fully into their lives. The way we expand upon it does, however, create some potential challenges and may make some of us uncomfortable as we seek to straddle the space between our tradition and *keruv*.”

-Rabbi David Lerner



Social Media:

Congregation Brothers of Israel in Newtown, Pennsylvania includes a special promotional video on their YouTube Channel with interfaith families telling the story of why this congregation is a welcoming and inclusive place for their families. Rather than *say* that the congregation is welcoming to interfaith families, Congregation Brothers of Israel chooses to *show* it.



Ritual Policy:

In 2015, Ohev Shalom in Wallingford, Pennsylvania published a set of ritual policies that outlined what every person can do to participate in Jewish ritual versus what only Jewish individuals can do to participate in Jewish ritual. The congregation's goal was to be transparent about policy in a way that avoided negative language. Click on [picture](#) to download original.

OHEV SHALOM RITUAL PARTICIPATION GUIDELINES

As our community continues moving toward greater inclusion, the following are offered as guidelines to ritual life at Ohev Shalom.

Ritual Guidelines

Everyone Can:

1. Stand/sit on the bimah
2. Lead a congregational reading (in English OR Hebrew)
3. Wear a kippah
4. Recite the Mourner's Kaddish
5. Dedicate a Memorial Plaque
6. Touch the Torah during the processional/recessional
7. Participate in dancing and singing, even in ritual settings where the Torah is present (e.g., Simchat Torah)
8. Ascend the bimah with a Jewish spouse/partner for an aliyah. Both individuals are called up for the honor in English, only the Jewish person is called in Hebrew, and only the Jewish person recites the Torah blessings.
9. Participate in all adult education-oriented classes (e.g., the Rabbi's Bible study class)
10. Participate in (add a name to) the Mishebeirach, prayer of healing list (and CAN say a name out loud during the service)
11. Participate in a Hebrew learning/Torah trope learning class
12. Share life cycle events in community announcements

Only Jewish Individuals Can:

13. Wear a Tallit
14. Recite the blessings over a Torah reading
15. Read from the Torah
16. Open/close the Ark
17. Lead a prayer service
18. Carry/lift/dress the Torah
19. Carry and hold the Torah during processions and/or dancing


Life Cycle Events

Everyone Can:

1. Participate in the life cycle events of their children, following the guidelines, including having an Aufruf (pre-wedding) celebration
2. Be buried in the Interfaith section of the Ohev Shalom Cemetery in Brookhaven
3. Have Ohev Shalom Clergy officiate at a graveside funeral or unveiling

Only Jewish Individuals Can:

4. Be married in the synagogue
5. Have a funeral in the synagogue



August 2015


Community Organizing and Community Conversations:

Adas Israel Congregation in Washington D.C. held a synagogue-wide event in 2013 where interfaith members of their community shared their stories about their connection to the synagogue community in a public setting. The event was videotaped and included on the synagogue YouTube Channel.




Pastoral Counseling:

Congregation Beth Mordecai in Perth Amboy, New Jersey created a monthly learning group for interfaith families facilitated by the congregation's rabbi and a local Episcopalian minister. This learning group is an opportunity for families to navigate shared challenges together in a supportive spiritual environment. Click on [picture](#) to download original.

**Congregation Beth Mordecai**
A Jewish Home for the Soul

224 High St., Perth Amboy, NJ 08861 | 732.442.1373 | OfficeBethMordecai@gmail.com | BethMordecai.org

**faithful
FAMILIES**

**FAITHFUL FAMILIES:
A New Support Group for
Couples with Different Faith
Backgrounds and Traditions**

Faithful Families is a monthly support group designed to help couples negotiate issues related to faith, tradition, and family that stem from being part of different faith backgrounds and religious traditions.

Questions we will consider include:

- How can I support the faith journey of my partner & go on my own journey as well?
- What are the challenges in differentiating our faith choices as a couple & as individuals from our parents? How can we entice their encouragement & support?
- What are the most difficult issues to negotiate & how do we come to a consensus as a couple & as a family?

The group is geared towards couples of ALL ages with different faith backgrounds including...

- Couples who identify with **different** religions & plan to raise their families with **both** religions
- Couples who identify with **different** religions and plan to raise their families with **one** religion
- Couples who identify with the **same** religion, but were raised in **different** religions

The monthly sessions will be co-facilitated by Rabbi Saks, of Beth Mordecai, and Reverend Anne-Marie Jeffery, of St. Peter's Episcopal Church.

The first *three* sessions will be mandatory to build group cohesion. Then, the sessions will rotate between Saturday and Sunday early afternoons after religious services.

Couples are encouraged to attend the services on the day of their session and be present for Kiddush/fellowship with the community following services. Attendance will be mandatory based upon the faith identity of the couple and family in collaboration with the facilitators.

Below are the dates/times for the first three sessions:

1. **Sunday, October 18 | 12:30-1:30pm | St. Peter's Episcopal Church** (188 Rector St, Perth Amboy)
2. **Saturday, November 14 | 1:15-2:15pm | Congregation Beth Mordecai** (224 High St, Perth Amboy)
3. **Sunday, December 13 | 12:30-1:30pm | St. Peter's Episcopal Church** (188 Rector St, Perth Amboy)

Space for this group is LIMITED, so **PLEASE RSVP** today to:
Rabbi Ari Saks (ari.saks@gmail.com or 732.442.2431)



Life Cycles and Weddings:

Temple Emanuel in Newton, Massachusetts made the decision to aggressively expand what they provide to interfaith couples during the wedding process, while not changing their policy on officiating at interfaith weddings. The congregation publicized ten concrete actions the clergy will perform for Jewish-Jewish and interfaith couples.

Some New Thinking on Intermarriage

Temple Emanuel will treat an interfaith couple as a Jewish-Jewish couple except that its clergy cannot officiate at the interfaith wedding. In between doing nothing for that interfaith couple (which is what we had been doing), and officiating at the wedding, there are 10 concrete things we do now for our interfaith couples that we do for our Jewish-Jewish couples. Each of these steps deepens the relationship between the interfaith couple and our community and clergy.

1. Extensive counseling with our rabbis.
2. Work with the interfaith couple to write letters of love and gratitude to their parents.
3. Work with the interfaith couple to write love letters to one another which they share a day or two before their wedding.
4. Blessing the couple on Shabbat morning (*Aufruf*).
5. Work with the couple to deepen their observance of Shabbat as a sanctuary in time.
6. Writing the Wedding Charge.
7. Affixing a Mezuzah on the doorpost of their home.
8. *Kabbalat Hatorah* ceremony on Simchat Torah.
9. A Birthright subsidy for a Honeymoon in Israel.
10. Approaching conversion as did Hillel in the Talmud.



**“My House Will Be Called a House of Prayer for All People.”
(Isaiah 56:7)**